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*Las Meninas and the Search for Self-Representation*¹

‘We have invented nothing’

— Pablo Picasso, on exiting the Lascaux cave in 1940.

‘Sitting under the Cherry Blossom.
How strange!’

— Issa Kobayashi (1763–1827)

Abstract: *The article will attempt to show that Velasquez’s Las Meninas can be viewed as an allegorical enactment of some of the current debates and controversies in the philosophy of cognition and self-representation. I will focus on two very different philosophical trajectories, to which the allegory of the painting can be linked. The first, analytic, trajectory relates Las Meninas to the notion of representation and self-representation in the work of philosophers David Rosenthal, Robert Van Gulick, Uriah Kriegel and Bruce Mangan, and neurologists Bernie Baars and Rodolfo Llinas. The second, continental, trajectory begins by relating to the painting Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ‘embodied self-representation’. This trajectory, which can be further linked to John Ziman’s ‘second person view’ of reality, proceeds to relate Las Meninas to Lacan’s ‘object gaze’ and the ‘unbearable fragility of representation’, ending with Bataille’s (non)concept of ‘sovereignty’ as essential yet non-representable losses in representation.*

I will conclude by suggesting that the evolution of the cognitive state experienced by an observer of Las Meninas can be viewed as an

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'ontogenetic' recapitulation of the more 'phylogenetic' progression of the philosophical history of representation and self-representation alluded to by the canvas.

Introduction

On the cover of *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* (Lehrer, 2007), Oliver Sacks observes 'That deep insights about human nature come first to poets and artists, to be systematically explored by scientists only decades or centuries later, is not a new idea'. This is to say that a work of art, although produced in a particular time and place, may reveal considerably more than the artist's actual or possible awareness.

I will argue that Diego Velasquez's *Las Meninas*, painted in the mid-seventeenth century, can, surprisingly, serve us in a similar way — by helping to illuminate major issues in contemporary philosophy and cognitive neuro-psychology that concern representation and self-representation.

The work of art will be viewed here neither as an object of philosophical investigation under the banner of aesthetics, nor merely as a source of inspiration for the philosopher. It will be viewed as an exploration of reality in its own right, providing possible solutions to problems that are central to the understanding of other fields of investigation, including philosophy.

I am neither trying to establish Velasquez's intentions nor trying to offer yet another testimony to his artistic prowess. Instead, in the spirit of playful affirmation, I would like to offer a personal interpretation of *Las Meninas*, emphasizing its relevance to certain current ideas and debates in the philosophy of cognition and self-representation. An additional disclaimer is in order: In 'reading' the painting as a form of artistic-philosophical exploration, I am following Sontag's (2001) discomfort with interpreting a work of art.

Velasquez painted *Las Meninas* well before Kant and long before the advent of analytic philosophy, phenomenology, and postmodern theory. The painting presents foregrounded groups of figures, the Infanta Margarita and her maids, the artist himself before a canvas gazing at the observer, a mirror behind him reflecting the subjects of his painting, a doorway with a figure that is either leaving or entering the room, a somber looking dog, the court dwarf, a few other figures and artworks hung along the walls. It provides us with a rich collection of allegories and metaphors that may be considered an enactment of the phenomenology of selfhood. In particular, *Las Meninas* appears

to explore what may seem, by way of certain postmodernist theories, as the closure of representation and the enclosure of the self.

Much has been written about Diego Velasquez's *Las Meninas*. Palomino (1947) said that it was 'truth, not painting'. Luca Giordano defined it as a 'theology of painting'. While Théophile Gautier, upon observing the work, 'wondered where the picture was'. In his *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault (1970) famously devotes a whole chapter to *Las Meninas*, which he viewed as a critique the classical era of representation. *Las Meninas* appears to lend itself to a heterogeneous constellation of interpretations without committing itself to any single thesis. Arthur C. Danto, the noted philosopher *cum* art historian, declares that he is not sure any of Velasquez's puzzles 'are meant to be solved so much as merely felt'; and yet he continues to dwell on the puzzles that to this day defeat what he calls 'learned interpreters' (Atlee, 2003). One may easily invoke other assessments of the painting that testify to its multifaceted, enigmatic and even mysterious character; interpretations that sometimes posit this mystery as central to the understanding of the work.

It provides a special and complex example to what Zeki (2002) describes as the 'ambiguity' that characterizes all great works of art.² It convinces us that painting as a type of representation may sometimes possess intrinsic advantages over more theoretical types of representation, such as writing, when both are applied to common objects of representation.

In the eight sections that follow I will try both to relate to *Las Meninas* certain contemporary theoretical themes and to explore the structure of the cognitive state induced by the encounter with the painting.

The first section, Self-representation, offers several possible interpretations of the painting, whereby it is both a presentation of a representation and a representation of a presentation.

The second section, HOMT SOMT and Self-representation, relates *Las Meninas* to higher-order theories of consciousness, especially of the self-representational variety. The work is shown to provide a unique and rare example of constitutive (non-relational) self-representation.

The third section, Peripheral Awareness, suggests that *Las Meninas* can be viewed as taking advantage of the circulation of canvases between Velasquez's easel and the walls of his studio. Under this

[2] Zeki uses 'ambiguity' in a neurological sense claiming 'I use the term ambiguity — a characteristic of all great art — in a neurological sense, ... By that I mean that a work of art is 'unfinished' enough to offer several solutions, all of equal validity, so there is no right answer to the puzzle offered by the work of art.'

notion, the painting is considered as an enactment of Bernie Baars' Global Workspace theory and as a metaphor of Bruce Mangan's Iconic Fringe-Consciousness

The fourth section, Merleau-Ponty and the Second-Person View of Reality, stresses the subtle acknowledgement of the observer by the painting so as to endow self-representation with an inter-subjective flavour.

The fifth section, *Las Meninas* and Lacan, moves away from the presentational and pre-representational themes dominating the preceding section. It examines the overturning of representation by exploring its fragile underbelly, so to speak, as it relates to Lacan's 'void', 'point of caption' and other elements from his theoretical matrix. Invoking Žižek (1992) I will argue that Velasquez had (unwittingly?) managed to create a beautiful artistic rendition of one of those elements, namely Lacan's 'object gaze'.

The sixth section, The Mirror, explores the significance of the small mirror hanging from the back wall of Velasquez's studio to the interpretive process in general and to *Las Meninas* in particular. Special attention will be devoted to the role of the image of the Spanish sovereigns that the mirror reflects.

The seventh section, Allegory, relates *Las Meninas*, and art in general, to biological parallels of allegory, in an attempt to clarify the structure of the cognitive progression induced by the encounter with *Las Meninas*.

The eighth and final section, Bataille, suggests that the sequence of theoretical approaches to representation that we have identified on the canvas culminates in Bataille's post-representational (non)concept of 'sovereignty'. Bataille postulates that representation generates irreducible losses in representation and meaning, losses that themselves cannot be represented. Both Bataille's 'theory' and what he termed 'inner experience' have been described as an encounter with the impossible that is there nevertheless. By relating Velasquez to Bataille, the paper concludes that the cognitive sequence that we can associate with the inner experience induced by *Las Meninas* recapitulates the theoretical/philosophical sequence that we have chosen to identify on its canvas.

It would be inconceivable to imagine Velasquez relating to his painting in the manner I am suggesting here. Were he to read this article he would surely be amused if not dumbfounded by my interpretations. Having said that, I will purport to demonstrate that *Las Meninas* is a profound depiction of the relationship between self and reality, with all the tension, uncertainty and paradox that such a depiction evokes.

1. Self-representation

In *Las Meninas* Velasquez paints himself painting himself. *Las Meninas* perpetually oscillates between representation and presentation. It blurs the line demarcating the account from that which is accounted for, representation and that which is being represented, self and other. It is an exploration of self-representation in the best tradition of current literary trends, where authored texts are largely dedicated to the medium of authorship, producing forms of embedded narration (e.g. Nabokov's *Lolita* tells a story about Nabokov telling a story). *Las Meninas* is one of the earliest expressions of an epistemic shift in which classical 'neutral' modes of representation are replaced by ones in which representation appears in conjunction with self-representation. Today we know that this is true not only for modern styles of narration but for most, if not all, biological modes of 'narration' pattern recognition.

However, *Las Meninas*' 'modern' theme alone cannot account for the way in which Velasquez's gaze leapfrogs three centuries and confronts us with such immediacy. Some of the questions *Las Meninas* imposes initially are: 'What is the object of the painting?'; 'What is Velasquez really looking at?' Like Nietzsche, Velasquez deliberately problematizes the notion of the thing in itself but does so long before Kant. To quote Nietzsche (1968):

At last, the 'thing-in-itself' also disappears, because this is fundamentally the conception of a 'subject-in-itself'. But we have grasped that the subject is a fiction. The antithesis 'thing-in-itself' and 'appearance' is untenable; with that, however, the concept 'appearance' also disappears.

Velasquez's object of investigation is alluded to in different ways:

- (a) The way in which Velasquez appears on the canvas renders the Infanta Margarita, her maidens, the dog and the entire studio an allusion rather than a direct representation.
- (b) The back of the canvas alludes to its invisible face on which the 'real' object of the painting appears (assuming that Velasquez is indeed painting what is placed before him.) The medium of the representation is being represented in conjunction with the representation.
- (c) The mirror on the back wall, which suggests that Velasquez is painting King Phillip the Fourth and Queen Isabella, is an allusion to 'sovereignty' as the proper source of autonomous selfhood.

- (d) ‘It’s you baby!’ Velasquez is painting us. His ultimate object of investigation is the observer.
- (e) The object of the painting to which Velasquez’s gaze alludes exists right behind us. It may allude to that part of ourselves that we cannot access directly but nevertheless exists (Foucault, 1970). It is a depiction of and an allusion to the irreducible losses that self-representation entails.

The simultaneity of these different possibilities on a single canvas problematizes the object of the painting and constitutes an artistic critique of the thing in itself. If we consider *Las Meninas* to be a representation, then its extension, or Velasquez’s object of investigation, initially appears to be the thing in itself. This includes the Infanta, her maids, the painter behind the canvas and the studio as a whole. The intension of the representation can be linked to the state of mind that the representation induces in the observer. However, as I will attempt to argue, upon reflection the observer realizes that Velasquez’s object of investigation is actually the observer’s intension, turning intension into extension and vice versa.

One of the questions that concern us is whether, among other things, Velasquez was able to depict successfully key notions in modern philosophy that preoccupy contemporary philosophers. The ease with which conflicting metaphors can exist harmoniously on the same canvas, and the way in which artistic and poetic forms of ineffability (De Clerq, 2000) seem to be better suited for describing the ineffability of being than their theoretic counterparts, suggests that Velasquez was indeed successful. The question at stake is not whether art can be properly captured by philosophy and language, but rather whether it can illuminate the ineffability of experience. If it does, then the painter has something to offer to the philosopher. This is why *Las Meninas* may have something special to offer those interested in consciousness studies. Let us begin with analytic philosophy and the key themes of higher-order theories, self-representation and fringe-consciousness.

2. HOMT SOMT and Self-representation.

Higher-Order Monitoring Theories of Consciousness (HOMT), for example, David Rosenthal’s (2004), claim that a mental state M of a subject S is conscious, if S has another mental state, M^* , such that M^* represents (is a thought of) M and the representation is an appropriate one. A higher-order theoretical account of *Las Meninas* could suggest that it is an artistic metaphor capturing the essential structure of the

conscious mental state according to HOMT. In order to advance this interpretation let us propose the following:

- (a) Assume that *Las Meninas*, the painting itself, stands for M, which in HOMT designates a mental state.
- (b) Assume that the canvas on which *Las Meninas* depicts Velasquez at work stands for M*. *Las Meninas* partially depicts the back side of that canvas. (Velasquez seems to be able to disappear and reappear behind M*).
- (c) Assume that Velasquez himself, painting M*, stands for the subject S. (Velasquez has also painted M, of course).

On this account, canvases stand for mental states. M* is not a conscious mental state since it is not being further represented by some other canvas — M**.³ Observing *Las Meninas*, we see the world through Velasquez's eyes. Neither 'we', the observers, nor Velasquez see the contents of M*: Velasquez has just stepped out from behind canvas M*, and is temporarily looking directly at us (although M* constitutes an 'appropriate' representation). Since Velasquez and we are not conscious of M*, we cannot see what Velasquez is painting and are not so sure what renders 'appropriate' a representation of M by M*.

Velasquez himself only becomes visible when he steps out from behind the canvas to 'put things in perspective' so to speak. Can M be properly represented by M* even when Velasquez is not directly seen painting M*? Must an appropriate representation of M by M* include Velasquez himself in M?

According to Kriegel (2003), Same Order Monitoring Theory (SOMT) retains some of the features of HOMT but demands that M represent itself. On this account, M*'s representation of M is non-contingent, non-relational, constitutive in nature and more similar to self-identity than to any relational representational scheme. In one version of SOMT the canvases M and M* are identical. This conclusion is also supported by Searle (1980). What one sees as M is precisely what Velasquez is painting on M*, it is not only identical to *Las Meninas*, it **is** *Las Meninas*! The relationship between the canvases M and M* is constitutive because they are self-identical. This is important because one of the most imposing challenges facing self-representational theories is combining representation and reflexivity.

M* has both to represent M and to be constituted by M, or at least a part of it as in a later version of Kriegel's (2006) SOMT: A mental

[3] On the other hand one can claim that M* is represented in a backhanded way by M.

state M of a subject S is conscious if S has a mental state M^* , such that, (1) M^* is an appropriate representation of M , and (2) M^* is a (proper) part of M .

Again M and M^* must enter what almost seems like an impossible relationship. Velasquez appears to satisfy both versions of SOMT with ease, effortlessly reconciling the conflicting demands of representation and constitutivity in self-representational theories. Actually, Velasquez succeeds in making M^* represent M while being both a part thereof and identical with it.

One can continue developing this theme even further by considering SOMT in conjunction with Bernie Baars' (1997) Global Workspace Theory, and in the next section on 'peripheral awareness' we will do just that. However, we already have a fine example of *Las Meninas* seemingly depicting with ease a relationship that certain versions of modern analytic theory of self-representation have considerable trouble formulating.

3. Peripheral Awareness

Peripheral awareness, or what William James (1890) termed 'fringe-consciousness', seems to be an essential component of conscious mental states. Kriegel (2004) goes as far as claiming that a mental state is conscious when and only when it includes peripheral self-awareness. Attempting to understand the way in which peripheral self-awareness is tied up with consciousness and the self must rely on three separate modes of analysis. These modes — phenomenological, neurological and theoretical — can neither be fully united nor fully separated.

How is peripheral awareness expressed in *Las Meninas*? Here I find it convenient to invoke Mangan's Iconic Fringe-consciousness. To describe it, Mangan (2001) uses a metaphor of a computer icon, whereby one is conscious of a computer icon that is displayed on the monitor in conjunction with the entire display on the screen. We recognize the icon and we are aware that by clicking on it we will subject its contents to a more focal awareness: A new screen with a mixture of new and old icons. We are also aware of our ownership of the computer.

If we interpret the painting as an exploration of a conscious mental state, then the studio depicts the enclosure: the internal space that is both inhabited and painted by Velasquez as he paints himself painting this enclosure. Forms appearing on the walls of caves and other enclosures have traditionally served as a convenient metaphor for the structural encasement of the conscious mental state.

The walls of the enclosure are adorned with paintings whose details are hard to discern, but like Mangan's icons can be given titles. Velasquez's fringe-consciousness is portrayed as a collection of canvases *in potentia*. He can always remove one of them from the wall, mount it on the easel and continue painting. On this account all canvases remain indefinitely incomplete. Merleau-Ponty (1964) reminds us that a work of art can never be completed, only abandoned. *Las Meninas* can be replaced by any one of the hanging canvases. If the canvas that is now placed on the easel depicts three onions rather than the Infanta and her maids, we would see Velasquez in his studio painting three onions instead. We can also assume that replacing the canvas on the easel would require a rearrangement of the paintings hanging from the walls in the order of their relevance to the future possibilities inherent in the embedding of that canvas. On a more enactive account canvases are anticipatory in nature and the ones adorning the walls of the studio can be seen as a superposition of predispositions for action. This is reminiscent of Van Gulick's Higher-Order Self-Representational Global Theory. Van Gulick (2004) suggests a reflexive Higher-Order Self-Representational theory that incorporates elements from Baars' Global Workspace theory in which the canvasses on the wall compete for a place on the easel. I find it fascinating that with a bit of imagination philosophers like Van Gulick and Kriegel, and cognitive neuro-psychologists like Baars, can use *Las Meninas* both as a metaphor and a heuristic tool in representing important facets of their theories.

Velasquez could have painted himself into the paintings on the wall so that they too would be paintings of Velasquez painting paintings. But he refrains from doing that, perhaps because a canvas can only become embodied once placed on his easel.

What does *Las Meninas* tell us about peripheral self-awareness? Both HOMT and SOMT theorists could say that fringe-consciousness is a legitimate form of consciousness. Their justification would be that the paintings hanging from the walls of the studio are properly represented on M^* , the canvas on which Velasquez is actually seen painting. The paintings on the wall are dimmer and lacking in detail, suggesting that fringe-consciousness can be used to refute those who claim that HOMTs are susceptible to infinite regress. After a few iterations, the paintings within the painting become dark and devoid of details, suggesting a smooth transition into unconscious mental states.

Las Meninas initiates a process that engages the observer in a cascade of higher-order reflections on the self.

If one refuses to abandon the standard representational approach and to insist that Velasquez is ‘painting what he sees’, most of the enigmatic features of *Las Meninas* can be explained by arguing that Velasquez is standing in front of a large mirror reflecting the Infanta, dwarf and the entire studio. Velasquez could be said to be painting the contents of this reflection (or part thereof), disregarding the mirror on the back wall. On this account *Las Meninas* is oblivious to the ‘world behind the mirror’.

The mirror as the surface of appearances may stand for the pre-reflective phenomenological field. As in phenomenology, questioning what is behind the mirror becomes as meaningless as questioning what is behind the ‘surface of appearance’. And since our investigation is also phenomenological, let us explore some of the parallels between *Las Meninas* and the phenomenological tradition; particularly, issues concerning the self and Merleau-Ponty’s application of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction to the body.

4. Merleau-Ponty and the Second-Person View of Reality

Velasquez’s bemused gaze is not without an uncanny twinkle. It is an intimate gaze wishing to disclose the humorous element in the encounter with the observer. Realizing it is she who is being accounted for, the observer is drawn together with Velasquez into a common inter-subjective space. *Las Meninas* invites us to join the Infanta Margarita, her maids, and Velasquez. He further establishes this common space with the Infanta Margarita’s and her maids’ implicit and subtle acknowledgement of the observer. The angle in which Velasquez’s brush is suspended also suspends time, creating a more durable instant and endowing our inter-subjective space with temporal thickness. The brush is suspended in a double gesture of anticipation, both an anticipation of the other and an anticipation of the other’s anticipation. As an observer, Velasquez’s polite amusement becomes apparent long before one identifies its cause, and for good reason. There is something amusing about temporary cognitive dissonance arising from one’s biases: This is another means Velasquez employs to solidify that collective inter-subjective space.

Las Meninas draws us into the same common space into which we draw Velasquez. It is a space into which both the artist and the observer bring their bodies, and a space that is defined by these bodies. The secret that Velasquez wishes to share with us, is that reasonably successful self representation must unfold within the inter-subjective space that Velasquez and we manage to bring to life.

Self-exploration has an irreducible need to explore the other and vice versa. Self accounting can only happen in conjunction with accounting for the other.

Zahavi (2006) suggests that the embodiment of both the self and the other is an important phenomenological theme, quoting Merleau-Ponty (1945): ‘The other can be evident to me because I am not transparent for myself, and because my subjectivity draws its body in its wake.’ Following Merleau-Ponty, Zahavi then adds, ‘To put it differently, since inter-subjectivity is a fact, there must exist a bridge between my self-acquaintance and my acquaintance with others; my self-experience must contain an anticipation of the other, must contain the seeds of otherness.’

Las Meninas is an exploration of embodied subjectivity. Subjectivity is embodied and environmentally embedded. It always seems to possess a vantage point: One may assert that the advent of perspective in painting, introduced more than 2,500 years ago by the Greeks Apollodores and Zeuxis, constituted one of the earliest expressions of embodied subjectivity in the history of painting. To establish a painting’s perspective, the painter chooses an imaginary and infinitely distant point that directs the painting’s construction. According to Foucault (1970), in *Las Meninas* the small back mirror functions as this point, forming part of an invisible axis that connects it with the observer.

The irreducible need for the other as a necessary condition for sound self-exploration is also implied by modern theories of logic. In his *Possible Worlds*, a book dedicated to Kripke’s semantic interpretation of modal logic, Girle (2003) writes about a variation of Gödel’s Second Incompleteness Theorem, which states that: ‘No type G reasoner-believer with consistent beliefs can consistently believe in their own consistency.’

It is interesting in this context to quote Girle on G’s irreducible losses in consistency when attempting consistent self-representation:

This is not a matter of human failing. We are looking at ideals. This is a matter of logic, established by proof, and applying to extraordinarily rational believers. And we are talking about totally rational, self aware believer-reasoners. So is the enterprise hopeless? Well, no. But ideal reasoner-believers will have to rely on others in the enterprise. They have to rely on scrutiny and assessment from outside their belief system. To quote the poet [and here Girle could have ‘quoted’ Velasquez], they need to be able to see themselves as others see them. Others can tell if beliefs are consistent without falling into inconsistency themselves.

Therefore, it seems that an embedded approach to subjectivity and self-representation — with the instrumental role that it confers on the body and the other — is also logically satisfactory.

It emerges that *Las Meninas* in a way already anticipates results produced by second-person theorists like Ziman (2006), logicians like Gödel and Girle, and phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty and Emanuel Levinas.

Once more, we are forced to consider whether the artist can venture into areas of inquiry denied to philosophers, or whether the artist's endowment with extra-theoretical epistemological access arises from an overeager 'will to interpret'. However, my attempt here was to show that Velasquez painted what certain prominent phenomenologists claimed, namely, that self representation must partake in the representation of the other and that the space in which questions about the self need to be addressed is an inter-subjective construct.

The encounter with *Las Meninas* consists of three phases: (1) pre-reflective, inter-subjective construction of a common space; (2) awkward self-acknowledgement of presence in the said space; and (3) an attempt to decipher the trigger of one's inter-subjective mechanisms by the canvas.

Operating between the theoretical and the phenomenological, *Las Meninas* is able to engage both reflective and pre-reflective aspects of self-representation in ways that are not available to mere theoretical investigation.

Perhaps Merleau-Ponty (1964) had Velasquez in mind when he said that 'the artist always brings his body'. Velasquez's body causes *Las Meninas* to 'bring its body', as evident from the depiction of the back of the canvas

Before exploring the relevance of *Las Meninas* to what I termed the post-representational theme, I would like to explore some of the parallels between Velasquez and Lacan. I wish to do so for two reasons: (1) the post-structuralist Lacan is placed ideally between phenomenology and postmodern theory; (2) elements in Lacan's theoretical matrix seem to overlap with numerous aspects of *Las Meninas*.

I will focus on Lacan's 'gaze', which resonates with some of the phenomenological themes that we considered above. For example, Lacan (1977) suggests that the 'gaze' is a desire for self-completion through the other. However, while for Lacan the eye belongs to the subject, the 'gaze' belongs to the object, animating the space that separates subject from object.

5. *Las Meninas* and Lacan

At this juncture it will be useful to consider Lacan's notion of the 'gaze'. Although this is not the place to elaborate on Lacan's theoretical matrix, it nevertheless provides us with some important insights that in a way define the transition from attempting to ground our thinking of the self and the other in Husserl's phenomenological reduction or Girle's logic, to an uprooting of such thinking and the impossibility of such grounding. In what follows I will try and argue that *Las Meninas* can be viewed as a painting of the Lacanian 'gaze'.

Lacan does not try to ground representation in the phenomenology of the body and the other, but rather to expose its fragility as a nostalgic object that serves as a thin veneer, a temporary blot covering the chaotic void that threatens to engulf it. We may evoke as metaphor for this fragility John William Turner's paintings of boats teeming with passengers afloat on the high seas dwarfed by towering waves that threaten to crush them. The canvas as a blank surface functions as a fantastic space, a screen enabling the enactive projection of our desires and expectations as nostalgic reconstructions. However, following Zizek, looking awry we realize that the same threats that lurk beneath the surface of representation may have subtler and more horrific allusions. Zizek emphasizes the parallels between Lacan and Alfred Hitchcock; Velasquez's approach to self-representation is Lacanian in the best tradition of Hitchcock.

In attempting to describe the basic matrix of the Hitchcockian procedure, Zizek (1992) describes a scene from *Foreign Correspondent* where in an idyllic Dutch countryside, the hero looks at a dozen or so windmills and suddenly realizes that one of them is rotating against the direction of the wind. To quote Zizek:

Here we have the effect of what Lacan calls the 'point of caption' (the quilting point) in its purest: a perfectly 'natural' and 'familiar' situation is denatured, becomes 'uncanny', loaded with horror and threatening possibilities, as soon as we add to it a small supplementary feature, a detail that 'does not belong', that sticks out, 'out of place' ... Suddenly we enter the realm of double meaning, everything seems to contain some double meaning that is to be interpreted by the Hitchcockian hero, *The Man who Knew Too Much*. The horror is thus internalized, it reposes on the 'gaze' of him who 'knows too much'.

Lacan refers to the 'point of caption' as a phallic signifier: A signifier lacking a signified that forces a radical reinterpretation of our original signification system within an otherwise idyllic scene. One can say that the reason Velasquez's gaze seems to hold a secret and is

‘uncanny’ is because he is ‘the man who knows too much’. Velasquez is not gazing directly at us but is ‘looking awry’ just like the title of Zizek’s book. Velasquez’s gaze functions both as a blot that defers the encounter with the chaotic void entailed by self-representation, and as a critical gaze that realizes it is also a blot. Velasquez is painting what Lacan is saying. Interestingly, one of the sections in Zizek’s book is titled *The Blot as the Gaze of the Other*.

Lacan (2002) considered paintings as objects that disarm the ‘gaze’, a gaze that does not belong to the subject any more than it belongs to the object:

The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, of the painting, might be summed up thus — You want something to see? Well, take a look at this! He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons. This is the pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting. Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the laying down, of the gaze.

However, as a painting of the gaze *Las Meninas* also has a profound Dionysian, almost animistic, effect. By gazing back at us and forcing us to confront the antinomial nature of ‘reality’ and the void lurking underneath the idyllic scene, it prevents us from resting our gaze. It reminds us that gazing directly into the eyes of the other is similar to gazing into the Dionysian abyss. Hegel (1976/1985) famously described the gaze of the other as the silence preceding the spoken word, as the void of the ‘night of the world’:

The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity — an unending wealth of representations, images, none of which occur to him or is present. This night, the inner one of nature that exists here — this pure self — in phantasmagorical presentations ... here shoots out a bloody head, there a white shape ... One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye — this night that becomes awful suspends the night of the world in an opposition.

Las Meninas situates us in between the eye and the gaze. While the consequential inter-subjective space extends from our eye to the other’s gaze and from the other’s eye to our own gaze, it engenders an irreducible tension out of the impossibility of comprehensive self-representation. In a way, it is an artistic recapitulation of Lacan’s thought. It is a painting ‘of’ the gaze.



This is a page from a calendar displaying a reproduction of a self-portrait of Hannah Levy (1914–2005), one of Israel's greatest modern painters, titled *My Face*. It was hanging on the wall of her Studio still bearing her daily markings. The painting could have easily been titled 'The Eye and the Gaze'. It captures both the 'object gaze' and the Lacanian void that we associate with the unbearable fragility of self representation.

(A full colour reproduction of *My Face* is printed at the back of this book.)

To refine our understanding of the Lacanian gaze and identify the motivation Lacan and Velasquez share, we need to consider what Zizek (1992) calls the ‘object gaze’.

For Lacan, these objects [the voice and the gaze] are not on the side of the ‘subject’ but on the side of the ‘object’. The gaze marks the point in the object (in the picture) from which the subject viewing it is already ‘gazed at’, i.e., it is the object that is gazing at me. Far from assuring the self presence of the subject and his vision, the gaze functions thus as a stain, a spot in the picture disturbing its transparent visibility and introducing an irreducible split in my relation to the picture; I can never see the picture at the point from which it is gazing at me ... The gaze is, so to speak, a point at which the very frame (of my view) is already inscribed in the ‘content’ of the picture viewed. And it is, of course, the same with the voice as object: this voice — the ‘superegoic voice’, for example, addressing me without being attached to any particular bearer — functions again as a stain, whose inert presence interferes like a strange body and prevents me from achieving my self-identity.

Notions such as the ‘object gaze’ or the ‘object voice’, lacking a traceable source and yet undeniably present, evade straightforward formulations. Velasquez, however, is successful precisely at this elusive juncture. *Las Meninas* as an object engages us with a double gaze. The first emanates from the subtly oblique acknowledgement of our presence as observers by the Infanta Margarita and her maids. Their acknowledgement enlivens the entire studio. It is a beautiful artistic embodiment of the Lacanian ‘object gaze’, and its success lies precisely where the incredible subtlety of this mute admission irrevocably masks over its source.

The second gaze is Velasquez’s, as it is depicted in *Las Meninas*. It is a critical gaze that does not look us in the eye, to avoid even hinting at the plausibility of a mutual reconstruction of inter-subjectivity and proper establishment of representation and self. His gaze is uncanny. Velasquez is painting ‘the eye and the gaze’ by endowing the canvas both with a subtle object gaze and an eye — his own. Velasquez could have comfortably replaced the title *Las Meninas* with ‘The Eye and the Gaze’.

Velasquez’s eyes have a dual function: (1) they operate as a nostalgic object that conceals the antinomy of eye and gaze, blots out the Lacanian void and ‘disarms’ the gaze; (2) and they serve as a phallic signifier pointing at this very antinomy. It seems almost as though Velasquez is able to manoeuvre between the eye and the gaze in ways that are not accessible to Lacan, by painting his own eyes to conceal and reveal the Lacanian gaze simultaneously.

We have mentioned Velasquez's eyes as nostalgic objects that blot out the void endemic to the exploration of self-representation. Another famous example of a painter/geometer that pushed self-representation to its limits and was forced to use a blot is Escher's *Print Gallery*. This work is a profound exploration of both self-representation and inter-subjectivity. The observer, presumably in a gallery, is observing itself observing a picture in a gallery *ad infinitum*. At the same time, the account and that which is being accounted for become inseparable, merging internality and externality into a unity. To achieve this feat Escher has to distort space employing a special technique (by using a conformal mapping and constructing a special-scale invariant distorted space). However, at the very centre of the print where self-representation seems to culminate, the construction becomes too difficult to follow. Escher therefore covers this self-representational abyss with his famous 'white blot' on which he signs his name. (A nostalgic object indeed.) Remarkably, Dutch mathematicians Lenstra and de Smit (2008) recently used computers to continue Escher's construction and remove his 'blot'. Their fascinating reconstruction, the self-referential animation in particular, is a profound exploration of the geometry of conformal self-representation in its own right.

Like Velasquez's eyes, the small mirror on the back wall of the studio also serves as a phallic signifier, infusing *Las Meninas* with another level of double meaning. It is a detail that overturns the Cartesian order and the relation between the account and that which is accounted for. In the context of the illusionary order that Velasquez tries to conjure, it is a signifier without a signified that exposes the illusionary nature of that order. Everything remains in its place and yet is suddenly subjected to a radically different interpretation.

6. The Mirror

The small mirror hanging from the centre of the studio wall behind Velasquez is probably the most enigmatic feature of *Las Meninas*. Precisely like the paintings that hang from the studio walls, it is framed and its identity is evident from its diffuse and rather ethereal luminosity. At the very center of Velasquez's self-exploration we find an exploration of light.

We may expect the mirror to also reflect the true nature of events. It is positioned ideally for revealing that which *Las Meninas* hides. It should reflect both the hidden face of the canvas Velasquez is painting on and Velasquez's ultimate object of investigation.

As we said above, one of the only ways to enable a realistic interpretation (one in which Velasquez paints what he sees), is to assume that Velasquez is looking at a mirror as he does in his self-portraits. The answers we seek for the puzzles *Las Meninas* poses should all be reflected in the contents of the back mirror.

Had Velasquez wanted to push realism to its limits, he could have let the back mirror reflect an image of his back and the Infanta's, the face of the canvas he was working on, and the mirror before him (inaccessible to us), which would provide a dimmer reflection of the back mirror.

Not only does the enclosure formed by the facing mirrors serve as an appropriate metaphor for a light-trapping contraption; it evokes Hofstadter's (1999) 'strange loops', which he likens to a video camera filming its own monitor; the same loops that join Velasquez and the observer, Hofstadter and Bach.

Hofstadter describes the enigma presented by self-representation and self-referential processes in general:

All the limitative theorems of metamathematics and the theory of computation suggest that once the ability to represent your own structure has reached a certain critical point, that is the kiss of death: it guarantees that you can never represent yourself totally. Godel's Incompleteness Theorem, Church's Undecidability theorem, Turing's Halting Theorem, Tarski's Truth Theorem — all have the flavor of some ancient fairy tale which warns you that 'To seek self-knowledge is to embark on a journey which ... will always be incomplete, cannot be charted on any map, will never halt, cannot be described'.

The back mirror is actually the icon of comprehensive self-representation. Hofstadter suggests that when systems exceed a certain threshold of complexity, they lose their full self-transparency.

It is interesting to note that out of all the framed objects hanging on the studio walls, that we associated with 'Velasquez's iconic fringe-consciousness', the mirror is the only object that cannot be mounted on the easel. This suggests that self-awareness cannot be the object of focal awareness and that its constitution is irreducibly peripheral. Mounting a canvas titled 'peripheral self-awareness' on the easel would necessarily include its own self icons forcing painter and observer alike to borrow from the very resources they wished to depict. We may never leave Velasquez's studio.

Baudrillard (2005) appeals to an auditory strange loop (a metaphor he employs in a socio-cultural context), consisting of a loudspeaker facing its microphone. The microphone receives auditory input from the environment in conjunction with auditory feedback from its

loudspeaker. The latter input is ordinarily kept to a minimum. However, if the loudspeaker is placed right before the microphone, any sound would grow increasingly louder as it is amplified in the self-referential loop. This would culminate in the sound of the rupture of the loudspeaker's membrane and produce another signifier without a signified. This sound or signal does not represent any input and does not belong to the same signification system. The sound produced by the membrane does not stand for anything else but the sound of the membrane's rupture. It is also the sound of the rupture of self-representation.

In their explorations of the limits of self-representation, both Hofstadter and Baudrillard argue that beyond a certain threshold of complexity, self-representation entails irreducible losses in representation. The self is always less than itself (due to these irreducible losses in self-representation), and more than itself (because of the irreducible need for the 'other' alluded to by Merleau-Ponty), but is never quite itself.

Casti (1997) claims that a mature science is aware of its own limitations, and this raises the following questions: Is it possible for our self-representational theories to account for their irreducible losses in representation? Can that irreducible loss itself be represented? If not, should these theories include non-representational elements? Are there theories that are constructed to account for irreducible losses in their representation?

Such theories actually exist in physics, number theory and philosophy, and we will discuss them later. But first let us ask ourselves what is Velasquez's position on this issue. That is, what does Velasquez do with the back mirror? What is his ultimate solution to the enigmas that he has created?

Representing the irreducible losses in representation and meaning entailed by self-representation, and even by representation in general, is no easy task, even for an artist. How does one depict irreducible losses in depiction on the canvas? Just as Escher signed his name in the center of the white blot in *Print Gallery* Velasquez places in the strategic center of *Las Meninas* an image of the royal couple, King Philip the Fourth and Queen Mariana of Spain

The back mirror is the most 'logical' place for Velasquez to reveal his personal take on self-representation and representation in general. Therefore, his choice of the diffuse yet radiant image of the King and Queen is highly significant. It is crucial for grounding our interpretation and serves as a dual zenith point for the 'ontogenetic' cognitive

process initiated by the encounter with *Las Meninas*, and for the more ‘phylogenic’ philosophical history of representation.

Does Velasquez’s exploration of self-representation culminate in an appeal to the non-representational? I will attempt to argue that it does. In order to do so in an artistic context we will have to explore the ties between allegory, pre-reflective awareness and the non-representational. I will claim the following: (1) the allegorical image of the sovereign is non-representational, or at the least pre-representational, and; (2) that Velasquez’s exploration of representation and self-representation culminates in an appeal to non-representational elements. Rather than use the back mirror to tell a story about the inability to tell a story, Velasquez makes a more radical move by painting the sovereigns into the back mirror. Both Escher and Velasquez employ nostalgic objects to blot out the self-representational abyss, yet their choices are strikingly different. In search for the essence of their autonomy, one chooses his name while the other opts for sovereignty.

7. Allegory

If we are to speculate about art and the non-representational, we must understand the difference between representation and allegory. Philosophy is always reflective and to a degree also self-reflective. Philosophy is a higher-order process *par excellence*. Allegory, however, is more emblematic and pre-reflective in character. The allegorical image engages one pre-reflectively and it is therefore an important device of artistic expression. In the same way that Husserl’s phenomenological reduction begins with the suspension of the natural attitude, both artist and observer are encouraged to suspend judgment in their initial encounter with objects of investigation. This move somewhat resembles getting accustomed to the moonlight before deciding where to direct the spotlight of representation. In the context of Baars’ studio metaphor of the Global Workspace theory, the placing of a specific canvas on the easel should be preceded by a gentle pre-reflective interaction with the object of investigation. This act allows for a proper and non-discriminating rearrangement of the canvases on the walls of the studio (or the actors about to enter stage). It thus reinstates the peripheral awareness penumbra in a way that is conducive to the predisposition for future action. Icons keep tabs on populations of neurons that are recruited for potential incorporation into binding patterns of reasonable future likelihood. (See Contreras and Llinás [2001] on non-specific vs. specific thalamo-cortical activation and his use of ‘recruitment’ vs. ‘augmentation’).

These are the same canvases, or icons, that we associated with Mangan's iconic fringe-consciousness. This approach considers the unconscious as a dark storage facility of canvases, all having little chance of being placed on the easel.

To appreciate the difference between allegory and representation, one should bring one's body, that is, one should consider the phenomenology of the actual encounter with allegory vs. representation. Allegories always seem to achieve their desired aims pre-reflectively. Placing a canvas that bears an allegorical image on the easel affects the self, because of the way the dark canvases on the walls of Velasquez's studio are rearranged. Allegories are emblematic and do not designate a specific representation as much as induce certain anticipatory states of mind.

The encounter with a representation (assuming that allegory contains non-representational elements), is slightly different. Here, too, we begin with a pre-reflective encounter with elements that are then integrated into some proper, final representation. If the time that elapses from the pre-reflective encounter with a representation to the proper integration of its constituents is too long, we experience cognitive dissonance. The rearrangement of the fringe-consciousness icons that enables the proper integration of these pre-reflective elements into a representation, is different from the one induced by allegory. In the case of allegory, we find an immediate recruitment of fringe elements whereby the penumbra of the conscious state is substantial but less detailed. The artistic use of allegory can thus be said to induce a state of mind possessing a different activation pattern of our fringe-consciousness to the one caused by ordinary representation or philosophical deliberation.

de Man (1990) argues that allegory is non-representational. He also says that because it relies on language, literary narrative tells the story of its own inability to tell a story.

Walter Benjamin (1998), who was deeply influenced by German medieval tragedy, felt that in a way allegory went deeper than theory. While Nietzsche (1967), in his critique of representation, embraced the Pre-Apollonian Greek Chorus as providing the non-representational, or the pre-representational arena into which the more Apollonian modes of representation (or actors) would later enter.

One could go as far as embracing a more organic metaphor for the difference between allegorical and representational modes of cognition, typical of more primitive biological pattern recognizers. The human immune system is a case in point, offering two basic kinds of responses. First is innate response: A fast, ecological, non-specific

and robust response to an ancient and limited evolutionarily repertoire of environmental excitations. Innate response is therefore reminiscent of allegory. The second line of defence, the acquired immune response, is more reminiscent of representation. It is slower, but very specific, and is able to recognize millions of different and relevant molecular inputs. In contrast to the limited and fixed innate response, the acquired response can synthesize new molecular representations to environmental inputs to which the body was not exposed previously. On this account, the difference between allegory and representation is similar to the difference between a general inflammation and the synthesis of very specific antibodies required to counter an obscure illness.

Now that I have tried to argue that allegory is both pre-reflective and non-representational, we are perhaps ready to try and appreciate what Velasquez chose to reflect in the back mirror. As we said, he chose for this purpose King Philip and Queen Mariana.

Benjamin (1998) considers the image of the sovereign in seventeenth-century German tragic drama to be an archetypal allegorical image. At the very 'centre' — the geometric and cognitive point of culmination of *Las Meninas* — Velasquez introduces a diffuse image of the King and Queen. As his journey of self-exploration is drawing to its conclusion, Velasquez crowns it with the allegory of the sovereign as the primal cause. The ultimate source of sovereignty is sovereignty itself. Velasquez's presence in the studio is both guaranteed and occasioned by the sovereigns. Sovereignty is a *telos* that directs Velasquez's actions and representations, but never serves as a means to an end in itself. Perhaps Velasquez is suggesting that the attempt to complete the project of representation must somehow account for the irrational exuberance, the irrecoverable expenditures and the refusal to be a means to an end that are associated with sovereignty.

We claimed above that Velasquez's exploration of self-representation culminates in an appeal to allegory, by incorporating non-representational elements at the heart of his attempts to depict self-representation. Yet one can argue quite persuasively that allegory is more pre-representational than non-representational. Is there a deeper connection between sovereignty and non-representationalism?

8. Bataille's Sovereignty

Fascinatingly, 'sovereignty' is an essential constituent of George Bataille's 'General Economic Anti-Epistemology' (Plotnitsky, 1994). For Batailles, 'sovereignty' denotes a form of theoretical thinking that

accounts for the irreducible loss in representation and meaning that any representation entails. What's more, this loss cannot be represented. The back mirror can accommodate the representation of the lost representations of *Las Meninas*, but like Bataille, Velasquez chooses the image of the sovereign to be reflected in that mirror. Bataille's General Economy is a theory that attempts to account for these irreducible losses in representation and incorporate their effects into the basic structure of the theory. As Plotnitsky (1994) shows, both quantum mechanics and number theory incorporate the effects of irreducible losses into their very structure: indeterminacy in the case of quantum mechanics and undecidability in the case of arithmetic.

Picasso was intrigued by Velasquez and *Las Meninas* from a young age. He painted and sketched *Las Meninas* 49 times, beginning at the ripe old age of 74. I suspect that Picasso waited so long because to an extent, any attempt to represent *Las Meninas* is also an attempt to capture the essence of irreducible losses in representation.

This point of intersection between Bataille and Velasquez that we term 'sovereignty' marks the end of a certain journey of self-representation.



Las Meninas (after Velazquez)

Pablo Picasso (17 August 1957)

For Bataille, improving the range and accuracy of a representation necessarily results in losses in representation and meaning. As epistemological projects evolve, the expansion of knowledge entails a parallel body of evolving un-knowledge, or *non-savoir* (Bataille, 1991). As the representation improves, the un-knowledge it generates deepens and becomes more refined. Quantum mechanics serves as a good example: it constitutes a significant improvement over classical mechanics and offers much improved accuracy; yet this improvement in representation generates irreducible losses in representation and meaning, as shown by Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and by the radically different understandings of reality that compatible with with the same underlying mathematical formalism and experimental evidence on which this theory is founded.

Finally, we may enter a short discussion of consciousness. Velasquez's appeal to non-representation in the heart of his attempt to depict self-representation is important. Like Bataille, Velasquez attempts to confront the irreducible losses generated by representation. Non-representational general economies like Bataille's suggest very different theories of consciousness than standard representational approaches. These more standard approaches do not incorporate irreducible losses in representation and do not embrace notions such as un-knowledge. Under a general economic approach, consciousness is related to the irreducible losses and the un-knowledge entailed by the improvement in our neurological, computational and physical theories. We can actually see how the progress achieved in a single generation in neurological research has transformed the traditional mind-body problem into David Chalmers' (1996) 'hard problem' and the problem of consciousness. The mind-body problem was a black-box containing, among other things, creativity, attention, meaning, understanding and reason. Today we have solid operational definitions and neurological explanations for these mental states. What makes the 'hard problem' (how a collection of atoms governed by the laws of physics gives rise to conscious inner experience) harder, is that everything we know about the brain leaves very little room for consciousness to be causally efficacious. On this account, as the 'easy problems' (how the brain processes information and converts physical input into physical output) become easier the hard problem becomes harder. There is less and less room left for consciousness to have a causal role.⁴ The hard problem is a manifestation of a more

[4] This is certainly not a majority opinion; for a more comprehensive discussion of mental causation see Heil and Mele (1993).

refined form of ‘un-knowledge’ than the ‘un-knowledge’ associated with the mind–body problem.

We have identified several intertwined philosophical trajectories as they unfold in *Las Meninas*, all of which concern representation and self-representation. One, analytical, trajectory included Rosenthal’s higher-order theories, Kriegel’s Same Order Monitoring Theory and its demand for constitutive self-representation, Baars’ Global Workspace, Mangan’s Iconic fringe-consciousness and Van Gulick’s Higher-order Global Theories. A related theme proceeds from Girle and self-referential systems to Hofstadter’s strange loops.

The second, continental, trajectory begins with Merleau-Ponty’s embodied and embedded self, proceeds with Lacan’s ‘object gaze’, Benjamin’s allegory and the pre-representational, and ends with Bataille’s ‘sovereignty’, the dissolution of representation and the postrepresentational.

Not only does Velasquez provide for the seamless coexistence of these different philosophical trajectories on a single canvas; at times he seems to make genuine contributions to their evolution, as in his depiction of constitutive self-representation, Lacan’s ‘object gaze’ and the irreducibly inter-subjective nature of the space of self-representation.

Needless to say, it is highly doubtful whether Velasquez would have been able to think in these terms, or tried to produce the effects I have suggested. For the purposes of this paper, however, such questions need not be addressed.

Las Meninas is much more than an anthology of self-representational theories. It is the story of two progressions: (1) an ‘ontogenetic’ progression that describes the temporal evolution of the observer’s cognitive response to *Las Meninas*; (2) a more ‘phylogenic’ progression (in the sense that it contains a whole evolutionary history of species) — the evolution of the notion (and philosophy) of representation. Both progressions are self-referential processes. In the ‘ontogenetic’ cognitive progression, *Las Meninas* serves as a sublime mirror leading Velasquez and the observer into a rapturous self-referential process. The progression of the philosophy of representation can also be viewed as a self-referential process. This is because unlike the sciences, in its search for ‘truth’ philosophy has no discipline of a higher order to appeal to other than itself.

Now that we have identified some of the philosophical trajectories that inhabit the terrain of Velasquez’s work, a new question arises: Are these two progressions mutually related? More specifically, can we say that the ‘ontogenetic’ cognitive sequence induced by *Las Meninas*

recapitulates the more ‘phylogenetic’ philosophical sequence? I believe that it does. Throughout this paper I have tried to preserve the order that these progressions share. Both the ontogenetic cognitive sequence and its phylogenetic theoretical counterpart begin with a Cartesian order and an objectivist account of representation reminiscent of what Husserl termed ‘the natural attitude’. We begin by accepting the Infanta, her maids and the studio as unproblematic extensions. On this account, Velasquez’s representing of the Infanta and her maids is the given thing in itself. In the next stage, both sequences undergo a process akin to the phenomenological reduction. Observer and philosopher alike are led to conclude that the natural attitude must be suspended and that, following phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty, the exploration of representation (which always appears in conjunction with self-representation), must acknowledge the irreducible role of the body, the ‘other’ and the inter-subjective. Next, these two sequences share the ‘post-structural’ stage whereby both philosopher and observer discover Lacan’s ‘object gaze’. This discovery completely overturns the traditional relationship between object and subject introducing us to Lacan’s void and the ‘unbearable fragility of representation’. Both progressions end in a post-representational stage typified by the inability to represent the dissolution of representation. Philosophically, this stage is characterized by Bataille’s notion of ‘sovereignty’ and an encounter with the impossible that is there nevertheless. As Plotnitsky (1994) reads Bataille, both his theory and what Bataille terms ‘inner experience’ culminate in an ‘encounter with the impossible’, which seems to have both cognitive and theoretical overtones. This is where Velasquez and Bataille try to tell a similar tale.

Like the history of representation, the history of human narration is both embodied and environmentally embedded. It is a history of offloading. The narrator is offloaded unto the narration. It is the history of the simultaneous withdrawal and disclosure of the narrator. The process of self-representation has no end in sight, no final representation, no final painting. We create our representations only to be consumed by them.

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