ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Linking perspectives: A role for poetry in philosophical inquiry

Karen Simecek

Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom

Correspondence
Karen Simecek, Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, United Kingdom
Email: k.d.simecek@warwick.ac.uk

There is a long-standing debate about whether poetry can make a substantive contribution to philosophy with compelling arguments to show that poetry and philosophy involve distinct modes of thought and aims, albeit with similar concerns. This paper argues that reading lyric poetry can play a substantive role in philosophy by helping the philosopher understand how to forge connections with the perspectives of others. The paper takes the view that poetry is not directly philosophical but can play an important role in developing the philosopher's awareness of how perspective shapes beliefs and thought processes. Following Robert Nozick, David Lewis, and Helen Beebee, it argues for the need to broaden our conception of the aims of philosophy beyond aiming for conclusive proof, at the least where philosophical inquiry is focused on questions of value. It then shows how poetry cultivates an intellectual virtue essential to philosophy aimed at uncovering equilibria and collective understanding.

KEYWORDS
argument, perspective, philosophical methodology, philosophical poetry, understanding

1 | INTRODUCTION

Philosophical interest in poetry has been dominated by the question of whether poetry can aid philosophical thought and promote philosophical inquiry.[1] This focus reflects a tradition of philosophers like Pope, Lucretius, Xenophanes, Parmenides, Empedocles, and Rumi presenting their philosophical work in verse. In addition, poets like William Wordsworth, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens have been celebrated as poet-philosophers, with some commentators arguing that their work should be seen as the product of philosophy through poetry. Beginning with Plato's banishing of the poets from his ideal Republic, however, arguments against poetry having a role to play in philosophical inquiry have tended to focus on poetry's (negative) relationship to truth (or, as John Koethe [2009] puts it, poetry's indifference to truth) and its inability to offer argument in support of any thesis it might advance. Although we may accept works of poetry as having philosophical themes, this does not amount to doing philosophy through poetry. One such argument hinges on the non-paraphrasbility of poetry and form-content unity.[2] The thought goes, if poetry is to play a role in philosophy, then it needs to be paraphrasable (that is, its content must be separable from its form). The assumption is that paraphrase is a mark of understanding and indicates that some proposition has a fixed meaning and that only a proposition with a fixed meaning can be evaluated in terms of truth or falsity. Poetry resists paraphrase: to change the words is to change the poem (what the poem does and what or how it means, which is often plural or ambiguous). Therefore, poetry cannot play any role in (analytic) philosophical inquiry.[3] Peter Lamarque argues: "[I]f paraphrase is impossible in poetry, it is obligatory in philosophy. There could not be a serious philosophical thesis that could only be expressed in one way or indeed an argument that demanded unique phrasing. This makes philosophical content in poetry problematic, for the way that a poem supports its philosophical themes both determines what those themes are and is part of its allegedly unparaphrasable content" (2009a, 46).[4]

Building on the idea of form-content unity in poetry, Lamarque argues that although both poetry and philosophy involve abstract thought, thinking of poetry as akin to philosophy is a category error, for they have distinct aims and use of language. He argues that "[p]hilosophical conclusions do not arise out of personal response to particularity" (2009a, 49), yet poetry is concerned with particularity, and the reader ought to attend to the fine-grainedness of expression, that is, to the aesthetic experience of the particular words of the poem. He goes on to add: "To read poetry (of any kind) *as poetry* is to adopt a certain attitude of mind, a receptiveness, among other things, to fine-grained expression, the salience of perspective, and the play of images. Reading philosophy as philosophy encourages different expectations and invites different kinds of appraisal" (2009a, 51–52). For Lamarque, this marks a significant distinction: the reader of philosophical prose is called to evaluate it for its truth, whereas in reading poetry, the reader is only called to judge aesthetically.

John Gibson offers a related worry concerning the possibility of philosophy through poetry by arguing that to treat poetry as philosophy would require poetry to be analysed in terms of its meaning (in order to identify philosophical propositions), which is to misunderstand the nature of poetry. Gibson points out that much poetry resists attempts to grasp singular meaning; instead it engages the reader in reflection on thought and feeling. He argues that it is a mistake

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[1]See Leighton 2015; Elliott 1967; Koethe 2009; de Gaynesford 2017; and Barfield 2011.

[2]For more on form-content unity in poetry, see Lamarque 2009b.

[3]This is similar to the debate regarding the possibility of philosophy through film: "If it is contended that the exclusively cinematic insight cannot be paraphrased, reasonable doubt arises with regard to its very existence. If it is granted, on the other hand, that the cinematic contribution can and must be paraphrased, this contention is incompatible with arguments for a significantly independent, innovative, and purely 'filmic' philosophical achievement" (Livingston 1991, 12).

[4]See also Abbott 2019 for a similar point.

to treat "the language of the poem as one would treat any chain of descriptive sentences whose business it is to describe some real or imaginary state of affairs" (2018, 9). He goes on to add that although poetry and philosophy might share concerns of worldliness, that is, "a kind of common cultural property that belongs to neither the poet nor the philosopher, as a shared sense of worries, wonders, anxieties, and puzzles" (15), what each brings to these aspects of human life is simply "another way of working through the same cultural material" (16) with differing results. Sharing a common focus does not mean we ought to put poetry in the service of philosophy, or vice versa. We ought instead to see them as distinctly valuable in what they offer us in terms of understanding human life.

In response to such scepticism about the role of poetry in philosophical inquiry, my project here is to take a new approach by arguing that such arguments against using poetry in philosophical inquiry subscribe to a narrow conception of philosophy. Furthermore, in response to Gibson's worry, there's an important distinction to be made between treating poetry as philosophical (that is, demanding that poetry does what philosophy does or aims to do) and what we gain from reading poetry as valuable to the philosopher (for instance, helping the philosopher cultivate an intellectual virtue necessary for philosophical inquiry). On my view, poetry is not directly philosophical but can play an important role in developing the philosopher's awareness of how perspective shapes beliefs and thought processes. In making the case, I argue first for the need to understand philosophy as a collective and collaborative endeavour. In addition, philosophical methodology is not reducible to a conception of philosophy as aimed at conclusive proof. Although it may well be the case that we ought not to expect poetry to contribute a logical, reasoned argument to philosophy, this only rules out a very limited contribution poetry might make. Second, I argue that the notion of perspective is relevant to understanding philosophy as a collective endeavour. In the final part of the essay, I show how poetry cultivates an intellectual virtue essential to some forms of philosophical inquiry, namely, those relating to questions of value and human experience. In making the case, I appeal to the importance of perspective in philosophical inquiry and demonstrate how engagement with poetry not only helps the philosopher better appreciate the role perspective plays but also cultivates the ability to forge connections between perspectives, which is important in uncovering and evaluating shared perspectives as well as in evaluating one's own philosophical perspective.

2 | PHILOSOPHY AS COLLECTIVE VERSUS INDIVIDUALISTIC

Arguments suggesting that poetry cannot play a substantive role in philosophical inquiry appear to be motivated by a narrow view of what philosophy is and what its aims are. For example, Lamarque writes: "The relation between a poem and its themes is not the same as the relation of a philosophical work and its conclusions. We might be misled by talking of 'support' in both cases. A philosophical work supports its conclusions, and a poem supports its themes but they do so in different ways. … In philosophy a conclusion is derived through principles of reasoning. Logic not rhetoric dictates whether the conclusion has adequate support" (2009a, 45).

Lamarque argues that in the case of philosophy there is an expectation that it will offer proof, whereas in poetry "[t]here is no call to test an argument or demand more proof" (2009a, 48). Here philosophy is viewed as something that aims at conclusive proof through use of logic and rational argument. On such a view, philosophical inquiry is reduced to an individualistic endeavour to develop arguments with sufficient support such that they are invulnerable to knockdown arguments (that is, arguments that do not have defeaters). It's clear that although some philosophical inquiry may well have the aim of conclusive proof, examples will be significantly limited (perhaps to fields of logic and metaphysics). Much philosophical thought

that we value highly does not aim for conclusive proof at all (and it is not clear that it can be evaluated in terms of truth). For instance, appeal to intuitions, thought experiments, and case studies in philosophical investigations is widespread. In such cases, the aim is more modest: the philosophers are simply aiming for their theory to be "agreeable" to others, that is, to be judged as offering a systematic, strong, plausible case for a given view (in other words, the theory meets a set of theoretical virtues rather than being evaluated according to truth or falsity). Take, for example, Alvin Goldman's (1976) fake barns. Goldman proposes a thought experiment comparing two scenarios. In the first, the subject is surrounded by real barns and upon seeing a barn *knows* that it is a real barn. In the second, the subject who ordinarily encounters real barns is now surrounded mostly by fake barns and upon seeing a real barn that is indistinguishable from the fake barns has the belief but does not *know* that it is a real barn, because he would have believed it to be a real barn even if it were one of the fake ones.

Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij provides the following analysis of what Goldman is aiming to achieve:

> Philosophy sometimes resembles curve-fitting in the sciences. Goldman's aim is to investigate how "this change in our assessment [from the first to the second scenario is] to be explained." … According to Goldman, the way to account for this pattern is by saying that we know that *p* only if the actual state of affairs in which *p* is true is discriminable by us from a relevant possible state of affairs in which *p* is false. Goldman is not thereby providing an argument for his data-points. Fitting data-points to a curve is not to justify one's data, and accounting for intuitions through philosophical theorising is no different on this score. If anything, it's the other way around: *ceteris paribus*, theories are justified in so far as they fit our intuitions. (2013, 822).

In other cases, the aim is to offer a way of viewing a particular problem such that connections to other philosophical beliefs are made salient. Take for instance philosophical attempts to show that certain features of human life are morally significant, such as James O. Young's 2008 *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, Miranda Fricker's 2007 *Epistemic Injustice*, and Annette Baier's 1986 "Trust and Antitrust"; all three works are highly cited and have inspired much discussion amongst the philosophical community. In both kinds of cases, the philosopher is offering something up to prompt thought and reflection in the philosophical community. The best way to understand what the philosopher is doing is to see philosophy as something that is collaborative and depends on the exchange of thought within the philosophical community and its related communities.

In his *Philosophical Explanations,* Robert Nozick argues for a collaborative conception of the aim of philosophy as an alternative to foundationalism, or for philosophy as aimed at conclusive proof. He argues that we ought to collectively seek linkages between theories as a way of generating insights or knowledge that are more secure than what any one individual may come up with. We look for what general principles are supported by different theories or theoretical structures. On Nozick's collaborative model, we ought to let linkages emerge and embrace potential incompatibility and tension between different views. Rather than being in a position of having to defend *p* against possible counterarguments, Nozick recommends that we look to understand how *p* is possible in light of, or as well as, possible defeaters. He writes: "To see how *p* can be true (given these apparent excluders) is to see how things fit together. This philosophical understanding, finding harmony in apparent tension and incompatibility, is, I think, intrinsically valuable" (1981, 10). The task of the philosopher therefore lies in explaining how it is the case that *p* seems possible whilst at the same time understanding how arguments for *not-p* also seem to hold. According to Nozick, by re-orienting inquiry towards bridging gaps between arguments through explanation

of their differences, we can make progress and identify general principles that are not vulnerable to knockdown arguments.

An alternative to philosophy as a truth-seeking enterprise is especially needed when considering philosophical investigations into questions of value in which a naturalistic understanding cannot be established and where discussion centres on appeal (via intuitions) to a shared understanding of what we value. David Lewis comments on the need to see philosophy as a collective enterprise in which we seek to collectively bring our intuitions (and the theories that emerge from them) into equilibrium. He writes: "Our common task is to find out what equilibria there are that can withstand examination, but it remains for each of us to come to rest at one or another of them" (1983, x). The context of Lewis's comment is similar to Nozick's; they both note that so-called knockdown arguments rarely have any purchase on those who subscribe to the target view. Building on Lewis's view, Helen Beebee argues that the individual aim is to develop philosophical views that are brought into equilibrium and inform our point of engagement with the community. She writes: "The fact that we bring to the table different sets of substantive assumptions and different methodological principles—the kinds of differences that generate intractable disagreements—is no threat to our ability to contribute to the aim of philosophy. On the contrary: such differences are precisely what generate the plurality of equilibria that it is our collective aim to uncover" (2018, 16). The collective project cannot progress without bringing together individual standpoints or perspectives (that represent a set of assumptions and methodological principles).

Beebee's rejection of philosophy as a truth-seeking enterprise arises from consideration of two key worries. First, Beebee argues that we have no agreed method for evaluating our intuitions, the theories we construct from them, and the theoretical virtues we appeal to in constructing theories: "[W]e have no grounds for trusting our intuitions. … And we have no grounds for thinking that the theoretical virtues are truth-conducive; indeed, even if we grant that they are, we have no agreed methodological standard for trading them off against one another, and hence, where such trade-offs are what divide us, we have no more reason to believe our own theory than we do a theory whose (alleged) justification comes from making the trade differently" (2018, 8). A further challenge emerges from recognising the centrality of disagreement to the practice of philosophy; for every serious philosophical view, there is significant opposition to it that is not due to any epistemic failing. Beebee asks how we can "be justified in believing our philosophical views, when we know that equally capable, well-informed philosophers disagree with us" (9).

Furthermore, as Nozick argues, individual thinkers are more likely to accept what they already believe to be true. Belief and commitment to belief cannot be *imposed* from the outside on a particular thinker, for an individual thinker always has the option of rejecting the argument, however compelling (one might be prepared to simply suspend judgment or accept the charge of irrationality rather than modify belief). That's not to say that one doesn't modify belief on being presented with reasons but rather to say that this is not due to the supposed force of an argument. In order to adopt a new belief, that belief must have internal justificatory force for the individual; in other words, the reasons are evaluated by the individual in terms of fittingness with other beliefs held, that is, in terms of whether they can be brought into equilibrium.

On the kind of alternative pictures offered by Nozick, Lewis, and Beebee, the value of engaging with other thinkers and other possible theories is to aid philosophical criticism of our own philosophical views; in other words, to determine what can "withstand examination," which in turn demands that we each develop a philosophical perspective: "[I]n the case of philosophy the aim of the discovery of equilibria demands that we take on board a set of core assumptions and methodological prescriptions in order to develop and scrutinize an equilibrium position of our own that can withstand examination" (Beebee 2018, 22). Argument construction still has a role to play for individuals in their development of theories, but one's

engagement with other people's arguments and theories is aimed at developing understanding of one's own philosophical view. Comparison to other perspectives highlights both what is shared with others and where there is conflict, with the latter indicating that more reflection is required for the individual (either to resolve the conflict by modifying one's own beliefs or to understand how and why someone might hold the conflicting position). The value of individually producing such theories through collaborative reflection lies in the understanding it yields collectively. As Nozick writes: "Embedding the world in the network of alternative philosophical theories and visions, seeing how each of these different philosophical possibilities gets a grip on the world, does produce understanding. The major philosophical theories of continuing interest are readings of possible worlds accessible from here, that is, possible readings of the actual world. We understand the world by seeing it in its matrix of possibilities, in its possibility neighborhood" (1981, 21).

Taking such an approach doesn't have to mean giving up on truth as an ideal, but it expands the aims of philosophy to include understanding as a value alongside truth in that both enable progress in thought. Both the practice of uncovering equilibria and forging connections will provide understanding even if they fall short of offering truth. As Nozick argues, "[E]xplanation locates something in actuality, showing its actual connections with other actual things, while *understanding* locates it in a network of possibility, showing the connections it would have to other nonactual things or processes. (Explanation increases understanding too, since the actual connections it exhibits are also possible)" (1981, 12). Understanding offers insight through showing how things connect and interconnect, and what might be shared or shareable with others in the philosophical community. Whether or not this maps on to what is true, it still reveals something important about human experience, how we make sense of the world and the cognitive resources we use in doing so.

3 | FROM INDIVIDUAL TO SHARED PERSPECTIVES

In light of the discussion in the previous section, I now want to argue that one's perspective shapes one's approach to philosophical inquiry (both methodological commitments and beliefs). The aim here is not to deny the value of philosophical argument and attempts at proof but to demonstrate the challenges to philosophical inquiry as a collective and collaborative practice rather than as merely an isolated, individual project. If we embrace philosophy as a collective endeavour, it becomes clear that we need to learn not only to appreciate our own philosophical perspectives but also how one's own perspectives are related to others and how we might go about forging shared perspectives. As Beebee suggests, our task is twofold: we not only ought to seek coherence or, as she puts it, bring equilibrium within our own view (to generate one's own philosophical perspective), we also need to seek connection with others to generate equilibria that can withstand examination, in other words, open up our theories to other thinkers to connect with and evaluate in a way that meets philosophy's aim as a collective and collaborative endeavour.

Nozick also hints at perspectivism in philosophical practice: "[K]nowing the world involves seeing the different ways it can be viewed" (1981, 21). Understanding different ways in which the world is viewed is not just a matter of perceptual or experiential point of view but the way one prioritises and processes information. According to Elisabeth Camp, "[A] perspective is an open-ended disposition to notice, explain, and respond to situations in the world—an ability to 'go on the same way' in assimilating and responding to whatever information and experiences one encounters" (2017, 78). In other words, a perspective is an idiosyncratic network (or map—see Camp 2007) of concepts (and their associations), beliefs, and commitments (further beliefs entailed by explicitly held beliefs) that configures value (how we prioritise sets of beliefs, and so on, as more firmly held—this could be due to the usefulness of a belief, experience as evidential, or as related to a conception of morality, and so forth). Such a network governs

one's judgment (how we apply such beliefs) that shapes the way one responds, interprets (processes information), and acts in the world. It is through an understanding of one's thinking as perspectivally informed that one can see that one is never able to isolate a philosophical question to consider it from a neutral point of view (a view from nowhere); one will always orientate oneself towards or against it, for one's own beliefs and commitments are at stake. How we articulate the question, what we consider relevant to the question, and how we approach trying to answer it are all shaped by one's first-person perspective.

On the "proof" model, one takes one's argument as having direct relevance for others, for instance, by assuming shared intuitions and appreciation of connecting reasoning, that is, assuming that any rational thinker will accept the premises as true and accept all moves to establishing the conclusion. Such a view assumes one is able to reason independently of one's first-person perspective, yet any new beliefs resulting from proof must be brought into the fold of one's existent set of beliefs and commitments. One's perspective is not neutral but configures a sense of value and import that one will find difficult to see otherwise. It is not a flat structure but hierarchical, with certain beliefs, commitments, values, and so on held more centrally or firmly than others. Furthermore, there are beliefs and commitments that are more firmly entrenched than others, depending on how they are configured within the network, thereby making the task of epistemological criticism harder. It is not enough to evaluate individual beliefs without awareness of how they figure in one's way of thinking.

Perspectives can be improved and refined: there can be a sense of progress at the individual level by the way a perspective develops in response to apparent conflict, incompatibility, and tension and through accommodating a greater number of beliefs that cohere in relation to a greater diversity of questions. To achieve this, what is needed is a mode of inquiry that seeks out what is shareable with others, and only after one has achieved a sense of a shareable human perspective or set of shared perspectives (that is, first-person plural perspectives) is one in a position to evaluate one's own thinking (as it creates tension or incompatibility with one's first-person singular perspective). As suggested by Thomas Nagel's (1986) notion of "the objective self," individuals have the capacity to abstract and generalise from their own idiosyncratic point of view to consider what is shareable with others at the interpersonal level. Whereas Nagel's analysis involves positing an objective self as distinct from the individual, subjective self, I am merely suggesting that one can reflect on one's own perspective in terms of the different layers from which it is constructed—as more or less general and more or less shared with others. A. W. Moore makes a similar point, arguing that when considering certain things of human significance, we must have a sense of the human perspective. Without such a sense of the human perspective we would fail to appropriately understand that situation, person, or action because it is tied to human life. Moore writes: "In order to identify with other people, we must learn to rise above our own points of involvement; but not above every point of involvement; not above a *human* point of involvement" (1997, 25). What philosophy can offer us to enhance our thinking is a method for modifying our perspectives by "letting linkages" emerge and creating shared perspectives that reflect the commonality or overlap between individual perspectives that aims to capture a "human perspective." The ideal here may well be to reach a human perspective, as Moore puts it, but it is much more likely that such a perspective is not in fact singular but plural, as Beebee's conception of the aims of philosophy suggests, and requires individuals to bring their own individual perspectives together, with the individual and the shared perspectives forming a feedback loop.

4 | LINKING PERSPECTIVES THROUGH POETRY

I want now to consider how lyric poetry, understood as essentially perspectival, can help the philosopher appreciate what it is to engage with other perspectives and develop the

skills for identifying and developing connections between perspectives. In the case of a poem, we are engaging with something that relies on shared language and invokes shared concepts; therefore, the reader is encouraged to move beyond their idiosyncratic perspective to a more sharable perspective, a human perspective. What the poem does is give us an awareness of the different perspectives one can adopt by setting up an encounter with other perspectives presented as part of a complex whole, rather than demand we understand it as a unified whole. If we have any hope of reaching human/shared perspectives or, to use Lewis and Beebee's terms, "equilibria that can withstand examination," the philosopher must first practice linking perspectives in order to reach what might be shared and shareable with others.

Alison Denham observes that "[a] poem can enable us to understand its subject from a particular subjective, experiential point of view by eliciting affective, perceptual and cognitive responses appropriate to that perspective" (2015, 189). Peter Lamarque comments that "poetic subjects themselves are perspectival. They are the expression of a poetic speaker and it is not merely contingent how the subject is expressed or presented; indeed what the subject is is partially determined by how it is expressed" (2009a, 49). Hannah Kim and John Gibson also argue that poetry is fundamentally perspectival: "[T]he I of lyric poetry is often nothing more than a center of perceptual, cognitive, and affective *attention*: the subject of *an* experience. It is a self effectively reduced to a perspective" (2021, 108). If a poem can, to some extent, provide an experience of another perspective, then it provides an opportunity to seek linkages between perspectives and identify insights from a human/shared perspective. In "Beyond Narrative" (Simecek 2015), I argue that lyric poetry is inherently perspectival and that in reading a poem what we are trying to do is appreciate how the poem is treating some subject, that is, we regard the poem as expressing interconnected thoughts, images, feelings towards some subject; the poem in some sense tries to help us to make the connections that the poem is suggesting. In other words, a poem is offering a way of perceiving or thinking about some object of joint attention (that is, its subject) that the reader is invited to share.

The easiest way to motivate the view that poetry is perspectival is to use an illustrative example. Let's take Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (Stevens 1954).

> V
> I do not know which to prefer,
> The beauty of inflections
> Or the beauty of innuendoes,
> The blackbird whistling
> Or just after.

The perspective of the work is gestured at with the use of repetition of words and sounds ("er"; "Or"; "beauty"; "The"; "s") that presents the words as a unit (in this case a stanza, but the repetition of words and sounds also occurs across the whole work).[5] As a reader, I am encouraged to follow the feeling of connectedness with cognition: how can I make sense of this as a unit of meaning? The connection between "the beauty of inflections" and "the beauty of innuendoes" through the connecting word "or" and the repetition of "the beauty of" leads to awareness of a supposed relationship here that the poem enacts by offering "inflections" as an alternative to "innuendoes." There's also the mirroring of the two disjunctive sentences. This gets me so far in my understanding of the working of the poem. The poem merely shows me *that* the sentences are connected, not *how* they ought to be connected. The latter is left to me to attempt to resolve.

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[5]Ribeiro (2007) takes repetition to be central to what makes *poetry* poetry.

In each canto of the poem, the blackbird represents the anchor point of the perspective, or way of looking. It is the concrete imagery ("the blackbird whistling") that draws on one's (imagined) visual perception and acts as the object of joint attention (shared between me and the poem). What surrounds the blackbird image in each canto connects the visual image with ways of connecting to possible associations, mirrors, linkages. For instance:

> IV
> A man and a woman
> Are one.
> A man and a woman and a blackbird
> Are one.

Although the blackbird is merely named at this point in the poem, the previous cantos have contributed to the imagery that the word "blackbird" carries forward ("Among twenty snowy mountains, / The only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird" and "The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds" invoking images of an actual blackbird that the reader brings to the poem). Again, the unfolding of the stanza is affectively connected, and on a linguistic level the extension of "A man and a woman" to "A man and a woman and a blackbird" seems straightforward. But to appreciate why the blackbird ought to be placed in such a relationship with "a man and a woman," work needs to be done by the reader. The reader cannot, however, simply draw on her own understanding of blackbirds to provide a resolution but must consider how the blackbird is situated in the work. To make sense of this, the reader must forge connections between her own perspective and that of the poem.

The perspective on offer in a poem represents other ways of thinking and other ways of valuing that are manifested in the focus and prioritising of certain thoughts, images, and feelings captured by the structure of the poem, as seen above with the example of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The act of trying to understand the poem involves abstracting away from my idiosyncratic perspective to an appreciation of my perspective as a human subject. Reaching such abstraction allows me to appreciate more that is shareable with others on the basis of a way of thinking that is available to me by extrapolating the shareable from the individualistic. Not everything will be resolvable in the poem, in virtue of the work's perspective being equally idiosyncratic. A sense of resolution is found, however, in the feeling of finding common ground. Reading poetry engages one in a particular kind of thinking activity, trying to negotiate the perspective of the poem from one's own first-personal perspective in play with all its baggage of linkages between concepts and beliefs, associations, and sense of import. Where individual tensions and incompatibilities emerge is also of value, showing the limits of one's perspective, including one's grasp of a human (shareable) perspective. What one can't grasp is just as important as what one can in terms of what that reveals about the self.

To illustrate how one's attempts to engage with and appreciate a work of poetry can cultivate the intellectual virtue of linking perspectives or generating equilibria, let's consider Robert Gray's "The Drift of Things" (Gray 2006) alongside Lucretius's *De rerum natura (The Nature of Things),* book 1 (Lucretius 2008). One reason for selecting these examples is that both deal with the same philosophical themes; in fact, Gray's poem is a response to Lucretius's work. By looking at them side by side, we can see how each offers a different way of understanding, perceiving, and knowing the external world yet also come to appreciate linkages between them. It may strike the reader that the examples of Gray and Lucretius show poetry's contribution as too limited, for it is a small body of poetic works that are concerned so directly with philosophical themes. To re-cap, however, what philosophical inquiry as a collaborative endeavour must do is seek explanations that matter at both the individual and the collective level. The philosophical value of such poetry is not in

its treatment of philosophical themes but in showing what it means to engage with another's perspectival thoughts, feelings, and experience and what it is to understand another's perspective through commonality, that is, by appreciating what is shared or shareable between one's own perspective and the other's.

The poems have distinct identifiable orientations: Lucretius focuses on the world with a sense of objectivity, whereas Gray focuses on the subjective encounter with things. Both focus on our sensation of things, both as sensations external to the human mind and as sensations that arise from one's own thoughts and feelings, but the prioritisation of these is different in each. For Lucretius, sensations of thoughts and feelings are secondary to sensations of the external world. For Gray, the focus is on the way things figure in our lives with feeling and value. What I hope to illustrate here is that Gray's poem is the product of such a collaborative mode of inquiry and that as readers we must seek the linkages not only between Gray's world view and Lucretius's but also our own, which includes our pre-theoretical perspective on things as they figure in our own lives. I then illustrate how aiming at explanation can enable linkages to emerge between these two very different (philosophical) perspectives. Unfortunately, there isn't space to provide a detailed study of each work in full. Instead, I have selected key passages that appear to focus on the same kind of thing, offering fertile ground for letting linkages emerge.

Here's an extract from Lucretius (lines 132–47):

> —To start with, the first rule
> is that nothing can come from nothing, not even by will
>   of the gods.
> Mortal men are afraid as they look about them and see
> the many things that happen on earth and up in the sky,
> and they cannot tell why or how and therefore think that
>   gods
> must bring them about by fiat. But if our axiom holds
> and nothing can come of nothing, then we are obliged to
>   look further
> to learn what we want to know—how each thing was
>   created
> and how, without the gods, all things have come to be.
> Consider the contrary case—that being could come from
>   non-being
> and that anything could arise from anything or from
>   nothing,
> without even a seed. Men could emerge from sea-foam,
> scaly creatures could come swarming up from the earth,
> and birds could burst forth from the sky. In meadowlands
>   or deserts
> cattle and wild beasts could simply appear at random,
> and trees could bear any fruit haphazardly, for all
> would be able to bring forth all, interchangeably.[6]

It is here that Lucretius presents his atomism, and in his making a case for this, rationality is contrasted with fantasy; he treats them as oppositional. The first half of the extract

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[6]There are a number of well-respected translations of Lucretius's work, largely for philosophers. I have, however, chosen a translation (by D. R. Slavitt [Lucretius 2008]) that best respects *De rerum natura* as primarily a poetic work.

is void of imagery. Instead, it contains the language of fact ("that," "things," "being"), cognition ("know," "think"), and logic ("why," "how"). Yet the evidence for the axiom "nothing can come from nothing" is an appeal to *imagined impossibilities*, such as men emerging from sea-foam and animals popping into view. In contrast, Gray presents a series of *imagined possibilities* (lines 14–16):

> A jetty in reeds, and clouds on water;
> the bus that rides the dust like a surfboard;
> a lizard trailed out of a mailbox drum,
> inert, all the long-shadowed afternoon;
> the planks on mud, from where chickens' pollard
> is thrown; a skirmishing of cherry trees
> in bloom, with sabres of wind; the looped vines
> of sea-foam; or trees in an avenue
> toward exalted snow—these are each itself
> and no other thing. It's plurality
> we experience, it is differences
> not the smear of Oneness

The perspective on offer in Gray's poem prioritises the vividness of experience of certain things from a human perspective. The descriptions are not attempting to be flat descriptions or matters of fact about perception but capture the character that the human eye perceives things as having ("a skirmishing of cherry trees," "sabres of wind," "exalted snow") and therefore how they figure in human life as experienced. This is an extension of Lucretius's treatment of imagery in which things are named without a sense of the human. On Lucretius's poem, George Santayana comments: "We seem to be reading not the poetry of a poet about things, but the poetry of things themselves. That things have their poetry, not because of what we make them symbols of, but because of their own movement and life, is what Lucretius proves once for all to mankind" (1910, 34). The human, however, is still required to recognise the poetry of things.

> Imagine a mighty wind that comes up to beat on the
>   ocean
> to overwhelm huge ships and scatter the clouds in the sky,
> sweeping along the plains with hurricane force that trees
> bow down to or rise up to join as their branches fly,
> and the blasts are so strong that even the mountains
>   shudder.
> You can feel its fury and hear its savage, threatening
>   howling.
> You cannot see this wind that roils the sea and sweeps
> the earth and harries the cloud across the sky's expanses
> this way and that, but you do not question that it is there. (lines 249–59).

    Both Lucretius and Gray are concerned with what cannot be literally perceived by the senses. For Lucretius that means the microscopic; for Gray that means meaning, interpretation, and value. The two perspectives are not strictly incompatible; instead we can see them as merely focusing on different aspects. Lucretius is concerned with how it is that things can exist; Gray is concerned with how we experience the existence of things. Bringing the two together yields the following insight: there's a way of understanding the external world as separate yet inseparable from the human perspective.

The poet's perspective does not seek to deny the perspective of the philosopher. Gray's poem uses some of the language of Lucretius but re-orientates certain ideas to point to what is in Lucretius's work but not taken as significant, that is, the poetic imagery. Ultimately, what emerges from reflection on the two poems together is the general idea that no matter how we point to things in the world, we can never experience them as distinct from ourselves. It is only through reflection on our sensations of thoughts and feelings about them that we have some hope of catching a glimpse of their existence. And where we find this is in the unknown, unknowable, and unexplainable. In other words, this is Gray's attempt to understand the idea of oneness in Lucretius's philosophy. Things aren't literally one whole, although they may have shared origins, yet our experience of them through sensation is of unity (lines 36–43):

> And these things flow into one another
> as quietly as smoke, unhesitant,
> unhampered. Glittering smoke of the world.
> The differences in them do not exclude
> their unity; the unity doesn't
> detract from difference. Still, there can't be
> one stuff, or "energy,"
> beneath all this
> that has remained itself, and that is "pure."

Here we have another modification of Lucretius's thought. Although it may be true that everything has some shared origin, that sameness is not left unaltered as things have changed.

> When we are in queues for the banks of Lethe
> we'll recall, attentive as candle flames,
> not only faces, but things we have known,
> and with intensity that is surprised—
> the stance of grass at the foot of palings
> one storm-lit afternoon; the night, an ocean
> among its ice-floes; whatever flung us
> into the furthest transcendence we've found. (lines 178–85)

Gray seems to be arguing that all we have is metaphor: through every attempt to access the nature of things, all we catch is a glimmer. Lucretius attempted to go beyond metaphor to speak directly of the nature of substance, the material world; but as Gray's poem shows, what we care about as human subjects is the wonder of the world in which we live, which in the words of Lucretius "could not have come from nothing." Although written only about Lucretius, Santayana's words sum up nicely how these two perspectives come together: "Nothing comes out of nothing, nothing falls back into nothing, if we consider substance; but everything comes from nothing and falls back into nothing if we consider things—the objects of love and of experience" (1910, 45), that is, how things figure in our lives as individual human subjects who experience the world in particular ways, with all its meaning and significance for us.

Both Lucretius and Gray are concerned with the observable and the imaginable, but how we observe and what we imagine is not neutral. To study the nature of things requires the subjective, human perspective; we feel and respond to the world. Although both Lucretius and Gray seek connection, what connects them is something provided by the human intellect. Ultimately, a perspective. For Lucretius, this perspective must be ordered and logical; for Gray, chaotic and wonderous. A seeming incompatibility emerges between these two perspectives, yet that does not preclude finding some common ground between them that

reflects aspects of the human perspective and general experience. The beauty of Gray's poem is the ineffable. The perspective of the poem is just out of reach, cannot be fully articulated, and this is also true of the subject matter. The poem re-creates the experience of trying to get beyond visual perception to things themselves, but all we have is visual perception as a means to do this. The poem is an allegory of our first-personal and perspectival way of engaging with the world—we can feel the edges of our perspective but cannot know what it is like to live outside it. What I *can* do within my own first-personal perspective, however, is consider what is particular to me and what is potentially shared and shareable with others as fellow human beings.

The rejection of the thesis that poetry can play a role in philosophical inquiry is based on a limited understanding of the practice of philosophy. Not only might philosophy aim at truth or conclusive proof, there are still philosophical questions for which truth is out of reach, such as questions of value and understanding human experience where we cannot provide a naturalistic account and instead need to rely on appeal to intuitions. In such cases, what is needed is for the individual philosopher to uncover points of agreement and commonality between individual philosophical perspectives as a way of meeting the philosophical aim of understanding. Reading poetry offers a valuable experience of trying to appreciate another's perspective from one's own that can trigger awareness of a process of seeking linkages that has value for philosophical inquiry. Consequently, by engaging with poetry, one can better appreciate what it is to engage in philosophical inquiry as a collective endeavour. What is important is the practice of engaging with other perspectives and trying to find connections as a way of seeking shared perspectives that emerge through the exchange of thought with others.

Through this discussion of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* and Robert Gray's "The Drift of Things," I have demonstrated how general insights can emerge from seeking linkages between perspectives by appreciating the common ground between them, that is, by trying to understand the nature of things from a shared, shareable, human perspective. Aiming to adopt a human perspective does not require that one get outside one's own perspective (that is, adopt an objective point of view that's distinct from one's own perspective). Instead, the task in uncovering general principles related to the human perspective requires that I attempt to understand other perspectives to identify what *might* be common or shareable. Such a process serves an important role in engaging in epistemological criticism of one's own views and philosophical perspectives. By forging connections between perspectives, we open up our own perspective to examination via what connects them with and disconnects them from other perspectives. Furthermore, my defence of poetry's role in philosophical inquiry is consistent with Gibson's understanding of meaning in poetry. An advantage of my view is that poetry can play a role for philosophy in virtue of poetry's resistance to fixed meaning and paraphrase. It is precisely what makes understanding poems difficult that cultivates the intellectual virtue of linking perspectives that is valuable to philosophy conceived of as a collective endeavour.

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