

On the equality of different professions, with Salvador Dali

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Abstract. Are the leading members of different fields comparable in their achievements? Is the A-grade painter (or A* if that is your top grade) somehow equivalent to the A-grade boxer, say? I would like to think so, but there is a problematic piece of data for me, though there is a philosophical question of why it is problematic: I find some brief remarks from a certain painter as funny as the jokes of leading comedians. In the appendix, I cast doubt on my characterization of Salvador Dali's humour as not trading on English language ambiguity.

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"I won't pay, I won't pay, I won't pay":

For this kind of grade A?

Imagine that you are a high achieving figure in your field and you are pushing someone around. Then someone else comes along and intervenes and says, "I am a high-achieving member of another field. Let's sit down and talk about this in a civilized way." I have heard a story that something like this actually happened, involving A.J. Ayer. But what if you replied "Yours is not a field on the level of my field"? I would like to say that $A=A$, by which I metaphorically mean that the A-grade in one field is somehow equal to the A-grade in another field, or whatever the top grade is. But there is a problematic piece of data, at least from my point of view and a philosophical question of why it is problematic.

Salvador Dali is chiefly renowned as a painter. But I happen to like some brief amusing remarks by him. I like his well-known line “Have no fear of perfection, you will never reach it.” And I like this piece of dialogue:

DALI: I adore flies. I am only happy in the sun, naked and covered with flies.

COCCYX WOMAN: But how is it possible to love being covered with flies? It’s so dirty.

DALI: I hate dirty flies. I only love the very cleanest flies. (1966: 159)

Imagine bringing Dali back. He is watching some English comedians who make a string of brief jokes, “one-line merchants” I believe they are called. Many of these jokes are not translatable, because they depend on double-meanings in English. Dali declares that he can beat all of them and when speaking in English. He never, or hardly ever, exploits such local linguistic features. He effectively writes for translation, which seems a handicap. Nevertheless, I suspect he would achieve his boast or get very close, although surely it is a very competitive industry and there are numerous failures.¹

I feel there is some route from the boast “I am one of the world’s top painters, and I can also beat the whole of your field” to your field is not as demanding, though I am not exactly sure of the route. This is not a very professional paper, I am afraid! It may be protested that for the painter example to function as a challenge, then the painting and the brief verbal comedy must be more separate than they actually are. Imagine two countries with a border region which one can cross easily and border people. Some may compare Dali’s conceived move from painting to comedy to that. A more “serious” painter has to go comic.



¹ If a professional comedian read this, I fear he would be of the opinion: “I’ve got past lots of barriers to reach this level while the writer of this paper surely regards himself as much better at composing jokes and sketches, etc., like a person who scores well on quiz shows in the privacy of his house, himself being the one who keeps score.”

Appendix

I think on reflection Dali may be more involved with features of English than I supposed. For example, “Henry Moore: he is an Englishman!” (1966: 88. He’s not a moor.) Also the opening line of the opening poem comes from a song.

References

Dali, S. 1966. *Diary of a Genius*. London: Hutchinson.

The Offspring. 2017. Why Don’t You Get A Job? Accessed from:

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