

PERSPECTIVES, POINTS OF VIEW, AND FRAMES. ON THE POSSIBILITY OF EVALUATING POINTS OF VIEW¹

*PERSPECTIVAS, PUNTOS DE VISTA Y MARCOS.
SOBRE LA POSIBILIDAD DE EVALUAR PUNTOS DE VISTA*

Andrés L. Jaume

10.26754/ojs_arif/arif.2024211340

ABSTRACT

This collaboration addresses the difference between the concepts of perspective, point of view, and conceptual framework. This distinction allows us to avoid the problem of circularity in philosophical perspectivism while preventing us from falling into relativism. The basic notion is perspective, and points of view are understood as ways of conceptualizing certain aspects of reality. Conceptual frameworks are seen as systems of points of view that can have a greater or lesser scope. Finally, the concept of personal flourishing is proposed as the ultimate criterion for determining how it is possible to improve one's point of view, since it is assumed that not all points of view have the same value, against skeptical assumptions, and that consequently, there is no room for vicious circularity in the philosophical perspectivism upheld here.

KEYWORDS: circularity, frame, perspective, point of view, relativism.

RESUMEN

La presente colaboración aborda la diferencia entre los conceptos de perspectiva, punto de vista y marco conceptual. Esta distinción nos permite evitar el problema de la circularidad en el perspectivismo filosófico a la vez que impide caer en el relativista. La noción básica es perspectiva, los puntos de vista se entienden como maneras de conceptualizar ciertos aspectos de la realidad. Los marcos conceptuales son vistos, así como sistemas de puntos de vista que pueden tener un alcance mayor o menor. Finalmente se propone el concepto de plenitud personal como criterio

¹ This publication is part of the R&D&I project PID2022-142120NB-I00 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by “ERDF A way to make Europe”.

último para establecer cómo es posible mejorar el punto de vista, ya que se asume que no todos tienen el mismo valor en contra de los presupuestos escépticos y que, en consecuencia, no hay lugar para una circularidad viciosa en el perspectivismo filosófico que aquí se sostiene.

PALABRAS CLAVE: circularidad, marco, perspectiva, punto de vista, relativismo.

1. POINTS OF VIEW COME INTO CONFLICT

All our access to reality presupposes a point of view. A point of view acts like a spotlight: it illuminates certain areas, leaves others in shadow, and obscures some aspects entirely. This inherent limitation often leads to considering one's point of view as absolute. However, reality vastly exceeds our capacities; we cannot grasp it in its entirety. Thus, truth is always given to us in perspective, and it would be an act of intellectual arrogance to think that it is only as it appears to us. The opposite scenario can also occur—believing there is nothing we can do in the face of reality, as an infinity of viewpoints might exist. In this case, condemned to a Pyrrhonian skepticism, we might fall silent or, at most, utter some of the familiar sceptical slogans: «I know nothing», «I determine nothing».

At the heart of any sceptical position lies a strong relativist stance that paradoxically seeks to establish itself as absolute. For this reason, scepticism, as Hegel noted in Chapter IV of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, remains «a childish quarrel», merely a moment in the progression toward absolute knowledge.

In the following pages, we will not pursue Hegel's thesis, which points to the end of investigative enterprise—a promised land signalling the conclusion of the history of our efforts. Instead, we will recall with Kant that we have only the critical path (Kant, 1998: 704, A 865/B 884)—a methodological scepticism that becomes a discerning, critical attitude enabling progress in the advancement of knowledge without succumbing to a strong version of relativism that would incapacitate us for rational inquiry.

Leaving from a particular point of view is no easy task. An epistemic subject is situated within reality and projects a point of view onto it. That said, nothing prevents this epistemic subject from being either an individual or a collective entity. Thus, it is acknowledged that there may be personal and collective points of view. As long as a given point of view does not fail—that is, as long as it maintains a certain *entente cordiale* with reality—there is no reason to doubt it. And this naive,

trusting attitude is typical of someone who does not question anything forcibly. Let us consider two examples:

- An individual epistemic subject holds a certain point of view and may change it or be compelled to do so. For instance, an individual might espouse particular political positions in their youth and later, in maturity, adopt a different perspective. Similarly, their tastes may evolve over time, or they may shift from defending one theory to another. Various factors can explain these changes. However, our interest here is in examining personal points of view in terms of their epistemic dimension, particularly their capacity to affirm truth.
- An individual *S* may defend proposition *p* at time *t1* and then defend *not-p* at time *t2*.

When Socrates questions his fellow citizens, they are forced to examine one or many of their common-sense assumptions, thereby questioning their points of view in some way. These points of view may pertain to various aspects, though not necessarily all conceptual content. A partial review suffices.

Sometimes, however, it is not the individual who changes their perspective but, rather, the epoch itself. When a particular set of beliefs we accepted uncritically collapses—such as during the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Age—we are similarly forced to change our perspective, reconciling everyday experience within a new frame. Thus, history, too, can be relativizing, making what was once true no longer so. How, then, can we guarantee our assertions? How can we avoid thinking that all knowledge is ultimately provisional?

In both cases, we observe a shift in perspective—either personal or collective. One might claim progress has occurred, that the abandoned point of view is inferior compared to the newly adopted one. However, anyone making such a claim must confront the possibility that they are caught in a vicious circle. They will argue that the initial point of view is inferior relative to the second because the second satisfies criteria unmet by the first. But are not criteria themselves also points of view? For instance, an education economist might argue that the school system is inefficient because it wastes resources, advocating for strict screening at the end of primary education to minimize such waste. Meanwhile, from an ethical perspective, it might be argued that the focus should not be on maximum efficiency but on universal access to education. The economist might counter that such ideals are fine but require resources without which educational plans will fail entirely. Should we then suspend judgment, asserting that both are merely points

of view and that one is as valid as the other? Or should we continue evaluating the disagreement? If so, by what criterion? It seems necessary to seek a solution that incorporates the truth contained within each position.

2. PERSPECTIVES, POINTS OF VIEW, AND FRAMES

If points of view were beyond evaluation, we would fall into a strong form of relativistic skepticism, where all points of view would have equal value because none would surpass the others. However, stating that one is better than another already implies evaluation, which we regularly do. For example, we might say it is better to be warm in the cold or to be healthy rather than ill. Evaluation implies normativity, an essential characteristic of human life.

Thus, points of view are ubiquitous and inescapable, yet we cannot abandon normative and evaluative questions. This necessitates an ultimate criterion, as will soon become evident, but also requires distinctions. Not all points of view are equal, nor do they all belong to the same category. Hence, it is necessary to determine whether the notions of a point of view, a frame, and a perspective are equivalent. In the literature, we encounter various approaches to this significant question. Some adhere to the model of propositional attitudes, while others emphasize what is done when adopting a point of view, as in Moline's model (1968). This author considers points of view as modes of accessing reality from specific positions that aim to satisfy certain expected behaviours. Other authors, such as Hautamäki, see points of view as ways of conceptualizing reality, while Adrian Moore treats them as positions. Clearly, the debate is open.² However, the issue is not determining who is correct but clarifying what cannot be resolved through the common use of terms. Thus, a terminological decision must be made.

At first glance, relying on everyday language usage, the distinction between these terms is rather vague. In ordinary discourse, we may use one term or another interchangeably, depending on the context. However, philosophical clarity necessitates distinguishing the meanings of these terms through some form of convention. That is what we will now undertake.

By perspective, we will understand the most basic and common elements of viewpoints and conceptual frames. Perspective is, metaphorically speaking, the lens through which cognitive access to reality manifests. One evidences a perspective on Earth by believing it to be round, or on the object one seeks to know by referring

² For a review of the different positions, see Liz, M. (2013).

to it. Perspective has an intentional and attentional character; it is directed toward something else but reveals a particular mode of access, as perspective selects aspects of the object that the subject considers relevant for their investigation or interaction with the object. A perspective is a viewpoint, situated not just within a subject but also positioned more broadly. Most importantly, perspective is not limited solely to conceptuality; it includes non-conceptual elements. The world can be seen in colours, not in black and white; it has a particular tint. One can have a hopeful or hopeless, positive or negative perspective, and so on.

With perspective as a foundational concept, we can now distinguish at least two types of viewpoints. The subject evidences their perspective from a particular circumstantiality that allows them access to the world. This access materializes in a specific viewpoint, which is a way of conceptualizing the world, that is, of understanding it and knowing how to navigate it. It is no coincidence that cognitive access to the world is mediated by concepts. We do not move through the world conceptually “naked”, but rather well-equipped with concepts. Thus, viewpoints are conceptual perspectives on the world, and for this reason, we can say they are ways of thinking and acting in the world. Through concepts, one performs actions, judges, and determines that something is a certain way. In the case of alethic judgment—the one that interests us cognitively—one affirms that the world is a certain way and not another.

We will confine the possession of viewpoints to creatures capable of having concepts, without delving into the question of what a concept is³ or the conditions for possessing them. Broadly speaking, viewpoints involve concepts as a way of thinking about the aspects selected by perspective. Thus, we have: (a) Personal viewpoints and (b) Collective viewpoints, i.e., the way a collective subject, such as a social institution, conceptualizes a reality. For example, in the penal code, human actions can be criminal or non-criminal, regardless of how morality conceptualizes them. Lying is not always a crime, though it may be morally reprehensible. Institutions exhibit a viewpoint different from that of individual subjects. Until recently, a pet was legally considered a “thing”, not a person; the legal frame was insensitive to the value or dignity one might attribute to a pet and placed it on the same level as a table or chair. Collective viewpoints do not belong to individual subjects but have a distinct reality—an institutional reality that does

³ On this point, the specialized literature is very extensive. For a very simple introduction to the topic, cf. Jaume, A. L. (2018). The anthology of Margolis, E. and Laurence, S. (1999) gives a good overview of the different theories.

not result from the mere sum of individuals but transcends the individual, forming the social fabric.

Finally, we have frames. A frame is much broader than a mere viewpoint. A frame exhibits systematicity across various viewpoints. In other words, a viewpoint is not isolated but articulated in relation to other viewpoints, and this articulation constitutes a frame. A frame, therefore, is a system of concepts. Not all frames are equal, however. We distinguish at least two levels: a macro-frame, or what has traditionally been called a worldview, and various levels of micro-frames or local frames.

A macro-frame, as already mentioned, is a worldview. It is a type of abstract entity that goes far beyond an individual subject. Rather, the individual subject participates in this image in which, in a certain sense, they simply exist. However, the necessary division of intellectual labour requires the development of smaller, localized frame. We will generically call these micro-frames. A micro-frame involves a finer-grained conceptualization of reality. It does not aim to think generically about the whole but rather about a specific portion of reality, sometimes larger, sometimes smaller. The reference to large or small is established in relation to the human scale or the mesocosmic world—that is, the world of interactions visible and tangible to us, with which we engage daily and pre-reflectively. Thus, we may have the micro-frame of the gardener, the microbiologist, the macroeconomist, or the jurist. Interactions with reality are focused through a viewpoint that evidences the interest of the epistemic agent intellectually working on a specific portion of reality—precisely that portion and not another. This is why we say there is a division of epistemic labour. Only the philosopher has the possibility of thinking about the most general image of the world. For this reason, the philosopher can adopt a speculative viewpoint, as they can survey reality and think about it, provided they do not fall into the illusion of being outside the world.

3. THE EVALUATIVE QUESTION

It is evident that tensions can arise between different conceptual frame. In fact, conceptual frameworks are not detached from people. People have tendencies that lead them to align with one frame or another. A person whose vital interest is theory is not the same as someone whose primary interest is power or money. These are different ways of engaging with life, of deploying concepts. Note, however, that this vital alignment goes beyond concepts; it is akin to a temperament toward reality, depending on perspective. Thus, perspectives themselves differ.

The idea of different perspectives gives us insight into what is important to each person. The existence of different types of people leads us to the existence of different criteria for evaluation. The focus of the *homo theoreticus* is not the same as that of the *homo oeconomicus*. However, the fact that one is engrossed in the pursuit of truth and the other employs it for profit already hints at the ultimate criterion at play to assert that not everything holds the same value. We seek, however, an ultimate criterion that stands as an unquestionable response to relativism, which, in my view, is human flourishing.

The pursuit of happiness or human fulfilment drives life itself. Every living being seeks to root itself in life with a certain degree of well-being; humans, moreover, who know they will die, desire a full life. They must convince themselves that, in light of such finitude, suicide is not the answer, and that life is worth living. They achieve this by creating an ideal of the good life, a conception of the best that guides their lives. Let us not forget that the underlying question of scepticism is precisely this: the supreme good, the Pyrrhonist tells us, consists in ataraxia, achieved by suspending judgment. However, the history of the West has been the history of a search for truth, not for impassivity and serenity detached from truth.

For this reason, viewpoints are also evaluable, as we can discern better ways of being in the world—understood as better ways of relating to reality. What, then, is a good way of being in the world? It is one that leads me to a personal flourishing. And what is a better way of being in the world? It is one that leads me more directly to flourishing. Fulfilment is an ideal that regulates our actions. Viewpoints fall under the influence of this ideal, which then appears as a regulative ideal.

Andrés L. Jaume
 Universidad de las Islas Baleares
 andres.jaume@uib.es

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- HAUTAMÄKI, A. (2020): *Viewpoint relativism. A new approach to epistemological relativism based on the concept of points of view*, Heidelberg: Springer.
- HEGEL, G. W. F. (2018): *Phenomenology of spirit*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- JAUME, A.L. (2018): *Preliminares al estudio de la Teoría del Conocimiento*, Madrid: Sínderesis.
- KANT, I. (1998): *Critique of pure reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LIZ, M. (2013): “Analizando la noción de punto de vista”, in M. Liz (ed.), *Puntos de vista. Una investigación filosófica*, Barcelona: Laertes, pp. 21-164.
- MARGOLIS, E. & LAURENCE, S. (1999): *Concepts. Core readings*, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- MOLINE, J. (1968): “On points of view”, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 5, pp. 191-198.