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ARTICLE



# Carlos Vaz Ferreira on intellectual flourishing as intellectual liberation

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## ABSTRACT

I argue for a substantive interpretation of Carlos Vaz Ferreira's account of intellectual flourishing as intellectual liberation. For Vaz Ferreira, I argue, there is an inescapable master-slave dynamic between language and language users, so that flourishing intellectually essentially involves a type of *mastery* of language that *frees up* thinking from enslaving linguistic/conceptual confusions and thus facilitates the acquisition of truth. Central to this project are Vaz Ferreira's most interesting, and radical, views on the nature of language signification and thus on human's ability to accurately describe and know reality, for failing to keep these linguistic limitations in mind, Vaz Ferreira argues, is a central way for language to enslave humans to confused thinking and thus prevent their intellectual flourishing.

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## 1. Introduction

The main goal of this paper is to present a substantive interpretation of an interesting account of intellectual flourishing advanced by early twentieth-century Uruguayan philosopher Carlos Vaz Ferreira (1872–1958).<sup>1</sup> For Vaz Ferreira, intellectual flourishing involves, and is propelled by, a fundamental

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<sup>1</sup>Vaz Ferreira is an intellectual celebrity in his native Uruguay (Tani, *Pensamiento y utopía en Uruguay*; Oliver, "Roots of Carlos Vaz Ferreira's Philosophy"). As early as 1952, in a work dedicated to summarizing Vaz Ferreira's thought, Arturo Ardao unapologetically states that Vaz Ferreira is "the maximum figure of philosophy in Uruguay during the twentieth century" (Ardao, *Introducción*, 17) "whose name is today fatigued with celebrity" in Uruguay (Ardao, *Introducción*, 7). Beyond Uruguay, Vaz Ferreira also enjoys some attention in contemporary philosophical discussions in Spanish (e.g. Cerrano and García, "Carlos Vaz Ferreira y su visión del ultra protectionismo"; Acosta, "Sobre la propiedad de la tierra" and "El Pensar Radical de Vaz Ferreira"; Carriquiry, "La crítica de Vaz Ferreira a la herencia"; Drews, "Lo verosímil en el 'razonabilismo'"; Vega, "Carlos Vaz Ferreira"). In general, in introductions to Latin American philosophy in English, Vaz Ferreira is typically given a passing reference (Gracia and Millan-Zaibert, *Latin American Philosophy*, 19, 81; Gracia and Vargas, "Latin American Philosophy", section 2.1; and Nuccetelli, "Metaphilosophical Foundations", section 1.1), but his thought is not given much consideration in any detail. A few exceptions of works in English dedicated to Vaz Ferreira are Haddox ("Vaz Ferreira: Uruguayan Philosopher"), Perez-Illarbe ("Vaz Ferreira as a Pragmatist"), Oliver ("Roots of Carlos Vaz Ferreira's Philosophy"), and Garcia Torres ("Vaz Ferreira on Freedom").

commitment to truth for its own sake that he calls “spirit of sincerity” which is embodied by “good reasoners, sincere investigators, those that pursue the acquisition of truth in good faith” (LV 137).<sup>2</sup> Vaz Ferreira worries, however, that this spirit of sincerity is often truncated by “the fallacies that have to do with the relationship between words and ideas and judgments; between language and thought” (LV 70), which Vaz Ferreira calls “verbo-ideological fallacies” (LV 70f). Intellectual flourishing requires a particular type of thinking characterized by freedom from these verbo-ideological fallacies, which is a type of intellectual liberation. This intellectual liberation is itself thus intellectually virtuous, for Vaz Ferreira. To be intellectually vicious, by contrast, is to lack the spirit of sincerity or to think within the bounds of verbo-ideological fallacies which “fatally condemn one to think badly” (LV 25–6) and thus “enslave the mind” (LV 82). He thinks that many of these verbo-ideological fallacies are predicated upon our misunderstanding or misuse of language, in particular our failure to grasp the limitations on the capacity of human language to express the nature of reality. As Vaz Ferreira sees it, words allure us because they enable us to label, classify, and organize the content of our experience, but the way human language relates to reality is often opaque to us and thus we are often led astray and overestimate the extent to which our linguistic descriptions manage to accurately describe reality. Vaz Ferreira goes further; he thinks that much of the history of the development of philosophical thought is connected to the history of the development of human’s ability to use language more effectively, and that such history can and should be understood as a history of the liberation of human thought. Vaz Ferreira argues that as history advances “*we are learning to use language in an incrementally more effective way; as time goes by words dominate us less, and we are gradually increasing our dominance over them*” (LV 184–5, emphasis in original). Thus, as Vaz Ferreira sees it, there is an inescapable master-slave dynamic between language and language users, so that to flourish intellectually involves a type of mastery over language that frees up thinking from enslaving linguistic/conceptual confusions and thus facilitates the acquisition of truth.

This general picture of intellectual liberation is attractive, and relatively uncontroversial. Central questions about the nature of language and the extent to which it can adequately describe reality are still unanswered, however. It is a central goal of this paper to provide a substantive interpretation of Vaz Ferreira’s answers to these questions, and thus present a more substantive version of his account of intellectual liberation. Here is the plan. In Section 2, after briefly situating Vaz Ferreira in his historical context, I present the central ideas in his account of logic and language

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<sup>2</sup>Translations are my own unless a translation is cited.

signification. This will serve as central background for the discussion on Vaz Ferreira's more detailed account of intellectual liberation, presented in Section 3.

## 2. Vaz Ferreira on logic and language signification

For Vaz Ferreira, intellectual flourishing essentially involves intellectual liberation, and this liberation is predicated upon mastering language and overcoming the many enslaving linguistic/conceptual confusions created by the limitations of human language to accurately express reality (LV 184f). Thus, central to our project of intellectual flourishing is understanding the nature of language signification, for Vaz Ferreira.

### 2.1. Brief historical context

A few words about Vaz Ferreira's historical context are in order. Francisco Romero (1891–1962), himself an important Latin American philosopher, has labelled Vaz Ferreira a member of “the generation of founders” of Latin American philosophy (*Filosofía en América*, 64).<sup>3</sup> Romero used this label because he sees this generation as inaugurating an authentically philosophical period in the history of Latin American thought.<sup>4</sup> Until this point, the two major currents of Latin American thinking were scholasticism and positivism. Scholasticism was imported into Latin America by its colonizers, and it remained the dominant way of doing philosophy during the colonial period in Latin America. By contrast, ‘positivism’, as it applies to Latin American philosophy, refers broadly to the kind of philosophy championed by Auguste Comte, though Latin American positivists often incorporated the thought of John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer into their particular variation of positivism (Zea, *El positivismo en México*, 17ff). Positivism was dominant during the latter part of the nineteenth century throughout Latin America, when a primary preoccupation was the building of independent nation-states after the political turmoil following the wars for independence (Gracia and Vargas “Latin American Philosophy”, § 1). Positivism was itself imported from Europe; its emphasis on empirical science and political pragmatism built upon a classical liberal model was welcomed throughout Latin America as a powerful instrument for independent and progressive nation-building (Gracia and Vargas “Latin American Philosophy”, § 1).

As Romero sees it, part of what makes these older models for doing philosophy less authentic than subsequent models in Latin America is that these

<sup>3</sup>Gracia and Vargas (“Latin American Philosophy”) reinforce this categorization in their influential taxonomy of the history of Latin American philosophy.

<sup>4</sup>Freire (*Pedagogía del oprimido*) and Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks*), for example, insightfully discuss some of the conditions that give rise to inauthenticity in oppressed societies.

involve understanding the thought originating in Europe as intrinsically superior to the thought originating in Latin America. What separates members of this ‘generation of founders’ from previous thinkers in Latin America is that they felt empowered to pursue novel ways of doing philosophy independently of the approving gaze of European philosophers and their standards of philosophical valuation. These founders developed various philosophical objections to positivism and thus facilitated an important philosophical transition in Latin American thought.

Vaz Ferreira is thus an important figure in the history of Latin American philosophy. Because he is, to a large extent, still in the grip of positivism, he inherits some of its paradigmatic strengths and weaknesses. For its strengths: he is clear, concerned with language and precision, attentive to the sciences of his day, and careful and meticulous in his reasonings. For its weaknesses: he is a bit too quick to dismiss the past and a bit too optimistic in his linguistic analyses. These strengths and weaknesses are visible in the account presented below.

## 2.2. *Early views on logic and signification*

The young Vaz Ferreira was greatly influenced by John Stuart Mill. As Vaz Ferreira matured, he developed his views in different directions, but in many respects his thought remained firmly planted within broadly Millian parameters. In 1899, when Vaz Ferreira was 27 years old, he published a textbook on logic, *Apuntes de lógica elemental* (LE), and in it, Vaz Ferreira closely followed Mill’s own influential work on logic, *A System of Logic* (SL). For our purposes, the most relevant theses advocated by Mill, and accepted by young Vaz Ferreira, are the following: radical empiricism (SL 39), the meaning of terms originating in experience (SL 42), the distinction between denotation versus connotation of words (SL 20), the distinction between real versus merely verbal propositions (SL 73–5), the purely conventional meaning of the denotation and connotations of words (SL 70), and the insistence that much confusion in philosophical discourse originates in the misunderstanding of the meaning of words (SL 60). In this subsection, I briefly present the way in which these Millian ideas were incorporated into the thought of the young Vaz Ferreira.

As Vaz Ferreira sees it, truth and falsity can be understood in two distinct but compatible ways. On the one hand, “what is true is what exists; what is false is what does not exist; what is not” (LE 1). Truth, in this sense, is the goal of inquiry. Science is a particular type of inquiry that “for its practical ends, it completely prescind[s] from speculations and debates concerning the existence and nature of truth”, rather “science postulates the existence of truth, given that it is its object, precisely to discover and to know it” (LE 1). Thus, for Vaz Ferreira, scientific inquiry is the type of inquiry that begins by

postulating the existence of truth as its goal. It is metaphysics that concerns itself with the existence or nature of truth (LE 1). Truth, however, can also be understood differently: “instead of applying to the object, the terms ‘true’ and ‘false’ can be applied to thought. It is said, in this sense, that a thought is true when it is adapted to reality; that it is false, or that there is error, when this adaptation does not obtain” (LE 1). Both senses, Vaz Ferreira claims, are acceptable understandings of the nature of truth and falsity.

Vaz Ferreira thinks that “seeking truth and avoiding error” are “human needs” (LE 1). Logic, he claims, has the objective of “providing rules to guide and aid man in his task” of “seeking truth and avoiding error” (LE 1). A first task in seeking truth is to think consistently, for “a thought that includes a contradiction cannot be true, because reality, to which thoughts must be adapted to be true, does not and cannot include contradictions” (LE 2). It is “pure or formal logic” that is tasked with establishing the rules for avoiding contradictions or establishing “the conditions upon which thought agrees with itself” (LE 2). However, knowledge of pure logic by itself does not contribute to knowledge of reality: “formal logic ... is completely independent from reality; it is entirely *a priori*, anterior to all experience, alien to facts, knowledge of which it takes none and knowledge of which it adds none, by itself” (LE 3). Vaz Ferreira further claims that pure logic is governed by a single principle that can be formulated in two different ways:

[formulated] in its positive form, this is the principle which is known as *the principle of identity* ...  $A$  is  $A$ ; [formulated] in its negative form, this fundamental principle which governs the agreement of thought with itself, or as it is also often called, [the principle] of consequence, or of contradiction.

(LE, 3)

Furthermore, “the principle of identity or contradiction has nothing to do with the truth of thoughts; it does not pertain with its matter, but with its form” (LE, 3). Pure logic concerns the form of thoughts, and it is these formal features of thoughts, abstracted from their matter or content, that secure the consistency of thoughts, if not their truth. The study of pure logic, then, “is nothing more than a preliminary [step] in the process of investigation into truth” (LE 41).

For Vaz Ferreira, thoughts, beliefs, judgements, and propositions can all be true or false, but these notions are interconnected. As he sees it, a proposition is “a verbal expression of a judgment, it is a speech that affirms or denies an attribute of a subject” (LE 9). For Vaz Ferreira, propositions are utterances or verbal expressions of thoughts or judgements, and, as we shall see below, all propositions have meaning only in purely conventional and contingent linguistic contexts. Furthermore, after dismissing several accounts of the signification of propositions, i.e. what propositions are about, Vaz Ferreira presents his own view: “every proposition contains an affirmation referring, not to

names or ideas, but to things, to a reality that is exterior [to the mind]" (LE 11–12). Furthermore, "when we utter a given proposition, unless this proposition refers precisely to phenomena in our spirit, our affirmation or negation does not refer to our own ideas, or ideas in general, but to objective reality, to things" (LE 10). Propositions can be made about words, ideas, and thoughts, to be sure, but normally propositions are about mind-independent reality, and they are true when mind-independent reality is the way that the propositions describe it.

Propositions are composed of terms or names, and: "Names or terms are words that usage or convention has established as signs of certain things, and that, because of this, they enable one to think of such objects" (LE 4). The meaning of terms, for Vaz Ferreira, is purely conventional; it is established by the *use* to which it is subjected in a linguistic community. For Vaz Ferreira both subject-nouns and predicates are names: "Concrete names are the names of things. Abstract names are the names of the properties of things" (LE 5). Central to Vaz Ferreira's account of terms is Mill's distinction between denotation and connotation (SL 70). Vaz Ferreira writes: "all names have a function in common: that of referring to one or various objects ... it is called *denotation*" (LE 6, emphasis in original). Vaz Ferreira continues "some names have an additional function: that of showing something about the object or objects to which they refer ... it is called *connotation*" (LE 6, emphasis in original). In sum: "All names *denote* objects, that is: designate certain objects or refer to them; some names *connote* attributes, that is: signify, imply, [or] express certain attributes" (LE 6, emphasis in original). Explicitly following Mill, Vaz Ferreira states that proper names – Diego, Frida, etc. – are non-connoting terms; they have a denotation but no connotation (LE 7).

Vaz Ferreira further notes that there is a tradition of distinguishing between essential and accidental propositions:

it is common to call propositions 'essential' those that affirm a property of a subject that belongs to its essence, understanding by essence that which makes a determinate thing to be what it is and without which it would cease to exist. The other propositions are commonly called 'accidental'.

(LE 13)

Vaz Ferreira insists that what have been traditionally called "essential properties of one thing are, simply, the properties connotated by the name of that thing; [so] essential propositions would be, then, those whose attribute is contained in the connotation of the subject" (LE 14). This understanding of essences has crucial implications for human's ability to understand the nature of reality. Several philosophers have presented essential propositions as denoting types of necessary truths accessible only by the proper use of a faculty of rational intuition, and thus constituting some of the most

impressive accomplishments of the human intellect and most insightful knowledge into the nature of reality. Vaz Ferreira rejects all of this:

A thing does not necessarily cease to exist when it loses one or several of its 'essential properties'; the only thing that happens is that the name that it previously had can no longer be applied to this thing, in the way it happens when it loses only an 'accidental property'. Remove from water the property of being warm, and, once it is cold, it would still be called 'water'; but make it cold to the point of freezing, and it would cease to be called 'water' to now be called 'ice'. This depends [simply] on the fact that the word 'water' connotes fluidity but not warmth.

(LE 13, footnote 1)

As such what has been traditionally regarded as essential propositions are "*purely verbal propositions*", which are contrasted with "*real propositions*", which, in affirming one or various properties of a thing that are not connoted by the word that serves as its name they show us something new about the nature of that thing" (LE 13–14, emphasis in original). Thus, Vaz Ferreira separates all propositions into either real or merely verbal propositions: "*purely verbal propositions correspond to analytic judgments, and real propositions [correspond] to synthetic judgments*" (LE 14).

In sum, for Vaz Ferreira logic is not a guide to reality because logic only deals with formal features of propositions. The primary task of logic is to avoid contradictions. The meaning of all terms, and thus of all propositions composed of those terms, is settled by contingent linguistic conventions. These linguistic conventions endow terms with their denotations and connotations; analytic propositions are propositions which state of a subject one of the attributes connoted by its name, and as such they are uninteresting trivialities of language, or purely verbal propositions that tell us nothing (interesting) about reality. All (non-trivial) true propositions, however, are real and synthetic propositions. After learning about logic and the signification of terms and propositions, the preliminary task has been attained and inquiry into reality can begin: "When one knows how to make thought agree with itself, one must then learn to make thought agree with reality" (LE 41).

### 2.3. *Meaning and levels of abstraction*

In 1907, at the relatively young age of 35, Vaz Ferreira publishes his important work *Los problemas de la libertad* (hereafter *Problemas*).<sup>5</sup> The main goal of this work was to conceptually disentangle philosophical problems pertaining to

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<sup>5</sup>This work was published in parts beginning in 1903 in *Anales de la Universidad*. Over thirty years after its publication, Vaz Ferreira describes this book as the only one that he tried "to write with proper time, study, concentration, [and] profundity and for these reasons it is the least imperfect" of his books (F, 35).



freedom from problems pertaining to causal determinism.<sup>6</sup> It is in this important work, however, that Vaz Ferreira presents an elaboration of the basic picture of language and signification that he proposed in *Apuntes de lógica elemental*, an elaboration that he never abandons.<sup>7</sup>

A major development is the introduction of what Vaz Ferreira calls levels of abstraction as “planes” in which thinking can operate and analyses of notions can take place. As Vaz Ferreira sees it, all human inquiry takes place within one of these levels of abstraction, and the meaning of terms is settled by the level at which these terms are thought. The most basic level of abstraction is the one that takes the meaning of terms as they are given in experience; and Vaz Ferreira claims, this is precisely the level at which empirical science begins its investigation: “*In the sciences, the degree of abstraction in which thinking occurs is established by tacit convention*” (P, 41, emphasis in original). The tacit convention in science is that “certain notions” are taken simply as “data, without [further] discussion” because these notions “are common to all men precisely because these are the data of perception” (P, 40–1). That empirical investigation begins at this level of abstraction explains “the ease for thinking and discussing found” in those empirical sciences which “results in part from words therein having a precise meaning; or, better, a meaning that is more or less the same for everyone” (P, 40).

The same holds for metaphysical thinking: “*In the sciences, the degree of abstraction in which thinking occurs is established by tacit convention. In metaphysics, it must be established by explicit convention in each case*” (P, 41, emphasis in original). The difference between the empirical sciences and metaphysics, for Vaz Ferreira, is merely the degree of abstraction at which these types of thinking operate. For example, metaphysics “is characterized by beginning its analysis from [scientific notions]; and ... it is possible to go further in this analysis, given that there are different degrees of abstraction which constitute it” (P, 41). The meaning of scientific notions, then, is fixed by the level of abstraction in which scientific thinking operates; and this is itself settled by the tacit convention to use the meaning of notions that arise from common perception. By contrast, metaphysics is a collection of different levels of abstraction in which metaphysical thinking occurs and the meanings of the notions operating at each different level of abstraction must be explicitly articulated.

These levels of abstraction, or conceptual frameworks, help settle the meaning of the notions operating within them and thus help make intelligible philosophical questions and answers to philosophical problems. As Vaz Ferreira sees it, propositions can be true in some conceptual frameworks

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<sup>6</sup>See Garcia Torres, “Vaz Ferreira on Freedom”.

<sup>7</sup>Vaz Ferreira makes references to this elaboration later in his career (LV 81, 183, 187), and towards the end of his life, he fully endorses what he had said originally in *Problemas* (F 9f; 35f).

and false in others. He writes: “any proposition referring to” a given object “could be true or false, depending on the level of abstraction at which it is placed in thought” (P, 41). Vaz Ferreira provides the following example:

Let us take any notion: let it be that of ‘matter,’ just as it is given in perception. Stripping it of certain properties which psychology demonstrates to be no more than subjective phenomena, we obtain a more abstract notion, which we continue to call ‘matter’. Taking the analysis further, we can make such notion more and more abstract; and, in all these degrees of abstraction, we always employ the same word ‘matter’. The result from this is that any proposition whose object is the notion of ‘matter’, or which has some relation to this notion, could be true or false (or better still, is commonly true and false) according to the degree of abstraction in which it is placed in thought.

(P, 41–2)

The details of Vaz Ferreira’s account are not as clear as one would like, but the basic idea seems straightforward. Thought operates at different levels of abstraction which permit or prohibit different kinds of information about a given notion and in so doing settle the very meaning of that notion at that level of abstraction. Thus, a single notion can have different meanings at different levels of abstraction in which this notion is thought. The meaning of notions is based on the quantity and quality of information that is permitted to be a part of them at a given level of abstraction. The more distant one level of abstraction is from another (that is, the less information is shared between different levels of abstraction) the less similarity of meaning between the notions operating within these different levels. Thus, for Vaz Ferreira, different conceptual frameworks make intelligible different kinds of questions and answers to philosophical problems by settling the meaning of the notions employed in these questions and answers, and thus settling the very thinkability of these questions and answers.

These conceptual frameworks thus allow for a kind of relativity of truth. Propositions that involve a single notion, like ‘matter’, can have slightly different meanings in different conceptual frameworks, depending on the quantity and quality of information that endows this notion with meaning at that level of abstraction, and thus these propositions can come out as true in one framework and false in another.

Vaz Ferreira further describes the methodology of his project in *Problemas*:

Now then: it can be believed that many of the theories that have been held in philosophy are true in some given degrees of abstraction, without prejudice of being, in others, false or devoid of meaning; especially if it is considered that it is possible, analyzing a notion contained in a theory, to get to another theory which is different or contrary to the first, this does not prove that the first is false *in its circle of abstraction*.

(P, 42, emphasis in original)

Vaz Ferreira's main point here is that the fact that a proposition or theory is true, false, or meaningless in one conceptual framework cannot by itself be taken as justification for thinking that this proposition or theory is true, false, or meaningless in a different conceptual framework.

#### 2.4. *The nature of Vaz Ferreira's realism*

Vaz Ferreira's endorsement of multiple levels of abstraction in which thought operates, and the conceptual relativity resulting therefrom, complicates the simple realist notion of truth endorsed in his earlier years. It is the task of this subsection to bring out some of these complexities, and thus to articulate the nuanced realism to which Vaz Ferreira subscribes from the writing of *Problemas* onward.

Vaz Ferreira's nuanced realism anticipates Carnap's influential distinction between internal and external questions concerning the existence or reality of entities. Roughly put, for Carnap, external questions are questions about the way words are used in a given linguistic framework, and these external questions are non-epistemic in nature; it is internal questions, or questions articulable within the parameters of a given linguistic framework, that are properly epistemic (Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology", 29f). Even closer to Vaz Ferreira's views are those advocated by Hilary Putnam in lecture one of his *The Many Faces of Realism*.<sup>8</sup> There, Putnam argues that Realism with 'R' is bankrupt because it retains an outdated Cartesian model with a sharp distinction between truth-bearers, which are partly linguistically-conceptually constructed, and truth-makers, which possess intrinsic properties (i.e. entirely non-linguistically-conceptually-constructed properties) (Putnam, "Many Faces of Realism", 3f). By contrast, Putnam advocates for what he calls 'internal realism', which is a less robust version of realism that permits for conceptual relativity – the view that there is no privileged conceptual framework from which reality can simply be described as it is in itself (Putnam, "Many Faces of Realism", 17f).

Vaz Ferreira's version of realism is similar to what Putnam calls 'internal realism'. For Vaz Ferreira, truth is what exists or what is, or a proposition is true if it corresponds to the way the world is. But the meaning of propositions is settled at different levels of abstraction (P, 41f). A proposition does not get to be simply true or false without reference to a specific level of abstraction in which it is thought (P 41, 44). An important difference between Vaz Ferreira's views, and those of Carnap and Putnam, is that Vaz Ferreira insists that some conceptual frameworks are more 'natural' ways of raising and answering particular questions; thus making it a sort of mistake to address philosophical issues at levels of abstraction in which they are not most naturally addressed.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>I wish to thank an anonymous referee for suggesting that I address Putnam's work.

<sup>9</sup>For more details, see García Torres, "Vaz Ferreira on Freedom".

A second significant difference is that Vaz Ferreira's account of levels of abstraction in which thought can operate is hierarchical in two interconnected senses: (a) the most basic conceptual framework is the one that takes the meaning of notions as they originate in experience, and other conceptual frameworks can be roughly arranged in terms of their *semantic similarity* to this most basic conceptual framework (P, 41f); and (b) the knowledge generated at the most basic conceptual framework C is most *epistemologically secure*, and the less semantically similar a conceptual framework C\* is to C, the less epistemologically secure C\* will be. Vaz Ferreira expresses this conceptual-epistemic hierarchy in terms of a sea metaphor:

We have already compared human knowledge with a sea, in which what happens at the surface can be seen and described with clarity; the deeper it gets, it can be seen less clearly; towards the bottom, it can be barely glimpsed, less and less, until it is absolutely impossible to see. Accordingly, if someone wanting to sketch or describe these realities, presents us the things at the bottom with the same precision, with the same clarity, with the same neatness of her sketches of the things at the surface—I am trying to say, if someone gives us a metaphysics that appears to be a science—we can affirm without reservations that she is giving us an error, instead of the partial truth of which we are capable.

(LV 85; see also LV 76)

Vaz Ferreira's radical empiricism shapes this sea metaphor. What is clearest, what can be known with a greater degree of certainty, is what is given directly in experience. Furthermore, human language is at its most transparent when used at the level that describes experience or the surface of the sea. As human thought descends deeper into this sea, human knowledge becomes less and less certain, and human language itself becomes less and less clear. It is metaphysical thinking that ventures into these deeper levels of human knowledge (CM 221); such metaphysical thinking complements scientific thinking: "the science that fears noble metaphysics is victim of other inconsistent and shameful metaphysics that becomes parasitic on science and that instead of purifying it obscures it" (CM 221). Vaz Ferreira extends the sea metaphor to make clearer the relationship between science and metaphysics:

... in the middle of the 'sea for which we have neither boat nor sail' humanity has established itself on science. Science is its floating plank ... but on all sides water abounds; and if delved into *in any part*, water is found; and if analyzed *any part* of the plank itself, it turns out to be made of the same water as the ocean for which there is no boat or sail. *Science is solidified metaphysics.*

(CM 221–2, emphasis in original)

Metaphysics is continuous with science, for Vaz Ferreira. What separates one mode of inquiry from the other is merely the level of profundity in the sea of human knowledge at which these inquiries operate. For Vaz Ferreira, most of

reality is knowable, if only partially, but the prospects of misunderstanding and confusion increase the deeper human thought ventures into the sea of human knowledge.

Importantly, for Vaz Ferreira, the conceptual relativity implied by his account of language signification does not imply that reality is fragmented. To think so would be to fall into the fallacy of ascribing the logical features of natural language onto reality itself:

The paralogism consists in attributing to reality the contradictions one occasionally incurs, and often times one is forced to incur, in expressing reality; [it consists] in transporting the contradiction from words to things, in making a verbal or conceptual fact into an ontological fact.

(LV 174)

The types of contradictions Vaz Ferreira has in mind are propositions like “Pedro is good and not good” (LV 122); he continues:

after analyzing the signification of the term, we note that ‘good’ is a scheme ... [and] what creates difficulties here is *the fundamental inadequacy of language to express reality* (in most cases, at least) ... *we should not, for example, commit to discussing whether Pedro is good or not good, as if it is necessary that Pedro falls [completely] into one or the other of these categories.*

(LV 122–3, emphasis in original)

Rather, Pedro is good in some sense and not good in some other sense. Thus, what Vaz Ferreira calls ‘contradictions’ are more carefully described as ‘merely apparent contradictions’ resulting from the vagueness in meaning of terms in natural language or being licensed by the relativity of truth that results from his notion of diverse levels of abstraction in thinking. Importantly for our purposes, Vaz Ferreira insists that at each level of abstraction, contradictions are not permitted: “a single thing cannot be *a* and *not-a*, at the same time and *from the same point of view*” (LV 176, emphasis in original). So, no one should claim, for example, that Pedro is good and not good *in the same sense*. Reality is consistent. The hierarchy of truths, at different levels of abstraction, implied by the metaphor of the sea of human knowledge is a feature of human’s ability to know and describe reality, not features of reality itself. The limitations of our conceptual frameworks may force us to describe things with various degrees of seeming inconsistency: “but ... [these things are] no more contradictory, nor less contradictory, because things, in themselves, are not contradictory ... they are the way they are” (LV 176). Given the limitations of our linguistic and cognitive capacities, we may be stuck saying that *matter is colored* is true in one sense and false in another sense, but none of this requires that we thereby conclude that reality itself is inconsistent or problematically fragmented.

Vaz Ferreira often speaks of levels of abstraction as “points of view” (P 47f, 54f, 62f; LV 176), so he wants to say that it is often reasonable to believe p-

from-point-of-view-A *and* not-p-from-point-of-view-B. This way of presenting Vaz Ferreira's views resonates with proponents of Kantian two-standpoint views, like Korsgaard, and proponents of standpoint epistemology, like Diana Toole. A brief comparison with these views can help to further clarify my reading of Vaz Ferreira's views.

In general terms, Kantian two-standpoint views are views that claim it is reasonable for one to hold otherwise contradictory propositions from different standpoints. It is irrational to hold *p* and not-*p*, but it is not irrational to hold *p*-from-standpoint-A and not-*p*-from-standpoint-B, they claim. For example, it is reasonable to hold that *we are free* from a deliberative standpoint and to hold that *we are not free* from a theoretical standpoint.<sup>10</sup> Dana Nelkin ("Two Standpoints") has argued against the tenability of these accounts. She argues that the proponent of the two-standpoints view has the burden of proof to show: (a) that it is intelligible to hold beliefs from standpoints in a way that does not reduce to simply holding beliefs; and (b) to show why holding otherwise contradictory beliefs from different standpoints does away with a type of irrationality akin to that of holding contradictory beliefs *simpliciter*. I call this the 'intelligibility' challenge.<sup>11</sup>

Vaz Ferreira's account has the theoretical resources to answer this intelligibility challenge. For Vaz Ferreira, the expression 'from a point of view' is meant to remind interlocutors that the *meaning* of the proposition being expressed is itself settled in a particular way. Vaz Ferreira's understanding of the nature of propositions is helpful here. As we have seen, for Vaz Ferreira, propositions are just utterances that express judgements, and their meaning is settled by contingent linguistic conventions. Crucially, levels of abstraction encode relevant linguistic conventions that serve as central parts of the context of utterance. For example, the proposition 'matter is coloured' is *true* when thought at the most basic level of abstraction, where the meaning of terms comes directly from experience. However, 'matter is coloured' is *false* when "Stripping [matter] of certain properties [like color] which psychology demonstrates to be no more than subjective phenomena" (P 41), namely, at the level of abstraction in which colours are taken to be *secondary qualities*.<sup>12</sup> It is thus not irrational to hold 'matter is coloured, from the point of view of experience' *and* 'matter is not coloured, from the point of view of empirical science' because 'matter is coloured' *means* something

<sup>10</sup>This account is suggested by Kant (*Grounding*, 56f), Korsgaard ("Morality as Freedom", 38), and Hill ("Kant's Theory of Practical Reason", 371). Nelkin ("Two Standpoints") explicitly argues against these.

<sup>11</sup>Nelkin herself does not word things exactly this way, but I believe this gets to the heart of her argument. She spends most of her paper addressing possible ways of meeting this challenge and finding them wanting.

<sup>12</sup>Many thinkers have thought that secondary qualities – colour, taste, smell, etc. – are purely phenomenological or subjective or otherwise less real than primary qualities – size, figure, extension, etc. This distinction goes at least as far back as the Early Modern period in Western philosophy, see Bolton ("Primary and Secondary Qualities").

slightly different in each case. There is no *real* contradiction here because the *meaning* of one proposition is not exactly the negation of the *meaning* of the other, and, crucially, this implies that there is no further rational pressure to reconcile these beliefs; there is no conflict to resolve. Consider an example. Suppose a parent tells her 8-year-old daughter to be careful not to paint their beautiful white couch with the paints with which she is playing. Suppose that later, after seeing a large red spot on the couch, the parent exclaims ‘you painted the couch!’ Suppose the child defends herself thus: ‘well, technically, colours are secondary qualities, and the couch, as a material object, only *really* possesses primary qualities, so it is in fact impossible for me to paint the couch’. Our parent should not be moved, nor is she being irrational in holding both ‘the couch has been painted red, from the point of view of experience’ and ‘the couch, as a material object, is incapable of *really* having secondary qualities like colour, from the point of view of empirical science’. There is no irrationality here. Rather, the words ‘matter’ and ‘colour’ mean something slightly different in these two levels of abstraction. When the parent cautioned the child not to paint the couch, she was *speaking* from the point of view of experience, and what she *meant* was settled by the contingent linguistic conventions operating therein. The child’s clever response to move to a different level of abstraction – one in which the proposition that upsets her parent is in fact false – does not alter the grounds for the parent’s frustration. The parent is perfectly reasonable in holding that what the child says is true, *given its meaning*, yet it is false and upsetting to the parent, *given her original meaning*. Nelkin’s intelligibility challenge is met.

Another group of contemporary philosophers whose views can be fruitfully contrasted with Vaz Ferreira’s are standpoint epistemologists, like Briana Toole,<sup>13</sup> who also speak about agents ‘believing from a point of view’. As Toole sees it, what an agent is in a position to know partly depends upon her standpoint or point of view, and importantly, such point of view is partly constituted by non-epistemic features like social identity (“Standpoint Epistemology”). Toole thinks that this is a substantive break from traditional epistemology, which she defines as the view that only epistemic features are relevant for knowledge or for what agents are in a position to know (“Standpoint Epistemology”, 2).<sup>14</sup> Toole’s claim is not the benign claim that different social locations expose people to different experiences and thus to different evidence, but the more radical claim that social identity colours the way in which agents go about reasoning with the evidence they

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<sup>13</sup>I wish to thank an anonymous referee for suggesting that I address Toole’s work.

<sup>14</sup>It is worth noting that the very intelligibility of this definition requires a non-trivial conception of what makes a feature be ‘epistemic’ that does not itself require reference to knowledge or what one is in a position to know. Toole acknowledges that she has no such definition (“Standpoint Epistemology”, 2–3); she argues, however, that her use of ‘epistemic feature’ can acquire sufficient content by appealing to paradigm examples of epistemic features: namely, evidence, justification, truth, belief, and reliability (“Standpoint Epistemology”, 3).

have and thus what they are in a position to know (“Standpoint Epistemology”, 6).

To the best of my knowledge, Vaz Ferreira’s texts do not settle the dispute between Toole and proponents of what she calls ‘traditional epistemology’. Vaz Ferreira does insist that all assessment of evidence, and similar such epistemic activities, must be done within the bounds of some specific conceptual framework, such that all knowing is knowing ‘from a point of view’. However, none of this settles whether non-epistemic features affect what agents are in a position to know. It seems to me that the picture presented so far can be extended to include either position. On the one hand, it is possible to argue that the conceptual resources required to construct a given Vaz-Ferreirian conceptual framework C are themselves partly settled by non-epistemic factors like social identity. If so, an agent’s ability to think the thoughts expressible in C, and thus ability to attain the knowledge expressible in C, would indeed depend upon non-epistemic features like her social identity. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that the conceptual resources required to construct any given Vaz-Ferreirian conceptual framework do not depend upon any non-epistemic feature. If so, Vaz Ferreira’s picture would be a variation of what Toole calls ‘traditional epistemology’.

### 3. Vaz Ferreira on intellectual liberation

Vaz Ferreira thinks that there is a master-slave dynamic between language and language users, and that much of human history tracks the gradual increase of human mastery over their own language (LV 184f). This linguistic mastery is a type of intellectual liberation for it facilitates a type of thinking free from linguistic/conceptual confusions and thus facilitates the acquisition of truth. At this general level of description, Vaz Ferreira’s account is relatively uncontroversial; however, as we have seen, Vaz Ferreira’s own conception of language signification makes his account of intellectual liberation substantive and insightful, but also controversial. The main goal of this subsection is to bring to light further distinctive elements of Vaz Ferreira’s thought that illustrate his version of intellectual liberation.

#### 3.1. *Verbo-ideological fallacies*

Vaz Ferreira recognizes the pernicious impact on thinking of what may be called ‘formal fallacies’ like affirming the consequent, denying the antecedent, etc., as well as ‘informal fallacies’ like ad hominem, false dichotomy, etc. He would be happy to include these types of fallacies within his general umbrella of ‘verbo-ideological fallacies’. What matters is that such thinking practices constitute obstacles for thinking well, for attaining truth and knowledge, and thus that they, to some extent, enslave the human



mind. This much should be relatively uncontroversial. Vaz Ferreira's own account of intellectual liberation, however, goes significantly further. In this section, I present some of the more radical verbo-ideological fallacies presented by Vaz Ferreira to make his distinctive account clearer.

Vaz Ferreira never attempted a systematic characterization of verbo-ideological fallacies. Instead, he identified these fallacies by looking at people's *lived* thinking practices, whether spoken or written, and carefully dissected the various ways in which people actually think poorly. His work *Lógica Viva* (LV), published in 1910, catalogues many of these fallacies. Vaz Ferreira's keen critical eye unearthed many of these fallacies, including: treating complementary considerations as opposing simply because they are different (LV 28f); treating merely partial considerations as complete or overriding considerations (LV 78f); treating merely verbal questions as factual questions (LV 35f); treating an unclear or poorly articulated question as fully intelligible (LV 71f); treating merely factual factors as normative (LV 44f); treating a position that is midway on a spectrum of possibilities as always more reasonable or more adequate than positions further from this midway point in the spectrum (LV 170f); and many more.

Vaz Ferreira goes further. He claims that much of the history of metaphysics is plagued with conceptual confusions (P 39f), and that most of these confusions are predicated upon the employment of the following types of thinking practices in metaphysical discourse: (i) reasoning on the basis of the law of excluded middle (LV 70f); (ii) reasoning with scholastic syllogisms (LV 136); (iii) seeking too much precision in metaphysical language (LV 60f); and (iv) reasoning with universal or systematic principles (LV 78f). Vaz Ferreira advances many intriguing reasons in support of his classification of these thinking practices in metaphysics as fallacious. His core rationale, however, is the rejection of classical logic as an adequate instrument for metaphysical discourse:

[T]his is extremely important, *classical logic has been unconsciously founded, implicitly, upon the principle that all terms have a permanent and clear signification* ... what classical logic has postulated is: first, that the connotation of each word is sufficiently precise, fixed, permanent, and clear in its limits, such that it can be said in all cases if beings enter or do not enter into the classes that are determined by those words; and, secondly, that there are, or there can be created, as many words as needed so that all beings and all phenomena can be named with absolute adequacy. Herein lies the reason classical logic has been of little use in practice.

(LV 123, emphasis in original)

Classical logic itself is valuable; it is required for ensuring that thought agrees with itself, but its mathematical-like nature makes classical logic unworkable with terms from natural language when inquiring into reality, claims Vaz Ferreira. What classical logic requires of terms, for it to work well, is not what

terms in natural language in fact deliver: *“The facts fundamentally forgotten by classical logic are two: the fluctuating, vague and gloomy character of the connotation of terms, and the incomplete adequacy of language to express reality”* (LV 124, emphasis in original). Many of the mentioned thinking practices are fallacious when employed in metaphysical discourse precisely because they unjustifiably make use of the tools of classical logic for purposes for which they are not suited.

As an example, consider the law of excluded middle, which states that for any proposition, either it or its negation is true. Vaz Ferreira cites a logic work by W. Hamilton in which Hamilton claims that we may not know whether (a) matter is infinitely divisible, or (b) matter is not infinitely divisible, but we do know that (c) either matter is infinitely divisible or matter is not infinitely divisible, because the law of excluded middle ensures this (LV 70). Vaz Ferreira, however, claims that we do not even know *this* about reality, for Hamilton leaves out two other possibilities: (i) that the natural language words in these propositions may not have a clear enough meaning to either apply or not apply to reality, making (a) and (b) neither true nor false, but simply senseless (LV 70); and (ii) that the words are only partly applicable to reality, making “the truth or falsity ... [of these propositions] a question of degree: such verbal formulation being adequate to some extent, but inadequate beyond that limit” (LV 133). This does not mean, of course, that these propositions are not well-formed or that their syntax is otherwise faulty. Rather, metaphysical discourse is essentially a discourse operating on layers of the sea of human knowledge deeper than the surface, precisely where clarity of meaning and signification of terms is more nebulous. Thus, there is no guarantee that the law of excluded middle always works in metaphysical discourse. The traditional metaphysician, then, mistakenly thinks she is describing reality adequately, but often she is in fact misunderstanding how natural language works in her metaphysical discourse, claims Vaz Ferreira.

### 3.2. Particularism about inquiry

Vaz Ferreira is a type of particularist about inquiry. He thinks that reasoning from universal principles is most often clumsy reasoning, for such a reasoning is commonly no more than taking a consideration for belief in a particular case and fallaciously elevating it to the status of overriding or complete consideration for all other cases (LV 78f). Vaz Ferreira is thus wary of all philosophical systems, and he thinks that they are more likely to lead to dogmatism than to liberated thinking (LV 78f). Concrete reality is extremely complex, and human linguistic and conceptual repertoire relatively limited, so the best strategy for attaining truth is to inquire into reality on a case-by-case basis.

Vaz Ferreira thinks that reasoning well in this particularist fashion requires the development of a type of instinct or intuition that he calls a “good hyper-logical sense”. He writes:

But there is another good sense that is developed after reasoning, or, better, together with it. When we have seen and thought with rationales the reasons in favor and the reasons against, for those competing reasons exist in almost all cases; when we have done all logic (good logic) that is possible; when we understand that the answers to many questions are only approximations or a matter of degrees; a moment arrives in which a type of instinct—what I call a good hyper-logical sense—is the one that solves for us questions in concrete cases.

(LV 91)

For Vaz Ferreira, this hyper-logical sense cannot be put into words, for it is in some sense “pre-reasoning” (LV 133; 184), yet it is essential in coming to more accurate answers in particular cases. Given Vaz Ferreira’s particularism about rational inquiry, developing this hyper-logical sense is central for attaining truth. Directly relevant for our purposes, a well-developed hyper-logical sense enables an agent to: (i) be sensitive to language signification and appreciate the nuances of meaning of words at different levels of abstraction in thought (LV 72); (ii) be sensitive to what level of abstraction is most natural or adequate for asking and answering different philosophical questions (P 44f, 64f); (iii) identify and weigh appropriately the competing considerations for belief in a particular case (LV 126); (iv) identify poorly articulated questions and propositions, and thus avoid being deceived by them (LV 72); and (v) be sensitive to, and thus avoid, the many verbo-ideological fallacies that enslave the human mind (LV 15, 72).

This particularist account of inquiry nicely complements Vaz Ferreira’s rejection of classical logic as a means of inquiry, his account of levels of abstraction in which thinking operates, and his metaphor of the sea of human knowledge. Vaz Ferreira’s account of intellectual liberation is embedded in this complex picture of the nature of language signification and its capacities and limitations in describing reality.

### 3.3. *Intellectual liberation in contemporary taxonomy*

Before concluding, I would like to briefly situate my interpretation of Vaz Ferreira’s account of intellectual liberation within a standard virtue epistemology taxonomy. In contemporary discussions, the two dominant accounts of intellectual flourishing are the reliabilists<sup>15</sup> and the responsibilists<sup>16</sup> views. According to the former, intellectual virtues are reliable cognitive faculties,

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Sosa, “*Knowledge in Perspective*,” Greco, “*Virtues in Epistemology*,” and Pritchard, *Epistemic Luck*.

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, Code, *Epistemic Responsibility* and Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*.

those that tend to produce epistemic goods like true beliefs, knowledge, and understanding. Reliabilists are historical descendants of classical externalist epistemologies, so they include faculties like perception, intuition, and memory amongst the intellectual virtues; these are the “faculty-virtues” (Turri et al., “Virtue Epistemology”, § 3). Responsibilists, by contrast, think that intellectual virtues are praiseworthy character traits like open-mindedness and intellectual humility; these are the “trait-virtues” (Turri et al., “Virtue Epistemology”, § 3). For responsibilists, to flourish intellectually is to develop commendable character traits and thus to take responsibility for one’s thinking practices.

This taxonomy is standard,<sup>17</sup> yet it seems reasonable to think that both accounts of intellectual flourishing are in fact largely complementary.<sup>18</sup> Vaz Ferreira’s conception of intellectual flourishing, as linguistic mastery that liberates thinking, is neither reducible to, nor incompatible with, these accounts of intellectual flourishing. Like responsibilists, Vaz Ferreira thinks that seeking intellectual liberation is taking responsibility for one’s thinking practices and developing intrinsically praiseworthy or commendable character traits (LV 76, 79f, 83f). Like reliabilists, Vaz Ferreira thinks that part of what makes intellectual liberation valuable is precisely that it tends to produce epistemic goods like more true beliefs and knowledge (LV 60, 72, 79f). Furthermore, just like a theorist is not forced to choose between faculty-virtues and trait-virtues, she is not forced to choose between these and linguistic mastery that liberates thinking, and arguably a complete account of the nature of intellectual flourishing must make room for all these notions. If so, contemporary discussions on virtue epistemology will be richer by explicitly incorporating intellectual liberation as a further dimension of the nature of intellectual flourishing.

#### 4. Conclusion

Vaz Ferreira thinks that intellectual flourishing involves, and is propelled by, a fundamental commitment to the pursuit of truth for its own sake that he calls “the spirit of sincerity” (LV 137). This spirit, Vaz Ferreira worries, is often truncated in its pursuits by many linguistic/conceptual confusions that originate from the language user’s failure to adequately grasp the nature and extent to which language adequately describes reality. Intellectual flourishing thus involves a type of mastery over human language that facilitates thinking, free from these linguistic/conceptual confusions and thus facilitates the acquisition of truth; this is intellectual liberation. Much of Vaz Ferreira’s precise understanding of intellectual liberation depends upon his substantive

<sup>17</sup>See Axtell, “Recent Work” and Turri, Alfano, and Greco, “Virtue Epistemology”, § 3, but it has also been subject to criticism, see Fleisher, “Virtuous Distinctions” and Battaly, “Pluralist Theory of Virtue”.

<sup>18</sup>See Fleisher, “Virtuous Distinctions”, Battaly, “Pluralist Theory of Virtue” and Turri, Alfano, and Greco, “Virtue Epistemology”, § 3.

understanding of the nature and limitations of language signification. Independently of the persuasiveness of many details in Vaz Ferreira's account, it should be relatively uncontroversial that intellectual liberation in general does constitute a legitimate dimension of intellectual flourishing. Furthermore, intellectual liberation is largely complementary to the dominant accounts of intellectual flourishing in contemporary discussions, like reliabilists and responsibilists, so incorporating intellectual liberation promises to enrich contemporary debates within virtue epistemology.

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