

To Have in One's Power

The Use of Perspectives in Genealogy

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Draft

Nietzsche—it is widely known—is a perspectivist. His perspectivism is sometimes offered as the cornerstone of his mature philosophy, a key by which we ought to interpret his other doctrines and commitments.¹ If that is right, then at a glance it seems likely to be especially so in the case of Nietzsche's genealogical method. Reasonably, we may suspect a sympathy between the two that makes reading the use Nietzsche makes of genealogy in a perspectivist light promise to bear fruit. After all, perspectivism is a highly revisionary epistemological stance, and it is presented as such by Nietzsche.² Its truth, therefore, demands similarly radical innovations in our approach to inquiry. Genealogy is manifestly such an innovation, the substantial scholarly debate about just what kind of innovation it is notwithstanding.³ The details of that and of the use Nietzsche makes of genealogy generally would then be what we hope perspectivism helps us better to understand. Yet, the more seriously we take the implications of perspectivism, the more we may doubt this first thought. Far from naturally resonant, perspectivism begins to look as if it makes the actual practice of genealogy impossible.

In the preface to *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche inveighs against 'English hypothesizing *into the blue*.'⁴ Prior genealogists like his erstwhile friend Paul Rée fail to ground their work adequately in 'that which can be documented, which can really be ascertained, which has really existed...'⁵ It comes as a surprise then that at the beginning of the First Treatise, Nietzsche is almost lavish in his praise of these 'English psychologists.'⁶ Unlike their books, he tells us, 'they themselves are interesting!'⁷ Whatever their failures, these 'old, cold, boring frogs' are in reality 'brave, magnanimous, and proud animals who know how to keep a rein on their hearts as

1. Most prominently Nehamas (1985).

2. *GS* 374.

3. Cf. Geuss (1994), Janaway (2007), Hussain (2011), Prescott-Couch (2014), and Srinivasan (2019).

4. *GM* Preface: 7.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *GM* I: 1.

7. *Ibid.*

well as their pain and have trained themselves to sacrifice all desirability to truth, to every truth, even plain, harsh, ugly, unpleasant, unchristian, immoral truth...'⁸ But if there is only a perspectival seeing, only a perspectival knowing, then what room is there as well for such a hard-headed ideal of truth? Worse, isn't this admiration for the devotees of that ideal precisely what Nietzsche claims to reject by his perspectivism? Why would Nietzsche wish 'to turn so sharp and disinterested an eye in a better direction, the direction of the real history of morality'? Doesn't he say, in the Third Treatise of the very same book, that to harden yourself against the affects for the sake of truth would 'be to *castrate* the intellect?''⁹

My argument is that genealogy is not a method of castration. The first thought is the right one. Neither is it an attempt 'to place philosophy 'on a strictly scientific foundation....''¹⁰ That, according to Nietzsche, would be to get the nature of both precisely backwards. Rather, genealogy constitutes Nietzsche's attempt to get that order of priority right by radically revising perhaps the most central regulative ideal in our conception of inquiry. This is the concept of **objectivity**, which Nietzsche claims now reveals itself to be a eunuch. The challenge he takes up is to replace it with a newly articulated 'future objectivity.'¹¹

So, there is no inconsistency with the perspectivist backdrop because that future objectivity is just what we anticipated it would require. Nietzsche's praise of the so-called 'English psychologists' is avowedly not praise for their scholarly output, but neither is it unconditionally praise for their adherence to the will to truth as it manifests itself in the moribund pursuit of the old objectivity. It instead reflects an appreciation for what they have helped to make possible. Though the philosophers of the future must leap over them, the 'resolute reversals of the familiar perspectives and valuations...' to which these cold frogs are driven by the most refined manifestation of the will to truth as lackeys of the ascetic ideal are nonetheless indispensable stilts for doing so, as 'to see differently in this way for once, to want to see differently, is no small discipline and preparation of the intellect for its future 'objectivity...''¹²

What the new objectivity demands, according to Nietzsche, is that we should cultivate 'the capacity to have one's pro and contra in one's power, and to shift them in and out: so that one knows how to make precisely the difference in perspectives and affective interpretations useful for knowledge.'¹³ My further claim is that Nietzsche's practice of genealogy both intensifies this preparation and bears its fruit. Genealogy

8. *Ibid.*

9. *GM* III: 12.

10. *GM* III: 24.

11. *GM* III: 12.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *GM* III: 12.

cultivates the capacity to be objective in this revisionary sense by forcing the genealogist to exercise and expand the capacity to occupy different perspectives. It makes that capacity useful by producing knowledge that meets his new standards. What these standards are precisely and why Nietzsche accepts them we can then articulate by considering what the point of objectivity could be to a perspectivist.

§I PERSPECTIVISM

To make good on these claims, let us look more closely at exactly what perspectivism involves. At its core are two fundamental thoughts. The first is ordinary. This is that the first-person stance is inescapable. Whenever we think or act, we are always already occupying that stance. It is just, as a matter of definition, *our own stance*. Perspectivism's controversial addition is that it is also always bounded, where this means that to occupy the first-person stance is to think or act from some place, with some presupposition, against some background, etc. Whatever we do, it is done from *here* rather than *there*, which is the crucial contrast. For a particular individual, occupying the first-person stance is always to occupy this one stance rather than another. It is, in short, to occupy a perspective.

From these two thoughts, the conclusion that there is only a perspectival seeing, knowing, acting, and so forth follows.¹⁴ But if one is willing to follow the perspectivist this far, it becomes pressing to determine the extent to which the bounded nature of a perspective also represents limitations for its occupant. Following Lanier Anderson, I think we can fruitfully approach that as a question about the boundaries and limitations of our representations.¹⁵ I will be generally ecumenical about the term.¹⁶ Our representation of something is the mode or manner in which it is present to us from inside the first-person stance. So, one could accept the inescapability of that perspective without also accepting that it is a limitation on our ability to represent. However, according to Anderson, to be a perspectivist requires accepting that it does as such a limitation.¹⁷ Of course, this raises the issue of what it means in the first place to say something is a limitation on that ability and of whether perspectivists might coherently disagree about the character of those limits.

The denial of perspectival limitations entails the positive claim that an unlimited representation is possible, a possibility that Anderson frames as the possibility of absolute representation.¹⁸ Yet although it can easily be gestured at, it is difficult

14. Cf. Moore (1997) for detailed discussion of exactly what assumptions are involved in perspectivism.

15. Anderson (1998), (2018), (2024a), (2024b).

16. The Nietzsche literature in general seems to me to share this stance.

17. Anderson (1998, p. 2).

18. Anderson (2024a/2024b).

to put the notion of absolute representation into both a precise and comprehensible form. Here, we will content ourselves with the gesture. Bernard Williams called an aspiration to represent the world in a way that captured what it would be like independently of how it was present— what it looked like— from any particular perspective on it the ‘absolute conception of the world.’¹⁹ The absolute conception is the conception of the world *as it is* in itself. For this to be a meaningful distinction, it must be taken to contrast with some other sense of the world as it is *not* in itself. That contrast is with the world *as it seems*. Of course, whatever it seems like, the world always seems like that *to someone*, and so this is the world as it appears from inside our perspectives.²⁰ With that recognition then also comes a nagging intuition that what the world seems like will depend significantly on *to whom it seems like that*. The question concerning absolute representation is whether this, unlike the first-person stance itself, is escapable. Might the world, as it seems to us in our representations, also sometimes be the world as it is in itself?

If it can, then that would be an absolute representation of it. That alone, however, is not enough to realize the aspiration of the absolute conception of the world if we take that ideal to require more than that the world in itself be representable within certain regions or localities. Many of those who so aspire do not aim at absolute but merely local representation, but rather take the ideal of absolute representation to be a total, comprehensive representation of the world-in-itself in its entirety.²¹ There could only be one such absolute representation and so only one absolute perspective. Any other absolute perspective would have to represent the world identically, or else what it represents would have to lie outside the former perspective’s representations. If that were so, then there is something about the world in itself those representations do not capture. As such, it could not have *really* been an absolute perspective in the first place.

The possibility of absolute representation and the possibility of *the absolute representation*, which for clarity I will now label specifically the ‘absolute conception,’ are at least *prima facie* distinguishable. A perspectivist could deny the possibility of the absolute conception without denying the possibility of all absolute representation. Indeed, one of the well-known claims that Williams made in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* was that although it would be a mistake to do away with all our standards for ethical concepts, it would likewise be just as much a mistake to take the standard for those concepts to be that of absolute representation or for philosophers to strive to make it so.²² Williams is, as he says, skeptical both of philosophy and the specific

19. Williams (1985, Ch. 8).

20. To accept this is not yet to be a perspectivist, and it has been suggested to me by Sasha Newton that this is a shared presupposition of the entire German Idealist tradition.

21. I would appeal here to our intuitions. But also see Williams (1978) and almost all of *GM III*.

22. Williams (1985, Ch. 8).

form of morality that requires itself to be understood as absolute.²³ But since the absolute conception demands either the absolute status of ethical concepts or their demotion as an element of the world independent of any perspective on it, that is already enough to rule out its possibility. For Williams, there cannot be a perspective that represents the world completely and comprehensively but leaves out ethical concepts, but there could not be any perspective that included them that was fully absolute.

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams is generally taken to accept the existence of genuinely absolute representations of at least some part of the non-ethical world.²⁴ I am happy enough to still call this a form of perspectivism, in which case it appears possible for the perspectivist to resist saying that it is always inappropriate to adopt absolute representation as a standard for thought. Anderson's stance seems to be that minimal perspectivism requires only the rejection of the absolute conception. One of his major concerns is, in fact, the ongoing debate amongst Nietzsche scholars between restricted and unrestricted readings of his perspectivism. Restricted interpreters argue for reading Nietzsche, on which he restricts the impossibility of absolute representation to some class of representations, usually a restriction fairly similar to the one Williams accepts.²⁵ Unrestricted interpreters argue that Nietzsche denies both the possibility of the absolute conception and the possibility of any absolute representations at all.²⁶

Though the restricted and unrestricted debate has proven both important and illuminating, the answer matters less than one might think at present. Either way, something of great practical significance has to be given up.²⁷ That is the authority of objective ethical (possibly all normative) standards. Less turns on whether more than just this has to be given up when the minimal loss is perhaps the one that many would experience as the most unmooring.²⁸ We have good reason to think Nietzsche himself would take that loss quite seriously. For one thing, he tells us so.²⁹ For another, that unmooring is a facet of a general aim that he is almost fanatically concerned with in later writings, about which he prophesies at the end of *GM*:

23. Williams (1985, p. 3).

24. Williams (2006) is more explicitly skeptical about even scientific absolute representation.

25. For exemplars, see Clark (1990), (2018), Clark & Dudrick (2012). See Leiter (2019) for an effectively restricted view with some unrestricted qualifications.

26. For exemplars, see Nehamas (1985), (2018) and Anderson (1998).

27. As far as I know, no major interpreter restricts Nietzsche's perspectivism even further than the ethical.

28. Some admittedly weak anecdotal support is that in teaching courses like ethics & the meaning of life or existentialism, I find students are more gripped by this possibility than almost any other significant ethical question.

29. *GM* Preface: 6/7.

And here I again touch on my problem, on our problem, my unknown friends (—for I as yet know of no friends): what meaning would our entire being have if not this, that in us this will to truth has come to a consciousness of itself as a problem? ... It is from the will to truth's becoming conscious of itself that from now on—there is no doubt about it—morality will gradually perish: that great spectacle in a hundred acts that is reserved for Europe's next two centuries, the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps also most hopeful of all spectacles ...³⁰

That is, with forestalling the cataclysm that could result from the death of the ascetic ideal and the debasing of the will to truth that would result.³¹

§ II GENEALOGY

This, then, seems to be the basis for treating perspectivism as the cornerstone of Nietzsche's mature philosophy. Things have been upended. We can no longer think what we once thought regarding such venerable topics as truth, morality, and knowledge, as he famously expresses with the declaration that God is dead.³² The consequence of which is that from 'the moment belief in the god of the ascetic ideal is negated, there is also a new problem: that of the value of truth.— The will to truth is in need of a critique...' ³³ If it is found wanting, then in order to avoid the slide into nihilism, something must be stood in its place.

Perspectivism provides the framework through which Nietzsche grapples with this task. It has to be because, as it turns out, the needed critique of the value of truth cannot be supplied by precisely the thing we would have thought most suited to it and also likely to ultimately vindicate that value, *the modern scientific image of the world*. The overarching question to be answered is whether 'nothing is required more than truth, and in relation to it everything else has only a second-class value.' Science, however, already presupposes the answer to this question. It itself is the will to truth. Moreover, we give 'too much' to science if we think that it itself does not also stand in need of a foundation.³⁴ Science itself requires that 'a philosophy, a 'belief,' must always be there first so that science can derive a direction from it, a meaning, a boundary, a method, a right to existence.'³⁵

Worse, in this distilled, scientific form, the will to truth drives the demand for answers to these questions that it cannot itself supply. An acceptable answer to the questions of 'why not deceive?' and 'why not let oneself be deceived?' after the death of God must be something like that 'one does not want to let oneself be deceived on

30. *GM* III: 27.

31. Cf. Reginster (2006) for a systematic reading of Nietzsche's philosophy as an anti-nihilist crusade.

32. *GS* 125.

33. *GM* III: 24.

34. *BGE* 211.

35. *GM* III: 24.

the assumption that it is damaging, dangerous, disastrous to be deceived...'³⁶ The guarantee of that would be something in the essential character of existence. What the partisans of science think they know that decides 'whether there is greater advantage on the side of the unconditionally mistrustful or the unconditionally trusting...' is the possibility of the absolute conception.³⁷

The rub is that the world is not unambiguously favorable to the utility of truth. Consequently, the will to truth itself suggests that unconditional belief in the very thing supporting it, the absolute conception, be given up. Either the will to truth is then given up too, or else it must find another way to support itself. That is why Nietzsche ultimately identifies even the scientific will to truth with the ascetic ideal. It is 'that ideal itself in its strictest, most spiritual formulation, completely and utterly esoteric, stripped of all outworks...'³⁸ But, of course, the grounds of that ideal have been undermined as well.

Therefore, if we are not to take for granted the supreme value of the will to truth or covertly succumb to the ascetic ideal, neither can we take for granted the absolute conception of the world. To avoid falling into the same trap as the scientific 'free spirits' Nietzsche mocks, his critique of the will to truth and justification of any alternative must not rest on any absolute grounds. Both must be, so to speak, perspectival. How they could be so returns us to the topic of genealogy and objectivity.

No critique or justification could be possible without norms or standards of legitimacy. But perspectivism will not let Nietzsche promise those standards as unconditional, as features of the world as it is in itself. What it could let him do is ground standards in the world as it seems to those with perspectives on it. That would be, to borrow his expansive use of the word, to ground the new standards directly in life itself, at which point his task becomes the question of what standards are useful or valuable from that standpoint. In the case of objectivity, much of its former value rested in its inter-subjectivity. Objectivity is essentially an interpersonal standard, so what we should ask is what we want in deciding what to count interpersonally as knowledge.³⁹

I cannot fully explore that question now, but it is worth reiterating that even if Nietzsche rescues the concept of objectivity, we can no longer consider this generally to be absolute knowledge of the world. What his future objectivity can always be is knowledge of what things are like *for us* from within and across representational perspectives. For that reason, the new standard of objectivity must involve grasping the ways that differences in those perspectives affect what the world is

36. *GS* 344.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *GM* III: 27.

39. Craig (1990). Cf. Queloz (2021) for discussion of Craig's methodology and its similarity to Williams (2002).

like *for* the beings who inhabit them. Thomas Kuhn's model of science, perhaps ironically, provides a helpful analogy for how we can conceive of doing that. On it, scientific knowledge is always articulated from within a scientific paradigm and on the basis of that paradigm's specific character. Through ordinary science, scientists gradually explore all the contours and possible expansions of the paradigm. In doing so, they progressively expose what it accounts for and what it does not.⁴⁰ Like the Kuhnian scientist, perspectival objectivity requires not cold, disinterested appraisal, but alternatively that we 'feel out' our world from our position within it.

We can now see how genealogy is useful for this purpose. Nietzsche's famous injunction from *GM*: III was to shift back and forth between perspectives. We can make sense of that now as useful because it allows us to note where and how, so to speak, life pushes back on each one. With a careful eye, we can begin to distinguish and assess the specifics of how it does so and how this varies across different perspectives. We may, for instance, notice conceptual localities where representations tend towards convergence in similarity across perspectives or that in others there is never any way to resolve or settle perspectival differences. Based on such first-order observations, we could hope to arrive at answers to significant general questions about our perspectives, such as which ones actually do help us to make our way around the world or which are stable under certain kinds of reflective scrutiny.⁴¹ To the extent that we find robust answers, we earn a right to say with the renewed force of objectivity what the world is like interpersonally. That is, across perspectives, though not outside them.

And that, then, is just how Nietzsche describes his own approach to the project of *GM* at its beginning. If we are to really understand the nature and value of moral representations *for us*, he says that we first need to understand how they arise out of and respond to our perspectives:

Let us speak it aloud, this new challenge: we need a critique of moral values, for once the value of these values must itself be called into question— and for this we need a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances out of which they have grown, under which they have developed and shifted (morality as consequence, as symptom, as mask, as Tartuffery, as sickness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as cause, as medicine, as stimulus, as inhibitor, as poison), knowledge of a kind that has neither existed up until now nor even been desired.⁴²

Genealogy is well suited to meeting that demand because, *qua* history, it is a paradigmatic place to learn what perspectives can be taken, as through it we can see what perspectives already have been. Moreover, when we attempt to see how or why they

40. Kuhn (1962).

41. This is part of the use that Williams (2002) makes of 'vindictory' genealogy.

42. *GM* Preface: 6.

were, we are frequently compelled to play at trying them on ourselves. When we are successful, the result is objective knowledge in Nietzsche's revisionary sense. When we fail, the attempt is nonetheless practice at having one's pro and contra in one's power.

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