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## What kind of perspectivist is Nietzsche?

POSTED ON SEP 5, 2011 12:40AM BY DAVE MAIER

by **Dave Maier**

Nietzsche is often described as a “perspectivist” about knowledge and truth. His remarks on the matter, however, render the issue far from straightforward. He clearly means to reject some form of absolutism, but which? And what does he leave in its place? One's answer to this question depends quite a bit on whether or not one wishes to see Nietzsche as an ally in contemporary disputes. Postmodern relativists, for example, see Nietzsche as a champion of their cause, breaking the chains of “objectivity” and liberating us from the logocentric hegemony of Western rationality or some damn thing. Defenders of metaphysical realism (or of Christianity, Nietzsche's explicit target) are generally happy to agree, allowing them to dismiss him along with his postmodern disciples as wild-eyed lunatics.

However, a recent trend in Nietzsche studies has been to claim him as an exponent of scientific rationality rather than as a critic (as in the work of Brian Leiter and Maudemarie Clark). On these latter readings, Nietzsche's “perspectivism” must then be understood as not at all relativistic, and indeed compatible with, as Leiter puts it, seeing a naturalistic or scientific perspective as “the true or correct” one.

This is a bold claim, given that even though Nietzsche uses the term “perspectivism” only rarely (and usually in his unpublished work), he seems to be presenting his views on truth and objectivity as new and different, and (in the *Genealogy of Morals*) as central to his argument. In contrast, naturalist readers of Nietzsche must downplay these views as relatively commonsensical rejections of outdated metaphysics, a mere reaffirmation (with a tweak here and there) of relatively traditional Enlightenment empiricism – the real action in Nietzsche's argument against traditional morality

occurring when, science having thus replaced metaphysics as the road to truth, we then turn to it and see what it in fact tells us about healthy human being(s).

In some ways this is a helpful corrective: it allows us to acknowledge the otherwise obscure influence of German materialism on Nietzsche's views, and to appreciate the biological basis of many of Nietzsche's arguments about psychological health. And, of course, it rejects the facile relativism attributed to Nietzsche by both detractors and admirers. However, I think it misses the mark. On my reading Nietzsche is neither a relativist nor a naturalist, but a ... dare I say "perspectivist"?

The problems with both relativist and naturalist readings of Nietzsche's perspectivism are both textual/interpretive and philosophical. Let's start with what Leiter calls the "traditional orthodoxy" or "Received View" of Nietzsche's relativism. Here's a typical passage from an introductory textbook (a very good one, actually):

” Nietzsche infers from the phenomenon of multiple interpretations that 'facts are ... what there is not, only interpretations.' (*The Will to Power*, section 481). But this is a mistake. That there are alternate interpretations of reality does not entail that we cannot grasp the *truth* about the world, only that we cannot grasp *all* of the truth. That a building is a house of worship as well as an architectural monument does not entail that it is *not* an architectural monument – the religious and aesthetic 'perspectives' can *both* reveal a truth about the world. It is this simple mistake which Nietzsche builds – quite unnecessarily – into the doctrine of perspectivism that is really fateful, for in it lie the relativism and nihilism that make post-modernism, as it seems to me, such an intellectually and spiritually destitute phenomenon. (Julian Young, *Schopenhauer*, p. 227)

Here Young moves directly from Nietzsche's denial of "facts" in favor of "interpretations" to its supposed consequence that "we cannot grasp the truth about the world"; and indeed if Nietzsche believed that that something is X and also Y meant that it was not Y after all, he would indeed be making a "simple mistake." But why should we believe this?

Here's WtP §481:

” Against positivism, which halts at phenomena—"There are only *facts*"—I would say: No, facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact "in itself": perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing.  
"Everything is subjective," you say; but even this is interpretation.  
The "subject" is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is.—Finally, is it necessary to posit an interpreter behind the interpretation? Even this is invention, hypothesis.  
Insofar as the word "knowledge" has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is *interpretable* otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings.— "Perspectivism."  
It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm.

Unpacking these compressed notes would take some time; but let us note at least that the "facts" Nietzsche rejects don't seem to be, well, facts, but instead a particular "positivist" conception of facts "in themselves." Indeed, he says the world is knowable; but we know the world by *interpreting* it. I see this as rejecting the Cartesian separation of subject and object: just as the "subject" is "not something given," the objective "world-in-itself" is not a collection of brute facts to be known by our minds, but instead the object of our wills as well. The passage is indeed obscure, but it's hard to see how Young's reading fits at all, unless "interpretation" must necessarily falsify our knowledge.

In her book *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, in fact, Clark's main point is to explain how Nietzsche originally advocated, but then came to reject, what she calls the Falsification Thesis: the skeptical idea that our faculties necessarily distort our knowledge. This is the point of Nietzsche's famous story, told in *Twilight of the Idols* (*Götzendämmerung*, a Wagner reference which is funnier in German), of "How the 'True World' became a Fable." Nietzsche lists six stages in "the history of an error," beginning with the Platonic dualism of real but abstract Forms and the earthly appearances which cut them off from us, passing through the Kantian conception of "noumena" as the essentially unknowable ground of our experience, and ending with the joyous realization that the pernicious distinction between appearance and reality can finally be dispensed with. His description of the sixth stage reads: "The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.*"

Clark and Leiter both read this last line as showing that Nietzsche is not a skeptic – that he embraces the "cockcrow of positivism" of stage 4, but modifies it in stages 5 and 6 just enough to cancel the unfortunate implication that in concentrating on "appearances" as empiricists do, they thereby restrict themselves to a "merely apparent" world. This certainly fits with the criticism of "positivism" in WP §481 above, as well as Nietzsche's affirmation there that "the world is knowable." However, it ignores the important sense in which Nietzsche's criticism of "positivism" (a tricky word, which we moderns use more narrowly to denote a particularly strict form of empiricism; here Nietzsche seems to mean empiricism more generally) stresses the role of interpretation in constituting the object of our knowledge. That is, in properly rejecting the idea that Nietzsche's "perspectivism" is facile relativism, naturalist readings underplay its actual force.

To see this, let us look at another, more forceful presentation of Nietzsche's "perspectivism," this time not in unpublished notes but in the climactic essay of one of his most famous works. Again I must abridge; here is the peroration of that section (*Genealogy of Morals*, Third Essay, section 12):

” Henceforth, my dear philosophers, let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject”; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as “pure reason,” “absolute spirituality,” “knowledge-in-itself”: these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective “knowing”; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing, our “objectivity,” be. But to eliminate the will altogether, to suspend each and every affect, supposingn we were capable of this—what would that mean but to *castrate* the intellect?

Like contemporary anti-Cartesians, Nietzsche believes that the idea of objective knowledge as a “view from nowhere” is incoherent. He tries to bring this out by comparing knowledge as we actually have it to seeing a visual image, which is “perspectival” in a more straightforward but analogous way. When I look at something, I have to stand somewhere, and so what I see is only the image as it appears from that angle. I cannot see the back (or maybe even the front), nor can I see the whole thing at once.

In this sense, no perspective is “truer” than any other. If a snapshot taken from that angle results in an inaccurate image, this must be due to a faulty camera, not my standpoint. Nor can there be such a thing as a *complete* visual image, say constructed out of all the individual ones. (Of course I may move from one place to another until I have seen enough; but that is not at all the same thing.) Yet I may find one angle more revealing than another, and some of them may be misleading or useless. Still, these judgments and manipulations are after the (photographic) fact: they are not reducible to

purely disinterested registering of how things are, visually speaking.

If cognition is like vision in this way, then just as there is no such thing as a single complete visual image, to be seen from no particular vantage point (which yet preserves the idea of accurate or faulty representations of what can be seen from each), then there is no such thing as a single complete way things are for us to know (a “world-in-itself”): all there are are interpretive perspectives and what can be seen from them. Yet, again, this does not dispense with, but in fact preserves against incoherence, the idea that we can get things right or wrong (just as our cameras may be accurate or faulty, in the visual case). Again we see a challenge to the empiricist (“positivist”) view, one not simply amounting to pointing out its overemphasis on “skepticism,” and reaffirming our ability to know. Much more fundamentally, empiricism does its best, just as did dogmatic metaphysics, to eliminate the interpretive aspects of inquiry as inherently “subjective.” (As I would put it, the Cartesian view does not overcome Platonism, but simply moves the Platonic world outside the Idea into the world as the ideally objective object of our inquiry, and empiricism is no help in this regard.)

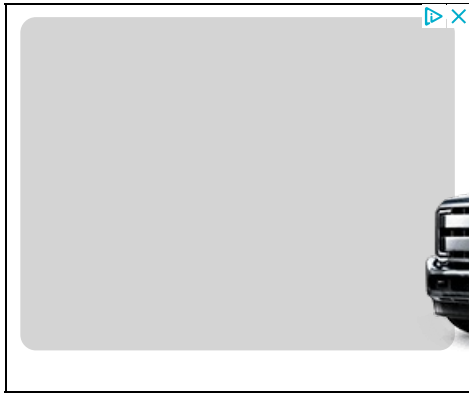
In contrast, as we might expect, Leiter's Nietzsche means no such thing. All Nietzsche means by the image of visual perspective, on this reading, is that no one camera angle can capture reality completely. Some perspectives are “inherently distorting” of the object, and the traditional notion of objectivity is preserved by doing exactly what I have said to be impossible: by treating individual perspectives on an object as *additive*, such that by so adding them we may approach, if not attain, a complete picture of how the object is independently of perspective. This gets Leiter just what he wants: rejection of dogmatic metaphysics; a limited, empirically oriented skepticism; and science as the “true or correct” (i.e., undistorted) perspective. In fact it sounds quite a bit like Young's commonsense “correction,” above, to Nietzsche's “mistake.” If that were all there were to it, we might indeed, given Nietzsche's apocalyptic attitude in the *Genealogy*, look around for something more interesting (even if, like Young, all we found was a relativism we must reject).

However, Leiter's reading seems to me to get wrong how the metaphor works, by bringing cognitive considerations into the image of visual perspective itself. This jumps the gun: we must understand the *visual* image *first*, and *then* look to see how it may illuminate our cognitive relation to the world. It is indeed true that there can be no such thing as what we may intuitively think there is: an ideally correct and complete visual image for our cameras to capture or distort (as the straightforwardly nonsensical phrase “view from nowhere” brings out). The natural cognitive analogue is that of an ideally independent (and thus inherently “complete” and “correct” – how could it not be, if untainted by subjectivity?) objective world – the “object” to the (equally suspect by Nietzschean lights) Cartesian “subject.” It is this that Nietzsche is telling us to reject as incoherent.

Why then does Nietzsche suggest that using more perspectives makes our “objectivity” more “complete”? For this is clearly where Leiter is getting the idea that, as naturalists often assert in such contexts, our failure to reach “complete objectivity” is not a metaphysical failure (that is, that the very idea is “a nonsensical absurdity”) but an epistemic one. For this we must look at the preceding paragraph in the above quotation, where Nietzsche continues his thought that objectivity in inquiry is not the *suppression* of our subjective interests but instead the “ability *to control* one's Pro and Con” [or, as in Young's rendering of WP §481 above, “For and Against”], and thus to “employ a *variety* of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge.” Note the language: we *employ* these things *in the service* of knowledge. We don't just add them up to approximate an ideal, nor do they amount to knowledge themselves: we *use* them by *controlling* them – and (only here sounding the anti-skeptical tone) yet “knowledge” is indeed the result.

We pretty much have to leave things here, but let me sum up a bit. As we've seen, the naturalist reading of Nietzsche isn't completely wrong, but it seriously underplays Nietzsche's criticism of

empiricism as a continuation of the unfortunate Cartesian separation of subject and object. That criticism, like the contemporary criticism of similarly Cartesian views in the work of such philosophers as Davidson, Wittgenstein, and Gadamer, focuses on the interpretive aspects of inquiry into the world, which undeniably, contra skepticism, results in knowledge. In these latter contexts as well, we can see such criticism as itself committed to relativism – the idea that everyone's perspective is “equally valid” and thus beyond reproach – only when we fail to see the conceptual interdependence of interpretation and inquiry. But as I often say, that's another story for another day.



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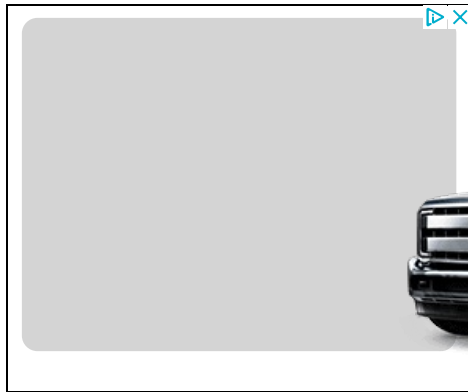
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**S. Abbas Raza** Thanks Namit, and excellent suggestions. We will come back to design decisions as soon as possible once we have the site stabilized and everything...

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