Received: 6 February, 2025
Accepted: 21 July, 2025
Published: 1 December, 2026

Perspective, Affectivity, and Existential Meaning: On the Cognitive Value of Love and the Novel

Íngrid Vendrell Ferran - University of Marburg, Germany, Ingrid.vendrell@uni-marburg.de

In *Love, Subjectivity, and Truth* (2023), Rick Anthony Furtak draws on his previous work on emotions, literature, and existential thought to offer a particular reading of Proust. For Furtak, *In Search of Lost Time* not only conveys and analyses experiences that enable the reader to explore existential issues, but also does "something like phenomenology" (x). In his view, Proust explores the search for truth about love and subjectivity using phenomenological descriptions. Furtak is particularly interested in how Proust's narrator, Marcel, is concerned with the kind of knowledge provided by love, but also questions the legitimacy of this knowledge (7). As he puts it: "A major conundrum that faces Proust's narrator throughout the novel is whether love puts us in touch with the world or encloses us in a fantasy realm that is of our own making" (39). In his view, there is in the novel a scepticism about what love is capable of revealing and yet, at the same time, this scepticism is overcome through the idea that love provides a particular kind of insight and is a condition for a "veridical apprehension" of the other (xii). One central question the book addresses regards whether love leads us to detect something actual which would not be visible in its absence, or whether it makes us apprehend false properties in the other. Inspired by existential philosophy (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche) and phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Ortega y Gasset, Scheler, von Hildebrand), Furtak argues that even a flawed subjectivity might play an important function in acquainting us with particular truths about human existence.

In this review, I will focus on what I regard as an important contribution of Furtak's book: the development of a rich and nuanced concept of perspective that underscores its affective nature, which at the same time acknowledges that it is precisely by virtue of being shaped by the subject's affectivity that perspectives are able to provide knowledge about reality and others. My aim is twofold. First, I will show how this notion of perspective enables Furtak to defend two closely interrelated claims in his book: *the cognitive value of love*, according to which our affectively shaped perspectives are able to provide knowledge; and *the cognitive value of the novel*, which describes the way in which we learn about the cognitive value of love by engaging with Proust's novel. My second aim is to show how this concept of perspective can be further developed by drawing on the phenomenological tradition and, in particular, on the works of Max Scheler.

To develop his arguments, Furtak draws on the thesis of the "emotional *a priori*" that he introduced in *Knowing Emotions* (2018). The "emotional *a priori*" explains why reality does not appear as neutral but as something that matters from our perspective. For him, love establishes multifarious interests in the world and determines what has reality and value, which is why we experience it as meaningful. Love makes possible a particular kind of vision that enables us to apprehend aspects of the world which would otherwise be unseen. For Furtak, there is a kind of truth that is only accessible via love: only love introduces us to the particularity of a person's life. In love, we see possibilities that have not even manifested themselves. Love is fallible but not blind. As he puts it:

"Love can in this way make a person not blind, but perceptive – even perspicuous" (2023, 18). In Proust's novel, love provides Marcel with an infra-red vision that makes him able to apprehend possibilities in the loved one.

Furtak notes that Proust's narrator is fascinated by the knowledge that his loves were shaped by contingent factors and could have been different (27). Importantly, these possibilities seem to be richer than the real world. How can we then know that we apprehend the other objectively rather than projecting our love onto this other? Put otherwise, can the emotional *a priori* provide a foundation for the apprehension of reality and value? For Furtak, the narrator is tempted by a particular line of thought: "Skeptical once more of his infra-red vision, he reflects that perhaps at the time he loved her she had simply been illuminated by a glow that emanated from inside *him*" (33). The narrator wonders if one's own moods lead to a false colouring of the world and others. Here, however, Furtak reminds us that our perception is "a way of seeing from somewhere—and in some way" (36). We cannot speculate how things would be without our interpretation and subjectivity. More radically, "if we were to aspire toward the idea of the universe's own impersonal perspective, 'from which all is seen but nothing is cared for,' we would be dead to the meaning of things, lacking the focus and orientation that are required for the conduct of life and the pursuit of knowledge" (36). Thus, as he puts it, the reason why it is a shame to be stuck in a depressive mood, in irascibility, in nostalgia, etc., is that this is not the only way the world is. In his view, what is needed is to inhabit different moods, affective standpoints, and perspectives. Our infra-red vision functions from a particular angle of interpretation of the world. "Each person's attunement is both outwardly and inwardly truth-revealing, because it brings to light aspects of the environment (what we love) while also showing who we are at heart (our way of loving)" (37).

That reality is always apprehended from an affective standpoint leads to scepticism about the knowledge achieved through it. To address this issue, Furtak presents an inventory of Marcel's sceptical opinions, organised around a classical set of ten Pyrrhonian modes of suspending judgment. These sceptical judgments address questions that explain differences among beings by virtue of differences in the impressions that the same objects produce on different subjects, our individual peculiarities, the limitations of our senses, our affective standpoints, the positions from which we regard the world, the fact that we perceive things along with other things, the fact that nothing impinges on our senses alone, the correction of our impressions, the influence of belief on our perception, our tendency to undervalue what we are accustomed to, and the fact that our experience is shaped by habit. Scepticism shows us that a plurality of points of view produces multifaceted truths for us (115).

Yet, Furtak suggests, "how a beloved person appears to us may have something to do with our attention, which allows us to grasp and apprehend the iridescent features of the one we love—and that, in this respect, those without a loving disposition are condemned to remain in the dark" (115). Thus, subjective standpoints which are shaped by our love are cognitively valuable when it comes to knowing the other. Importantly, Furtak argues not only that we can know others through love, but also that this love might enable us to know ourselves insofar as the self arises from engaging with the intersubjective world. As he writes:

> Our feelings both designate the properties of people and things *and*, in addition, "manifest, express, and reveal" the first person, "the inwardness of an I," at the same time. Our loves, as well as the love of others for us, lend us a space in which to become what we are—that is, what we will have been. (140–41)

Therefore, the cognitive value of our perspectives in love consists not only in providing knowledge, but also in giving meaning to our existence and in leading us to become who we are.

In my view, this complex and rich concept of perspective enables him to defend what I called above the *cognitive value of love*. As with authors of the phenomenological tradition, according to Furtak, objectivity cannot be equated with neutrality. For him, perspectives can provide knowledge of the world, others, and ourselves. In fact, the kind of knowledge provided by perspectives is inaccessible from a "view from nowhere" (Nagel 1986, 7, 25, 140). Perspectives are shaped by the subject's affective states. It is precisely by virtue of being affective in nature that perspectives are able to provide meaning and value. In fact, affectivity is what makes each of our perspectives unique and the knowledge achieved from them irreplaceable. As a result, in love, we can objectively apprehend the other and grasp possibilities inherent to her being. The kind of "infra-red vision" provided by love is not possible from a neutral standpoint. In my view, Furtak's emphasis on the affectively shaped nature of perspectives makes an important contribution to current research insofar as this issue has not been sufficiently acknowledged. While there has been a focus in epistemology on the cognitive achievements provided by perspectives, less has been said on the affective nature of perspectives themselves. For Furtak, each of us is endowed with an infra-red vision regarding the other's possibilities. Each perspective is unique and enables us to apprehend the other as she is, although this does not mean that she is seen by everyone in the same manner.

In addition, insofar as the novel provides the reader with relevant insights about the cognitive value of love and makes us think about the limits of this knowledge and how to overcome them, Furtak is defending what I called above *the cognitive value of the novel*. In particular, he defends a form of aesthetic cognitivism, according to which engaging with the novel allows us to discover the cognitive value of the subjectivity of a loving person. Put otherwise, literature teaches us how the subjective perspectives of the loving person play an important role in the acquisition of knowledge about others, and indeed the kind of knowledge acquired.

One aspect which I want to explore in more detail here is how Furtak develops this concept of perspective by employing his thesis of the "emotional *a priori*," which, as he states in several parts of the book, is inspired by Max Scheler's concept of an "*ordo amoris*," i.e., an order of the heart. For Scheler, there is an order of the heart which is more basic than cognition and will. As he puts it: "Man, before he is an *ens cogitans* or an *ens volens*, is an *ens amans*" (1973a, 110–11). This order of love shapes what becomes visible in our horizon and the degree of relevance with which things or the world are given to us. Love, as an attitude of openness to the world and others, enables us to apprehend the evaluative dimension of life. For Scheler, it is the order of our heart that pre-selects what can be apprehended and the order of preference in which it will be given to us (1973b, 116). Each individual (and collective) has its own order of the heart, so there are differences between what matters and what is preferred.

The use of Scheler's concept of "*ordo amoris*," which animates the thesis of "the emotional *a priori*" in order to develop the notion of perspective, demonstrates Furtak's awareness of the potential of phenomenology to study the cognitive value of affectivity and literature (see also Vendrell Ferran 2023). However, in my view, there are other aspects of Scheler's philosophy which could be employed to shed light on key aspects of the concept of perspective and, in so doing, develop Furtak's project further. As a Scheler scholar and a philosopher strongly inspired by phenomenology, I focus, in what follows, on three lines of research that can be developed by drawing on Scheler's concept of the order of the heart.

To begin, Furtak emphasises the role of love in enabling us to apprehend features of the other. This is in line with Scheler, who attributes to love its own order and logic. However, there is a crucial difference between Furtak and Scheler on this point. For Scheler, love is not an emotion but what he calls an "act" in which the

spiritual person is involved and which, as such, makes us open to the other and her possibilities. Unlike love, emotions such as jealousy or fear do not have any cognitive function for Scheler: they simply respond to values previously grasped by means of our capacity to feel (1973a and 1973b). In contrast to Scheler's position, Furtak conceives of his emotional *a priori* not only in terms of love, but also as encompassing other affective states. This suggests that, unlike Scheler, for Furtak emotions can be regarded as reliable sources of insight. This is not just a terminological or taxonomical difference between the two authors, since it also has consequences for their respective understandings of affectivity more generally. The thesis that emotions might provide knowledge of features of the target—which is implicit in Furtak's book—is, from Scheler's standpoint, problematic. Rather than revealing objective features of the other, emotions only reveal the relation between object and subject. If I fear the dog, this fear reveals that I am in a particular relation with the dog that makes it appear to be dangerous, but this does not imply that the dog is *really* dangerous (see also Mulligan 2009). In my view, Furtak's book should underscore the differences between love and the emotions. It should be clear that love, by virtue of being an affective phenomenon of a particular kind, has a cognitive value that cannot be found in emotional responses such as fear or disgust.

Second, Furtak's work would benefit from distinguishing between the different meanings of the concept of "*ordo amoris*" that can be found in Scheler's work. In fact, the concept as used by Scheler has three distinct meanings: there is an objective, a descriptive, and a normative *ordo amoris*. The objective *ordo amoris* describes the objective realm of values that can be grasped by our feelings. The descriptive *ordo amoris* refers to the subject's affective structure, developed over the course of her life. This order differs from individual to individual and defines one's character. Finally, there is a normative *ordo amoris*, which refers to a selection of objective values that can be realised over the course of a life: this is not an imperative to become a specific person, but rather describes a potential self that may be realised over the course of a life. The order of the heart is not constituted by an individual history, but is given at birth.

In my view, Furtak is focused on the descriptive rather than the objective and normative meanings of the concept. In particular, his idea that the subject's perspective is shaped affectively fits well with the thought that the descriptive *ordo amoris* is developed over the course of one's life. For Furtak, our affective perspectives are shaped by our emotions, and this accords with Scheler's notion of a descriptive order of the heart. From a Schelerian point of view, all kinds of affective states contribute to shaping our particular subjective perspectives. In my view, it is understandable that he does not use the idea of an objective *ordo amoris* to elaborate the affective nature of perspectives, insofar as he does not have to commit to value realism for his view. Yet, Scheler's normative *ordo amoris* would be relevant for Furtak's project, specifically in the final part of the book where he explores who we become due to our loves. In my view, Furtak could develop this issue in more detail by employing the notion of normative *ordo amoris* to explain how the knowledge about the other acquired from the perspective of the loving person, and the kind of existential meaning that this provides, allows the subject to become the person she is. In other words, loving a particular person enables the subject not only to apprehend possibilities intrinsic to the other, but also to develop possibilities intrinsic to herself that would perhaps not come to be realised if she did not love this particular other.

Finally, this latter point could help to develop Furtak's version of aesthetic cognitivism. The idea that literature can provide knowledge by virtue of letting us engage with the perspectives depicted has been defended by recent proponents of cognitivism (Huemer 2022; Vidmar Jovanovic 2023). With his book, Furtak is advocating the view that it is by engaging with the subjective perspectives depicted in the novel that we acquire what Burri (2007) has called "maximal subjective standpoints," which enable us to discover aspects of reality which

otherwise would remain unseen. More precisely, for Furtak, the cognitive value of engaging with literary perspectives consists in providing us with viewpoints that enable us to discover the cognitive value of love. This means that when we engage with these perspectives, we not only come to know the other, but become the person we could become, and so the cognitive value of literature goes beyond providing propositional, practical, or phenomenal knowledge; it precipitates an existential transformation of the reader's self. In other words, engaging with literary perspectives could lead us to realise what Scheler calls the normative *ordo amoris*. In this respect, and given the cognitive value of love, the cognitive value of literature should be interpreted as leading the reader to an existential transformation: the reader learns not only that love discloses the particularity of the other and her possibilities, but also that it enables her to develop existential possibilities. In this reading, Furtak could defend the view that learning from the novel is not just about acquiring propositional truths but also has to do with prompting a transformation of the reader's existence.

References

Burri, A. 2007. "Art and the View from Nowhere." In *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative, and Knowledge*, edited by J. Gibson, W. Huemer, and L. Pocci, 308–17. Routledge.

Furtak, R. A. 2018. *Knowing Emotions: Truthfulness and Recognition in Affective Experience*. Oxford University Press.

———. 2023. *Love, Subjectivity, and Truth: Existential Themes in Proust*. Oxford University Press.

Huemer, W. 2022. "Fictional Narrative and the Other's Perspective." *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 22 (65): 161–79.

Mulligan, K. 2009. "On Being Struck by Value." In *Leben mit Gefühlen*, edited by B. Merker, 141–163. Mentis.

Nagel, T. 1986. *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford University Press.

Scheler, M. 1973a. "*Ordo Amoris*." In *Selected Philosophical Essays*, in M. Scheler, 98–135. Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy.

———. 1973b. *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values*. Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy.

Vendrell Ferran, Í. 2023. "On the Transformative Power of Literary Perspectives." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 57 (3): 12–30.

Vidmar Jovanović, I. 2023. "Perspectivism, Cognitivism, and the Ethical Evaluation of Art." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 57 (3): 31–48.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.