

Perspective – a thinking skill

1,455 words

Introduction

Perspective is the ability to stand back and see a situation in a wider context. It is a thinking skill that can be extremely useful when we are immersed in any form of complexity – from thinking about our existence as a human being, to living our day-to-day lives, through to battling with a moral question.

At Life², we believe that, by developing perspective, people can gain better lives in the modern world. This is why we have provided some of the content in the 'Good stuff' section – particularly the information and overviews contained within the 'Understanding the world' and 'Understanding concepts and ideas' categories – to help people develop perspective.

This article explores what perspective is, how to develop it and how it can make our lives better.

How to develop perspective

A useful way for someone to begin developing the skill of perspective is for them to apply it to (at least) one situation – their own life within the modern world. To do this, they need to develop perspective across a particular range of topics, starting with the basic assumptions on which we each base our views of reality, moving on to our situation within the universe and planet around us, through to our make-up as creatures and the systems and concepts we use to relate to each other and manage our lives. These topics include:

- The reality we live in, including philosophical questions such as 'what is reality?'.
- Our situation, including our universe (its age, origins, size and scale, plus the place of our planet within it), and our planet (its terrain, the origin of life, what biological life consists of, and the diversity and extent of nature).
- Our species, including our characteristics as creatures (our biological and genetic make-up, our abilities and factors that influence our thinking and behaviour) and the variations in our circumstances on the planet (such as location, population levels and wealth).
- Human affairs, or how we manage our affairs as a species, including political systems, beliefs, values, cultures and the history of human affairs.
- Our concepts - in other words, the abstract concepts and ideas that we use in our thinking and that inform our lives, including understanding what concepts actually are (including their parameters and how we can use them effectively), as well as how to understand specific concepts such as morality (what it means as a concept, what its parameters are and how we can use it effectively).

The final topic in the list above may seem to be less useful than the others, but it is an important new area in which people could be educated, and could bring major benefits. For example, it will help people to understand the structure of moral questions, the different ways we might respond to them, the assumptions that might underpin each response and the legitimacy of these assumptions. In short, it makes us better able to navigate around

concepts such as morality, and better at using them. This is our reason for including the content in the ‘Understanding concepts and ideas’ category of the ‘Good Stuff’ section.

Learning in a particular way

In order to develop perspective on these topics (and others), people need to learn about them in a particular way. One feature of the modern world is that there is a massive amount of information and knowledge available to us, and it is impossible for one person to have anything approaching a comprehensive knowledge, even of the restricted range of topics outlined above. To develop perspective, people therefore need to be taught to develop knowledge of a topic in the same way as they would use a map to develop knowledge of a geographical area – rather than being stuck in the detail of one particular location, to see an overview of it and its parameters.

Maps are a useful metaphor for this way of learning and thinking. They work because they sacrifice detail (e.g. an exact description of the surroundings in a particular location, such as the colour of the flowers) in order to provide an overall perspective, and enable users to find their way around the terrain represented on the map. We need to do the same when learning about topics in order to gain perspective. In this way of learning, understanding the structure and parameters of a topic and how to navigate around it is just as important as understanding some of the detail, as this overview enables us to find our way around it and then seek further information on a particular area should we wish. There will need to be detail within each topic area but it will need to focus on appropriate and useful sub-topics and be at a level that is consistent with the overall purpose of the ‘map’ – too much detail will make the ‘map’ too complex to use, and too little will also limit its usefulness.

Even concepts such as morality have parameters and structure that people can learn about, in order to help them find their way around specific moral views and arguments better.

The value of perspective

Perspective on one’s life in the great scheme of things can provide benefits for our mental well-being and help us navigate our way through life more easily. If we know little about our situation in the world, our history, culture, concepts and other aspects of life, then our awareness of life will be as restricted as our view of the world might be if we were sitting in the middle of a forest without a map. Our path through life will therefore be as random and uninformed as our path through the forest would be, and we would have little knowledge to give us any comfort about our place within the ‘bigger picture’. The solution in both situations is the same – we need to ‘lift ourselves above’ the position we find ourselves in, and gain perspective on it. We do this by increasing our knowledge of certain aspects of the world around us, using a map.

Perspective can help us to achieve at least two things that will contribute to the ultimate aim of living happier and more fulfilled lives:

1. First, it can help us to understand ‘where we are’ in the broadest possible sense – to form a conception of the ‘big picture’ we live within. This will be beneficial for us in a number of ways, the simplest being that having a picture of ‘where we are’ tends to reduce our anxiety and give us a certain sense of calm in our lives. For example, if one can picture one’s own life within the context of the larger universe and history itself, one emerges with a sense that one is reasonably insignificant yet extraordinarily lucky to have the chance to experience life. This can provide one with a range of positive thoughts to carry through daily life, including a sense of comfort that, whatever the trials and tribulations of one’s own life, we are part of something much bigger. It can also provide an injection of energy, enthusiasm and wonder into every day of being alive. It is also a form of wisdom, as among many other things, it enables us to understand ourselves better, react in a more balanced way to the highs and lows of life and view other people in a more understanding way.

2. A second benefit of perspective is that it can help us to better understand various major aspects of our lives and the world. As a consequence, it can help us to navigate our way through life more easily, both on large questions and everyday ones. For example, it can help us to consider big questions such as how we should live and what path to pursue in our lives. It can also aid our decision-making about more detailed, everyday issues such as moral questions ('how should I behave in this situation?').

This method of thinking could be particularly useful and appropriate in the modern world, given the increasingly high levels of complexity and accumulated knowledge that surround each of us, and the increased difficulty of navigating this. It means we don't have to know everything in order to live well-informed lives.

The manifold disadvantages of not possessing perspective can be taken to be the reverse of each of the points above – for example, having an unrealistic view of the world or your own situation as a creature, getting stressed or confused by the apparent complexity of the world and making poor decisions in life.

We hope that the content on our site provides a useful starting point for developing perspective in your life, and that this perspective brings you a range of useful benefits.

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