

## Assessing Frames for Epistemic Aptness

### §1: Framing in Talk and Thought

- Ordinary human talk and thought are filled with ‘framing devices’.
  - *Metaphor*: ‘That house is a dump’; ‘My job is a jail’; ‘Our chair is a bulldozer/gorilla/quarterback’.
  - *Telling details and apocryphal stories*: ‘Obama’s middle name is Hussein’; ‘Trump was denied admission to Harvard’.
  - *Slurs and thick terms*: ‘kike’, ‘jap’, ‘dyke’; ‘foodie’, ‘wanton’; ‘awesome’, ‘sucky’.
  - *Slogans*: ‘Black Lives Matter’; ‘#fakenews’; selfish genes; minds are computers.
- Frames can facilitate communication, understanding, and discovery.
  - They can signify complex informational bundles, and coordinate implicit, context-specific assumptions.
  - They can facilitate overarching, intuitive comprehension of many disparate elements.
  - They can prompt us to notice and probe for surprising properties.
- But they are ‘double-edged swords’.
  - They can make us complicit in objectionable conversational assumptions.
  - They can foster confusion via the appearance of intersubjective alignment.
  - They can produce epistemic complacency, blinding us to ‘unknown unknowns’.

Perhaps Locke is right to disavow such “eloquent inventions” as “perfect cheats” that “insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment.”

→ Frames induce cognitive structures which can contribute to rational engagement with the objective world, and are assessable by distinctively epistemic norms.

### §2: Characterizations, Perspectives, and Frames

- A *characterization* is a way of thinking about a subject which:
  - collects a potentially large body of information,
  - often including vivid, affectively-laden features,
  - into an intuitive holistic structure varying along at least two dimensions:
    - *prominence* (cf. Tversky: intensity and diagnosticity)
    - *centrality* (cf. Thagard, Sloman: mutability)
  - e.g. stereotypes; cf. conceptions.
- Characterizations perform a distinct functional role from concepts:
  - contextually malleable v. cross-contextually stable;
  - facilitate rapid recognition and response to objects/kinds, v. determine extension;
  - ‘emergent’ v. compositional combination;
  - potentially idiosyncratic v. communal.
- A *perspective* is an open-ended disposition to interpret: to *notice*, *relate*, and *respond* in certain ways, given a certain taxonomy.
- Most perspectives and characterizations are relatively inchoate and piecemeal. A *frame* is a representational vehicle that expresses a focal interpretive principle which crystallizes a perspective.
- Perspectives, frames, and characterizations are all *non-propositional*.
  - Characterizations have contents: features arranged in a relational structure. This can be specified propositionally, albeit with effort.
    - But explicitly entertaining these first- and higher-order propositions is neither necessary nor sufficient for characterizing, which requires actual cognitive implementation, in a way that is partly but not entirely under voluntary control, and is independent of actual endorsement.
  - Perspectives are ongoing, open-ended tools for thought, not thoughts *per se*.
  - A frame may be associated with a proposition, but primarily as a tool for producing characterizations.



### §3: Achievements of Understanding

- Faced with these divergences between logical concepts and associative characterizations, many philosophers (and others) dismiss the latter as mere noise, or at best a fast and dirty heuristic for achieving a simulacrum of rationality.
- Even robust realists should allow that inquiry aims at more than the sheer accumulation of truths:
  - knowledge of substantial and relevant true propositions;
  - knowledge of why those propositions are true and how they relate;
  - ‘configurational comprehension’ (Mink 1970), which fosters retention of and negotiation among facts.
- When they work, this is just what perspectives provide.
- Understanding in this sense is not a matter of knowing the answer to a special question, but of interpretive know-how: “knowing one’s way about” an existing domain and “how to go on” in assimilating new information (Wittgenstein 1957).
  - Frames in general, but especially metaphors, can fruitfully guide search for new information: directly, by leading agents to seek evidence confirming an explanation; or indirectly, by suggesting unknown features that would complete a structural kernel (Gentner and Jeziorski 1993).

### §4: Normative Assessment

- *Truth*
  - Not directly applicable to perspectives; framing propositions may be useful even if ineliminably false.
  - Although characterizations are typically complex, tacit, and indeterminate, they can be assessed for truth once their constituent contents are articulated explicitly.
    - Attributed basic features should actually be instantiated.
      - Selectivity is not falsity.
    - The truth of relational propositions depends on a wider factual and practical background.
      - Assignments of intensity should reflect actual statistical distributions (cf. stereotypes).
      - Assignments of diagnosticity should track useful categorizations, as a function of both objective structure and practical purposes.
      - Assignments of centrality should track causal structure, esp. ‘difference-makers’ (Strevens 2008).
- *Aptness*
  - Perspectives, and the frames that produce them, can be assessed for epistemic reliability and robustness.
    - Apter frames produce characterizations that encompass a wider range of data, carve nature more nearly at its joints, make more accurate predictions, and enable more effective interventions.
    - External aptness may depart from internal qualities of coherence and vividness.
- An internally coherent frame can induce epistemic complacency, leading us to neglect unfitting known features and to fail to seek out unknown unknowns.
  - What to do? Not: avoid metaphor, fiction, models, etc.
    - As with any tool, a frame’s ultimate value depends on the context and purposes of its deployment.
    - Even true internal frames mold attention and evaluation, and typically distort through simplification: e.g. minds are computers; language is a compositional representational system.
    - Indeed, a frame’s overt falsity can push us to precisify and justify which constituent elements are true.
  - Exclusive reliance on ‘pure’ logical reasoning about ‘just the facts’ is dangerously idealistic.
    - To combat epistemic complacency, we should deploy logic, and a range of representational formats, to make our basic and structural commitments explicit, to impose consistency across an increasingly wide range of contexts, to probe for statistical profiles and efficacious interventions.
    - And we should actively cultivate multiple overlapping, sometimes dueling frames.