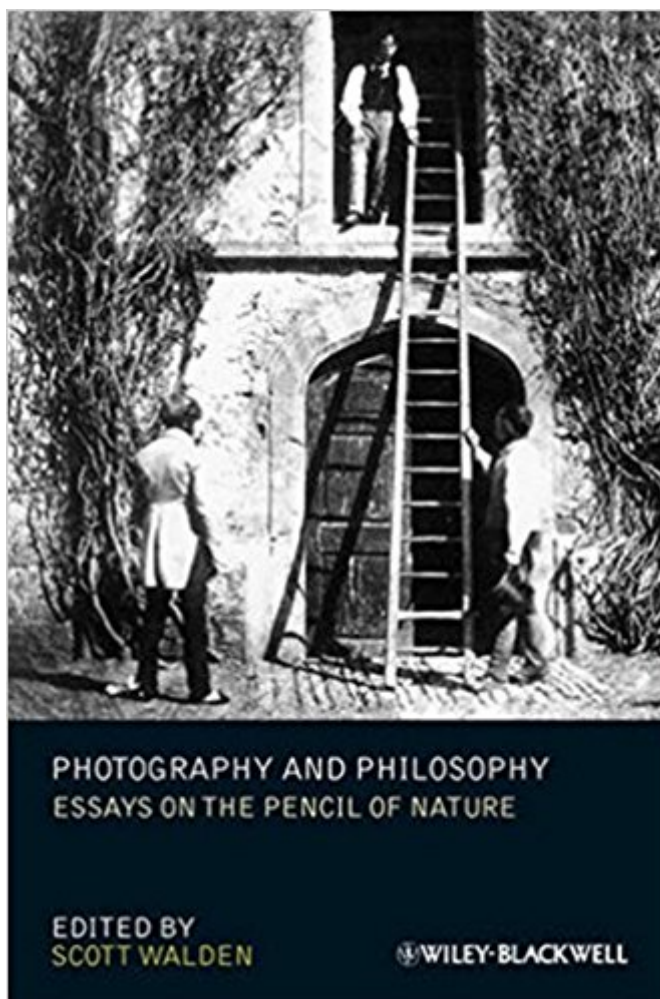


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# Photography And Philosophy: Essays On The Pencil Of Nature



## Synopsis

This anthology offers a fresh approach to the philosophical aspects of photography. The essays, written by contemporary philosophers in a thorough and engaging manner, explore the far-reaching ethical dimensions of photography as it is used today. A first-of-its-kind anthology exploring the link between the art of photography and the theoretical questions it raises. Written in a thorough and engaging manner. Essayists are all contemporary philosophers who bring with them an exceptional understanding of the broader metaphysical issues pertaining to photography. Takes a fresh look at some familiar issues - photographic truth, objectivity, and realism. Introduces newer issues such as the ethical use of photography or the effect of digital-imaging technology on how we appreciate images.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"As a whole, Walden's collection is a valuable addition to the philosophical literature on photography. It is well organized and contains a sustained discussion of many of the more provocative claims that philosophers have made about photography. It is still an open question whether any of these claims are true, but rather than simply dwelling upon the banal truths that we all already agree upon, it is a lot more interesting." (The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Summer 2010) "This is a very valuable collection that gathers together a set of articles and issues that should be of general interest to philosophers of art." (Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, February 2009) "How does one accept or deny 'reality' in photographic excursions? This is the central issue in this extraordinary

compilation of 13 essays by contemporary philosophers who argue back and forth (in editor Walden's clever arrangement) so that readers must engage their own minds within the constantly conflicting (theoretical and personal) propositions/explanations. This is a rich, provocative, intelligent, challenging, and important compilation. Highly recommended." (Choice, November 2008) "Many of the essays are well written and indeed groundbreaking." Given its overall depth, the anthology is worth reading by any critic, curator or student of the arts." (Prefix Photo, 2008) "Will enlighten the student and refresh the informed. Contributes greatly to the literature and will occupy a favorite spot on the book shelves." (Metapsychology)

"Required reading for anyone interested in analytic philosophy of photography, Scott Walden's collection includes essays by most of the major writers in this area. The combination of classic pieces with newly commissioned work makes this both a useful reference book and a stimulating contribution to ongoing debates about photographic representation." •Nigel Warburton, The Open University "Any adequate aesthetic theory must accommodate facts about the production, interpretation, and evaluation of photographic images. Scott Walden's valuable collection should help bring the realities and significance of photography into the philosophical mainstream; it provides rich and well-informed reflections upon epistemological, ontological, and evaluative aspects of photographic process and product." •Robert Kraut, Ohio State University "This is a first-rate collection of essays in the philosophy of photography by the leading figures in the analytic literature. Remarkably, it is also the first such collection to appear in English, running from the classic essays by Walton and Scruton right through to current work by leading exponents such as Lopes, Maynard, and Currie. Covering a range of questions foundational to the epistemology, ontology, ethics, and aesthetics of photography, it is probably the most wide-ranging single book available on the philosophy of photography to date. As such it is a real achievement, sure to foster debate." •Diarmuid Costello, University of Warwick

The French literary theorist Maurice Blanchot writes somewhere that literature begins the moment that literature becomes a question. I read Blanchot here along the lines of Aristotle: what makes a craft (techne) distinct from a science (episteme) is that its boundaries are not pre-determined by universal laws in advance. A striking feature of Scott Walden's "Photography and Philosophy" is its openness to the question of what photography is. The volume begins with Kendall Walton's essay arguing that photography is a transparent medium that bypasses the preconceptions, prejudices and proclivities of the photographer because of the autonomous mechanicity of its process. This is

somewhat related to the Roger Scruton piece which challenges whether it is appropriate to view photography as art or in aesthetic terms at all. Along and against these lines, the Meskin and Cohen selection inquires into whether photography is a special means of extending human perception, a kind of "visual prostheses", as it were. The question of the relationship between reality and the experience of the photographic image is explored by a number of authors. The Savedoff and Carroll essays, for instance, look at how the assumptions and beliefs we have prior to that experience shape and inform our perception of the image. Such questions are not distinct from ethical and political issues, as raised in a fascinating essay by Arthur Danto. Does a Sebastiao Salgado, for example, bear a special responsibility in the production of images that are simultaneously and paradoxically beautiful and tragic? All this represents just a sample of the issues and authors presented by Walden. A philosophy of photography, then, is not an instructional manual on how to take pictures, however much such a use of the word corresponds to a colloquial, though historically idiosyncratic (if not outright inaccurate), use of the term philosophy. That much contemporary philosophy characterizes itself as "analytic" is instructive in this regard. For an analysis is, after all, a breaking apart of things (-lysis) in order to return to an understanding of the thing broken apart (ana-). As such, the job of the philosopher is not so much to create any new knowledge but to be like, as Locke once put it, the humble janitor who clears away whatever intellectual rubbish lies in the way of genuine thought and creation. Yet, for all that, I think that the previous reviewer is a bit shortsighted in what can be taken from Walden's text. On the one hand, I would hardly take a text in analytical philosophy to be a how-to manual of anything. Walden's volume does what the highest caliber analytical philosophy is supposed to do: rigorously dissect in order to satisfy what Aristotle claimed gives birth to philosophy, namely wonder. On the other hand, precisely because the question of what photography is remains as open at the end of the volume as at the start, can we say that genuine thought about photography begins. Thus, I think reflection on Walden's volume cannot but affect how one views and practices photography, be one a philosopher or photographer, professional or otherwise.

I'm a photographer who will do anything to try to improve the quality of the images I capture. That includes looking at all kinds of books that at first might appear to have little to do with photography. However, a book entitled "Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature" seemed like it might have something to offer me. The book is a collection of essays from a series of modern philosophers who are concerned about photography. It emphasizes two sub-fields of philosophy: epistemology, the study of how we know; and aesthetics, which deals with the nature of beauty and

art. The book covers a range from the questions of whether photography is an art and what the truth value of a photograph is to how it is that photographs have value to us and what is ethical behavior for a photographer. There is even a discussion of how the persona of a movie star effects the interpretation of the movie in which the star appears. The writing varies from interesting to entertaining to boring. Some of this is related, at least, to the density of the material presented and how far it is removed from our everyday considerations. For me, the most interesting essay was written by Arthur C. Danto, an aesthician who also wrote generally on art for the magazine "The Nation". After a circuitous approach Danto explores the ethics of photographic intrusion upon the lives of individuals. Luckily, the introduction by Scott Walden, the editor, provides a summary of each of the essays that I found useful to consult before reading each essay and occasionally after. Typically, one of the essays contends that photography can not be an art because the photographer through mechanical means captures only what is in front of his lens. Most photographers will point out that even though this is true, photographers can control what is in front of the lens to convey some vision as to the nature of the subject. More importantly, the value of photographic images may not depend on whether photography is an art. I was reminded of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who argued that philosophy required that one must first define terms and that it was impossible to define the terms. He then quit the profession of philosophy. (I'm certain that I have simplified the story to make my point.) Undoubtedly, philosophy has great value for those who are concerned with the larger questions of life, and perhaps all questioning people who hope to lead an intellectual life must consider it. And yet, as I might have expected, my final conclusion is that there is little to be learned from the speculations of the philosophers when it comes to improving photographic skills or learning how to read a photograph. If you are concerned with those larger questions, I suppose this book may be of interest. For the average photographer, I expect that this book will help them find a vision and turn it into a communicative image not one wit.

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