

Nietzsche's perspectivism

PERSPECTIVISM

In the opening sections of the book, Nietzsche repeatedly refers to 'perspectives'. In the Preface, he says that perspectivity is 'the fundamental condition of all life'; in §§2 and 3 he refers to the beliefs in the opposition of values and the value of truth as 'foreground evaluations, temporary perspectives'; in §11, he refers to the belief in synthetic a priori judgments 'one of the foreground beliefs and appearances that constitute the perspective-optics of life'. What does all this mean?

The term 'perspective' comes from the language of vision. We literally see things from and with a particular perspective. Our eyes are located at a particular point in space, from which some things are visible and others are not, e.g. the top of the table, but not its underneath. A scene looks different from different perspectives – from high up, we can see further and things look smaller, from below things 'loom' over us and we cannot see very far.

The idea of perspective has a rich metaphorical life. Important for our purposes, when someone seems to overreact emotionally, we tell them to 'get things in perspective' – what has happened is not as important as they seem to think, they need to see the 'bigger picture' or take the 'longer view'. In emotional overreaction, the immediate experience (which is near) dominates the person. This relates to Nietzsche's talk of 'foreground evaluations' – we take what is near to us (in the foreground) as the standard by which we interpret the world. (In §2, he talks of 'a perspective from below', though the literal translation is 'a frog's perspective' – which was also slang for 'narrow-minded' (because you can't see far or wide).)

Nietzsche talks about 'perspective' when he is relating beliefs to our values (and hence to our instincts). He uses the word 'interpretation' to mean a belief about something as if it is like this or that. An interpretation is an understanding of the world from a particular perspective; and so interpretations, like perspectives, relate back to our values. (Different perspectives are defined by different values; differences in belief are not themselves enough. Two people with different religious beliefs, for instance, may occupy the same perspective if their beliefs reflect the same underlying set of values.)

So Nietzsche is saying that philosophical beliefs about truth and goodness are part of a particular perspective on the world, a short-sighted, distorting perspective. One of its most important distortions is that it denies that it is a perspective (Preface), that its truths are unconditional (§4), that it represents the world as it truly is. But philosophers are wrong to think that it is possible to represent or hold beliefs about the world that are value-free, 'objective', 'disinterested'.

This applies even to sense perception, which we might expect to be most responsive to how the world is (§192). First, we find it easier, argues Nietzsche, to reproduce an image we are familiar with than to remember what is new and different in our sense impression. We are averse to new things, and so already, our experience of the world is dominated by an emotion. Familiar emotions – what we fear or love – will affect what we see. Second,

we cannot take in everything – we do not see every leaf on a tree, but out of our visual experience, create for ourselves an image of something approximating the tree. We do the same for everything we experience; our emotions affect this process. Third, whenever a new idea or experience arises, people become over-excited, impatient to develop or experience it. Over time, we become more cautious, see it more for what it is.

We can support Nietzsche's argument by an evolutionary account of human cognition. We can't possibly take in everything around us. We must be selective in order to survive at all. So from the very beginning, our intellects are responsive to our interests, our biological instincts and all that develops from them – our emotions, desires and values. So we do not and cannot experience the world 'as it is', but always selectively, in a way that reflects our values.

The laws of nature

Nietzsche uses his perspectivism in some contentious ways. For example, in §22, he argues that the scientific idea of 'laws of nature' is an expression of the value of equality (something Nietzsche strongly disapproves of). It is an interpretation of nature driven by ideas of democracy and atheism – there is no god, no master, all are 'equal before the law'. It is a ridiculous analogy of natural events with a particular morality, one that thinks of morality as a single set of laws that apply to everyone. We could just as well interpret natural events as the assertion of power claims. That there is an equally good way of interpreting nature shows that the 'laws of nature' approach is an interpretation, from a particular perspective.

We can object that if Nietzsche were right, the scientific idea of laws of nature should have arisen at the same time as ideas of democracy and an increase in atheism. Yet Leonardo da Vinci did much to contribute to the idea that all natural events follow strict laws even as he worked in a very hierarchical culture in which atheism could be severely punished. It wasn't until over 150 years (around 1650) later that ideas of democracy and atheism began to rise.

Nietzsche could challenge this in two ways. First, he could argue that our historical account is wrong, e.g. that the idea of democracy was part of John Wycliffe's thought. Wycliffe, who lived in the 14th century, attacked the authority of the priests and argued that the Bible should be available to everyone to read in their own native language. He was also interested in natural science. Second, Nietzsche could argue that the connection between democracy, atheism and the scientific idea of laws of nature can be seen in the emergence of all three together over several hundred years. Nietzsche's histories are often imprecise in this way, as he is only interested in the big picture.

THE PARADOX OF PERSPECTIVISM

If Nietzsche claims that all our knowledge is from a particular perspective, then his claims about perspectives and his theory of perspectivism must itself be from a particular perspective. So is what he says about perspectives objectively true or not? If it is meant to be objectively true, this would be a contradiction of his perspectivism. But if objective knowledge is impossible, then aren't all perspectives just perspectives, all equal? Nietzsche denies this as well.

First, he says that some perspectives are foreground perspectives, suggesting that others – his own, for example – are better, less distorting perspectives (§2). Second, he claims

that particular philosophical or moral views are false, e.g. the belief in the opposition of values (§4). Third, Nietzsche is an empiricist – he says that our sense organs can become ‘fine, loyal, cautious organs of cognition’ (§192) while he rejects the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments (§11). But how can the senses be a better source of beliefs than a priori reason unless some perspectives are better than others?

Nietzsche’s view is that perspective cannot be eliminated, i.e. values cannot cease to guide our knowledge, and that the attempt to eliminate it completely is misguided. However, some perspectives are less distorting than others. First, a perspective may be aware that it is a perspective. Becoming aware of the perspectival nature of knowledge is itself an improvement in knowledge. Second, we can find a less perspectival perspective by assembling many different perspectives: ‘perspectival ‘knowing’ [is] the only kind of ‘knowing’; and the more feelings about a matter which we allow to come to expression, the more eyes, different eyes through which we are able to view this same matter, the more complete our ‘conception’ of it, our ‘objectivity’ will be.’ (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, III §12) We need to be flexible, not trapped by one set of values or the illusion of value-free knowing, but able to move from one valuational perspective to another, and from these many points of view, assemble our picture of the world.

We may still ask, from what perspective does Nietzsche develop his views, his critique of philosophy, his position ‘beyond good and evil’? The answer, roughly, is ‘life’ – what he means by ‘life’ and how this could be a value, is discussed in the handout on ‘The will to power’.

IS TRUTH PERSPECTIVAL?

Perspectivism is a claim about knowledge, about our beliefs and representations of the world. But many philosophers have thought that Nietzsche is also a perspectivist about truth – there is no truth, only ‘truths’. This doesn’t follow from what has been said. Certainly Nietzsche says that what people believe is true depends on their perspective, as does how they understand the concept and value of truth. But this does not mean that truth itself varies between perspectives. This claim would contradict Nietzsche’s claim that certain perspectives are distorting – how can they be distorting if what is true, from that perspective, depends on that perspective?

Nietzsche’s attacks on the value of truth are not attacks on the idea that there is any such thing as truth. That appearance may be as valuable as truth does not imply that there is not truth – instead, it presupposes that there could be! Perspectivism claims only that the truth must always be represented from some perspective; there is no one way to represent the truth.

However, there are passages in which Nietzsche’s seems to be a perspectivist about truth, e.g. §43 in which he discusses the ‘new philosophers’. Unlike past philosophers, they will not insist that ‘their truth’ will have to be ‘a truth for everyone else’. But Nietzsche then rephrases the point in terms of judgment: “My judgment is my judgment: no one else has a right to it so easily”. Nietzsche is saying that new philosophers, unlike past philosophers, will not want everyone to agree with them, to occupy their perspective, to share their values. Nietzsche thinks his views are not for everyone, but only a select few. We can interpret the phrase ‘their truth’ to refer to their judgments, and not as a suggestion that what is true is itself dependent on perspectives.

The desire that everyone agrees on the truth, is part of the mistaken metaphysical picture that denies perspectivism and wants to represent the 'one' truth just as it is. Once we recognise that there are only many perspectives to be had, whether we think that our perspectives should or could be shared by others is an open question.

Truth and appearance

If truth is not perspectival, then is there a 'true world', the world as it really is, independent of how we can know it? Isn't this the philosophical myth – a true world transcending the world of experience – that Nietzsche attacks? Nietzsche discusses the relation between appearance and truth in §34 – but it is very difficult to understand, and many philosophers think that his views are expressed better in later works.

The argument in §34 starts from the question of the value of truth and appearance: 'It is nothing but a moral prejudice to consider truth more valuable than appearance'. Nietzsche then says that if we wanted to do away with all appearance, leaving just 'the truth', we can't do so coherently. And then, 'why should we be forced to assume that there is an essential difference between 'true' and 'false' in the first place? Isn't enough to assume that there are degrees of apparency,... lighter and darker shadows and hues of appearance'. Does this mean that there are only appearances, no truth except what appears in different perspectives?

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche presents a story of the development, through six stages, of philosophical theories about the relation between appearances (how the world appears) and truth (how it is 'in itself'). First, we thought the true world could be known to the good and wise person (Plato). Second, we thought that it was unattainable, but promised, to the good and wise person, e.g. in an afterlife (Christianity). Third (Kant), we came to think that we can neither know or achieve the true world, but the thought of its existence was a consolation and the source of our moral obligations. Fourth (later German Idealists), we realized that if we cannot know anything about the true world, it is neither consoling nor does it give us moral obligations. Fifth, we realize that therefore even the idea of a 'true world' has no use – and this seems to be what Nietzsche suggests in §34. But there is a sixth stage, perhaps present in §34, but represented more clearly in Nietzsche's later thought – if we abolish the idea of the 'true world', in what sense are appearances just appearances? They can only be thought of as appearances if we have something to contrast them with. But in getting rid of the idea of a 'true world', there is no contrast. 'Appearances' are no more 'false' than 'true' – they are all there is.

How does this help? We can suggest that instead of supposing that there is some 'true world' which then appears to us, we must understand 'appearances' as what comes first, logically speaking. We then interpret 'appearances' to be the 'appearance' of something. This quickly leads to mistakes, e.g. we think in terms of substances and properties. We should resist this interpretation, and understand 'appearances' as ever-changing relations. For example, we can only talk about 'hues' of red in relation to each other – darker or lighter, more or less intense; we cannot talk about a shade of colour 'absolutely'. This should be a model for our understanding of appearances. The world is ever-changing, not some thing 'behind' or 'beyond' appearances, that appears differently at different times. We are wrong to talk of a 'true world' beyond appearance.

But this does not mean that 'truth' is relative to perspectives. Appearances and perspectives are not equivalent. Perspectives can distort appearances; and so what 'appears' from a particular perspective may be a distorted version of those very

appearances. Perspectives that are not distorting (or less distorting) of appearances have a better grasp of what we may call the 'truth' – without meaning to refer to some world beyond appearance.

THE WILL TO TRUTH

Nietzsche is more concerned to analyse the will to truth than to develop a systematic theory of what 'truth' is. The will to truth in philosophy has, so far, understood the 'truth' in terms of the mistaken belief in the opposition of values. It understands the truth as 'unconditional' in two ways. First, it is free of perspective. And so the will to truth, correspondingly, attempts to be free of perspective and values, encouraging the 'objective' detachment that one finds praised in philosophy and science. But this attitude, argues Nietzsche, is an impoverishing of life, which is both emotional and perspectival. Second, the truth is unconditional in being of incomparable worth (it is also identical to the good). So the will to truth aims at the truth 'at any price', rather than placing the value of truth in relation to life. But the will to truth misrepresents itself, because it is not 'pure', but part of a particular system of values, viz. the ascetic ideal that demeans life and the world available to us.

By contrast, Nietzsche argues, that a judgment is false may be no objection to it (§4); there are other values more important. The truth can be dangerous, a threat to life. New philosophers will place truth, the value of truth and the will to truth in relation to life, and will use them for greater ends. Their will to truth will not be unconditional.

Is Nietzsche suggesting that new philosophers will want to have false beliefs or knowingly believe what is false? Does this even make sense? If you believe something, you believe it to be true. Nietzsche asks 'why do we not prefer untruth?' (§1). But does the question make sense? Can we prefer untruth if we cannot believe what we know to be false?

The idea of the will to truth is about how we understand the value of truth, i.e. how that value guides us in forming our beliefs (when we don't yet know what is true or false). While it may be true that we cannot consciously and deliberately believe what we know to be false, Nietzsche has argued that what happens consciously when we form beliefs is unconsciously guided by our values. The will to truth serves (or can serve) as part of a self-deception – we think we want the truth, and for its own sake, but this desire in fact serves the will to power, to create favourable conditions in which we attain the maximum feeling of power.