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Perspectival Complacency, Perversion, and Amelioration

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1 Perspectives as Double-Edged Swords

Talk of perspectives is everywhere: in politics, art, and our personal lives, we speak of transforming our “outlook,” of articulating our “vision” or “worldview,” of suddenly getting someone’s “point of view.”¹ Such talk is not idle: clashes and shifts of perspective are an undeniable feature of our individual and social realities. But it is difficult to know what such talk amounts to. At a minimum, it must be metaphorical, given that it is frequently applied to non-perceptual domains. Worse, the target phenomenon is abstract and amorphous in a way that makes it exceedingly difficult to pin down.

It is also not clear whether perspectives are something we should embrace or shun. On the one hand, they perform a valuable cognitive role. Acquiring a perspective enables us to “know our way about” (Wittgenstein 1953): to assimilate new information smoothly into our network of beliefs and to respond fluidly to new situations. It also streamlines interpersonal communication and planning. On the other hand, this flexible, intuitive understanding also makes perspectives dangerously self-effacing and self-reinforcing, blinding us to interpretive limitations and luring us into interpretive complacency.

If perspectives are double-edged swords, what should we do? I will argue that as limited cognitive agents navigating a complex environment, we need perspectives. Although their flexible, intuitive nature risks seducing us into self-perpetuating prejudice, we can train our perspectival habits to conform more closely to our endorsed

principles. However, this leaves open the possibility that those principles themselves are corrupt, in ways we cannot discern from the inside.

The best way to combat myopia and complacency, I will claim, is to enrich our range of perspectival resources, especially through framing devices like art and history. However, I will also argue that exposure to alien perspectives risks perverting our endorsed perspective. From the inside, we cannot distinguish perversion from enlightenment; but we lack access to any neutral point from which to adjudicate between perspectives. Our best option, I conclude, is to cultivate a resilient perspectival flexibility while critically probing perspectives for aptness through logic and conversation.

To see why perspectives carry these risks and rewards and to understand how best to manage them, we need a clearer sense of what perspectives are. In §2, I sketch such an account and identify how perspectives differ from beliefs and other propositional attitudes. I present the threat of perspectival complacency in §3, the antidote of perspectival open-mindedness in §4, and its commensurate risk of perspectival perversion in §5. In §6, I sketch some internal and external norms for assessing perspectival aptness. Although there are no reliable recipes for improving aptness, I conclude in §7 by exploring some tools for perspectival amelioration.

2 What Even Is a Perspective?

Perspectives are ubiquitous, but also tacit and amorphous. Moreover, different theorists deploy the term ‘perspective’ to refer to overlapping but distinct phenomena. To focus discussion, it is helpful to begin with some relatively concrete examples.

2.1 Some Touchstone Cases

Politics starkly showcases perspectival variation. Two people encounter largely overlapping information about an event—say, a police shooting; an increase in the stock market or the murder rate; a rule for or against wearing masks or headscarves. But they draw dramatically

different conclusions about why that event occurred, what it portends, and how one should feel and act in response. Further, these different responses are systematically correlated with divergent responses to many other situations. With enough research and debate, the two individuals may come to agree about all the local claims under discussion. But they still fail to see “eye-to-eye”, insofar as the relevant difference is located in a deeper nexus of assumptions and values. We observe a similar perspectival inflection in religious difference: thus, Catholics, evangelical Christians, Unitarian Universalists, Hasidic Jews, Confucians, Zen Buddhists, Hindus, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, and New Age enthusiasts differ in their doctrinal commitments and in their moral judgments and affective responses to particular behaviors; but these particular differences matter and persist insofar as they exemplify deeper differences in what those religions assume and advocate about how people should act in the world.

A salient feature of both political and religious perspectives is that they are deeply suffused with value. But perspectival variation is also evident in science, where moral and aesthetic values are less overtly on display. Thus, in microeconomics we might contrast a rational choice approach with a behavioral one (Mathis and Stefen 2015): the two “paradigms” have different explanatory targets, make different empirical assumptions about human minds, and idealize away from those assumptions in different ways. Similarly, in anthropology we might contrast androcentric and gynocentric approaches to the evolution of tool use in early hominids (Longino and Doell 1983) in terms of which environmental pressures were most pressing, which innovations occurred first, and what causal effects they produced.

As these examples illustrate, part of what makes perspectives difficult to adjudicate, even in science, is that substantive assumptions are intimately intertwined with values and priorities. In particular, scientific paradigms often trade off explanatory virtues like breadth, depth, and precision in different ways.

Most scientific perspectives are also like political and religious perspectives in being explicitly articulated and institutionally regulated. By contrast, many everyday perspectives are more individual, tacit, and unregimented. For instance, we might contrast a detail-oriented, problem-solving approach to life with a romantic,

meaning-seeking one; or a hierarchical, boundary-setting perspective on parenting with an egalitarian, nurturing one.

Nuanced perspectival variation is especially evident in fiction (Camp 2017a). Thus, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* expresses a nostalgic, white-oriented perspective on the antebellum slave-owning South, while Alice Randall's parody *The Wind Done Gone* focalizes its Black inhabitants. Fictions like Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* make perspectival variation their focal subject matter; while films like M. Night Shyamalan's *Sixth Sense*, David Fincher's *Fight Club*, and Christopher Nolan's *Inception* employ plot twists that retrospectively transform our perspectives on their narrated events.

These political, religious, scientific, personal, and artistic examples vary widely—most obviously, in their domains of application and their factual and normative commitments, but also in their breadth of application, their intrapersonal and interpersonal stability, and in their intellectual, evaluative, imagistic, and emotional involvement. This massively multi-dimensional heterogeneity might make it appear quixotic to theorize about perspectives as a unified kind. Against this, I want to suggest that at an appropriate level of abstraction, these variations can be seen as exemplifying a common functional role that generates a distinctive common profile of epistemic risks and benefits. Further, this functional role suggests a common set of epistemic norms for assessing perspectival aptness and a common set of techniques for ameliorating their limitations.

I don't intend to lay claim to the unique definition of perspectives as a natural kind. Other theorists have proposed their own analyses, and will want to pick and choose among the various elements of this functional role or add further elements depending on their theoretical needs. Further, the differences in domain, stability, and cognitive resources I propose to abstract away from do have significant effects. What I claim is that the suite of cognitive operations I identify work together in a functionally coherent way, which is discernibly operative in the touchstone cases that should guide our theorizing about perspectives in the relevant sense.

In the remainder of this section, I offer a brief sketch of this common functional role. In short, a perspective as I understand it,

is an open-ended disposition to interpret whatever one encounters within the perspective's target domain, by *noticing*, *connecting*, and *responding* to information in an intuitive way that is partly but not entirely under one's voluntary control. Applied to some particular topic, a perspective synthesizes a complex body of information into a rich, holistic, multi-dimensional construal, which I call a *characterization*. The most obvious instances are stereotypes of social kinds, like women or Republicans. But where stereotypes are culture-wide ways of thinking about types, characterizations also include idiosyncratic construals of particular persons, objects, and events, such as one's colleague, childhood home, or planned wedding. And while many characterizations are like stereotypes in including vivid images and affective attitudes, we also have characterizations of abstract subjects like economics and consequentialism. Finally, where stereotypes have particular targets, perspectives are open-ended dispositions to form and update characterizations for any target in a domain.

We sometimes express perspectives through *frames*: representational vehicles that crystallize a perspective into a focal interpretive principle. Familiar types of frame include metaphors, like "Juliet is the sun" (Camp 2006, 2017b); slurs and other social labels, like "slut" or "queer" (Camp 2013, 2018; Camp and Flores 2024); mantras and memes, like "He's just not that into you" or "Minds are computers" (Camp 2020); and generics like "Women are cooperative" or "Boys will be boys" (Leslie 2008; Haslanger 2015). As these examples illustrate, frames can connect to perspectives and to the world in many different ways. But they all function as frames insofar as they stabilize perspectives by associating them with concrete, intuitively resonant representational types that can be re-tokened across contexts and agents.

In §2.2 through §2.4, I expand briefly on how perspectives affect interpretation by influencing what information we notice, and how we connect and respond to it.

2.2 Attention and Prominence

The first way that perspectives affect interpretation is by guiding how we initially encounter and process the world. Although we experience

ourselves as directly accessing a detailed, integrated reality, it is empirically indisputable that our engagement with the world is highly selective, and that what agents notice and how they encode it is affected by their background assumptions and purposes. For current purposes, it's useful to distinguish three more specific respects in which perspectives affect attention.²

First, attention *parses* situations into objects and features of repeatable types, which are connected and distinguished within a complex network of categorical distinctions, or a taxonomy (Carnap 1928/1967; Rosch 1976). This taxonomy itself presupposes that those categories are grounded in lower-level features, at least in the sense that those lower-level features cluster together in relatively stable patterns (Boyd 1999). I'll call the parsed features in terms of which an agent intuitively encodes and thinks about the topics they interpret—typically features like being a human, a car, a man, or fast, middle-class, or threatening—*basic* features.³ By using a taxonomy to parse the world, an agent presupposes that its categories track basic features that *matter*, at least in the sense of being relevant to the agent's goals. An agent may parse basic features by being sensitive to patterns among lower-level features without being able to explicitly identify those lower-level features or patterns in themselves: for instance, they may intuitively code someone as male, middle-class, or threatening without being able to articulate why.

Second, attention *selects* some parsed features for conscious awareness. The influence of an agent's interests and purposes on selection is famously illustrated by the “invisible gorilla”: an actor in a gorilla suit who walks through a group and is unnoticed by most test subjects who are tasked with counting the group's basketball passes but completely obvious to subjects not assigned that task (Simons and Chabris 1999). Although the invisible gorilla illustrates top-down effects on selection, unexpected features and objects can also intrude into awareness from the bottom up.

Third, within those features that are consciously recognized, attention allocates greater *prominence* to some than others. Following Tversky (1977), I understand prominence (which he calls “salience”) as a function of two distinct but mutually influencing factors: intensity and diagnosticity.

Intense features have a high signal-to-noise ratio. In simple cases, like a lightbulb's illumination, a feature's intensity can be specified in terms of a physical departure from its local surrounding conditions. However, in many cases the interaction between context and intensity is more complex, insofar as what counts as irrelevant "noise" or as a departure from the feature's expected magnitude itself depends on the agent's background assumptions. Thus, to art historians, the intensity of a patch of pigment will depend not just on its saturation level relative to that of surrounding patches but also on their assumptions about typical saturation levels for other paintings within that genre and in other genres. Such background statistical assumptions also modulate non-perceptual assignments of intensity. For instance, the property of being a Republican will likely be more intense in an agent's thinking about George if they know him through playing Ultimate Frisbee, and employ a culturally entrenched stereotype of Ultimate players as crunchy liberals, than if they know him from the golf course where they expect to find Republicans.

Where intensity is essentially contrastive, *diagnosticity* is essentially connective: it allocates attention to features that are classificatorily useful, because they are purportedly correlated with other features that are relevant given the agent's purposes. So, for instance, subtle details about the color, pattern, and placement of a man's handkerchief or tie might be diagnostic of his affiliation with and status within a social group. Like intensity, assignments of diagnosticity are often richly mediated by an agent's background assumptions: for instance, a patch of ultramarine blue will be especially prominent to someone who knows that it was produced with lapis lazuli, which was often used to signify the wealth of the painting's commissioning patron.

The overall prominence of a given feature in an agent's intuitive thinking is a combined function of its assigned intensity and diagnosticity. Intensity and diagnosticity are often aligned, whether by natural or artificial design: thus, poison frogs and stop signs are both bright red because the highly intense color draws attention to highly relevant information. But the two can come apart. Thus, a flashing light may pull your gaze even if you know it is just a child's toy; and a snake's triangular head shape and vertically elliptical pupils may be highly noticeable to someone who knows that those features are

correlated with snakes' being venomous, even if those features are not themselves large or brightly marked.

To the extent that background taxonomic and statistical assumptions and purposes drive encoding and recall, by influencing how agents parse, select, and prioritize the information they encounter, we should predict that agents with different taxonomies, assumptions, and purposes will process equivalent information in systematically different ways. Moreover, there is an important sense in which different taxonomies, assumptions, and purposes *warrant* attending to different profiles of features. The bedeviling question, to which we'll turn in §6, is how to adjudicate which profile of assumptions and purposes an agent should employ. In the remainder of this section, I discuss the two other main ways that perspectives affect agents' intuitive handling of information: connection, and response.

2.3 Connection and Centrality

Perspectival interpretation isn't merely a matter of encoding a list of informational bits, even a curated list prioritized by prominence. Agents assimilate the information they select and prioritize into complex networks, so that some features are more *central* in their intuitive thinking. A decent measure of a feature's cognitive centrality is its "mutability": how much the agent's overall intuitive thinking about the topic would change if they no longer attributed that feature to it (Murphy and Medin 1985; Thagard 1989; Sloman, Love, and Ahn 1998).

Features can be connected on a wide variety of grounds. The simplest connection is a pure conditioned association, such as the sound of a bell and the smell of food (Pavlov 1927) or the taste of a cookie and the memory of a gauzy curtain (Proust 1913). However, most intuitive connections have some putatively justificatory status, such that the presence of one feature *motivates* attributing the other. While some such connections, like that between bachelors being unmarried and their being male, or between being a squirrel and being furry, may be purely conceptual or metaphysical, most of the

connections that drive our intuitive cognition are more contingent. For instance, many of us intuitively expect bachelors to live in small urban apartments, socialize frequently, and drink lots of alcohol. Some of these imputed correlations are assigned a causal basis; while others are moral—say, that bachelors deserve to be lonely because they never learned to practice genuine empathy; or aesthetic—say, that bachelors should furnish their apartments with leather couches and chrome lamps because this embodies their tough, glamorous lifestyle.

The imputed connecting grounds just invoked are obviously quite different. One hallmark of perspectively driven thought is that we intuitively take some features to “fit” together with each other and with the subject to which they’re attributed, without being clear about *why* they fit. Further, when we are prompted to clarify, we often impute stronger grounds than our evidence warrants: for instance, attributing a general, normatively inflected metaphysical basis for an isolated observed correlation. I return to these risks of overinterpretation in §3. For the purpose of sketching perspectives’ effects on intuitive thought, it suffices to note three points. First, regardless of their putative basis, features that are more centrally connected are thereby more accessible for recall and more influential in accessing and explaining other features. Second, agents with different practical and theoretical purposes and different factual assumptions about how and why features are distributed both *will* and *should* connect the same set of features into distinct patterns. And third, as with intensity and diagnosticity, prominence and centrality are often aligned but can come apart.

2.4 Prediction, Evaluation, and Response

So far, we’ve seen that agents with different perspectives operate with different categories, statistical assumptions, and purposes. As a result, they will not be merely disposed to but internally justified in selecting and prioritizing different features for attention and recall, and in connecting these features together into different patterns on different grounds. In turn, these different interpretations of the situations they encounter

will prime them to form different expectations about what else is true of and will happen in those situations. For instance, a Fox-News-watching Republican and an NPR-listening Democrat who both know that George is a bachelor who plays golf and Ultimate Frisbee are likely to make different predictions about George's job, car, food preferences, and religious affiliations, or about how he would respond to a report of vandalism during a protest over a police killing of a Black man.

In addition to straightforwardly informational differences, agents with different perspectives will *color* the features they impute in different evaluative terms: morally, aesthetically, and emotionally. Thus, someone who prioritizes family relations might pity a bachelor for spending so many hours alone while someone who prioritizes self-sufficiency might celebrate his social freedom. These specific evaluations of particular constituent features affect an agent's evaluation of other constituent features, as well as their evaluation of the overall topic. Thus, pity for George's solitary time might be linked to contempt for the hours he spends alone at the gym and to an overall feeling of alienation toward him.

Coloring often goes deeper than layering a normative value onto a neutral informational base; rather, the basic parsing and attribution of features intertwines description and evaluation in an indissoluble, holistic way (McDowell 1981; Williams 1985). That is, an agent's interpreting some encountered situation as one in which a subject *S* possesses a basic feature *F* often depends on their background assumptions about the statistical distributions among a complex network of further basic and lower-level features, which are themselves normatively loaded. For instance, the same motion might be perceived as a playful invitation or as a threat, or the same utterance might be perceived as jocular "locker room talk" or as a demeaning insult, depending on the ascribing agent's assumptions about who is acting or speaking and about how people of various social categories tend to and should engage in social bonding.

Different ways of parsing a situation afford and motivate different responses to it (Gibson 1979; McClelland and Sliwa 2023). Thus, an agent who hears an utterance as locker room banter might find George compellingly zany and be motivated to approach him and other

bachelors at a party; while an agent who hears the utterance as an insult might find George threateningly misogynistic and be motivated to avoid him and his “bro” friends.

Finally, an agent’s perspective systematically influences their intuitive thinking, not just about one particular subject or feature but about a range of other topics. Thus, at least in the United States, an agent’s intuitive characterizations of George, locker rooms, social banter, and bachelors are likely to cohere with their characterizations of unmarried women, fathers, grandmothers, noisy bars, motorcycles, and detached houses with lawns, among other things. To the extent that these various distinct characterizations are driven by a common taxonomy; common statistical assumptions; and common moral, aesthetic, and practical values, they cohere into a broadly encompassing, mutually supporting interpretive network.

2.5 Perspectives and Propositions

Much of the impetus for invoking perspectives is to contrast them with standard propositional attitudes like belief. What light can the above analysis of perspectives as dispositions to notice, connect, and respond to information can shed on this contrast?

The first major contrast is that perspectives are not particular attitudes or representations but modes of interpreting whatever situations an agent encounters within the perspective’s domain of application. In a slogan, perspectives are *tools* for thought rather than thoughts per se. As we have seen, they are not devoid of content: they presuppose a taxonomy, which embodies statistical assumptions, values, and priorities. These presuppositions can be articulated in propositional terms. But they are so fundamental that they function more like conditions on the possibility of making cuts in a space of possibilities (Stalnaker 2014) than as such cuts themselves.

Moreover, perspectives can guide interpretation without being associated with any particular set of focal beliefs. Many perspectives, like liberalism or nationalism, lack substantive, defining propositional commitments; instead, they are rooted in a nexus of expectations and

values that can be flexibly filled out with a wide range of more fine-grained assumptions. Other perspectives are plausibly defined by specific doctrines: for instance, evangelical Protestantism canonically requires commitment to the Bible's inerrancy and to Jesus's divinity as the only route to eternal life. However, what makes such doctrinal propositions perspectively relevant, when they are, is their functional role in guiding intuitive interpretation; and they can perform this function in the absence of the sort of endorsement characteristic of belief. Indeed, most evangelical Christians today believe that salvation is possible without belief in Jesus's divinity.⁴ Similarly, many devotees of astrology disavow causal connections between stars' positions and personalities. What makes these people adherents of their respective perspectives is not acceptance of any particular content but their commitment to construing the world in the relevant way. Indeed, as we'll see in a moment, a perspective can guide one's intuitive thinking even when one does not endorse it as the appropriate way to construe the world.

To say that perspectives are tools for thought might just mean that they govern the *dynamics* of thought, where this is compatible with their output being straightforwardly propositional attitudes like belief (or desire or intention). We can pinpoint the difference between propositional attitudes and perspectives more directly by comparing beliefs with characterizations, as the outputs of perspectives, and noting that one can intuitively "get" a characterization, in the sense of being able to instantiate the relevant intuitive dispositions, without believing it. For instance, I "get" the stereotypical characterization of bachelors without believing that it is factually accurate or normatively valid. Likewise, our attention is regularly drawn to features, like skin color, that we would rather ignore; and we often intuitively associate features, like attractiveness and intelligence, that we don't reflectively believe are causally connected or even robustly correlated.⁵ Conversely, we often *fail* to "get" characterizations whose contents we reflectively endorse, as on first encounter with a scientific or social theory (Camp 2020). In general, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for getting a characterization that one entertain, endorse, or otherwise explicitly represent a set of propositions specifying its contents.

Rather, I suggest that “getting” a characterization requires it to be easily *implemented* in an agent’s intuitive thinking. Implementation entails, first, that when the agent thinks about the relevant topic, the basic features that are attributed by that characterization are spontaneously activated in cognition. In particular, the agent must be disposed to represent experiential features in a phenomenologically vivid way and be disposed to be motivated by morally, aesthetically, emotionally, and practically valenced features. Intuitive implementation entails that in cases where the agent does not reflectively believe that the subject actually possesses a feature attributed by the characterization, they must expend some cognitive effort to avoid deploying it in their thinking.

Second, intuitive implementation entails that the characterization’s higher-order structural properties of prominence and centrality are also instantiated within the agent’s cognitive architecture, so that the agent is actually disposed to notice and recall prominent features and to draw a rich range of inferences about highly diagnostic features and central features.

In these respects, “getting” a characterization is analogous to getting a perceptual Gestalt. It is not sufficient to see Figure 1 as an old lady to look at it while endorsing the proposition that the concept *old lady* applies to it. Trying to apply the concept often helps, but does not guarantee success. If and when the concept does lock into one’s perception, the figure’s disparate elements are subsumed into a coherently structured whole on which certain features are especially prominent, take on a certain significance, and are connected to others in certain ways. And this structure and significance is markedly different from that produced by seeing the figure as a young lady, or as a meaningless jumble.

So too for “getting” a non-perceptual characterization: implementation makes a phenomenological and functional difference that cannot be reduced to entertaining or endorsing a certain set of contents. Thus, a student who gets the characterizations of “jocks” and “burnouts” operative at an American high school will notice, recall, explain, predict, and respond to a wide range of features and behaviors in real time in a way that someone who simply acquires an understanding of those characterizations from reading a sociolinguistics text, like Eckert



Figure 1. William Ely Hill, *My wife and my mother-in-law. They are both in this picture—find them.* Illustration in *Puck* 78(1918) (November 6, 1915): 11. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. PD-US.

(2000), may not. An agent—say, a teacher—might be intuitively competent with those characterizations without endorsing them; and both teachers and students might be capable of switching to a different set of characterizations—say, “college prep” and “vocational”—which dispose them to notice, explain, and respond to the same set of people and behaviors quite differently.

This distinction between propositionally entertaining or endorsing and intuitively “getting” extends from particular characterizations to perspectives at large. Thus, on the one hand, a scientist might possess an ideal Carnapian specification of a discipline’s paradigm or conceptual scheme—comprised of its taxonomy, statistical assumptions, and values and priorities—but be unable to put that specification to work in characterizing situations as they arise in real time. Conversely, a committed feminist might be disposed, while immersed in reading *Bridget Jones’s Diary* or *Fifty Shades of Grey*, to construe particular fictional characters and the world more generally in terms of a gender ideology that they reflectively reject and which they do not deploy in most other environments, such as applying for jobs or using a dating app.

3 Perspectival Complacency

The sketch of perspectives in §2 puts us in a position to begin explaining perspectives’ double-edged interpretive effects. As limited agents navigating a complex world, we need perspectives: they are essential for encoding and accessing information in ways that reflect our purposes and values, so that we can act fluidly, flexibly, and appropriately in response (Camp 2019). At the same time, these very features also make perspectives prone to distortion. Further, as open-ended, flexible dispositions to generate intuitive, holistic, cognitive structures, perspectives are distinctively difficult to diagnose, define, and assess.

3.1 Stereotype Accuracy and Characterizational Confirmation

Stereotype-driven thinking vividly demonstrates how perspectives can be deeply habituated, smoothly functional, and internally justified—and yet also, as Endre Begby (2013) says, “epistemically pernicious.” Social kind terms like “woman,” “Black,” and “queer” function as perspectival frames (Camp and Flores 2024). More specifically, they express interpretive principles that render a wide range of fine-grained, superficially observable features, like skin color, dress, and

speech, highly *prominent* because they are (purportedly) *diagnostic* of simple, sharply defined categories. These categories are in turn treated as highly *central*: justifying inference to a wide range of unobserved features that are (purportedly) “normal” for members of that kind. “Normalcy” here entails that those features are (purportedly) differentially correlated with group membership. But it also typically entails that certain normative responses—moral, aesthetic, emotional, and/or practical—are (purportedly) *warranted*, so that non-conformity is not merely surprising but somehow wrong. Further, for many agents, these categories are central in the sense of *explaining* group members’ (purported) tendency to possess those features, in virtue of metaphysical *essences* (Haslam et al. 2000; Gelman 2005; Leslie 2014).

Many of us take stereotype-driven thinking to be insidious. Even so, we need to understand why it is compelling for those who endorse it; why even those who reject it are still prone to engage in it; and how it exemplifies risks and benefits endemic to perspectives more generally. One reason stereotypes are intuitively powerful, even for those who reflectively reject them, is that they are *self-effacing*: they lurk ubiquitously in the background, regulating parsing, selection, explanation, and response in ways that are prior to and largely below the sorts of conscious attitudes we typically articulate and dispute about. In particular, it is experimentally challenging to identify independent, objective criteria for assessing stereotypes’ accuracy because both in-group and out-group individuals tend to parse the personal character traits they ascribe to individual people in stereotype-conforming terms (Judd and Park 1993). Similarly for behaviors: the same arm movement is more likely to be parsed as a playful swat or a threatening jab depending on the ascribing agent’s stereotype of the race of the person performing it (Duncan 1976).

Stereotypes are also intuitively powerful because they are practically and epistemically *self-reinforcing*. In practical terms, the fact that personal traits are typically expected, recognized and responded to by others in stereotype-conforming terms sets up external “looping effects” under which it becomes increasingly efficient to act and to interpret others in terms of that stereotype (Hacking 1995, Camp and Flores 2024). All agents need to be competent with stereotypes in order to efficiently navigate such a social environment. Further, even

members of groups who are subordinated by them can have good reason to conform in order to facilitate achieving their practical goals. But given this, it is cognitively efficient to use those stereotypes to regulate one's own internal expectations and responses, because it reduces the processing load imposed by maintaining the multiple ledgers of a stereotype-resisting "double consciousness" (Du Bois 1903).

In epistemic terms, stereotypes are self-reinforcing because their intuitive, sub-conscious effects invite forms of reflective justification that are distinctively difficult to disprove. First, culturally competent social agents inevitably encode significant stereotype-supporting evidence through direct encounters with, testimony about, and cultural depictions of stereotype-conforming individuals. Indeed, considered simply as statistical judgments (e.g., "What proportion of Asian-Americans complete college?"), stereotypes are arguably often fairly accurate.⁶ Second, because most stereotypes ascribe a host of features on a variety of grounds, disproving the applicability of any one feature or connection among features still leaves the bulk of the stereotype intact. Third, because stereotypes have generic force, evidence of a low differential correlation between a stereotypical feature f and membership in group G need not falsify attribution of f to any particular member of G or to G s in general. After all, generics like "Mosquitoes carry West Nile virus" are often judged true despite recognized low correlation (Leslie 2008); and even non-generic assumptions of statistical correlation and connecting grounds allow for exceptions. In particular, because the essences that purportedly ground stereotype-conforming features are deep and multi-tracked, it is possible for them to manifest in multiple ways or be masked altogether without being falsified. And even when a particular putative ground between being G and possessing f is disproven, the intuitive fittingness of the association often leads agents to seek out alternative justifications for that connection.

Given all these ways in which stereotypes are practically and epistemically self-effacing and self-reinforcing, it should not be surprising that stereotypes are as "sticky" as they are. Even so, they are deeply problematic. Most obviously, they can lead agents to posit non-existent essences, to accept unjust norms, and to perpetuate oppressive social structures. But they also lead agents into more narrowly informational

error, by overestimating differential correlations between properties and underestimating properties' variance within a population (Ryan et al. 1996); and by ignoring or denying individual members' non-conforming properties.

Stereotypes offer an especially crisp illustration of perspectives' self-effacing and self-reinforcing nature because they are comparatively crude and rigid, and because many of us are on the lookout for their distortions. Other characterizations—of colleagues, politicians, towns, musical genres, scientific topics, and so on—are also self-effacing and self-reinforcing. But their greater nuance, flexibility, and idiosyncrasy makes their distorting effects even harder to notice and test.

With effort and luck, some such distortions can be discerned from the inside, at least in principle. Thus, we might notice that we have been making inconsistent predictions: say, that we are surprised when a mom but not a dad we meet at school dropoff wearing scrubs turns out to be a doctor rather than a nurse, even though we know that a majority of doctors under forty-five are female. We might notice that we have been taking inconsistent actions: say, that we tend to discipline Black and brown boys in our classroom for being “disruptive” while tolerating similar behavior from white boys (and all girls) as “fidgeting.” Or we might realize that we have inconsistently implemented our avowed values: say, that loving our neighbor means dropping our long-waged war against their children's trampling of our flower beds.

The work of bringing one's intuitive characterizations and one's reflective beliefs into alignment is as important as it is difficult. However, even if it is accomplished, there remain many cases of what many external observers would classify as informational and/or normative inconsistency that are internally invisible to the agent themselves. Worse, some of these inconsistencies are invisible to them, not because they fail to notice that the two features or situations are different, but because they reasonably treat the interpretive difference as justified. Consistency treats like cases alike; but there are almost always variations between cases that can be leveraged to justify distinct assessments of otherwise similar phenomena, as when one agent or different agents classify one public event as a riot and another as a protest. Inconsistency is a risk for all forms of representation,

including straightforward propositional attitudes. But the rich, multi-dimensional, holistic nature of characterizations exacerbates the danger of internally justified but objectively unwarranted inconsistency significantly.

3.2 Perspectival Perpetuation

So far, I have argued that characterizations are practically and epistemically self-effacing and self-reinforcing, as illustrated by the special case of stereotypes. Turning from particular characterizations to the perspectives that generate them, we find that these qualities of self-effacement and self-reinforcement are amplified by the nature of perspectives as temporally and topically open-ended modes of interpretation.

First, with respect to attention: we can only recall, explain, and respond to information we actually notice; but we are less likely to notice information that is irrelevant for our purposes or that doesn't fit within our taxonomy, and more likely to parse clusters of lower-level features into perspective-conforming categories. By themselves, selectivity and partiality are unavoidable, functionally adaptive qualities for finite agents navigating a complex world, and needn't constitute distortion. However, we are prone to deploy attention in perspective-conforming ways that are genuinely distorting. Thus, we avoid even encountering information that fails to fit our perspectives (Nickerson 1998). When we do notice it, we tend to scrutinize it more closely, seeking reasons to dismiss it (Lord et al. 1979; Lord and Taylor 2009). And in cases where we eventually accept it, we tend to assimilate it in ways that minimize its overall effects (Anderson et al. 1980; Moreno and Bodenhausen 1999).

A similar point applies for explanation. To be prepared to act in a complex environment, finite agents must extrapolate from limited information to more general underlying structures. It is functionally adaptive to do this by imputing the most parsimonious, robust, and relevant network of connections possible. However, we are prone to turn these explanatory virtues into vices through excess. Among other things, we tend to neglect variations across contexts and extend the

scope of correlations too far beyond their original contexts. We tend to impute causal connections in place of mere correlation—especially when we are experiencing emotions, like anger, whose warrant requires a causal basis (Small et al. 2006). We tend to treat the causal connections we do impute as being metaphysically robust rather than superficial. And we tend to take our affective and aesthetic responses, like disgust or distaste at unfamiliar combinations of features, as evidence in favor of moral principles (Haidt and Joseph 2004).

The upshot is that perspectives must be selective, preferential, and abductive in order to perform their function of encoding, selecting, synthesizing, and responding to information in purpose-driven ways in real time. But the open-ended, intuitive, flexible, holistic nature of perspectives means that they implement selection, preference, and extrapolation in ways that tend to induce distortion and blind us to those distortions. We don't just ignore certain information and deprioritize certain values. We fail to notice the streams of perspective-dissonant information we neglect, even as we take the streams of perspective-conforming information we do collect to support our interpretive acuity. Because perspectives are self-effacing in this open-ended way, we risk falling into *myopia*: blindness to our own interpretive blindneses. Worse, because perspectives are open-endedly self-reinforcing, we risk compounding myopia with *complacency*: we are unmotivated to seek out additional information and values or to probe for perspectival blind spots.

Agents in the grip of a distorting perspective may thus manifest pernicious interpretive habits in ways that are epistemically invisible to them and impervious to reflective introspection. As far as they can tell, they really have extrapolated a consistent set of background assumptions from their past experiences and prioritized values. And they really are using those assumptions and values to parse new information accurately, assign it appropriate levels of intensity and diagnosticity, explain it parsimoniously, and respond to it in commensurate moral, aesthetic, emotional, and practical terms.

Such agents aren't motivated to seek out "unknown unknowns," because they lack any positive evidence that they're failing to notice something they should care about. Their explanatory networks are sufficiently rich and complex that they can smoothly assimilate most of the new information they do notice, and explain away any apparent

counterexamples. And to top it off, the phenomenology of Gestalt understanding imbues them with an intuitive feeling of confidence that the world hangs together in a coherent, sensible way (Trout 2002). In Kuhnian terms, their paradigm functions effectively across a wide range of normal contexts. Barring a cataclysmic event, they have no reason to doubt that they have achieved a robust grip on reality.

From a different perspective, however, these agents' interpretive limitations and distortions may be glaringly obvious. Agent *Y* may see that *X* has failed to notice facts that are relevant by *X*'s own lights, or that *X* has extrapolated statistical correlations beyond *X*'s local context, or has ignored relevant contextual variations, or has imputed ungrounded explanatory connections. In some cases, if *Y* points out information that *X* has missed, this may give *X* good, if defeasible, reason to revise their particular characterizations or general background assumptions. However, *Y*'s disagreement with *X* may be more than just informational, insofar as they take *X* to be employing a misguided taxonomy and/or to be motivated by malign purposes or confused priorities.

In such a situation, if *X* and *Y* attempt to resolve their disagreement about some particular topic—say, whether a certain politician will win an election, whether guns should be more tightly regulated, or whether Hamlet is driven by an Oedipal complex—the result may be a hermeneutic impasse. If both parties have managed to achieve internal perspectival consistency, then when each lobs what they take to be compelling evidence for their preferred conclusion at the other, this evidence is likely to produce a cavalier dismissal or at most a local concession. And in turn, their interlocutor's lack of a concessive response is likely to confirm their view that this interlocutor is myopic, even as their own ability to accommodate all the relevant information reinforces their own complacency. The result is a vicious cycle of increasing intrapersonal stagnation and interpersonal alienation.⁷

4 Perspectival Open-Mindedness

In §3, I argued that perspectives are selective and preferential in self-effacing, self-reinforcing ways that risk myopia and complacency. This is frustrating enough when we are mired in a perspectival dispute with

someone else. But it also offers a warning to ourselves: even when we feel secure in the integrity and acuity of our perspectival faculties, we may be getting things wrong at a deeper level. Indeed, the fact that many of us take our own past selves to have been myopic and complacent gives us good inductive reason to suspect our own current perspective. Is there any escape?

If we were simply saddled with our perspectives, then perhaps we could only shrug our shoulders and hope for the best. However, most adult humans do not dwell in a single monolithic context or deploy a single stable perspective. As we saw in §2, perspectives are contextually malleable in response to local shifts in statistical distributions, purposes, and priorities. They are also partly under voluntary control. Sometimes our perspectives shift despite ourselves, as when stereotype threat causes members of social groups to underperform in environments where the stereotype is rendered salient (Schmader et al. 2008; Steele 2010). But perspectival shifts can also be actively cultivated, much as with Figure 1. For instance, we can combat stereotype threat and implicit bias through cognitive “counterprogramming” (Finnegan et al. 2015), by activating alternative stereotypes and focusing on individual group members’ distinctive features. When internal cognitive measures don’t suffice, we can change our external environments—for instance, by surrounding ourselves with frames that trigger perspectives we endorse (Gawronski and Cesario 2013; Brownstein 2016) and by breaking down oppressive social structures (Haslanger 2015).

Such strategies can help us achieve better internal harmony between our intuitive perspectives and our reflectively endorsed principles. But as we saw in §3, internal harmony is not enough to address the risk of complacent myopia. To discern and redress our interpretive blindspots, we need to enrich our perspectival resources. One obvious technique for such enrichment is travel: inhabiting an environment that manifests a different profile of statistical distributions and meeting people with different assumptions and values. However, this imposes a high logistical burden. It also may not be enough, if we just lug our habitual interpretive baggage with us. And it may not be necessary, if we can conjure alternative locales in our imagination.

Where we are actually situated often matters less than *how* we engage with the situations we encounter. And for the project of augmenting our perceptual repertoires, frames are plausibly our most powerful resource. As tangible representational vehicles that crystallize perspectives into stabilized, simplified forms, frames provide concrete, sustained principles for training ourselves into novel intuitive patterns of attention, connection, and response. Because literary fictions and movies are phenomenologically vivid and affectively rich, they constitute especially obvious candidates for perspectival learning (Camp 2017a). But many eloquent verbal and non-verbal works of history, religion, politics, and science are deeply perspectival (Camp 2020b).

Acquiring a novel perspective by way of a representational frame requires imaginative flexibility: first, to extrapolate from the frame's explicitly encoded contents to its associated characterizations; and second, to implement the relevant dispositions in an intuitive, flexible, open-ended way. This species of imagination is distinct from, though often engaged in combination with, the imaginative simulation of contents (Camp 2009). We are never guaranteed to succeed, and success is typically only partial. Still, perspectival play is something that most of us perform regularly, from curiosity and for fun as much as in a sober-minded search for epistemic or moral growth.

Cultivating novel perspectives offers important personal and social benefits. Personally, it can revise our characterizations of particular topics by leading us to notice new features, forge new connections, and construct alternative hypotheses. It can shift our global statistical assumptions and raise our awareness of structural interpretive biases. And it can train us to be flexible at a meta-level: responding to changing circumstances by modulating within our enriched repertoire of interpretive options (Nguyen 2020; Camp 2023).

Socially, cultivating novel perspectives can give us an intuitive ability to predict how the adherents of an alternative perspective will think and act. Instrumentally, this can help us to overcome a hermeneutic impasse, by equipping us to present evidence and arguments in terms that are congenial to our interlocutor. It can also enable us to navigate novel cultural milieus, and thereby unlock heretofore inaccessible social and economic capital (Morton 2014). More profoundly,

it can help us to understand others empathetically, in and despite their differences from ourselves (Lugones 1987; Nussbaum 2002; Smith 2019). For instance, many generations of white readers have felt that they came to viscerally understand what it's like to be a slave by reading Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, what it's like to be Native American by reading James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*, or what it's like to be a Chinese villager by reading Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*.

The benefits of cultivating a novel perspective can be more than merely instrumental and its effects more than temporary. We may integrate elements of its taxonomy, explanatory principles, and values and priorities into our ongoing perspectival commitments. At the limit, we may embrace what was once an alien perspective as our own. This is the classic argument for liberal education: not that we learn any particular body of facts or set of investigative tools, but rather that open-minded engagement with multiple, divergent, disciplinary, and cultural perspectives undermines complacency, frees us from the shackles of our parochial assumptions and enables us to construct our own, authentic identities.

5 Perspectival Perversion

The argument for liberal education is compelling: open-mindedness is indeed a powerful antidote for myopic complacency. However, it also carries a correlative risk, of perversion. As I argued in §2, cultivating an alternative perspective requires actually implementing it, so that its profile of assumptions, purposes, and priorities regulates what one in fact notices and recalls; which associations one is inclined to make and on what grounds; and how one is motivated to respond, emotionally, morally, aesthetically, and practically. This goes beyond mere simulation and cannot be safely quarantined within a “pretense module,” as simulationists like Goldman (1992) and Currie (1997) maintain (Camp 2017a, 2023). Moreover, because perspectives are open-ended, their effects cannot be limited to a fixed set of contents, in the way that the risk of contagion from repeated exposure to a disbelieved proposition might be.

One route to perversion is through *erosion*: unreflective habituation into new interpretive dispositions. We may think we are engaging with an alternative perspective only temporarily and instrumentally, for politeness, inquiry, or fun. And in many cases the long-term risk may be fairly minimal, as when we spend an afternoon with a bigoted uncle or a pack of faithless hedonists, or when we read *Lolita* or *Gone with the Wind*. But even so, assimilating and responding to information under a perspective's influence affects how we encode the information we acquire during that time and the habits by which we interpret other information going forward, in ways that are not straightforward to undo (Camp 2017a, 2023). And in many cases, as when we enter college or a career, our perspectival immersion is more prolonged. The more immersive and more sustained our perspectival engagement is, the harder it becomes to retain our own perspectival compass, and the more we may convince ourselves that it is best to "go along to get along" even within our own minds (Morton 2014).

Even engaging an alternative perspective for the sake of combating it can be risky. In a perspectival dispute, mere comprehension—determining the operative force and content of an interlocutor's speech acts—already requires significantly entraining to their perspective. This itself constitutes a kind of cognitive complicity. Beyond this, most of our available conversational responses also engender some sort of communicative complicity (Camp 2013, 2017b). That is, any response that targets an utterance's focal contents—even denial—still accommodates its background presuppositions, which then govern the subsequent conversation unless actively blocked (Lewis 1979, Langton 2019). But "blocking" by bringing presuppositions explicitly to the conversational center can be socially costly. Worse, it risks amplifying those presuppositions by implicitly acknowledging their contextual accessibility and social currency. Perspectival presuppositions in particular are so deep, amorphous, and open-ended that challenging them risks derailing the conversation entirely.

In such cases of such supposedly temporary and instrumental compliance, we risk becoming perverted into a new perspective while attempting to retain our "true" one. An alternative route to perversion is *seduction*: conversion to a whole new religion, scientific theory, political viewpoint, or musical genre; or just to a particular

characterization, say, of a colleague or movie. Such conversions often occur abruptly, with a Gestalt “click.” In such cases, the agent is likely to feel they have been cured of heretofore undiagnosed myopia through enlightenment, so that everything is now revealed in its proper place. And sometimes this is indeed the correct diagnosis. But the feeling of enlightenment may itself be an illusion.

Conspiracy theories offer a stark illustration: their internal coherence makes them intellectually and phenomenologically satisfying, by tying together many disparate, puzzling facts via a simple explanation, often by positing a hidden cause. But this clarity and unity may not reflect actual causal structures and may blind us to relevant subtleties of reality (Nguyen 2021). Conversely, we can also be blinded by informational complexity and phenomenological intensity. Thus, our nuanced, visceral, empathetic experiences in reading fiction or history may convince us that we truly understand what it was like to be an African-American slave, a First Nations tribal member, or a villager in Communist China, when in fact we have at best inherited or confabulated a fantasy of what *we* would feel like in that situation (hooks 1992; Young 1997; Clavel Vásquez and Clavel-Vásquez 2023).

Whether the conversion is incremental or abrupt, grudging or enthusiastic, it opens a gap between the agent’s past perspectival commitments and their present ones. To the agent, their new perspective’s internal integrity and phenomenology of confidence confirm its rightness, even as their past self and their former compatriots accuse them of perversion. The problem is that there is no independent, accessible point from which to adjudicate who is right. While we can modulate among perspectives, we can never step outside of all perspectives to achieve a “sideways on” view of their relationships to the world or each other. As Alexander Nehamas (2000) puts it apropos of the seductive power of beauty,

Spending time with such a thing, with other things like it, with other people who like it as well will have an effect on me which I cannot predict in advance. Once that effect is in place, I may have changed into someone I would not have wanted to be before I began. But I may now no longer be able to see that what I am, perhaps, is

perverted. How can I tell if I have followed the right course? Which standards should I apply to myself?

Thus, given that open-mindedness is in itself simply a disposition to try on alternative perspectives, and as such one that ineluctably carries the risk of perversion, we need to temper our celebration of liberal education from §4: without some further constraint, open-mindedness cannot be straightforwardly counted as a virtue.

6 Assessing Aptness

In §3, we saw that two parties to a perspectival disagreement may be mired in a hermeneutic impasse. Each party appears interpretively virtuous to themselves; and indeed, they may be internally coherent. But to the other, this virtue appears to be a pernicious illusion. With luck and hard work, one or both parties may manage to “get” what they take to be the other’s perspective. But there is no accessible, perspective-free standard from which to adjudicate among perspectives, to determine which is better; or indeed even to compare them, to determine how well the one has succeeded in understanding the other. Given such an impasse, should we proceed?

6.1 Strategies for Responding to Hermeneutic Impasses

One strategy, dear to philosophers since Plato, is to abjure perspectives as interpretive noise or as “cheap and dirty” heuristics for logical reasoning about the objective facts. (Contemporary proponents include Gendler 2008, Kahneman 2011, and Bloom 2016). I have argued that this is not a viable option for agents like us. We need to navigate a complex environment in real time in ways that serve our purposes. Moreover, many of our most pressing ordinary and theoretical disputes are perspectival and cannot be settled by adjudicating among finite bodies of evidence via logical principles. Even if we manage to avoid obviously perspectival tropes like metaphor and fiction, we still inevitably parse, select, connect, and respond to information in ways

that embody substantive assumptions about statistical distributions and normative values and priorities. In our zeal to eliminate perspectives, we risk driving them underground, confabulating rational reconstructions to justify repressed gut intuitions.

A second strategy is to cling resolutely to our existing perspectives. As Hume (1757) says, when we are “confident of the rectitude of [the] standard by which [we] judge,” we should refuse to “pervert the sentiments of [our] heart” even temporarily, in contexts like fiction or political debate. While I have agreed with Hume (and Plato) that the risk of perversion is real, I have also argued that complacency poses an equally pressing, but converse, risk. The hazard of open-mindedness is a necessary condition for epistemic, moral, aesthetic, and personal growth.

A third strategy is to embrace relativism: to accept that we have no reason to think that our perspective gets things right in any metaphysically privileged sense. Its seeming right to us is a contingent historical quirk, engendered by the inevitability of our being always already thrown into some interpretive milieu. Ultimately, perspectival adequacy is a merely pragmatic matter (Nietzsche 1886; Rorty 1991; see also Elgin 2017). While this is the most epistemically humble stance, I think we must acknowledge how starkly it conflicts with our actual interpretive practices. As Hume (1757) says, it sounds plausible to say that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, until someone asserts something as obviously wrong as that Ogilby is on a par with Milton—or that Nickelback is as good as Kendrick Lamar, that masks are repressive health hazards, or that global warming is due to natural causes.

Rather than either abjuring perspectives, clinging to prejudice, or abandoning ourselves to perspectival flux, I think we should embrace perspectives as an essential aspect of our rational agency. Perspectives are indeed inherently open-ended, intuitive, and self-effacing. In practice, they are also typically vague, inchoate, and tacit. But we can mitigate myopia and render perspectives accessible to critical assessment by actively articulating the assumptions that are encoded in their operative taxonomies and then identifying the idealizations and abstractions that those assumptions in turn presuppose.

Likewise, we do indeed inevitably operate from within a perspective and handle incoming information in a way that conforms to and

tends to confirm it. But open-minded perspectival exploration, especially guided by frames, can mitigate perspectives' self-reinforcing complacency. Experiencing how compelling an alternative perspective can be from the inside, and how benighted other perspectives can appear by contrast, should induce epistemic humility in our current perspectival convictions. Humility should put us on the lookout for disconfirming evidence. And appreciating multiple, vividly engaged alternatives should push us to make an active choice among them.

6.2 Norms for Perspectival Aptness

Confronting the need to make an active choice among plausible perspectives constitutes progress over complacent myopia. However, making that choice wisely requires developing and deploying norms of perspectival aptness. A full discussion is a topic for another day; here I simply gesture at some of the relevant types of norms we should employ.

As open-ended tools for thought, perspectives cannot be directly assessed for truth. But the characterizations they generate do have contents, albeit ones that are rich, evaluatively laden, multi-dimensional, and holistic. We can say that a perspective is *informationally apt* to the extent that it reliably produces accurate characterizations about particular topics within its domain.

The most minimal condition on a characterization's being accurate is that the basic features it attributes to its target are actually instantiated by it. When an attributed feature f 's application conditions are vague or ambiguous, the target t to which f is attributed should possess lower-level properties that locate t within f 's range of permissible application. Thus, if I characterize George as overbearing, he should actually be at least somewhat more opinionated, confident, louder, and so on than other people.⁸ In addition to minimal accuracy, the structure that the characterization imposes on those basic features should also be accurate. That is, features should be assigned high intensity insofar as they depart from statistically accurate baseline conditions, and also assigned high diagnosticity insofar as they are actually relevant for the agent's classificatory purposes. Features should be connected

to one another in ways that reflect actual patterns in the world; and the attributed grounds for those connections should actually obtain. Slightly more ambitiously, a characterization should not ignore known information that should be intense or diagnostic given the agent's statistical assumptions and values. And it should not fail to connect features that have been correlated in the agent's past experience.

In order for a perspective to *reliably* generate characterizations that are substantively and structurally accurate in these ways, it must employ a taxonomy that parses basic features into categories that actually reflect robust, stable differences in the world. It must be appropriately sensitive in updating the baseline statistical distributions that determine particular assignments of intensity and diagnosticity across contexts. And it must track contingencies that regulate changes to those distributions across times and contexts.

When these conditions are met, there is a substantive sense in which a perspectival agent is getting things epistemically right: they access, organize, and update information in ways that track objective patterns in the world. However, informational aptness is not the end of the story. For epistemic purposes, perspectives vary along multiple parameters, with competing epistemic payoffs (Flores 2021). Among other things, an agent may prioritize being opinionated over avoiding error (Fraser 2020); or achieving informational breadth over explanatory depth; or being resilient in their capacity to assimilate new information. More fundamentally, a perspective may be informationally apt but useless for an agent because it parses information into categories that are irrelevant for their practical or theoretical purposes, or that encode values they think are pernicious, such as being chaste or cute (Haslanger 2007).

A perspective is *functionally apt* if it is poised to serve the agent's purposes and values, as they prioritize among them, and in a way that generates commensurate emotional, moral, aesthetic, and/or practical responses. An agent who consistently implements a perspective that is both informationally and functionally apt is internally impervious to criticism. (In practice, of course, such agents are exceedingly rare.) There is no evidence that an interlocutor can provide to them about conflicts among their substantive assumptions and values or between those assumptions and reality that would rationally compel them to alter their perspective.

However, as we have seen, that interlocutor may still rationally disagree with them if they reject their taxonomy, values, and/or priorities. What should we make of persistent disagreement among even perspectivally ideal agents?

Some such cases of disagreement invite ecumenical relativism. For instance, one aesthete may grant that a painting is serene and profound but prefer another because it is more energetic and disorienting. Similarly, a structural engineer may grant that a theoretical physicist's theory is more elegant, encompassing, and accurate but prefer their own theory because they prioritize predicting the evolving properties of middle-sized dry goods. However, many candidates for perspectival diversity are more difficult to accept, because they are grounded in irreconcilable clashes of value. In these cases, sincere articulation and assessment can help to pinpoint the grounds of disagreement and perhaps foster appreciation for the other perspective's informational and functional aptness. However, this is unlikely to break a hermeneutic impasse or to produce perspectival conversion, on the assumption that each perspective has achieved its own internal harmony.

7 Amelioration

Applying norms of the sort I gestured at in §6.2 can help us to diagnose others' perspectival limitations and our own inconsistencies, and illuminate potential paths for addressing both. This work is important and ongoing. Nevertheless, the more fundamental question remains: how do we flourish as perspectival agents while navigating the twin risks of complacency and perversion? The deep problem with perspectives is not that they are selective and preferential. That much is an inevitable consequence of being finite cognitive agents. Nor is the problem even that perspectives are self-effacing and self-reinforcing. If we are lucky enough to inhabit a perspective that is informationally and functionally apt for its environment, then it will work well even if we can't discern or validate its operative principles. Even myopia isn't so bad, if we are flexible enough to address blind spots as they arise. Rather, the deep problem is complacency and the risk that our perspectives

stagnate and ossify in ways that prevent us from shifting gears when our environment changes in ways that undermine functional aptness.

As I have emphasized, there is no sure-fire recipe for avoiding complacency or perversion. Instead, I propose three broad strategies for honing our interpretive skills without abandoning our perspectival compass. Unfortunately, none are particularly revolutionary or sure-fire; but they can still be helpful.

First, we should cultivate perspectival habits that are flexible but also resilient. Given the risk of perversion, we should mostly gather information from sources we take to be reliable; we should spend most of our time with people, news sources, and art we find congenial. When we notice gaps between our reflective principles and our intuitive inclinations, we should deploy corrective frames to bring the latter into line. But we should also make regular forays into alternative milieus, in sufficient empathetic depth to implement their operative perspectival dispositions. Different degrees and directions of departure will fall beyond the pale for different agents. Perspectival play requires time, motivation, mental space, and imaginative flexibility. Some people lack these resources; for others, the risk of perversion may be too great. In particular, greater social power plausibly imposes a greater obligation to explore. Still, we should all strive for a modicum of sincere perspectival curiosity. After a perspectival venture, we should not simply perpetuate the perspectival habits we now find most comfortable. Rather, we should interrogate our current inclinations and commitments—on our own, but especially in dialogue with those we trust (Dover 2022). We should actually ask Nehamas's questions: Who am I? By what standards should I evaluate myself?

Second, in answering these questions, we should embrace logic—not as a retreat from perspectives, but as a complementary tool. Most intuitive perspectives function to integrate us into contexts so that we can process and respond to local information in real time in ways that reflect our currently prioritized values and purposes. By contrast, logic is a tool for achieving cross-contextual consistency: for combining and processing stable information according to general rules in ways that track truth and other values (Camp 2015). Indeed, logic is itself a perspective: a disposition to interpret information in terms of contextually stable, formally individuated, truth-tracking rules. We can use logic to

stabilize and revise our more worldly perspectives by explicating the contents of our particular characterizations, our global assumptions about statistical distributions and explanatory connections, and our practical, theoretical, and evaluative commitments. Here, it is worth noting that logic can take many forms: not just predicate calculi, but also diagrams (Shin 1994), graphs (Pearl 2000), and maps (Camp 2018), some of which may more perspicuously reflect the functionally operative structures of our perspectives and their resulting characterizations. And here too, while logical articulation and assessment can be conducted alone, they are often most fruitfully engaged in conversation.

Finally, we should beware the siren song of simplicity. Perspectival frames are cognitively and communicatively useful because they compress complex, multi-dimensional perspectives into more schematic, stable, shareable principles. This is especially important at the beginning of inquiry, when we are groping through unfamiliar territory. But the world we care about is often too messy and our values too nuanced to be adequately captured by catchy slogans. Thus, as theoretical inquiry and practical engagement proceed, we should seek to avoid ossifying our thinking into rigid, blinkered structures, and expect catchy slogans to give way to multi-dimensional, multi-layered theories (Camp 2020; Camp and Flores 2024).

There is no sure sign of perspectival aptness. Each of us is undoubtedly myopic, confused, and complacent every day. Sometimes we catch ourselves; sometimes others call us out. Often that is annoying; sometimes it is mean or misplaced. Still, we should try to hear and learn from each other, especially when we are most confident in our interpretive rectitude.

Notes

1. Thanks to audiences at Brown University, Institut Jean Nicod, Cornell University, Sheffield University, the University of Pennsylvania, Uppsala University, and the 2020 Central APA, as well as participants in my 2019 Rutgers University seminar in aesthetics, Susanna Siegel's 2020 Harvard University seminar in epistemology, and Georgi Gardiner's 2021 University of Tennessee seminar in epistemology. Special thanks to Antony Aumann, Tez Clark, Carolina Flores, Deborah Marber, Thi Nguyen, and Joy Shim for extensive comments and feedback. Thanks to Stephen Laurence for the rendition of Figure 1.

2. The last several years have seen an explosion of philosophical interest in the empirical basis, theoretical analysis, and normative implications of attention; see especially Wu (2023), Siegel (2017), Munton (2021), Watzl (2021), and Whiteley (2022).
3. For Rosch (1976), “basic” categories are categorical kinds like DOG, as distinguished from subordinate categories like SPANIEL and superordinate categories like ANIMAL. As I am using the term, basic features are the primary terms in which an agent cognizes a domain. For someone invested in dog breeds, SPANIEL might be a basic feature. I distinguish basic features from the lower-level features that determine the extensions of basic features, and from higher-level structural features like prominence and centrality.
4. Thus, a 2008 Pew study found that 51% of evangelical Christians believe that belief in religions other than Christianity can lead to eternal life, and 26% allow that atheists can achieve salvation; while according to a 2011 Pew survey, 95% of evangelical Christian leaders say that these beliefs are incompatible with being an evangelical Christian.
5. One popular strategy for cashing out the difference between believing and intuitively “getting” is to construe beliefs as reflective, abstract, reason-responsive attitudes, in contrast to a primordial system of automatic, embodied, associative cognition (e.g., Kahnemann 2011; Gendler 2008, 2011; Frankish 2010). While “dual systems” theorists rightly draw attention to how much of our cognitive lives is driven by intuition and its departures from reflective judgment, a dualist approach imposes a cleaner and deeper cleavage between intuition and reflection than is warranted. First, the various criteria that supposedly differentiate the two “systems” are a matter of degree and frequently diverge (e.g., Bargh 1994; Carruthers 2014; Mandelbaum 2016). Second, we deploy perspectives on sophisticated, abstract domains like science as much as on deeply enculturated domains like food and gender. In neither case is intuition impervious to reflection. Interpretive disputes in both everyday life and theoretical discourse often involve articulating and debating about perspectival assumptions; and often enough, we modulate our intuitive thinking at least temporarily in response to others’ arguments.
6. At least for in-group assessments of independently identifiable ‘core’ stereotypic features for gender and race/ethnicity (though notably, not for nationality or political affiliation; Jussim et al. 2015).
7. For simplicity, I have focused on perspectivally divergent agents encountering a common body of information. The risks of myopia and complacency are exacerbated by the fact that perspectives affect which sources and types of information agents encounter and trust (Nguyen 2018).
8. When the attribution is generic—say, I characterize snakes as dangerous or women as cooperative—then the corresponding generic should be true, where this may not require a high degree of correlation.

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