Abstract: Perspectives talk is ubiquitous in philosophy. I argue that the use of the perspective metaphor has non-trivial implications for how first person phenomena are conceptualized. I begin with a brief discussion of how conceptual metaphors work, focusing on ontological metaphors. I then argue that there are two distinct concepts of a perspective that serve as distinct source domains for perspective metaphors: an indexical objective (IO) perspective, and an holistic interpretative (HI) perspective. These two source domains form the basis for quite different ways of conceptualizing phenomena in the target domain. In the final section, I apply this analysis to a particular context where perspective metaphors are frequently employed: that of the first person perspective. Each of these source domains suggests different problems and possibilities in thinking about the first person perspective.

What is the significance of thinking of something as a perspective? To do so is to think with a metaphor, and metaphors structure concepts in non-trivial ways. A metaphor works well, when it works well at all, because there is something interesting, useful, or revealing about conceptualizing one domain in terms of another. Metaphors posit structural similarities between two domains in which some things seem more salient, while others fade into the background. That this occurs in our philosophical theorizing is not obviously problematic; on the contrary, it is arguably one thing that makes metaphors so useful. However, as Paul Redding has noted, “The use of such perspectival figures of speech here is so common and seemingly natural that it easy to forget the figurative nature of these terms, and in such discussions the question of the consequences of posing such epistemological questions in such ways is rarely asked” (2003, 366). I wish to give close attention to precisely these sorts of questions, focusing in particular on its application to the first person perspective.

In Section 1, I begin with a brief exploration of metaphors, especially ontological conceptual metaphors. In Section 2, I identify two distinct concepts of a perspective, and I argue that they provide distinct source domains which offer different structures to the concepts understood through their
usage. Finally, in Section 3, I examine how these two different source domains result in distinct conceptualizations of and possibilities for inquiry into the first person perspective. I would like to note that while I identify two concepts of a perspective, I do not claim that these are the only two concepts. The precise number is less important than how perspectival metaphors may be influencing the way we think about the phenomena we characterize under this term. We need not settle this issue to consider how conceptualizing something as a perspective frames our inquiry in significant, and often unrecognized, ways.

1. Ontological conceptual metaphors

As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) famously argued, metaphors are deeply imbedded in ordinary language, structuring the way we understand all sorts of concepts. Metaphors need not be fanciful; some of the most powerful metaphors are those that, like HAPPY IS UP and SAD IS DOWN, structure our basic conceptualization of those phenomena. But how do they work? Of particular interest here is a conceptual metaphor (such as ARGUMENT IS WAR), which involves a “unidirectional mapping projecting conceptual material from one structured domain (in this case, War), called the source domain, to another one, called the target domain (Argument)” (Dancygier and Sweetser 2014, 14). To say that the mapping is “unidirectional” is to say that the extension of the similarities goes one-way or is “asymmetric: these usages construe Argument events as War or Combat events, and are not construing War as verbal debate or Argument” (Dancygier and Sweetser 2014, 14). When a conceptual metaphor is basic to conceptualizing the subject matter in a domain, Lakoff calls it an ‘ontological metaphor’ insofar as it shapes the notion of what it is to be that kind of thing. It is through the use of the metaphor that we “refer to it, quantify it, identify a particular aspect of it, see it as a cause, act with respect to it, and perhaps even believe we understand it. Ontological metaphors like this are necessary

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\text{“I’m feeling up. That boosted my spirits. My spirits rose...I’m feeling down. I’m depressed. He’s really low these days. I fell into a depression.” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 15)}\]
for even attempting to deal rationally with our experiences“ (1980, 26). The use of an ontological metaphor need not be explicit. Some of the most influential metaphors are those that implicitly structure thought.² For instance, in a now familiar example, Lakoff describes two ontological metaphors that are used in thinking about the mind: THE MIND IS A MACHINE and THE MIND IS A BRITTLE OBJECT. Each of these metaphors allows us to articulate aspects of mental experience.

2. Two notions of perspective

Now, consider a phrase such as “the first person perspective.” My claim is that this phrase employs an ontological metaphor. If that’s right, then a pressing question emerges: in what ways might thinking about the first person as a perspective influence an account of the first person? But before proceeding to answer this question, we must start with a closer examination of the particular contours of conceptualizing something as a perspective at all. I claim that there are two distinct concepts of a perspective that provide different source domains for metaphors that involve conceptualizing phenomena as a perspective. The aim of this section is to elucidate these two source domains.

a. The Indexical Objective (IO) Perspective:

The first notion of a perspective is what I call an indexical objective (IO) perspective, and we will approach it through an example. Consider the filming of a royal wedding, where two cameras provide different perspectives of the cathedral. One camera is located next to the priest in front of the altar, set at just the right angle to provide a close-up of the bride and groom as they say their vows. This camera affords a view of the cathedral that is quite different than what can be seen from, say, another camera mounted directly underneath the dome, which shows wide shots of the cathedral floor from above.

² Also, metaphors do not require an articulation of similarities between objects. As Elisabeth Camp notes, “merely understanding the utterance requires a hearer to mold his mind in the speaker’s image: to structure his overall thinking so that the relevant features really are intuitively prominent and central for him, in a way that goes significantly beyond the hypothetical contemplation of a proposition.” (Camp, Why metaphors make good insults: perspectives, presupposition, and pragmatics 2017).
Each of these cameras provides a perspective on the cathedral, but what does this notion of a perspective amount to? Well, for one thing, each view has different content, a description of what is within the visual field. This content is bounded by the edges of the visual field. From above, one can see the long train of the wedding dress and the pattern of the tile floor. From below, it is possible to see down the length of the room, but not the floor. Some objects will be obscured, or ‘occluded’, from the line of sight (see van Fraassen 2008, 37). From above, one can see the tops of the women’s hats, but not their faces. From the chancel, one can see the expression on the face of the bride, but not the guests seated behind her. Also included here is the self-occlusion that results from three-dimensionality.

I call this perspective an objective indexical objective (IO) perspective. Consider how the cameras depict a locatedness that might be described simply as a view from ‘here.’ A perspective originates from some focal point and takes as its object a particular content. Interestingly, it also is possible to eliminate this indexicality and describe the perspective in objective (non-perspectival) terms. An IO perspective locates the viewer at a particular fixed location, such as in “looking down from the center of the dome.” But an IO perspective may also be identified by working backward from a description of all the things that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Thus, the camera’s location may be marked on the blueprints of the chapel; someone who knew a cathedral well enough might be able to guess the precise location of the camera from a detailed description of the boundaries and objects that are visible from that perspective. We might identify two distinct evaluative notions here: completeness and faithfulness. Completeness is a matter of totality, of full inclusion. To be perspectival is to be limited; perspectives are always, necessarily incomplete.³ Because of its essential limitedness, perspectival is sometimes used in contrast to objective, but this conflates completeness with faithfulness. Faithfulness is a matter of whether the content of a perspectival representation is an accurate depiction of what can be seen from

³ I take the necessity here to be conceptual, as part of the concept of what it is to have a perspective is for there to be a limit of some sort. A literal view from nowhere is not a perspective at all, but may be thought of as an upper limit on a perspective.
a particular vantage point. For instance, suppose a drawing of the Chicago skyline looking south from atop the Willis (Sears) Tower included the John Hancock building. The Hancock building is north of the Willis Tower, and thus the drawing would not be faithful insofar as it is not an accurate depiction of what can, in fact, be seen of the city from there. It is for this reason that the indexicality of an IO perspective is eliminable, and thus is in this sense objective.

b. The Holistic Interpretive (HI) Perspective:

There is also a second concept of a perspective, a holistic interpretative (HI) perspective. Elizabeth Camp locates this notion of a perspective in the following passage:

“On my way of understanding, perspectives are modes of interpretation: open-ended ways of thinking, feeling, and more generally engaging with the world and certain parts thereof (Camp 2006, 2008, 2009). Above all, perspectives are ongoing dispositions to structure one’s thoughts, along at least two dimensions. First, a perspective involves dispositions to notice and remember certain types of features rather than others, so that those features are more prominent or salient in one’s intuitive thinking, and have more influence in determining one’s classifications (cf. Tversky 1977). Second, a perspective involves dispositions to treat some classes of features as more central than others, in the sense of taking those feature to cause, motivate, or otherwise explain many others.” (Camp 2013, 335-336)

Two features of this description stand out. First, note that Camp emphasizes holism, modes of interpretation that give coherence and significance to the whole. A significant example in Camp’s work is the gestalt figure, in which it is possible to look at a single image and “see” two quite different things, such as the OLD LADY/YOUNG WOMAN. Furthermore, seeing the image as one object rather than the other (say, the OLD LADY rather than the YOUNG WOMAN) is not a matter of seeing more or less, or of revealing something hidden, or of adjusting the boundaries of one’s view. Instead, seeing the old lady involves the use of one particular interpretational frame (old lady), rather than another (young woman). These images are seen as distinct wholes, never as parts of a single picture. Camp notes that “In perspectival thought, our overall thinking about some topic is organized into an intuitive structure,

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4 This is the sense in which, as Catherine Elgin says, “a linear perspective drawing of an actual scene is a measurement, a mapping” (Elgin 2010).
much the way the concepts OLD LADY or YOUNG WOMAN can organize our perception... Structures of prominence and centrality are intuitive and holistic, as the analogy with perceptual gestalts brings out” (2017). One way of putting this is that the switch between one gestalt image and another is less a matter of what one is seeing as it is a matter of what one is seeing it as.

This idea of “seeing-as” brings to the fore that an HI perspective cannot be fully articulated in an objective description of content. Recall that an IO perspective is identified by specifying the spatial boundaries of the visual field and by identifying what is and is not occluded from view. But these descriptions will not help in locating an HI perspective; moreover, one may not be able to tell what is and is not occluded without already having some kind of perspective or another. Switching between OLD LADY and YOUNG WOMAN occurs without any change to the boundaries of the picture. Furthermore, the lines in the image remain the same, and what is or is not occluded is a direct consequence of which gestalt image is providing the current interpretational structure (e.g., is what is occluded the other side of the OLD WOMAN’s face, or the back of the YOUNG WOMAN’s head?). The content is not irrelevant, but the objective features of the content do not play a determining role in pinpointing the HI perspective. As Putnam remarked in a different context: “Seeing an expression in the picture face is not just a matter of seeing the lines and the dots; rather, it is a matter of seeing something in the lines and the dots—but this is not to say that it is seeing something besides the lines and the dots” (Putnam 1999).

The second significant feature in Camp’s description is that a perspective is an interpretative structure or lens that includes not only a way to make sense of what is currently before one, but also indicates a way to continue. As Camp explains, “getting a perspective, even temporarily, requires actually structuring one’s thoughts in the relevant structure, so that those thoughts hang together in an intuitive whole, with some properties sticking out and others receding; and so that one has an intuitive ability to ‘go on the same way’ in assimilating and explaining new information.” (Camp, Slurring
Perspectives 2013, 336) As a result, an HI perspective cannot be reduced to a description of any specific content; it is not merely an articulation of what is, but a structure for interpreting what will be.

3. Two perspectives on the first person

These descriptions of the IO perspective and the HI perspective are incomplete, but are sufficient to suggest that there may be quite different source domains for perspective metaphors. In this final section, I consider these differences in relation to thinking of first person phenomena as a perspective. I will not be critiquing any particular account of the first-person perspective; rather, the goal is to explore how the concept of the first person perspective may vary from one source domain to the other.⁵ One methodological challenge is that to employ the concept of a perspective in thinking about first person phenomena is to already conceptualize those phenomena in particular ways. Thus this section works two ways: 1) starting from the descriptions of the source domain and extrapolating the subsequent structure of the target domain, and 2) examining accounts of the first person perspective and working backward to see what source domains they employ.

Suppose an IO perspective is the source domain when thinking of the first person perspective. If so, then one might expect that the content of the first person perspective will be of primary interest. Furthermore, it might seem that the only way to proceed with an inquiry into the first person perspective is by obtaining a proper characterization of either its unique content or of its unique focal point. A good candidate for locating this content is likely with the indexical “I” as a peculiar form of self-reference, and it might also seem that understanding self-reference would amounts to an explanation of the first person perspective. Some have taken precisely this approach. For instance, Sebastian Rödl says:

⁵ One might note that not all discussions of the first-person use the term “perspective”. One example is Christopher Peacocke, who does not use the term ‘perspective’ in his discussion of the first-person in the Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Perception (Peacocke 2013). This is a notable exception, but one that proves the rule.
Self-consciousness is the nature of a subject that manifests itself in her thinking thoughts whose linguistic expression requires the use of the first person pronoun, ‘I’. Our theme, then, is a manner of thinking of an object, or a form of reference. (2007, vii)

Similarly, Lynne Rudder Baker emphasizes the content of first person ‘I’-thoughts in her account of the first-person perspective:

A robust first-person perspective is often manifested by a reflexive use of pronouns: “I (myself)” or “he (himself)” embedded in sentences whose main verbs are linguistic or psychological verbs—for example, “I protested that I was overcharged,” or “I wonder how I will die.” If I protest that I was overcharged or I wonder how I will die, then I am thinking of myself as myself; I am not thinking of myself in any third-person way (e.g., not as Lynne Baker, nor as the person who is thinking a certain thought, nor as a woman in the front of a computer) at all. I am not only the thinker of the thought, but also I (thought of in the first person) am part of the object of my thought. (2013, 39)

Notice that in both cases the first person perspective is accounted for in terms of a particular kind of content, the content of “I-thoughts.” This precisely what one might expect if the notion of a perspective here is conceptualized as an IO perspective. We might also add that if a perspective can be articulated by means of such a description, then a pressing issue is to explain why this particular content is unique at all (i.e. is the indexicality eliminable?). Cappelen and Denver have argued that the perspectivality of the first person view is eliminable: “There is no philosophically distinctive role to be played by perspectivality in the explanation of action, inquiry, or perception” (2013, 2). Note that the claim that there is “no deep difference in representational kind between the two” is plausible only if one is assuming an IO perspective as a source domain.

But how would this assumption fare if the source domain for the perspectival metaphor were an HI perspective? Recall that an HI perspective is a holistic interpretative structure. An approach to the first person perspective from an HI perspective would likely emphasize the distinct relational structures and subsequent possibilities of different views which would not be reducible to one another. As an example, consider Recanati’s discussion of the first person indexical:

“[N]o transformation from indexical to non-indexical is possible without affecting the cognitive significance of the utterance and therefore changing the thought it expresses....The irreducibility and indispensability of indexicals is widely acknowledged.” (2007b, p. 243)
Moreover, the example of the gestalt image that figures prominently in our description of an HI perspective is especially pertinent to an idea from Richard Moran (2001) that the first person perspective is one of two stances one may take toward oneself: a theoretical stance where one takes oneself to be an object in the world (the third person), and a deliberative stance where one occupies the position of the subject or agent (the first person). Crucially, for Moran’s view, taking up the deliberative stance changes one’s relation to one’s own attitudes and deliberations. What is unique about the first person perspective is a matter of the integration of my deliberative abilities with my beliefs and other rational attitudes.

4. Conclusion

The conclusions that we are now in a position to draw are tentative, but I believe I have made an initial case for thinking that the metaphor of a perspective plays a non-negligible role in structuring inquiry into the first person perspective. We might also reasonably expect that the same is true for other phenomena that are commonly understood in perspectival terms, a suggestion which must be explored at another time.
References


