Frames, Perspectives, Scenarios[1]

Marcos, perspectivas, escenarios

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Abstract

We offer an analysis of the notions of "frame", "perspective" or "point of view", and "scenario", while also examining related concepts such as "content structures", "reframing", and the notions of "adopting a frame" and "adopting a perspective". This is a work of conceptual engineering that seeks to account for common uses of these notions both in everyday contexts and in scientific and technical domains. One of the central ideas of our work is that there is significant continuity between the notion of a frame and the notions of perspective or point of view. Another is that frames and perspectives do not impose insurmountable boundaries on our connection to reality. Rather, they constitute the very means through which we connect to it.

Keywords: frame, perspective, point of view, scenario, structure of contents, reframing, conceptual engineering.

Resumen

Ofrecemos un análisis de las nociones de "marco", "perspectiva", o "punto de vista", y "escenario", analizando también otras nociones relacionadas como las de "estructura de contenidos", "adoptar un marco" y adoptar una perspectiva". Se trata de un trabajo de ingeniería conceptual que intenta recoger algunos usos habituales de estas nociones tanto en el ámbito ordinario como en ámbitos científicos y técnicos. Una de las principales ideas que articular nuestro trabajo es que existe una gran continuidad entre la noción de marco y las nociones de perspectiva o punto de vista. Otra es que

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marcos y perspectivas no imponen límites infranqueables a nuestra conexión con la realidad. Son más bien justamente nuestras vías de conexión a ella.

With Ulises

We use the notions of "frame", "scenario", and "perspective" in a variety of ways. All three belong to a broad family of perspectival notions. Associated with the concept of a "frame", we might consider related notions such as "framework", "conceptual scheme", "paradigm", or "approach". Similarly, tied to the notion of "perspective" are terms like "point of view", "vantage point", "standpoint", "stance", or "aspect". The notion of "scenario" is more tangential but often employed when exemplifying or illustrating a "frame" or a "perspective".

Given this diversity of usage, it might not be particularly meaningful to seek essentialist or realist definitions of these notions. That is, attempting to pin down what "frames", "perspectives", "scenarios", and related concepts really are may not yield fruitful results. However, there is clear value in conceptual engineering—understood here as the effort to provide clear and useful meanings to terms that are repeatedly used and considered significant.

This work undertakes precisely such a project. Our central thesis is that these three notions—frames, scenarios, and perspectives—are intimately related. Their relationship can be described as one of either increasing "concreteness" (as we move from frames to scenarios and then to perspectives) or increasing "abstraction" (when we proceed from perspectives to scenarios and then to frames).

As we shall see, our proposal diverges from other conceptions of frames. Frequently, frames are understood as distinct from the concrete perspectives that particular subjects adopt in specific circumstances. On this view, the reality of frames is thought to differ markedly from the reality of perspectives: frames are often construed as overarching structures that impose themselves upon our perspectives. We will argue that alternative conceptions of frames exist—conceptions that are superior or, at the very least, more conceptually useful.

In our approach, the difference between frames, scenarios, and perspectives lies solely in the "level of abstraction" adopted when analysing phenomena. If we adopt a highly abstract perspective, we can identify "frames". If our analysis seeks greater concreteness, we encounter "scenarios". Finally, if we aim for maximal

concreteness, we find "perspectives". A little later, all this will acquire a very clear meaning.

Our approach demystifies frames, stripping them of the enigmatic status they hold in other accounts. Frames no longer represent some ultimate horizon of intelligibility.[2]

1. A Practical example: Legal Frames

Consider, for instance, a "constitution": a set of laws, general principles, value claims, and so forth. Let us ask: what would a "frame", a "scenario", and a "perspective" be in this case?

The Frame. In this context, a "frame" would be a structure of attitudes and contents related to the social and political organisation of a community. The contents are explicitly codified in the laws, while the attitudes are encapsulated in the principles and values expressed within the constitution.

The Scenario. A "scenario" would refer to a specific country at a particular historical moment. Other scenarios are always conceivable, and multiple constitutions could potentially be adopted within any given scenario.

The Perspective. There is no practical distinction between "point of view" and "perspective". Both terms can be treated as equivalent for present purposes. To adopt a frame is to adopt a point of view. A perspective, then, emerges when a community in a specific scenario adopts a constitution. In this case, the perspective is collective, belonging to the community as a collective subject.

The legal example illustrates this conceptual structure well. A "frame" comprises an —explicit or implicit— conventional structure regulating attitudes and contents. The "scenario" situates that frame —and also other possible ones— within some spatiotemporally defined circumstances. Finally, relevant "perspectives" arise when a subject—in this case, a collective one—adopts that frame within those circumstances.

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[2] I am referring to a philosophical tradition that has its roots in historicism, as can be seen in authors such as Hegel, Dilthey, or Ortega y Gasset, and also in the conceptualism of authors like Kant or Sellars. Wittgenstein is not foreign to these influences, and we can detect them both in his Philosophical Investigations and in On Certainty. However, what sets him apart is his intense "particularism". A similar remark can be made about authors like James or Putnam.

This example is very instructive. From it, we can initiate a general analysis of frames and related notions. Let us highlight three key points:

1. The concept of a frame is closely linked to the notions of scenarios and perspectives. Scenarios contextualise frames within specific circumstances, while perspectives integrate frames with particular subjects.
2. A frame is structured by two components: certain "contents" (in our example, general laws) and certain "attitudes" (in our example, principles and value declarations). These components can be analysed independently and in various relational configurations.
3. Concepts like "reframing" can be plausibly analysed within this framework. In the case of a constitution, a "reframing" would correspond to adopting a new, or partially new, constitution. Changes in circumstances or subjects do not necessarily entail reframing; reframing occurs only when the components of the frame—contents or attitudes—change.

2. Other examples: theatre, films, fine arts

Consider "frames" in theatre and films. Here, frames correspond to the scripts, screenplays, designs, and ideas that must be represented and expressed in a performance or film. Again, we can distinguish between contents and attitudes.

"Scenarios" in this context are the theatrical sets where dramatic works are staged or the shooting locations for films. And "perspectives" would involve the actors and actresses performing these scripts, screenplays, designs, and ideas within those scenarios. They embody the frames by making them accessible to an audience.

In fine arts, a painting's "frame" guides our focus on certain attitudes and contents. Sometimes this is achieved by a physical structure (e.g., a wooden, or metal, or plastic frame), while at other times it is something more functional (e.g., an unconventional framing device like some arrows pointing to the painting). Even we can have a frame continuing the painting's themes. In that case, the frame is completely fictional.

Our main thesis is that analogous conceptualisations of frames, scenarios, and perspectives apply across all domains—knowledge, science, discovery, decision-making, action planning, emotions, and more. By analysing these concepts in terms of their interrelations and varying levels of abstraction, we can advance clearer and more practically useful understandings of these pervasive notions.

3. Definitions

Below, we propose definitions for the notions of "frame", "scenario", and "perspective", beginning with the latter. We also define other related notions, including "structure of contents", "reframing", "adopting a frame", and "adopting a perspective".

Perspectives

Perspectives (or equivalently, points of view) can be understood as having the following structure:[3]

$$<S, Att, n\text{-}CC, CC, Cp>$$

S represents the subject (individual or collective), Att the attitudes associated with the perspective, n-CC the non-conceptual contents, CC the conceptual contents, and Cp the conditions of possession, which are necessary for the subject S to hold the perspective.

Frames

Frames can be understood as perspectives stripped of the subject S and the conditions of possession Cp. The would have the following structure:

$$<Att, n\text{-}CC, CC>$$

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[3] A full account of the use of that structure for representing perspectives can be found in Vázquez and Liz (2015), including a discussion of the need to preserve a distinction between the non-conceptual contents n-CC and the conceptual contents CC tha a perspective can have. Hautamäki (2015 and 2020) offers an alternative structure. Perspectives would have the structure <S, O, A>, where S is the subject, O is the object, and A represents some aspects of O. This model aligns with an adverbial/adjectival approach, in contrast with our model. (In an adjectival interpretation, aspect A would be seen as a modification of O when S adopt the point of view. In an adverbial interpretation, aspect A would be seen as a modification of the subject S when S adopt the PoV) —about the relations between the adverbial and adjectival interpretations of the "aspects", see Liz (2010). Other authors distinguish a larger number of components capable of giving structure to a perspective. Lehtonen (2011), for instance, distinguishes 1) a subject, 2) the subject's interests, aims, and values, 3) the subject's attitudes, 4) the background knowledge and expectations of the subject, 5) the social, cultural, and historical context of the subject, 6) the conceptual apparatus of the subject, 7) the subject's method of approach, 8) the basis or data available to the subject, 9) the object of focus, and 10) the observable features or properties. The analysis we offer requires more components than those identified by Hautamaki, but less components than those identified by Lehtonen.

Frames consist of structures of attitudes and contents.

In some contexts, such structures may be highly relevant (e.g., for practical purposes), while in others, they may have limited significance. However, this variability in relevance does not imply a fundamental distinction in the nature of frames as opposed to perspectives.

Structures of contents

A structure of contents can be represented as follows:

$$\text{<n-CC, CC>}$$

Structures of contents arise from frames by setting aside the attitudes Att. Not every combination of non-conceptual and conceptual contents (n-CC and CC) will necessarily result in a relevant structure of contents. However, when structures of contents are derived from frames, they are typically relevant in a certain context.

The notion of structures of contents is particularly useful in data representation. Databases, for example, aim to capture or refer to structures of contents, often representing both non-conceptual (for instance, qualitative attitudes towards certain values or actions) and conceptual components (for instance, quantitative results). These structures can then be conceptualised and modelled in various ways.

As with frames, some structures of contents may be far more relevant than other ones (e.g., for practical purposes). Yet, this does not imply a fundamental distinction in the nature of structures of contents compared to frames —and by extension, compared with perspectives.

Scenarios

Scenarios are constituted by the conditions of possession Cp that are sufficient for adopting a specific frame or a specific perspective.

With respect to the relations between Cp and frames, or perspectives, we have to consider two possibilities:

1. From a general set of possession conditions Cp, more specific subsets Cp', Cp'', Cp''', etc. can be identified:
   In Cp', <Att, n-CC, CC, Cp'>, and, for some S, <S, Att, n-CC, CC, Cp'>
   In Cp'', <Att, n-CC, CC, Cp''>, and, for some S, <S, Att, n-CC, CC, Cp''>
   In Cp''', <Att, n-CC, CC, Cp'''>, and, for some S, <S, Att, n-CC, CC, Cp'''>
   Etc.

2. Different possession conditions Cp_1, Cp_2, Cp_3, etc., can independently be sufficient for adopting the same frame or the same perspective:
    In Cp_1, <Att, n-CC, CC, Cp_1>, and, for some S, <S, Att, n-CC, CC, Cp_1>
    In Cp_2, <Att, n-CC, CC, Cp_2>, and, for some S, <S, Att, n-CC, CC, Cp_2>
    In Cp_3, <Att, n-CC, CC, Cp_3>, and, for some S, <S, Att, n-CC, CC, Cp_3>
    Etc.

Scenarios, while tangential to frames and perspectives, are increasingly important. They are particularly significant in system modelling and simulation, including particularly the modelling and simulation of decision-making processes.

Reframing

A reframing is simply a change of frame.

Since frames have the structure <Att, n-CC, CC>, a reframing necessarily involves changes either in the attitudes Att, or in the contents n-CC or CC.

Changes in n-CC would produce non-conceptual changes and changes in the CC would produce conceptual changes. Of course, there can be both kinds of changes at the same time.

Other changes such as a change of the subject S or a change in the possession conditions Cp would not constitute a reframing.

Reframing can be either partial or total. In partial reframing, some components of the frame remain unchanged. In total reframing, all components of the frame are altered.

Adopting a perspective and adopting a frame

To adopt a perspective implies adopting a frame, and vice versa.

Perspectives have the structure <S, Att, n-CC, CC, Cp>. Here, adopting a perspective involves instantiating the subject S under given possession conditions Cp.

Frames have the structure <Att, n-CC, CC>. Here, adopting a frame requires introducing in that structure both a subject S and some possession conditions Cp. These elements are not inherent to frames but must be added in order to constitute a perspective.

As we can see, the notion of "adopting" involves some variations in meaning if we think either of frames or if we think of perspectives, but these differences are generally negligible. It is extensionally the same adopting a perspective and adopting a frame.

It is time to summarise our results. Frames are perspectives that omit the subject S and the possession conditions Cp. What remains is a structure of attitudes Att and contents (either non-conceptual n-CC or conceptual CC). Dispensing with attitudes yields structures of contents alone. In turn, scenarios are constituted by some possession conditions Cp, encompassing spatiotemporal, material, and other circumstances necessary for adopting a frame or perspective. Perspectives enrich frames by incorporating a certain subject S, individual or collective, and a scenario Cp. Perspectives are frames adopted by a subject in specific circumstances. Finally, a reframing changes a frame's attitudes or contents but does not involve changes in the subject S or in the possession conditions Cp.

In conclusion, perspectives, frames, structures of contents, scenarios, and reframing are interrelated notions, with each defined by its role in structuring or contextualising attitudes and contents.

4. Some consequences

In this discussion, we have argued against making radical distinctions between perspectives (or points of view) and frames. While the two are conceptually distinguishable, their relationship is fluid, interdependent, and context-sensitive. This fluidity reflects how these notions are used in both common and technical language. Now, we make explicit some consequences of the conceptual convertibility between perspectives and frames.

1. No Essential Hierarchy: Frames Are Not Superior to Perspectives

Frames are not "super-perspectives" that are more substantial, fundamental, or beyond agentive control. Historically, philosophical notions like "paradigms", "conceptual schemes", "hinge beliefs", etc., have often been treated as overarching structures limiting our engagement with reality, specially limiting the intelligibility of reality. This interpretation makes of frames insurmountable barriers.

We reject this view.[4] Frames are not impenetrable, or inviolable, or insurmountable barriers. They are no more or less substantial than the perspectives from which they arise. Both frames and perspectives are tools for accessing and structuring reality, not constraints upon it.

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[4] This conception is very present throughout the history of Western philosophy. It is an image that is strongly active, for instance, in Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. However, it is a very bad way of "framing" our position in reality.

2. No Absolute Extremes: Maximum and Minimum Frames Do Not Exist

The idea of "maximum frames" or "minimum frames" lacks clear meaning in our account. Similarly, "maximum perspectives" or "minimum perspectives" are not well-defined concepts.

Frames—and, again, by extension, perspectives—exhibit openness. They can always expand to incorporate more content. And they can always focus on more precise details. This flexibility undermines any notion of "maximum frames/maximum perspectives" or "minimum frames/minimum perspectives".

3. A Plurality of Frames and Perspectives

The variety of possible frames is as vast as the variety of perspectives. Moreover, frames inherit this diversity because they are derived from perspectives, stripped of subjects S and conditions of possession Cp.

This conceptual openness extends to data structures, which may vary as much as frames and perspectives, encompassing both conceptual and non-conceptual contents (CC and n-CC).

4. Blurred Boundaries between frames

The distinction between frames can often be blurry, for two main reasons:

Non-conceptual content indiscriminability: In many cases, non-conceptual content does not allow clear differentiations. For example, we might struggle to discern whether something appears visually as green or blue, or whether we feel warm or cold.

Fuzzy concepts in conceptual content: Similarly, conceptual content can involve vague or borderline cases. For instance, deciding whether a person is bald or not can be unclear.

These inherent ambiguities make the boundaries between frames inherently fluid. And the boundaries between data structures also would be fluid for similar reasons.

However, this does not entail that the boundaries between perspectives are so fluid. And this is a very important point. The subjects S and the possession conditions Cp can distinguish perspectives even if the boundaries between the associated frames are blurry.

5. Every frame can be reframed

Frames are inherently "reframable". Any change in the attitudes or the contents of a perspective can bring about a corresponding change in the associated

frames. The significance of such reframings varies in relation to the context and the subjects involved.

Some reframings may be automatic, especially in contexts like visual perception, where shifts in perspective (e.g., eye movements) are constant and critical for depth perception, size estimation, and shape recognition. Other times, the reframings are fully intentional in an agentive sense.

Nonetheless, the potential for reframing reflects the dynamic and plural nature of both perspectives and frames.

5. Conclusions

Perspectives, frames, and structures of contents are interrelated through processes of addition and subtraction. At the beginning of our paper, we talked about processes of abstraction and concretion. Our structural representation allows us to understand these processes simply as the addition and subtraction of some structural components. Adding some components to structures of contents yields frames, and adding further components to frames yields perspectives. Conversely, removing some components from perspectives yields frames, and removing additional components from frames yields structures of contents.

That result offers clarity.However, it also poses a very difficult problem. As a consequence of perspectivist dependence (see at the beginning of the paper), we only can have access to any of those structural components by adopting other perspectives. And from those perspectives, we can identify certain structures of contents <n-CC, CC>. For simplicity, we can call them "data". The subject S, the possession conditions Cp, even the attitudes Att, can be seen as some sets of data.

Since this situation can repeat indefinitely, at some point we must confront the crucial question:

What truly exists, perspectives or simply those data?

This question echoes longstanding philosophical debates, including realism versus anti-realism, materialism versus idealism, and the dichotomy of "it" versus "bit".[5]

From a perspectivist approach, the most plausible answer to that question would be:

Both exist!

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[5] See Part 3 of Chalmers (2023).

Perspectives provide access to reality as "seen" by a subject. And perspectives can be "seen" as sets of data. Whether we emphasise one or the other depends on the perspective we adopt.

Similarly, debates over the primacy of the conceptual (CC) over the non-conceptual (n-CC) depend on the adopted perspective—for example, whether we prioritise personal experiences of pain or third-person physiological descriptions of that pain.

If everything depends on perspective, and perspectives can be profoundly varied—perceptual, cognitive, volitional, emotional, evaluative, agentive, etc.—, then asking what "really exists" becomes highly unstable.

However, the crucial problem is not one of contextual dependence or perspectivist dependence. The crucial problem is the lack of control in speculative thought. Among our perspectives there are cognitive perspectives trying to obtain a full understanding of reality. And they are not dispensable perspectives, especially when we joint philosophical inquiry. But they are perspectives with respect to which we cannot have the sort of empirical evidences or a priori reasoning we can have in other fields of our knowledge.[6]

In any case, our most important conclusion is the following. Frames and perspectives are not limits to intelligibility or barriers to accessing reality. Rather, they are our pathways to reality. From perspectives we can identify frames, and from frames we can identify data. And we can go the other way around. But together, they form a continuum that enables us to interpret and engage with the world.

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[6] About that point, see Williamson (2021).

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