

“Concepts in Motion” in Perspectival Considerations of the Reality

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Näkökulman käsite viittaa havaitsemiseen ja kielelliseen ajatteluun, joka koostuu monista tekijöistä. Jotkut näistä tekijöistä liittyvät tarkastelemaan subjektiin, jotkut tarkasteluvälineisiin ja jotkut tarkastelun kohteeseen. Todellisuuden käsitteellinen pohdiskelu ja rakentaminen ovat käsitteellisen ajattelun ”perspektiivistä liikettä”, joka etenee havaitisijaan liittyvistä tekijöistä käsitteellisten välineiden kautta objektiin liittyviin tekijöihin. Tämä on usein edestakainen prosessi, koska näkökulman objektiin liittyvät tekijät voivat vaikuttaa sekä käytetyn käsitteistön valintaan että havaitisijan intresseihin.

Keywords: point of view, perspective, observing subject, conceptual tools, object of observation

1 Introduction

This paper provides a philosophical analysis of the perspectival nature of conceptual thinking. The topic has been discussed, although not very systematically, particularly in the philosophy of hermeneutics, and authors such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer have acquainted us with the fact that our thinking and understanding are always perspectival, i.e., historically, culturally, socially, and in many other ways conditioned and situated. The paper contributes to this discussion by introducing and developing the notion of perspectival dynamics of conceptual thinking. Its main claim is that the conceptual reflection of reality is a “perspectival motion” of conceptual thinking that proceeds from observer-related factors through conceptual tools to object-related factors. This undoubtedly abstract notion is explained and illustrated with examples. Some of the ideas presented are based on my previous article concerning the concept of a point of view, with some elaborations and omissions (Lehtonen 2011).

2 Tentative remarks on the concept of point of view

Although language has many functions other than the simple representation or reflection of reality, the following discussion will focus on these cognitive uses

of language. Among conceptual tools, I include—in the customary manner—concepts, metaphors, models, theories, and frameworks. Perspectivity, for its part, is a general feature of our epistemic endeavours, and we usually observe or consider things from some point of view instead of from no point of view.

Although the term “point of view” is used both in everyday language and in science, its meaning is vague and unspecific. In its concrete sense, a point of view refers to the physical, spatial, and temporal position from which something is seen or viewed. Figuratively, a point of view refers to the perspective from which a subject or event is perceived or a story narrated. This second meaning is closely related to a third: a point of view can also refer to a person’s mental position or attitude. The component analysis of the concept of a point of view that I will present here focuses mainly on the figurative meanings of a point of view (i.e., the second and third meanings).

The analysis will group the components of points of view into observer-related, tools-related, and object-related factors. Conceptual apparatuses and frameworks that are the main focus of the paper are involved in tools-related factors, which also involve the method of or approach to viewing, and the basis of viewing or the data (i.e., source material). Thus I consider a point of view to be a complex epistemological concept in which we can distinguish different components or variables such as the observer, his/her interests and concerns; the social, cultural, and historical contexts; the method or approach to observation; and the focus of observation. I also assume that a point of view is related to the ideas of limited perception and partial information about objects. In this, I follow Antti Hautamäki (1986) who has presented a thorough object-oriented analysis of the concept of a point of view.

3 A component analysis of the concept of a point of view

Although the meaning of the term “point of view” is vague, Hautamäki suggests that at least one common feature is evident in the different uses of the expression “from *x*’s point of view”: namely that it can act as a kind of operator which can be used as a prefix at the beginning of a sentence. The expression “from *x*’s point of view” indicates that the grounds for stating the sentence that follows are somehow restrictive and limiting. As such, nothing is surprising about this, since information acquired by humans is always limited. This is so because our capacity for data processing is limited (both in terms of quality and quantity) and

because our knowledge acquisition is interest- and background-knowledge-dependent as well as perspective-bounded. Therefore, if a statement is made from a certain point of view, then not everything has been taken into account or not all relevant possibilities have been considered; rather, only some of the aspects of an object are selected, depending on interests, aims, values, background assumptions, and so on. Thus a selective mechanism is associated with a point of view. For this reason, it can be said that “from x ’s point of view” is, in a sense, an antonym to “absolutely” or “thoroughly” (Hautamäki 1986: 63, 65).

It is a truism of everyday life as well as of scientific investigation that all of reality can never be taken into account, and that certain aspects that can be observed and that are considered particularly relevant are “selected”, while others are ignored. Therefore when we consider something from a point of view, we supposedly only perceive part, or some of the aspects or properties, of that thing. Even if we may think we see a material object in its entirety, for example, we actually see only those properties of the object that our apparatus of sense perception and the actual observational conditions make it possible to see. Our “resolution power” and analytic capacity are limited (and more limited for some than for others), hence our point of view is connected with partial or incomplete information. A point of view, then, represents openness to the world, and simultaneously a certain kind of limited or partial perspective. This perspectivity is not limited only to perceptual observation, but is also met in abstract thinking and rational deduction such as arithmetic and conceptual analysis. To take an example, we can substitute x with either 12 or $5 + 7$ in the equation $7 + 5 = x$, depending on whether we intend to present the result of the addition or the commutative property of it.

The “location”, or viewing-point of the observer, is one of the elements of a point of view. A viewing-point is literally a spatial location, but it can also be in a metaphorical sense a cultural, historical, or ideological location. Therefore three main elements of a point of view can be distinguished: the viewing-point, the range of the point of view, and the focus of the point of view. If we borrow optical terms, it can be said that insofar as a point of view has a clear focus, everything else in the range of the point of view in question (i.e., that which is unfocused) is part of the more or less fuzzy environment surrounding the focal point.

We can also distinguish between observer-oriented points of view and object- or focus-oriented ones. This distinction can be illustrated by imagining a tube through which we look at our surroundings. At one end of the tube, is the eye of

the observer. At the other end, is a view. When a point of view is considered someone's or as belonging to someone, we have an observer-oriented concept of a point of view. When a point of view is considered to be directed toward something, we have an object- or focus-oriented concept of a point of view.

The tube itself can also be part of what we see when we look through it at our surroundings. Similarly, the "limits" of a point of view can appear in the view we get when we consider something from a specific point of view. Therefore a point of view can raise factors and features (e.g., needs, interests, concerns) that would not appear if reality were seen from a different point of view. To put it another way, the properties and structure of a tube (or of a point of view itself) form new constellations (and "colourations") together with the view that opens from the tube—constellations that would not appear there if the tube were not there (or if the point of view were different).

Points of view are not neutral or impartial—they do not leave everything as it is. Instead, they are constructive because they actively contribute to what is or can be seen or considered. A related fact is that a person's opinions correlate with his/her point of view. On the one hand, a person's opinion and attitude can change if she/he changes the point of view from which she/he observes or considers something. It can therefore be said that an optimist and a pessimist have different points of view of the same reality. On the other hand, changes of opinion and attitude are apt to lead to the shift of a point of view. For example, if someone who earlier exhibited a consumerist lifestyle becomes an environmentalist, then she/he supposedly is paying much more attention to environmental issues compared to before; thus his/her point of view with respect to the reality changes. Hence a change of point of view may include a reconfiguration of conceptual commitments that enables us to see old things in a new way.

The following components can be distinguished in an observer-oriented concept of a point of view: the observer; his/her spatial and temporal position; the observer's social, cultural, political, economic, or other position; and the observer's mental position or attitude. Important observer-related and culture-dependent features of a point of view also include the culturally determined standards of truth, rationality and consistency inherent in the tradition the observer hails from. The following components can be distinguished in an object-oriented concept of a point of view: the object and its observable or conceivable features or properties, and the environment or the context in which the object appears. Somewhere

between an observer-oriented concept and an object-oriented concept is the tool-oriented concept of a point of view, which is related to what was above called a “tube”. The components of the tool-oriented concept include concepts, theories, methods, and approaches. These components are chosen and used by the observer and thus they depend on that observer.

The observer-oriented concept and the object-oriented concept are related to each other, since the features that are relevant or important in an object under observation or in subject matter under discussion are determined by the factors related to the observer and his/her situation. Such variables include the observer’s spatial and temporal position, knowledge interests, as well as social, cultural, political, and economic positions. These variables also include the wider theme, context, and tradition of the discussion in question. The wider theme “surrounds” the subject matter of the discourse, and the tradition of the discourse provides observational tools (concepts, metaphors, theories, etc.) for the observer.

To sum up, the concept of a point of view, in a figurative sense, refers to “mental viewing” or rational consideration, which has many constituent elements, some of which relate to the observing subject, some to the tools of observation, and some to the object of observation. These constituent elements can be presented as follows:

Observer-related factors

- The subject (observer, viewer, possessor) or the type of subject
- The interests, aims, and values of the subject
- The mental position or attitude of the subject (the “colour” of viewing)
- The relevant background knowledge and expectations of the subject, including the metaphysical commitments and ontological premises that direct the subject’s modes of thinking and understanding
- The spatio-temporal location of the subject and his/her social, cultural, and historical context, including the culturally determined standards of truth, rationality, and consistency

Tools-related factors

- The conceptual apparatus (concepts, metaphors, models, theories, frameworks, etc.) used by the subject
- The method or approach to viewing
- The basis of viewing, the data (i.e., source material)

Object-related factors

- The object, subject matter, or focus of a point of view
- The features or properties of the object
- The environment or the thematic context in which the object appears

According to the list above, most components of points of view are related to or dependent on the subject (or bearer/occupant) of the point of view and his/her interests. This concerns tools-related components as well because concepts, metaphors, and theories are knowingly or unknowingly chosen and used by people. In addition, conception and definition are human actions that direct our consideration of reality and determine (i.e., “slice”, “construct”, and “structure”) the referent-objects of our words. An example of this is the difference between the brain conceptualized by physicians on the one hand and physicists on the other. Physicians consider the brain as a biological organ and the locus of the mind, whereas physicists focus on the brain’s physical features and electro-chemical operation. Similarly, a road engineer, a road maintenance person, a policeman, and a poet conceive of a road differently, i.e., they have, in a sense, different concepts of what a road is.

4 The metaphor of “languages in motion”

In what follows, I analyse the function and significance of conceptual tools in perspectival considerations by means of the metaphor of “languages in motion”. I focus on the question of how this metaphor can enhance and enrich our understanding of the concept of a point of view.

Presumably most people consider expressions such as “languages in motion” and “the motion of languages” to be figurative. However, these expressions can also have various literal meanings of which some examples are given below:

- When different languages are spoken, we have “languages in motion” in the sense that speaking produces sound waves of different duration and speed.
- When people moving around in a group speak different languages, it can be said that there are “languages in motion”.
- When a vehicle such as a car, truck or train transports dictionaries, textbooks, or other written material in different languages, one can, in a sense, say that there are “languages in motion”.

However, here I am not interested in these or other literal (or semi-literal) meanings of the expression “languages in motion” (although these literal meanings can also undoubtedly be interesting regarding the relationship between language and reality). Instead, I focus on its figurative meanings. In the same way as for other figures of speech, we can ask: What is this expression a figure of? What does it represent or stand for, if anything? An obvious suggestion for an answer to these questions is that expressions mentioning the motion of languages refer to different linguistic and cultural changes and developments. For example, it is a truism that the vocabulary and grammatical rules of languages gradually change. The meanings and connotations of words change as well. Another truism is that different languages influence each other and that every language receives a constant (wider or narrower) flow of new words and expressions of foreign origin. Languages are in motion also in the sense that jargon, dialects, and slang wax and wane. New linguistic practices and means of communication appear, and old ones disappear. In addition, the global distribution of languages varies over time, and the number of people who speak a language changes. Some languages grow, others decline and disappear.

In sum, it can be said that languages can “move” or “be in motion”, metaphorically, in the following interrelated ways:

- 1) Various syntactic (i.e., terminological and grammatical) changes occur.
- 2) There occur various pragmatic changes in linguistic practices and means of communication as well as the number and typical age in addition to the social and educational status of the speakers of a certain language or dialect, to name just a few examples. In addition, new media arise.
- 3) Various semantic changes or changes in interpretation and conceptualization occur.

In the remainder of this paper I focus on the last-mentioned type or semantic changes. I would like to remind the reader that based on the above analysis of the concept of a point of view, the conceptual apparatuses are included in the tools-related components of a point of view.

5 Conceptual tools as “moving parts” of a point of view

Metaphorically speaking, language is in motion in perspectival considerations, first, in the sense that concepts or meanings of terms are used like adjustable tools such as pliers, wrenches and clamps that can be chosen, changed or adjusted according to the requirements set by the type, complexity, variety, etc., of the objects to be dealt with.

We choose, define, and use different concepts according to the situational and topic-dependent requirements not only of scientific research, but also everyday communication. Although the choice of conceptual tools takes place intuitively and without conscious consideration in many everyday situations, the choice of adequate tools must be carefully considered and justified in scientific research.

The definition of concepts can be, to some extent, compared to the adjustment of a wrench to fit tightly around a nut or bolt. If we define, “expanding” or “narrowing” our concepts in a suitable way, we can, through the concepts, effectively and informatively discuss a chosen topic.

In light of the above remarks, a suitable way to define our concepts depends on the observer-related and object-related factors of a point of view, thus on factors such as the interests, aims, and values of the subject, his/her social, cultural, and historical contexts, the features or properties of the object, and the environment or context in which the object appears. However, something distinguishes conceptual tools from tools such as pliers, wrenches and clamps, and I do not mean only that the former are abstract and the latter concrete. You need a hammer, screwdriver, saw, wrench, and level, among other tools, to build a house, but none of these tools is itself part of a house. Conceptual tools, by contrast, are used to address a topic that is itself conceptual (or conceptualized) and that consists of the concepts used to address it. Therefore, concepts function not only as adjustable tools but also as the “mouldable” and “recyclable” building materials of our views.

Some tools such as saws, planes and chisels are used to slice and shape building materials such as wood, steel, cement, and plaster. Other tools such as hammers, screwdrivers and wrenches are used to fasten building materials together by items such as nails, screws, nuts, and bolts (and to unfasten and detach materials from existing construction). Conceptual tools can also be, in a sense, divided into

shaping and fastening tools. By using suitable concepts and argumentation we can strive to shape, or even change, people’s opinions or understandings of a given topic. Examples of these kinds of concepts are “reasonable”, “justified”, “true” and “real”, which are related to rational persuasion and epistemic attitudes. For example, by emphasizing that what we say is true, we may hope to elicit the acceptance of our views by our audience. Through many other tools such as linking words and phrases, we can combine or blend different topics, issues, and opinions into a more or less coherent whole. It depends on the case and context, which of these tasks—shaping or fastening—a particular concept is used for. Thus there is no general rule here. In view of this, the motion of language is about the adjustment of conceptual tools to fit contextual requirements, such as the listener’s point of view, background knowledge, previous discussions, etc.

Different building materials have their characteristics irrespective of the builders who use them. In the case of conceptual tools, albeit language being public property in the sense that any given language is used by a community for communication between different people, the meanings of terms and expressions can change and be shaped, for example by the context, values and interests of the language users both individuals and groups. Linguistic expressions can therefore be interpreted and reinterpreted, whereas material tools are more fixed and constant.

6 Changes in conceptual apparatuses

Language can also be said to be in motion in the sense that when we consider subject matter unknown to us for the time being, we need to actively familiarize ourselves with suitable concepts to be able to address and take over the subject matter in question. Therefore we strive to fit our vocabulary into the theme under discussion, and we strive to find suitable expressions until we are satisfied with them in terms of intelligibility and stylistic appropriateness, among other things. However, it is not always necessary to use only such concepts that completely “hit the mark”, for conceptual thinking is characterized by flexibility and creativity. Part of this creativity is what Alasdair MacIntyre (2003: 372) calls “translation by linguistic innovation”. Such translation is necessary if the aim is to understand an alien culture or tradition.

That our considerations of reality are perspective-bounded and not always completely focused is not entirely a drawback, it has advantages as well. Metaphorically speaking, a completely focused view only allows us to see the facts that we

are representing straight on. An incompletely focused view allows us to see, more or less obscurely, what is going on in the “margins”. Elijah Millgram (2009: 98) says, illustratively, that such a view lets us see slightly “around the corner”.

Our ability to produce descriptions of the reality and to perform other linguistic tasks depends on the contents of our conceptual toolbox. These tools can be of two basic types: specialized or multi-purposed. First, we could, at least in principle, have a large collection of special-purpose tools. Second, we can have a rather limited number of adaptable multi-purposed tools. Because our cognitive resources are limited in terms of vocabulary and the conceptual reservoir, among other things, and because the reality is complex, we must in many cases opt for the second option, “that of keeping the number of tools down to what we carry, by being willing to improvise with what we have” (Millgram 2009: 59). Suffice to say here that the use of metaphors is part of this “conceptual improvisation”.

The motion of conceptual thinking from observer-related factors through conceptual tools to object-related factors has as its “vehicle” or “chariot” individual terms, longer expressions and wider themes that can be formulated in different ways at different “positions” (i.e., at the viewing-point, the tools and object) of a point of view. It can also be said that “perspectival motion” is an interaction between the observer-, tools- and object-related factors of a point of view.

7 Conclusion

I said at the outset that conceptual reflection and construction of the reality is a “perspectival motion” of conceptual thinking that proceeds from observer-related factors through conceptual tools to object-related factors. This is often a back-and-forth process because the object-related factors of a point of view can influence both the choice of the conceptual apparatus used and the interests of the observer. The structure of this process can be visualized by an ellipse whose vertices (and the areas around them) represent the socio-historical context of the observer and the environment of the object.

We have seen that other metaphorical meanings of the expression “languages in motion” include the following:

- Concepts are used like adjustable tools such as pliers and wrenches that can be chosen, changed or adjusted according to the requirements set by the type, complexity, variety, etc., of the objects to be dealt with.
- Conceptual tools are used to address a topic that is itself conceptual and that consists of the concepts used to address it. Concepts therefore function not only as adjustable tools but also as the “mouldable” and “recyclable” building materials of our views.
- By using certain concepts and argumentation, we can strive to shape, or even change, people’s opinions or understandings of a given topic.
- We need to actively familiarize ourselves with suitable concepts to be able to address and assume the subject matter in question. Therefore we strive to fit our vocabulary into the theme under discussion, and we strive to find suitable expressions so that we are satisfied with them in terms of intelligibility and stylistic appropriateness.

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