The 468th Convocation

Address: "Understanding Perspectives"

By John A. Lucy

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You will, I hope, excuse me as I take a moment to look out over the chapel and all of you gathered here today. I have, of course, sat many times on the benches you occupy, attending various opening day ceremonies, memorial events, and indeed my own Ph.D. graduation one August day some fifteen years ago. But this is the first time I've had the opportunity to take just this perspective on things, to see the whole arrangement as it spreads out from this crow's nest of a vantage point. And, since one never knows whether one will ever be invited back, I had better seize the opportunity while I can.

Well, the hardheaded realists among you will perhaps be comforted to know that I find it all looks pretty much as I imagined it would. No surprising revelation quite yet. Doors and windows, faculty, students, and parents—all are more or less where I expected them to be. Though it is a bit of a miracle, don't you think, that one can even imagine such a scene beforehand. How is it, actually, that never having stood here before I can predict relatively well just how the scene will appear? From developmental research on children we know that we begin to acquire this capacity to recognize the same object from different, novel perspectives in the first year of life. And some few years later we can recognize complex arrangements of objects from different angles and predict where things should be, or recognize where there has been a misalignment, or notice that an item is missing. This imaginative capacity is truly a wonderful power, one we depend on routinely and unconsciously as we go about our daily life. Notice that in this sort of spatial perspective taking, we ultimately commit to the notion that reality itself (including the observer) is stable and that as we move around and take different perspectives, scenes really ought to align with our expectations. And when these expectations are occasionally violated, as in a visual illusion, a hallucination, a magician's trick, or a work of art, we have strong reactions, whether of confusion, consternation, surprise, or delight.

But from another perspective, the scene here is not at all how I imagined it some fifteen years

ago. Everything is different, really. Some of the differences are straightforward, largely temporal ones: the chapel has been refurbished (to good effect I might add) and the characters have mostly all changed (in some cases also to good effect). And there are more subtle differences. I am not the same person who sat out there so many years back doing all this imagining, so how can I see now what I would have seen then? And I am certainly not seeing what whoever-it-was-who-stood-up-here-then saw. And are any of you really like I was when whoever-it-was-who-stood-up-here-then with me-out-there imagining what-he-saw-when-he-looked-at-us? Well, you get the idea. I don't mean this to be one of those can-you-step-in-the-same-river-twice sort of predicaments, but there is a genuine puzzle here when we start thinking about how perspectives shift as part of people's actual changing lives.

What sort of perspectives are we talking about now? Certainly not the same kind as in our spatial case. As we saw, the spatial case assumes that reality, including the observer, is somewhat stable, that you down there can imagine the view up here and then, at least in principle, directly come up here and check out your surmise and it will check out because you are still you and the scene is still the scene. But now we are using the same term *perspective* to talk about situations in which you, the inquiring subject, and the scene, the object of inquiry, can change between the time of imagining and the time of verification, sometimes in fundamental ways. Use of the same term *perspective* in this way with its attendant implication of a stable reality has led to no end of trouble. For example, we assume that as stable subjects, what we want now as young people is what we will want when we are older; that what we wanted as young people, our children will now want. But we are not the same in those two developmental phases and, perhaps more crucially, we likely have faced quite different worlds. You can see the same stable reality logic at work when we look back on a failed love affair and think "I must have been crazy." What we are really saying here is that rather than judge our *current* reality as unstable, or our perspective on it as contingent, we would rather regard ourselves as having been slightly out of our minds before—in other words, assigning experiences that seemed real and compelling enough at the time to the status of some sort of hallucination. Logically, it is as likely that we are out of our minds now. Or better, that there were, and therefore are, two quite different realities rather than two perspectives on the one, though this too can lead to bewilderment about which "me" is the real "me." I think that age often brings the welcome wisdom that both are real in their own way

and form parts of the complex whole of who and what we are in our life. But until then, we are rather prone to be hard on out past selves and on others whose current views of reality don't quite square with ours, because, after all, the assumption of this model is that there is only one reality and we trust that our current self has got hold of it.

Our use of the term *perspective* extends still further. Consider the cases where someone asks, "Why can't you just take my perspective?" or "It depends entirely on how you look at the situation" or, most tellingly these days, "You just don't get it." In these cases, people are challenging our interpretation of the situation even as we stand in the same place, at the same time, looking at the same facts. This sense of the term *perspective* may, of course, overlap with our previous sense, we may just have differing past experiences. But this usage captures a broader array of possibilities, such as when we speak to people who simply do not share our fundamental assumptions and values. The subtext of our efforts at discussion is often that the other is willfully avoiding seeing the obvious. Again, the reality is taken as stable; it is the other subject who seems incapable of seeing it. How many potent examples there are here. Just think of some of the jarringly painful contemporary discussions we have had over what constitutes sexual harassment, over the reasonableness of the Clinton impeachment or the FBI attack on Waco, and over the morality of abortion. People can have very similar experiences and confront more or less exactly the same facts and yet differ profoundly in their conclusions because of very general interpretive frameworks they bring to the situation. To take the most prominent current example: some believe the events of September 11 were an Israeli conspiracy; others believe they were a Republican plot to manipulate the electorate; others believe they were acts in a holy war; others believe they were acts of disheartened European immigrants; others believe they were the acts of a politically motivated terrorist organization; and so on. To be sure, deciding among these views depends in part on getting the facts straight; but the plausibility of these interpretations to those who embrace them has much to do with whole ways of seeing the world that seem profoundly compelling to those who hold them and profoundly misguided to those who do not. But we need not focus solely on the dramatic: there are heated disagreements everyday between different scientific schools of thought, between various religions, between cultural outlooks— all these are kindred cases. Often, rather than challenge our model of a stable (hence singular) reality, we prefer to confine our discussions to those who think as we do and

simply avoid those who disagree.

Understanding these sorts of contrasting perspectives cannot be accomplished simply by walking to a new location, or getting a bit older, or even sharing certain experiences; rather, it involves an act of imagination that yields an understanding of a whole worldview, a system of meaning within which events are interpreted one to another. Young children cannot perform this act of imagination; most adults do not come by the capacity easily and it usually requires some training. Indeed, a large part of your education here has been directly addressed to this skill. Let me explain. As usually conceived, education involves a sort of paradox: you are to be liberated from your ignorance by exposing you to knowledge. But of course, you must acquire our knowledge and our way of knowing, that is, you must conform to the received wisdom. Not surprisingly, we have in our culture a long tradition of skepticism about education since it liberates only by enslavement. If you really want to think freely, one might argue, you should never go to school. The usual liberal arts answer to this anxiety is that we are going to teach you to think critically so you won't be slave to our ideas. This is fine so far as it goes, but it is not always so clear what critical thinking means; often it means something like learning how to question assumptions and ferret out inconsistencies. But this sort of answer offers little or no constructive suggestion about what you are supposed to do in a positive sense. The alternative I am articulating here is that the fundamental core of a liberal education is learning to grasp other ways of thinking, other perspectives, by learning to see the ways that knowledge about reality depends on systems of meaning. All education at this University, whether collegiate, graduate, or professional, engages in this process both in terms of the specific approach to bodies of knowledge and in terms of a general cast of mind. The liberation in a liberal arts education lies not in knowing facts or in being a sharp or clever critic, but being able to get inside systems of ideas and grasp their inner logic and, thus positioned, undertake the process of exploring how the different logics might be reconciled or translated one to another in some fruitful way.

Communication through natural language lies at the heart of this process of understanding. And in language we encounter the last type of perspective we need to discuss. For language, the medium through which we grasp other systems of meaning, other systems of understanding, is itself an exquisitely structured network of meanings. In this sense, each language, through the

categories it selects and the ways it organizes and deploys them, provides us with a perspective on the world, a perspective that inevitably shapes all the messages conveyed through it. The perspective embodied in our language, and in the specialized professional jargons built up on it, presents the greatest challenge to our understanding of experience. Rapid, automatic, pervasive, and nearly invisible, our use of language constantly shapes our understanding in manifold ways. Coming to terms with these effects represents the ultimate challenge in nearly every field of study. The scientific study of these issues has hardly begun and, not surprisingly, this is also where our contemporary system of education remains most deficient. True understanding, I would argue, requires some minimal understanding the very medium of understanding. Instead, many would deny there is even a problem. Some, sitting snugly (even smugly) within their English borders, remain confident that there are no significant differences in how people talk. Others venture forth, bringing their English perspective to bear on the interpretation of individual elements in other codes and find, not surprisingly and to their great comfort, that the differences among languages are not so great after all. But others have taken up the task of getting inside the inner logic of other languages, the systematic arrangements of meaning, and have been astonished by the range of differences among codes and sobered as to the possibility of genuine translation. There are languages, for instance, that would radically alter my characterization of spatial perspective by requiring me to mark every verb for the direction of the action in terms of north, south, east, and west; other languages that would confound my efforts to describe my past experience by ignoring our distinction between present and past tense; and still other languages that would transform my efforts to discuss others people's ideas by requiring me to indicate constantly whether my statement was due to personal knowledge or to hearsay. Note finally that the entire discussion here provides a further example of language effects as we see the confusions that arise when we project assumptions about a stable reality drawn from the spatial meaning of *perspective* onto other uses of the term. In short, efforts to communicate about other perspectives must pass through this elaborate category system with inevitable effects of its own.

Within a language community, the shared code allows us to understand each other, to share perspectives effortlessly— we hardly notice the grooves we are forced into. Conversation provides the surest route to understanding each other's perspectives in all the other senses I've outlined. Most of you, I trust, are learning something of my perspective on the world through this

talk. But were we not to share a code, this whole process would be derailed. We would be left without the possibility of direct conversation and have to rely on those who can translate for us the ideas of others. Such translation presents enormous difficulties but is absolutely essential to bridging significant cultural differences. I imagine that some in this audience cannot in fact understand my words and will learn about my ideas if, and only if, some friend or member of the family recounts them afterward. Just be sure to indicate that it is all hearsay so they don't attribute these ideas to you.

What I hope you will convey to them on my behalf is that our simple way of thinking about all perspectives on analogy with spatial perception obscures some very important distinctions. It leads us to imagine a stable reality that ignores the effects of time and experience on both subject and object. It leads us to imagine a simple relationship between subject and object that ignores the constitutive role of frames of interpretation. And it leads us to imagine that the coordination of these frames of interpretation is a transparent process rather than itself mediated by a meaning-laden code. The upshot of these misrecognitions and confusions is that we continue to regard our differences from other people as either wholly trivial (that is, "they are really just like us") or as the product of their failure to see or refusal to acknowledge facts obvious to any observer if they would only look. The reality is that our vision of the world stems from a complex and multilayered web of experiences, systems of interpretation, and conventions of communication in which the reconciliation of perspectives is a daunting task.

We have endeavored in your time here at this University to give you the tools to navigate such differences in perspective by being skillful and sensitive interpreters of your fields of knowledge and, we hope, of diverse viewpoints more generally. We have not only tried to give you some understanding of these diverse perspectives, but also to give you some perspective on the process of genuine understanding—that most important achievement of the human imagination. I congratulate you on the completion of your training and wish you well as you go forth to confront the complex and difficult world we face today. We trust that you will put your skills to work establishing meaningful dialogue with those whose perspectives may differ from your own so as to build a better world for us all.

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