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Imprecise precision: Rejoinder to Basbøll.

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Abstract:

The article reflects on the comments of Thomas Basboll on the paper "Reflexivity: Curse or Cure" and other related issues. He raises three main issues that add support to three-part classification of reflexivity as immanent, epistemic and transdecant. The authors re-state his points and provide a reply to each of them. They concluded that Barboll shows a desire on a purely formalist analysis of reflexivity in immanent terms.

We thank Thomas Basbøll for his thoughtful and engaging comment on our 'Reflexvity: curse or cure' paper (Davis and Klaes [4]), and hope our rejoinder will give further impetus to economic methodologists' reflections on reflexivity. However, we do not feel compelled to give ground on any of the three main issues Basbøll raises, because we believe they only add further support to our three-part classification of reflexivity as immanent, epistemic and transcendent, while his quest for precision – which Basbøll believes would rescue us from a

perceived abyss of ambiguity he sees looming at the very heart of our project – only confirms for us the imprecision of precision, and, properly understood, the virtues of such imprecision. Here we re-state Basbøll's points and reply to each of them.

First, Basbøll rightly identifies our interest in *Las Meninas* as one prompted by an interest in interpretative ambiguity and its representation, and one stimulated by how reflexivity has been discussed in the methodology of economics literature. We introduced the painting as a means of distinguishing three levels of reflexivity, because we explicitly wished to model reflexivity on a visual metaphor (Klaes [4]: 331). Basbøll regards this as the cardinal sin which he alleges fatally undermines our endeavor. By starting with a metaphor which he claims is 'needlessly vague', our 'analysis goes astray the moment' we present its outlines (p. 114). [1] Analysis of reflexivity should rather draw up a 'rigorously determined contextual space' ruled by such stern stuff as strict 'logical form' (Ibid.).

But Basbøll's own particular approach to 'logical form' is metaphorical itself in that the only framework for analysis that he himself offers for a rigorous approach to reflexivity is again a particular interpretation of the painting, in this instance, a geometrical one, and indeed a Euclidian one at that. Certainly geometry can be used to investigate the painting. But this investigation is nonetheless interpretive and metaphorical in that it provides a particular framework in which one can 'see' the painting. Moreover, it is not clear to us why a geometrical approach is a logical approach if the latter is understood to be somehow non-metaphorical?

Second, according to Basbøll, we should have recognized that our only hope of ever capturing the essence of reflexivity is when analysis is limited to what we termed immanent reflexivity: 'Reflexivity is interesting in so far as it is *immanent* to the claim made' (p. 115). It is only in the context of immanent reflexivity that Basbøll sees any hope for applying the formalist tools he believes necessary to yield the kind of rigorous analysis he is aiming for. Venture beyond immanent reflexivity into what we termed epistemic and transcendent reflexivity, and you are doomed. Instead of engaging in the fascinating area of research Basbøll pursues, you waste your energies on issues that are 'unproblematically reflexive' since both epistemic and transcendent reflexivity pertain to issues that are 'harmlessly vague' (Ibid.).

While Basbøll is fascinated by immanent reflexivity, and regards our other two forms as trivial, we believe we demonstrate in our discussion of the epistemically and transcendentally reflexive concerns of prominent economic methodologists that this assessment is not widely shared in economic methodology. Basbøll's quick gloss on the reflexivity of Cold War economics seems to us to amply testify to his complete innocence of the more subtle points of this reflexivity. From the perspective of economic methodology, it is immanent reflexivity that seems not very interesting and certainly less relevant in economics than the other two forms that we identify.

Third, we also sin according to Basbøll by being on the wrong side of a long-running debate in art history and allied fields as to the correct interpretation of *Las Meninas*. Had we paid due attention to the relevant secondary literatures, we would have had to acknowledge that *Las Meninas*, on proper inspection, turns out to be a formalist treasure trove only susceptible to the kind of rigorous analysis of immanent reflexivity Basbøll wants us to pursue. The failing leveled at us here is, in fact, the neglect of one paper by Snyder and Cohen ([1]) that Basbøll regards as the definitive analysis of reflexivity in *Las Meninas*, and as the basis for a complete understanding of reflexivity *tout court*.

Indeed it was economic methodology, not art criticism that was our focus, and accordingly we thought it entirely appropriate to pass over the art history debates about the interpretation of Velazquez's *Las Meninas* in using the painting to illustrate the three dimensions of reflexivity we distinguish. All the more are we surprised at being charged with the neglect of a relevant literature when Basbøll himself almost entirely neglects the

relevant economic methodology literature which was the main focus of the paper. As to the Snyder and Cohen paper, suffice it to point to Snyder's ([2]) later more substantive contribution on *Las Meninas* which explicitly acknowledges that the enigma of *Las Meninas* must be sought in the dissonance between the geometrical reconstruction of the painting and the intuitive first response of our visual perception – a view that stands quite apart from Snyder's insistence that proper appreciation of it requires a metaphorical rather than a geometrical reading. Finally, it is ironic that while introducing Snyder and Cohen ([1]) as the definitive reading of *Las Meninas*, Basbøll himself casts doubt on their interpretation by subsequently offering his own interpretation in terms of a second mirror external to the canvas.

In conclusion, and casting other comparatively minor differences aside, what emerges from our exchange with Basbøll are two fundamentally opposed outlooks on reflexivity. On the one hand, we witness the desire on his part for a purely formalist analysis of reflexivity in immanent terms. On the other hand, we emphasize attention to those dimensions of reflexivity that go beyond immediate semantic self-reference. Basbøll does make an intriguing claim about reflexivity requiring a rigorously if not formally 'determined contextual space even to arise'. But why should one suppose that interesting issues of reflexivity only arise in logically precise contexts? Why not rather suppose they typically arise in logically and semantically vague contexts? While we share his ambition that clarifying reflexivity problems may reduce their problematic nature – thus our three-level analysis of forms of reflexivity – we do not regard ambiguity as invariably something to be eradicated by the 'right' interpretation of the object at hand, and believe that associated reflexivity problems are more pervasive a problem than he does. Indeed we see metaphor as a key vehicle of interpretation when a characteristic of ordinary semantics is ambiguity.

Footnotes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all page numbers refer to Basbøll ([3]).

References

1. Snyder, J. and Cohen, T.1980. 'Reflexions on *Las Meninas*: paradox lost',. *Critical Inquiry*, 7(2): 429–47.
2. Snyder, J.1985. '*Las Meninas* and the mirror of the prince',. *Critical Inquiry*, 11(4): 539–72.
3. Basbøll, T.2006. 'Reflexivity in perspective: a note on Davis and Klaes' reading of *Las Meninas*',. ***Journal of Economic Methodology***, 13(1): 113–9.
4. Davis, J. and Klaes, M.2003. 'Reflexivity: curse or cure?',. ***Journal of Economic Methodology***, 10: 329–52.