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Visual Depiction of Impossibility and Hans Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521)

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Introduction: Science Under Less than Optimal Conditions

[1] Long gone is the idea that in science, or in the observation ingredient in science, objects are presented nakedly to the senses, without the intermediary of theory; or at least that idea is largely absent among those acquainted with the rudiments of contemporary philosophy of science. And that is just the beginning of the various changes in our understanding of science since roughly the time of Kant. Taken together, these changes indicate that though science is indeed a good or even the best way of gaining knowledge of the sensible world, caution is needed when we try to understand precisely how we gain this knowledge.

[2] It is required, for example, whenever conditions for observation are less than optimal, and also whenever there is reason to think that assumptions built into a scientific theory may not square with the particular kind of sensible object being observed. Caution is required under these conditions, despite the fact that popular enthusiasm for science, to which even

practicing scientists are not immune, tends to prefer acting as if it is not required and that we know antecedently that there are no naturally occurring impediments or limits to science.

[3] Consider in this regard the general domain of the human sciences, and the recent spate of exotic psychological syndromes, drawn to our attention either directly, through those sciences, or indirectly, though means imbued with the noted, popular enthusiasm. Remarkably often, diagnosis of such a syndrome is taken straightforwardly to be a matter of observing patterns of behavior, without much concern at all for background theory, in terms of which the observation is conducted. In the case of dissociative identity disorder, for example, it turns out that probably the high rate of diagnosis in the 1980s and 90s was the result of iatrogenesis as much or more than anything else. The scientific diagnostician seems to have produced, or helped to produce, in the patient the very syndrome that he took himself to be observing, and which he was indeed observing. But it turns out he was not observing behavior that was simply there, nakedly present in the patient being observed. Given the then prevailing theory of that disorder, and his own diagnostic and therapeutic practices, he was in a sense observing behavior he had produced or helped to produce.

[4] In those cases there was direct observation of the patient by the diagnostician. The situation only gets more problematic when the patient is historically removed from the patient. The subject could be long dead, for example, meaning that symptoms would have to be identified retrospectively, without direct observation, from the scientific record alone. If there were no such record, the situation would of course be worse still. The historical or literary or some other kind of record would have to suffice, as the source of observational data, even though that data would not have been collected with the usual scientific concern for control of the conditions in which the observation occurs. Either that, or the very idea that the identification could be genuinely scientific would have to be abandoned. And that might well be hard to do, even for a scientist, given the popular tendency to oversimplify science, and the accompanying social or economic pressure to act as if there are no naturally occurring impediments or limits to science.



Figure 1. *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, by Hans Holbein the Younger (1521)

[5] Religious believers feel that pressure as much as anyone, quite apart from complications in observation, of the kind just rehearsed. In the case of visual religious art, for example, there is reason to think that theory sometimes brought to bear on the particular kind of object observed, by someone removed from us historically, just does not square with the specifically religious nature of that object. Consider as a case in point the novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, who died in 1881, and who in 1864, while traveling in Switzerland, observed Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521), and apparently stood mesmerized before it for a period of roughly twenty minutes.

An Account of Dostoevsky Before Holbein's *Dead Christ*

[6] The neurosurgeon Edson Jose Amancio has recently claimed that Dostoevsky *might have* presented the symptoms of Stendahl's syndrome when observing Holbein's painting on that occasion since there is, as Amancio puts it, "evidence" for such a claim (Amancio: 1099). Stendahl's syndrome occurs among those of a highly sensitive nature, who while traveling, view especially beautiful or powerful art. The symptoms are emotional disturbance, crises of panic and anxiety, and also what is usually termed "altered perception of reality." There is no account in the pertinent scientific literature of what reality is, or how it is structured, so that it can then be determined just how perception of it has been "altered," in the sense appropriate to identifying Stendahl's syndrome. Altered perception of reality is apparently taken to be any perception, which is out of the ordinary, in some vague, theoretically unspecified sense of "ordinary."

[7] Amancio's argument is based on two indirect sources of evidence, and those alone, neither of which rises very high toward the epistemic ideals of science. Both are marginally historical. The first is a single, uncorroborated memoir, and the second is a single case of apparently autobiographical fiction. The first are the memoirs of Dostoevsky's wife, Anna Gregorievna, which record her observations of him as he viewed Holbein's painting. The second is Dostoevsky's own novel, *The Idiot*, in which the character, Myshkin, which literary critics frequently take to be a fictional surrogate for Dostoevsky himself, describes the painting and his reaction to it. Dostoevsky *may have* suffered from Stendahl's syndrome, or so Amancio argues, *just because* there is some straightforward (or superficial) similarity between the symptoms of the syndrome, and what is recorded in Gregorievna's observations and in the novel.

[8] The evidence cited by Amancio would be objectionably tenuous, on standard scientific grounds, *if* he had drawn the conclusion that Dostoevsky *actually did* present the symptoms of Stendahl's syndrome, or for that matter, even that there is *some likelihood* that he did. However, his conclusion that Dostoevsky *may have* presented the symptoms is so weak that it is decidedly unclear exactly what he is doing in offering his account. Perhaps Amancio is inviting us to further explore the incident in question and perhaps inadvertently inviting us to explore the dangers of science under conditions unfavorable for doing science. I accept this invitation.

[9] One way to explore both sources of evidence would be to consider alternatives to the theory or the sensibility that Dostoevsky himself brought to bear, as he interpreted his own reaction to the painting. This approach is recommended both by the fact that Amancio does little or nothing to help us understand that theory or sensibility, but assumes it at face value, and by a certain tendency in both history and literature, on the one hand, and science or the popularized versions of science, on the other, to make substantive assumptions about the structure of reality without scrutinizing those assumptions. In the present case these assumptions could and I think do make a difference in how we understand religious art. Certainly, Dostoevsky was not immune to this tendency, as we will see.

[10] In what follows, I articulate one key feature of an alternative to the implicit theory that Dostoevsky himself apparently brought to bear on the interpretation of his experience when he viewed Holbein's painting, a theory assumed uncritically by Amancio. I will not be

concerned with any other feature of Dostoevsky's sensibility, except insofar as it is informed by his own theory, which I suppose he took to be something very much like so-called common sense.

[11] I develop this alternative not in terms of the first two symptoms of Stendahl's syndrome, emotional disturbance and crises of panic and anxiety, but only in terms of the third, "altered perception of reality." I develop this alternative in terms of a logical assumption typically thought necessary for doing science, by both the scientist, if only when he is being less than fully careful, and by the scientifically uninitiated, who are in the habit of deferring too quickly to science. The assumption is that the structure of reality always and everywhere conforms to the principle of non-contradiction. My alternative matches Amancio's claim, in being really nothing more than a claim about what *may be* the case.

[12] The point is to show the danger of unbridled or popularized science, as it is brought to bear on religious art, by establishing the noted epistemic parity. Given such parity, there is no reason to prefer Amancio's apparently scientific account to the alternative. Unless I am mistaken, however, the inclination to prefer the apparently scientific account will remain, which suggests that we are predisposed to overlook just how unusual the objects of religious art might be. This is a distinct possibility, even on the part of those, like Dostoevsky, who otherwise seem remarkably sensitive to religious matters.

Dostoevsky's Idea of a Machine-Body

[13] There is no disputing that normally reality conforms to the principle of non-contradiction. No object or state of affairs normally both has, and fails to have, at the same time, and in the same respect, a given property. Holbein's painting, the physical object through which a particular art object appears, is no exception. Invoking the standard philosophical distinction typically made in this context, I call the first *Holbein's painting*, and the second, the art object somehow associated with that painting, *Holbein's art object*, meaning the particular art object we somehow observe through the medium of his painting.

[14] What does Holbein's art object depict? Does it depict a normal object or state of affairs that conforms to the principle of non-contradiction? Could it depict something abnormal, which does not conform to that principle? These questions may seem obtuse, from the perspective of common sense, but the situation is quite different if considered philosophically.

[15] We know from Gregorievna's testimony that when he began to observe the painting Dostoevsky stood there "stunned" for some few moments, as if he were beginning to experience the onset of the very kind of epileptic seizure to which he was susceptible. She then left the room, apparently because the sight of him persisting in that state was too much for her emotionally.

[16] Upon returning, after roughly twenty minutes, she observed him standing in the same place, still with the same appearance of being stunned, or as she also puts it, "oppressed" or "agitated" by what he was observing. She describes his face as exhibiting "a kind of fear," familiar to her she says from the onset of his epileptic seizures, even though, in this case, no seizure had actually occurred, or would occur anytime during the period shortly after they left the painting together. Gregorievna does give, at one level of analysis, an account of what

she thinks Holbein's art object depicts. She says that both it and his painting depict "Christ after his inhuman martyrdom, now taken down from the cross and in the process of decomposition" (Amancio: 1101). At another level of analysis, however, she gives no account of what Holbein's painting depicts. She says nothing about what she takes to be named by her use of the word "Christ." Myshkin, in *The Idiot*, offers a similar account, though he adds the missing detail, by comparing Holbein's painting with other paintings in the genre.

[17] Myshkin, who I assume is speaking for Dostoevsky, says that Holbein's art object depicts "Christ just after having been taken down from the cross." He emphasizes, that Christ has *just* been taken down, whereas less precisely, Gregorievna says only that it depicts him *after* having been taken down. It depicts, she says, Christ as having started to decompose, and gives as an example the tumescence of the face. Myshkin agrees, in effect, but adds that even so there is yet no rigidity in the face, or the rest of the body, since it has *just* been taken down. The tumescent face can and still does bear the visible imprint of tremendous suffering, and it would not, he says, if it had so much as started to turn rigid. The face then lacks entirely even the vestiges of what he calls the "extraordinary beauty," the serene after-death beauty, which typifies other paintings in the genre of the dead Christ, even as they by and large somehow also manage to preserve visible signs of the suffering just endured. In these other paintings, even though they presumably depict Christ after or just after being removed from the cross, there may or may not be the impression of rigidity. There may or may not be a lingering visible impression of recent, extreme suffering, though there typically is. But there will typically be the impression of serene, after death beauty, or so Myshkin claims.

[18] Holbein's painting depicts, Myshkin also insists, by that very comparison within the appropriate genre, no more than "the corpse of a man." And then he tells us, exercising the poet's prerogative (Ledbetter: 1-9), it would seem, what we *must* imagine, if we are to see in Holbein's art object what *he has seen*, or what is presumably *actually there*, to be seen, put there by Holbein or not.

[19] We must imagine, Myshkin insists, that nature and the human bodies within it are what he calls "monsters" in the sense that they are depicted as only marginally what they really are (Des Chene: 205-10). They are being depicted as really or fully a kind of "machine," while in fact they are not. At most, they bear some surface similarity to machines, but they are not really machines. By virtue of this fact, by virtue then of what Holbein's art object actually depicts, Myshkin says, many *are made to lose their faith*. At another point he says, by contrast, only that the painting *could* produce a loss of faith. Without further elaboration, and none is given by Myshkin, or Dostoevsky, for that matter, the idea that Holbein's art object simply *could make some contribution to the loss faith*, is insignificant, for present purposes. Presumably even God could do that, by for instance hardening the heart of Pharaoh (Exodus: 9:12). I assume then that Dostoevsky meant that the Holbein painting at least *tends to make* the viewer lose faith.

[20] Dostoevsky offers an explanation for why Holbein's painting has or tends to have that effect, which answers in turn the question of whether he thinks Holbein's art object depicts an object that conforms to the principle of non-contradiction. It depicts Christ as only a

man, with a body that is monstrous, that is, not only or exactly human, but only what Dostoevsky calls a “machine.” There is evidence from both the historical record, and his own literary work other than *The Idiot*, that Dostoevsky thought the key intellectual source of atheism in the modern world is the Enlightenment idea that the world and everything in it is some kind of machine. *The Brothers Karamazov* is routinely cast in this light, for instance, as a kind of literary manifesto (Guignon) against the machine model of the world, and its supposed implications.

The Alternative Introduced

[21] There are certain abnormal machines, known to us, which do not conform to the principle of non-contradiction, so-called quantum machines, for example, but all machines known to Dostoevsky were decidedly normal. Their structure and functioning conformed to the principle of non-contradiction. It follows, under the assumptions I have already noted, that when he took Holbein’s art object to depict what he called “Christ,” Dostoevsky assumed that the object depicted conformed to the principle of non-contradiction, because any normal machine does. By making that assumption, Dostoevsky was perhaps following without knowing or acknowledging it, a certain well-established theological and philosophical practice of assuming that if Christ as both God and man is the object of belief, then since belief must be rational, and since being rational conforms to the principle of non-contradiction, both Christ and the idea of Christ are no exception (Osler: 15-35). They too must conform to that principle.

[22] If both Christ and the idea of Christ did not conform to that principle, then for instance, no painting of Christ, Holbein’s or any other, since it is an ordinary physical object that conforms to the principle of non-contradiction, could actually manage, through its corresponding art object, to depict Christ; and this because both the art object and any possible form of depiction also conform to that principle. If they did not, the painting could not manage to depict anything at all, since no physical thing can depict what is logically impossible. For present purposes, the key assumption in this familiar line of inference is that no physical thing or work of visual art can depict what is logically impossible.

[23] Suppose for the sake of argument that when he stood before Holbein’s painting, Dostoevsky might have been observing a logically impossible object, impossible just because it does not conform to the principle of non-contradiction. Suppose, in other words, that if he did experience on that occasion an “altered perception of reality,” it was not merely a perception of some unusual object, a God-man who nonetheless conforms to the principle of non-contradiction, but an unusual because impossible object, which *nonetheless he did somehow perceive*, through Holbein’s art object. Suppose *that* is indeed what Dostoevsky did, when observing Holbein’s painting. On the additional, quite plausible assumption that this would be quite different than what is meant by “altered perception of reality” among those like Amancio who appeal to Stendhal’s syndrome, we have an alternative to that syndrome for explaining Dostoevsky’s behavior as he observed Holbein’s painting.

[24] But why think in the first place that the visual depiction of the impossible is or might be possible? In other words, why think that any physical thing, Holbein’s painting or any other, does or could depict an impossible object, impossible because it does not conform to the

principle of non-contradiction? Again, such questions may offend so-called common sense, but that is no obstacle to the case I am building.

[25] There is a lesson here to be learned from fiction, or the writing or speaking of fiction, and its relation to so-called paraconsistent logic (Burgess: 99-120) or logic which is tolerant of inconsistency, a lesson which may apply to the painting or visual fiction of Holbein. If it does, then though some theological impediment may remain, there is no philosophical impediment to thinking that when Dostoevsky viewed that painting and became mesmerized, he actually missed a crucial feature of what he was seeing, and so falsely described it, by describing what it depicted in terms of being a machine.

[26] Under this alternative explanation, Dostoevsky's faith may have been threatened, *not* by what he should have seen, or *actually was* in a sense seeing, without knowing it, or at least without being able to articulate it, but by what I suppose a theologian might call an idol of reason. A philosopher would call it an unjustified generalization about the structure of reality, unjustified by virtue of an uncritical, logical assumption.

Fiction and the Art of the Impossible

[27] Written or spoken fiction can be produced in a way that guarantees consistency, but it need not be. The paraconsistent logician Graham Priest tells a story, for instance, which has at the center an empty box that contains something. The story is a tribute to someone dead, who believed while alive that there are or could be such boxes. Priest says, in framing his fictional tribute, that it would be a poor tribute indeed to automatically think that the characters in the story are mistaken about the box or what it contains.

[28] Fiction and belief work the same when it comes to evaluation of certain claims regarding truth. If someone says sincerely that he believes something, then that is strong evidence he truly does believe it. If the author of a fiction sincerely says that something is part of his story, then that is strong evidence that it truly is part of his story. Testimony has significant evidential force, in other words, in both fiction and the formation and transmission of real-world belief, despite claims to the contrary by those modern philosophers largely responsible for suspicion regarding miracles, like Hume (Coady: 186-89). There is a sense then, in which Priest is reporting a logical "miracle," in his story about the empty box that contains something. The tomb was empty, Christians also think, and it does not matter in the least if it nonetheless had something in it, say a human body like the one depicted in Holbein's *Dead Christ*.

[29] I have been telling you a story about what Dostoevsky may have experienced when he viewed Holbein's painting. The story is admittedly fictional, and contains the fictional, or logically inconsistent object named "Christ," but even in science, postulated entities, which science cannot do without, are also fictional and also sometimes impossible, as when a quantum machine both is and is not in a certain state. When the object being described in fiction or science is unusual, so must the assumptions on the basis of which the object is described. A God-man is presumably unusual, to say the least, so unusual, perhaps, that describing Holbein's art object as a machine (Thompson), as Dostoevsky did, rather than a machine and not a machine, would miss entirely what is distinctive about it.

[30] Admittedly, I am only pretending to report my beliefs, as I tell my story about Dostoevsky before Holbein's painting, but that does not count against what I am doing, even when the context is science. Since any or all storytellers pretend, including the scientist who tells mathematically and experimentally sophisticated stories about the entities postulated by his preferred theory, anything that can be believed can be part of a story (Sorensen: 365). Even if I do not believe that as Dostoevsky stood before the painting, he observed Holbein's art object depicting a logically impossible object, I could believe it.

[31] And so could you, since you could tell the same story to yourself, either starting now, or after you master the rudiments of paraconsistent logic. If you do, then you will accept a system of belief regarding Dostoevsky and Holbein's art object, such that you affirm within that system a contradiction. However, either by taking it on my testimony, or by mastering the noted rudiments, you can affirm that contradiction without thereby reducing your system of belief to triviality, through logical explosion, the phenomenon in which everything follows from a contradiction. Triviality is to be avoided, it would seem, because on a standard interpretation of orthodox Christian belief, such belief is inconsistent with believing or accepting every belief.

[32] You can avoid logical explosion, provided that you make certain adjustments elsewhere in the system of your beliefs, including possibly dialetheism, or the view that some contradictions actually are true. For instance, supposing that the doctrine of Incarnation can be expressed only marginally, at the limits of expressibility, if it can be expressed at all, and that dialetheism is true, you might be required to abandon the validity of transitivity or disjunctive syllogism, for example. Presumably that cost, or one similar to it, would be worth it. Thinking the cost of dialetheism too high, you might instead be practically motivated by the apparent fact that it ought to be possible to reason within an inconsistent natural language in a controlled and discriminating way. Both options remain open to those who adopt a paraconsistent logic, and there are others as well.

[33] Dostoevsky could have done the same, at least in principle, as he stood before Holbein's painting in 1864, though under the alternative I am proposing, he probably did not. He can in a sense be excused from not doing so, since the innovations of paraconsistent logic, many of them inspired by recent improvements in the theory and technology of the machine, did not occur until after his death, and since in any case his preferences and skills did not go in the direction of logic. On those same grounds, however, it is more difficult to excuse Amancio, who assumes uncritically Dostoevsky's own apparent perspective regarding non-contradiction and the structure of machines.

[34] Viewed in paraconsistent terms, Holbein's painting of the dead Christ could be an inducement to faith, rather than a threat. Perhaps when Dostoevsky stood mesmerized before it, he exhibited not Stendahl's syndrome, or at least not the third symptom, altered perception of reality, under the standard construal of reality as always consistent, but rather only emotional disturbance, panic and anxiety. Perhaps in an entirely familiar way, those feelings simply caused him to miss the unusual, contradictory reality being depicted. Perhaps they did so in part, because he endorsed in effect a modern view of beauty, in which the perception of beauty has no significant cognitive element or precondition, but is done directly and only with the organs of perception, so to speak. Had Dostoevsky been better

prepared for what he perceived, when he stood before Holbein's painting, by recognizing either that dialetheism is true, in the case of Christ, or that he needed to reason within a system of Christian belief in a controlled and discriminating way, he might have seen not a machine-body, but a contradiction, inducing him to faith.

[35] Then again, perhaps instead he did see a contradictory reality, but felt stunned, or agitated, because under the logical assumptions he had made, Dostoevsky did not have the resources, despite his impressive imaginative powers, to articulate what was being depicted. Instead he appealed to what he knew of ordinary machines and similarities between them and human bodies. Perhaps then he succumbed to Bacon's idols of the theatre and the marketplace, without knowing it, a familiar enough phenomenon, even for literary artists observing visual religious art, and interpreting what they have supposedly observed, for the purposes of their own. Perhaps Dostoevsky saw what was there to be seen, but simply misrepresented it, when it came to his presumably autobiographical account of what he saw, in *The Idiot*.

Conclusion

[36] Those of course are not the only possibilities, under the alternative I have proposed. Dostoevsky could have felt as he did, and at the same time such feelings could have signaled the onset of an epileptic seizure, which was somehow prevented from becoming full blown by his viewing of Holbein's painting, as if Christ, the contradictory God-man, somehow used the painting as a tool for stopping short the natural process of having such a seizure. If there is a God, and if that God can perform a miracle through a natural event, then there is no *prima facie* reason that God could not perform a miracle through a human artifact, such as a painting.

[37] Scientists, I think, including Amancio, too often miss the trouble caused for them by religion and art, when optional assumptions about the structure of reality are not neglected. There is perhaps no better corrective to that inclination than familiarity with deviant logics and what they suggest about the structure of reality, especially perhaps the unusual reality presumably depicted by religious art. If Holbein's art object is a paraconsistent object, about which a contradiction is true, or even if instead we have some independent motivation for reasoning about it in a manner tolerant of contradiction, and if altered perception of reality is a necessary condition for Stendahl's syndrome, then Dostoevsky did not suffer from that syndrome as he stood before Holbein's painting in 1864.

[38] As I have argued, given the way both fiction and belief work, my alternative to Amancio's claim *may be* true. It is important to note that even though he begins by claiming only that his explanation may be true, Amancio eventually concludes that the evidence he has cited is "highly suggestive" that Dostoevsky experienced Stendhal's syndrome as he stood before Holbein's *Dead Christ*, no part of his argument actually supports the transition to this stronger claim. His argument consists of nothing more than the accumulation of second-hand reports, few of them at that, with no consideration of alternatives. It fails to meet even the most minimal conditions of good, abductive inference (McCullagh).

[39] Admittedly, Amancio's original or weaker claim still *may be* true, though there is no reason to think that it is likely to be true. There is epistemic parity between his explanation,

and my own, and no more reason to believe one than the other. If, however, I had to predict, I would predict that you, a character introduced into my story at what I hope is just the right point, at paragraph 29 above, the point best suited for raising doubts about following the lead of Amancio, and Myshkin, and their oversimplified or popularized view of science, will likely continue to follow their lead, though you are rationally unjustified in doing so.

[40] Why will you likely do that? So far as I can tell, the answer is that you will continue to think that either dialetheism cannot be true, or that the more practical motivation for paraconsistent logic does not guarantee that such logic actually describes the structure of any reality, and this from some automatic deferral to what you vaguely understand to be “science.” Perhaps all that can be said in response is that this inclination on your part may well have some other source (Wolfson: 103) than what you apparently think it has.

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