

Nietzsche on Perspectivism

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I. The Puzzle of Perspectivism

a. GM III §12:

- This passage has dominated Anglophone literature on perspectivism for two decades. It starts from the question of what ascetic philosophizing would look like, moving swiftly to a discussion of different conceptions of objectivity.

Nietzsche entreats us to resist views that demand of us that we posit

... “an eye that cannot be thought at all, an eye that should have absolutely no direction at all, in which the active and interpreting forces through which seeing first becomes a seeing-something should be prevented, should be absent; [...] here a nonsense and non-concept of an eye is always demanded. There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival ‘cognizing’; and *the more* affects we allow to speak about a thing, *the more* eyes, different eyes we know how to utilize towards the same thing, the more complete our ‘concept’ of the thing, our ‘objectivity’, will be.”

From this, we can extract three significant connections:

- i. Perspective is linked to *plurality*
- ii. Perspective is *beneficial* to cognition
- iii. Perspective is connected to particular facets of *psychology*

b. GS §354:

- This passage presents the sole published passage to use the word ‘perspectivism’. Therein, Nietzsche offers an account of the joint development of natural language and reflective consciousness, and of the forces that shaped the development and nature of language.
- Nietzsche claims here that in bringing states to a point of reflection, “our thought itself is continuously *outvoted*, so to speak, through the character of consciousness” and translated into the “herd-perspective”.

... “This is genuine phenomenalism and perspectivism as *I* understand it: the nature of *animal consciousness* brings with it that the world of which we can become conscious is only a surface- and sign- world, a world generalized and made common,—that everything that becomes conscious *becomes* through this flat, thin, relatively stupid, general, sign, herd-mark, that a great, thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalisation is associated with all becoming-conscious.”

This passage also makes important connections:

- i. Perspective is linked to a *single, inescapable perspective* in consciousness, which applies irrespective of the particularities of one's state.
- ii. Perspective is connected to *falsification, corruption, and stupidity*.
- iii. Perspective is not connected to the affects, values, etc., of contemporary cognizers, but to the *psychologies of those in whom the outlines of natural languages first emerged*.

c. Desiderata for understanding perspectivism as a single picture:

- α. An account that is **thick** enough for there to be something shared, a sense of some form of unity, across the passages ...
- β. ... but *thin* enough that perspectivism can appropriately be thought to bear on divergent discussions in different passages in connection to a host of rather different, even seemingly contrary features.

2. The Outlines of an Answer

The 'doctrine' of perspectivism: a philosophical position or Rylean '-ism' whose content is presented across the contents of the perspectivism passages.

a. Nietzsche's uses of 'perspectivism':

- i. "*Perspectivism* of desirability (of *the ideal*)" (86:7[21]).
- ii. "As far as the word 'cognition' has any sense at all, the world is cognizable: but it is *interpretable* differently, it has no sense behind it but innumerable senses, 'perspectivism'" (86:7[60]).
- iii. The atom posited by mechanists "is made available according to the logic of that consciousness-perspectivism [...such thinkers leave out] the necessary perspectivism, by virtue of which every centre of force—and not only the human being—constructs the entire rest of the world from itself out [...] *Perspectivism is only a complex form of specificity*" (88:14[186]).

Questions: What would it mean for there to be a perspectivism *of the ideal*? In what sense does an ant construct its world *by virtue of a philosophical position*? In what sense do the scientific mechanists *accept claims about perspective*?

b. Nietzsche's uses of 'phenomenalism':

Phenomenalism: commonly understood as the position on which knowledge or cognition concerns itself solely with *appearance*.

- i. Nietzsche writes in a draft plan on “the concept of ‘phenomenalism’” of a “Critique of recent philosophy: flawed starting point, as if there were [...] no phenomenalism in introspection” (85:2[204]).
- ii. “One must not search for phenomenalism in the wrong place: nothing is more phenomenal (or, more clearly) nothing is so much *deception* as this inner world that we observe with the famous ‘inner sense’” (88:14[152]).
- iii. “*The phenomenalism of the ‘inner world’*” (88:15[90]).

c. Perspectivism as a feature of domains of psychology:

- There is no doctrine of perspectivism *simpliciter*, but separate theses asserting the perspectivism of given domains, e.g. introspection or evaluative thought.
- Perspectivism can be attributed to different mental phenomena in virtue of different underlying properties.
- All that is required is that some perspectivism thesis be asserted in each perspectivism passage.

3. What Does ‘Perspectivism’ Pick Out?

- a. The first element of perspectivism is *pervasive perspective*—an assertion that perspective is an ineliminable and inescapable part of the subject’s attempts at cognition in the domain in question.
 - Present across Nietzsche’s writings, including in the *Genealogy* and *The Gay Science*.
- b. The second element has been overlooked somewhat by more recent work on perspectivism. I label this *interpretive pluralism*. This is expressed in the claim that

“the world is cognizable; but it is *interpretable* differently, it has no sense behind it but innumerable senses, ‘perspectivism’” (86:7[60]).

 - First, weaker reading: *anti-reductionism*. No one perspective generates all and only correct representations.
 - Second, stronger reading: *metaphysical anti-realism*. There are no joints in nature at which our attempts at cognition can carve. Objecthood arises only internal to perspectives and in relation to the interpretations produced by the sense- and cognitive- apparatus of types of creature.
 - i. “One must rebuff questions about how the ‘things in themselves’ might be, quite apart from our sensory-receptivity and the activity of the understanding, with the question: how could we know *that there are things*? The ‘thingness’ is only created by us” (87:9[106]).
 - ii. The idea of an aperspectival critique of the intellect “already presupposes that there *would be something*, an ‘in itself’, apart from all perspectival kinds of observation and sensible-mental appropriation” (86:5[11]).

c. Perspectivism involves the specification of facts about both the *subject* and *objects* of cognition.

- Assertions of perspectivism assert that the domain in question is one in which mental relations obtain between active, conditioning, perspective-laden subjects and essentially conditioned objects.
- Nietzsche still insists that the world of experience is reality, but contends that creatures differently constituted (every “centre of force”) experience very different worlds of objects and sense, all of which are robustly perspectival and reflect the perspectivism of ‘world-construction’.

4. The Unity of the Perspectivism Passages

This understanding of perspectivism satisfies the *thinness* desideratum. But what that other desirable feature of readings of perspectivism? Is this account *too* thin?

a. A simple thought: assertions of perspectivism are denials of the opposite of perspectivism.

Absolute Cognition: a direct, immediate, and purely receptive relation of acquaintance between a passive subject and an unconditioned object.

The various perspectivism passages are united in each addressing contexts in which forms of absolute cognition have been asserted and particular routes to absolute cognition proposed.

b. Absolute Cognition in GS §354: The “facts of consciousness”.

- Nietzsche writes one passage later, in GS §355, of philosophers who insist that it’s “methodologically required to start from the ‘inner world’, from the ‘facts of consciousness’”.
- This idea can be traced from Karl Leonard Reinhold, through G.E. Schulze and Fichte, to Schopenhauer, who writes that everything of which one has
“certain, sure, and hence immediate knowledge lies within his consciousness. Beyond this consciousness, therefore, there can be no *immediate* certainty; but the first principles of a science must have such a certainty [...]. *Consciousness* alone is immediately given, hence the basis of philosophy is limited to the facts of consciousness” (ZA III:11/WWR II I).
- Representatives of the facts of consciousness tradition took themselves to be fusing broadly Kantian systematic claims with a supposedly Cartesian method.

Cf. Nietzsche in BGE §16:

[There are] “harmless self-observers who believe that there are ‘immediate certainties’, for example ‘I am thinking’, or ‘I am willing’, which was Schopenhauer’s superstition: just as if cognizing had here been given its object to grasp, pure and naked as a ‘thing in itself’, and no falsification took place on either the side of the subject or the object. I will repeat a hundred times that ‘immediate certainty’, like ‘absolute cognition’ and ‘thing in itself’, contains a *contradictio in adjecto*”.

It is against the facts of consciousness tradition that the assertion of perspectivism GS §354 is directed.

- Nietzsche argues for the necessary mediation by natural language in conscious introspection, and that the forces operative upon the formation of language motivate the thought that such self-observation might be mistaken or distorting in important respects.

c. Absolute Cognition in GM III §12: Ascetic Objectivity.

- Nietzsche's interest in principally in psychological objectivity, which concerns our being objective in our thoughts and attitudes toward matters.
- Nietzsche's principle foil, once again, is Schopenhauer:

"The error came to a head when Schopenhauer taught: the only access to the 'true', to cognition, lies *precisely in getting away from the affect*, from the will; the intellect free of will *could do nothing other* than see the true, genuine essence of things" (87:9[119])

Cf. Schopenhauer:

"[A] purely objective and therefore correct view of things is only possible when we consider them without any personal involvement, therefore with complete silencing of the will [...] each affect or passion clouds and falsifies cognition; indeed, each inclination or aversion twists, colours, and distorts not merely the judgement, no, but even the original intuition of things" (ZA IV:442/WWR II XXX)

- The word Nietzsche employs in relation to views such as this is *Entselbstung*, or 'de-selfing'.
- Nietzsche's aim in GM III §12 is not to assert an essential relation between things like affect, drives, values, etc., and perspective and perspectivism, but to resist ascetic objectivity, whose defining characteristic is *Entselbstung*—objectivity understood as requiring the expunging of all subjectivity, of anything that smacks of one's willing, feeling, or wanting, of one's self.
- Nietzsche wishes to reclaim for cognizers the "right to the great *affect*" (87:9[119]), essential to "a great method for *cognition*" (84:26[119]), *viz.* that of shifting between different states, each disclosing different properties, so as to make "the *difference* in perspectives and affect-interpretations useful for cognition" (GM III §12).
- Extirpating affects and will is presented as plausibly impossible and also undesirable.

5. Conclusion