

Chapter Two

Viewpoint Pluralism: Experience the World from as Many Points of View as Possible

My motto: Seek out new experiences for their own sake unless there is a stronger reason not to have a particular new experience.

One of the cornerstones of my philosophy of life and work is a simple but profound concept I call viewpoint pluralism. Essentially it is this: The more perspectives or points of view we have of something, the better our knowledge and understanding of it, and, potentially, the richer our experience of it. This applies to everything from life, love, and work to buying a car.

Undoubtedly you have looked at something from many different angles or perspectives in order to see or understand it better. If you go shopping for a new car you will probably want to see how the car looks from the front, back, and sides. Natural objects such as trees are often better appreciated when seen from many angles. And we can also usually enhance our view of something by getting a more close-up view of it.

Three principles form the basis of my viewpoint pluralism philosophy:

1. There are indefinitely many distinct points of view.
2. Our knowledge is proportional to the number and kind of points of view we take.
3. What points of view we ought to take depends on our purposes.

Indefinitely many distinct points of view

The claim that there are indefinitely many points of view means that there is no definite limit to the number of points of view. And an unlimited number of perspectives means that our potential knowledge of an object is virtually unlimited.

Please note that in viewpoint pluralism we are talking about *indefinitely* many points of view, not *infinitely* many points of view. Claims about infinity are stronger, and they are more difficult to support. In fact, even the French philosopher Descartes drew a distinction between two, preferring in many cases to talk about the indefinite rather than the infinite.

There are two types of points of view--perceptual and conceptual—and they each have indefinitely many points of view.

Perceptual points of view

Imagine a house. There are many visual points of view of the house, from all sides, from above, and from the inside. Now imagine someone with a telescope that becomes more powerful the farther away he is from the house. Suppose this person uses his telescope to look at the house. He has a point of view of the house.

Now imagine this person receding into the distance. As he recedes, he acquires different points of view. Yet he keeps the house in view, since the telescope grows stronger as he recedes. Since visual is a type of perceptual point of view, there are indefinitely many perceptual points of view of the house. This is true for any subject or object.

Conceptual points of view

Conceptual points of view include context and meaning. Think of monism, dualism, and pluralism as points of view about how many types of things there are in the universe. Monism says there is one, dualism says there are two, etc. Triism believes there are three types of things (e.g., minds, bodies, and spirits). In theory, there could be a different name for each point of view that there is some specific number of types of things in the universe. Each one is the name of a conceptual point of view. Because there are indefinitely many numbers, it follows that there are indefinitely many conceptual points of view.



Knowledge Is Proportional to the Number and Kind of Points of View

When we take a perceptual point of view of an object, we perceive it through one of the senses. This creates an internal impression of the object based on information received from the object. This representation constitutes a part of our knowledge of the object in this context. Therefore, the more representations like this we have, the more knowledge we have of the object.

If we see a house from every angle, we know better what it looks like on all sides. By seeing it from the back, the sides, and even from the inside, we learn to know the house better. Anyone who wants to buy a house is likely to look at it from many different

angles. Normally, it is difficult to see a house from the top, but a prospective buyer is likely to inquire about the condition of the roof.

Generally speaking, the more senses we perceive an object through, the more knowledge we have of it. Anyone who has tried watching television with the sound turned down can appreciate this statement. Food is another good example. Our appreciation of food is greatly enhanced



Points of view: A view of houses from the top

by the color, texture, and odor of the food, in addition to its look and its taste. Because we are so visually oriented, we may tend to overlook the role of touch and smell in our lives and the ways these senses can enhance our experiences.

Quality of perception counts too. Good quality perception produces good quality representation, which in turn produces good quality knowledge. Seeing a famous person in person is much better-quality knowledge than seeing them on television. Often, we can enhance our perception of something by getting a closer view of it. We might also use binoculars or a telescope to enhance our view, if the object is far away.

A conceptual point of view of an object creates an internal representation of the object that includes more than just the physical attributes – a house is a home, for instance, a television is a source of entertainment. Because this representation constitutes our knowledge of the object in that context, the more conceptual points of view we have of the object, the better our knowledge and understanding of it.



When we think of an object as being a house, we conceive of it as a physical object having a certain purpose. When we also see it or instance, from the points of view of color, shape, size, and price, we have

even better knowledge of it. Someone who is buying a house is likely to inquire about many aspects of the house, including its history, surroundings, the quality of the materials of construction, architectural design, and price.

Anyone who has a hobby, such as coin collecting or bird watching, knows how looking at different aspects of their chosen hobby can enhance their experience. For example, studying the history of coins adds a new dimension to this hobby, as can an understanding of the principles used for determining the value of coins. Baseball fans find that knowing more about their favorite players increases their enjoyment of the game.

Quality also counts. As our concepts improve, so does our knowledge. If our concepts are confused, as when people believed the earth was flat rather than round, our knowledge will be limited or nonexistent. The quality of our concepts improves with experience and education. As we acquire more points of view through experience, and learn how to structure them through education, our knowledge is enhanced. Anyone who has pursued a hobby or a sport over a number of years can understand how increasing the quantity and quality of our points of view of a subject can enhance our appreciation of it. For

example, a baseball fan who actually attends some games, or who plays the sport, will have a better understanding of the game than someone who is only content to watch it on television. And someone who enjoys the Internet will find their experience greatly enhanced if by constructing their own website, rather than simply visiting other websites.

The Point of View to take Depends on our Purposes

Points of view we need to take vary with our purposes. An architect has one point of view of a house, while a buyer has another. In my business, a marketing manager may have a different point of view of a flowmeter from the product manager, the treasurer, or a customer. The purpose of the marketing manager is to sell flowmeters, the purpose of the treasurer is to keep down costs, and the purpose of the customer is to measure flow rate.

Even though our particular point of view is determined by our purposes, we can sometimes avoid disagreements if we understand the other person's point of view. And seeing many different perspectives is the key to having a full understanding of a situation. Understanding someone else's perspective can often help reach a compromise with them, if necessary. A marketing manager who understands the budgetary constraints of the treasurer will be in a better position to negotiate approval for the product she wishes to purchase. Likewise, parents who can understand the "mindset" of their children, difficult as this may be, have a better chance to influence their behavior than parents who stubbornly refuse to see their child's point of view.

Of course, not all points of view are equally valuable or desirable. Points of view based on false assumptions, like the view that the sun revolves around the earth, ought to be discarded. By testing out and evaluating different points of view, we learn which ones to keep and which ones to discard. Much of the advantage of education consists in acquiring new points of view and replacing the points of view we learned as children. Of course, science knowledge itself evolves and improves over time, as scientists gain experience and a broader perspective.

Practical Applications of Viewpoint Pluralism

As we've said, the more points of view or angles you see something from, the better you understand it. Here are some practical applications of Viewpoint Pluralism.

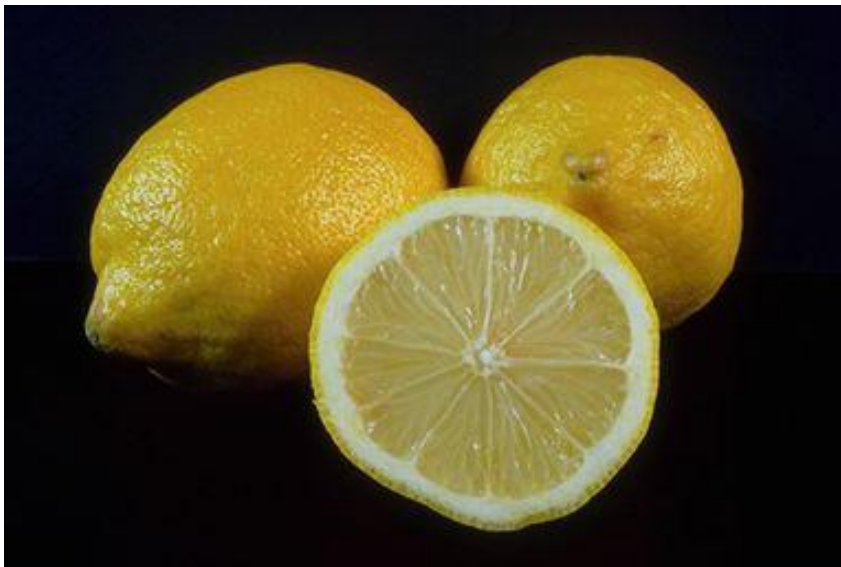
1. When you are studying a subject, find out what people from different perspectives have to say about it. For example, if you are trying to lose weight, pick up two or three different articles or books about the subject, and see what you can learn from each. If you are interested in a consumer product such as a car, try to understand customers' perspectives as well as the manufacturer's view. If you can find a neutral third party, such as a testing or evaluating agency, so much the better. And don't get all your news from one source--each newsgathering organization has its own perspective.

2. Incorporate new experiences into your own life. New experiences increase our knowledge and broaden our horizons by giving us new points of view. New experiences provide enjoyment and pleasure we would not otherwise have, and enhance our mental skills. Here are some simple examples of new experiences worth trying:

- Have lunch or dinner at a new restaurant you haven't tried, or one offering a kind of food you've never had.
- Take a new route to or from work.
- When shopping, select a new fruit, meat, or other food you have never had before to have the experience of eating it. Incorporate this idea into your regular shopping trips.
- Have a new experience every day.



3. Start noticing differences in shades of color and in shades of experience. There are many areas of experience in which we use a single word to describe a whole range of different phenomena.



When you look at a color, try to be aware not only of the color, but also of the shade. Being aware of a name for the shade, such as "lime green" or "lemon yellow," will fix it better in your mind.

There are "shades of experience" in other areas besides color – taste, for example. There

are many different tastes corresponding to the words "sweet" and "sour." By being aware of these different shades of experience, and thinking of different words to distinguish them, you will enrich your own experience and also improve your memory. You will become "experience-rich," as we discuss in the next chapter.

Of course, not all new experiences are good. Some are dangerous, while some are simply undesirable. My motto: Seek out new experiences for their own sake unless there is a stronger reason not to have a particular new experience.

Not All Points of View are Created Equal



The principles of viewpoint pluralism may seem to suggest that you should simply take different points of view of any subject, regardless of what that point of view may be. This is not the case, however, since not all points of view are created equal. Some viewpoints are more important and more valuable than others. For example, the history of a house or a car is a very relevant perspective when you are thinking about making a purchase. If you are buying a used car, you want to know, for example, if the car has been in an accident, and how well it was taken care of. You may not care about the exact dimensions of the trunk, however, provided you can see that it is a normal size trunk for this type of car.

Some viewpoints are so similar that there is little practical difference between them. When you are looking at a house from the front, moving one foot to the left or one foot to the right will in most cases not provide a sufficiently different point of view to make this important. Moving around to see either side of the house, however, is a significantly

different viewpoint, since this enables you to see an entire side of the house that was previously obscured.

The third principle, which states that the points of view we ought to take depends on our purposes, provides a way to limit the number of points of view taken, and also provides a guide to selecting which points of view to take. There is normally no point to simply taking a large number of very similar points of view of an object, unless for example it is an object of great value and we are trying to examine it very closely. Examining an old but highly valuable coin, or a diamond, might call for such an approach. This approach can also pay dividends when looking for a lost item.

Viewpoint Pluralism in the Workplace

One area where viewpoint pluralism has a very significant application is in the area of job skills. Anyone who has looked for a job knows the value of having multiple skills. If someone wants a computer job, having a variety of skills and experiences makes that person much more valuable than someone who may know how to type but only knows one or two major programs. Having other skills such as telephone skills, experience on the Internet, and a programming background make anyone more valuable on the job market.

From the perspective of an employer, hiring someone with multiple skills has obvious benefits. The more skills someone has, the less training they need. Someone who can write well, type, do research, is computer-savvy, and knows their way around the Internet can potentially accomplish much more on the job than someone whose skills are mainly limited to typing or to computer programming. I once hired a secretary who could barely type, and who was not motivated to improve her typing skills on her own. As a result, I could only use her to answer the phone and make outgoing calls. During the time she was there, almost no letters went out of the office.

What is the relation between viewpoint pluralism and having multiple skills? Someone who is looking to improve their job skills can do so by looking at their job from multiple points of view to find out if there are ways to enhance their marketability or broaden their capabilities.

- The first step is to look at a job from different perspectives or points of view, which highlight different aspects. Examples of aspects include writing, programming, typing, doing research, doing interviews, making decisions, etc.
- Then look at each aspect and determine if there are ways to improve your capabilities in this area. This could involve taking a course, reading a book, getting some additional experience, or simply talking to someone who is an expert in this area. Logic dictates that you put the most effort into those aspects that are most important to your job.

Specialist vs. Generalist: When to Shut Out Distracting Viewpoints

Most people are familiar with the dichotomy of being a specialist vs. being a generalist. People sometimes ask whether it is best to do one thing really well, or to be good at many things but master of none. This is an important question for a viewpoint pluralist, since some professions require years of focused training and experience. If someone is a viewpoint pluralist who wants a variety of professional experiences, how are they supposed to have the time to devote years to one profession? For example, anyone who wants to be a medical doctor has to spend years in medical school and often must select an area of specialization to practice in. How can such a person be a viewpoint pluralist?

There is no question that some goals take many years of concentrated attention to achieve. During this time, it may in fact be necessary to shut out other points of view because they are distracting. Anyone who has studied for a test knows that being effective requires concentration, and may require eliminating any distractions. The same may hold true while writing a paper, listening to music, or even playing a game.

In fact, however, there is no incompatibility between being a specialist and being a viewpoint pluralist. Having many points of view to draw on can enhance what we bring to the table.

Being a viewpoint pluralist does not require having multiple careers, or changing careers. Instead, a viewpoint pluralist who specializes in a career can stand out by looking at the career or the profession from many different perspectives. For example, a medical doctor might learn about diseases and conditions that are associated with his or her area of specialization, thereby gaining a broader understanding of the field. Someone who is trained as a cognitive psychologist can learn about other schools of thought in psychology, including behaviorism, clinical psychology, experimental psychology, and applied psychology. A marketing manager for a product such as flowmeters may wish to learn more about the technical aspects of flowmeters, what different types there are, their history, etc. By taking the approach of viewpoint pluralism, a specialist can learn about the many different aspects of a career or profession, resulting in increased knowledge and expertise.

Of course, some people may find that the career or profession they have chosen is no longer right for them. For such a person, viewpoint pluralism can help by providing a framework for looking at many different potential career options. It also encourages looking at multiple aspects of each option to determine their viability and to find out the best one. This methodology can be applied to a variety of decisions, not just careers or professions.

There is also another way to reconcile the specialist vs. generalist dichotomy. By focusing on one subject for a period of time, it is possible to either become an expert or at least to become quite knowledgeable about it. After learning a subject quite thoroughly, it is then possible to move on to another subject and learn that thoroughly as well. Someone who uses this approach can become an expert on a variety of subjects and use that expertise to spark unexpected creativity and synergies.

The perpetually popular book, “The Inner Game Tennis,” written in 1972 by a Harvard English student, Timothy Gallwey, has sold more than a million copies because its simple principles apply to a range of sports as well as personal and professional success. At the time Gallwey was captain of the Harvard tennis team and a serious student of meditation, and he combined both areas of expertise in the book. He built a successful career by extending the series to golf, skiing, stress, music and work.

The idea of exploring one subject in depth and then moving on to another one works well for hobbies and other interests that make life richer and more enjoyable. For example, someone might learn about coin collecting, baseball, racquetball, the movies, Chinese cooking, knitting, and personal computers. Each of these areas of interest has many aspects. Use your interests as a guide in selecting which subjects to pursue. And then see if there are any interesting connections between them.

The idea of sequentially exploring different areas in depth also works when trying to become more knowledgeable about a major area of interest, such as a career or profession. By selecting different aspects of a profession to focus on, you can acquire a very broad base of knowledge over a period of time. These aspects might include history, theory, various techniques, different schools of thought within the profession, etc. Using this approach, you can become very knowledgeable about a variety of aspects of your career or profession. In some cases, this process can continue over most of a lifetime.

Viewpoint Integration

While viewpoint pluralism is a means of attaining knowledge, how do these different items of knowledge relate to each other? Someone who knows a little about a large number of completely unrelated things, or who has a limited amount of experience in many unrelated areas, may feel fragmented. Fragmentation can also occur when someone has one set of experiences that are completely unrelated to another set of experiences. An example is when someone's work life is completely unrelated to their home life. How can a viewpoint pluralist avoid the feeling of fragmentation?

I will begin by discussing some of my own experiences with fragmentation. After graduating from college, I spent a number of years pursuing my PhD in philosophy. During that time, I made a number of friends and acquaintances in this field. Even while writing my dissertation, I was working as a technical writer for several companies in the Boston, Massachusetts area. After receiving my degree, I started my own company, Idea Network, but I continued doing the technical writing. I also began teaching philosophy part-time.

During the time that I was teaching philosophy part-time and doing technical writing, I experienced a feeling of fragmentation since these two areas were completely unrelated to one another. There was very little commonality between my technical writing job and my philosophy teaching job. After several years of this, I decided to try market research, thinking that this would enable me to use more of my philosophical training, including my background in analysis.

As I had hoped, I was able to use my philosophical training more in market research than in technical writing. However, because this was a new profession for me, it took a number of years to become successful in it. Market research is a business that relies heavily on networking and word-of-mouth, and it takes time to become established in the field. As time went along, I was able to integrate more philosophy into my practice of

market research. As a result, these two areas of my life, philosophy and work, have become more integrated.

Viewpoint integration is the solution to fragmentation in experiences and viewpoints. Since fragmentation can occur when two areas of experience are completely unrelated to each other, the solution to this is to try to draw some type of connection between them.

Another approach to viewpoint integration is to find ways to integrate past experiences into your present life.

Variety is the Spice of Life



Viewpoint pluralism can help provide the variety that helps make life interesting and provides the “spice” to life. The section about on practical applications of viewpoint pluralism provides some ideas for applying this philosophy to everyday life. Here are some other suggestions.

1. When you enter a restaurant, try sitting where you can get a good view of the entire restaurant, instead of sitting in a corner or facing a wall.
2. Try listening to different kinds of music, or listen to some new artists that you haven’t heard before.
3. Read a book on a new subject you know nothing about.

4. Learn to make some of your favorite foods, instead of only ordering them in restaurants. For example, if you like eating Chinese food, learn to make a few dishes yourself. Try making your own clam chowder or sushi.

5. If you play a sport such as baseball or racquetball, upgrade your skills by taking lessons.

6. Travel to a new place you've never been before. Keep a journal about your experiences.



7. Look up an old friend from many years ago to catch up on old times.

8. Get a shortwave radio and listen to the world from the perspective of someone in another country.

9. Start playing a musical instrument. If you already play one instrument, try playing a different instrument.

10. Subscribe to a number of different magazines to get different perspectives on the news, and on current events.