

## Article

# Nietzsche Was No Perspectivist

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**Abstract:** There is a widespread agreement that Nietzsche has developed a kind of position or doctrine called ‘perspectivism’. Scholars go on and develop metaphysical, semantic, epistemic, and psychobiological interpretations of the supposed Nietzschean perspectivism or even ‘perspectivisms’. They engage in debates about whether this perspectivism is relativistic, realistic, or anti-realistic and what the tenets of perspectivism are. In this paper, I suggest putting an end to this practice. I examine Nietzsche’s explicit mentions of the term ‘perspectivism’, the problems associated with the misunderstanding of this term as a label, attempts to reconstruct perspectivism based on explicit mentions of ‘perspective’ and related vocabulary, and doctrinal assumptions scholars try to connect with this terminology.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche; perspectivism; terminology; labels; isms; metaphilosophy; metaepistemology

## 1. Introduction

In recent literature on Nietzsche’s thought, as well as on perspectivism and relativism in general, one can find the following statements:

Ex. 1. “Nietzsche’s perspectivism is a philosophical methodology for achieving various epistemic goods”; ([1], p. 127)

Ex. 2. “Nietzsche’s perspectivism, if not quite identical to relativism, comes very close to it, as he seems to affirm some of the core features of relativism”; ([2], p. 52)

Ex. 3. “I will argue that Nietzsche offers a positive epistemology, and that those who interpret him as a sceptic or a mere pragmatist are mistaken. Instead he supports what he calls *perspectivism*”. ([3], p. 19)

It seems to be a widespread agreement that Nietzsche adhered to some kind of ‘perspectivism’.

Authors discuss whether Nietzsche’s perspectivism is an epistemological [3] position or a (metaphilosophical) methodology [1]. They offer metaphysical, semantic, epistemic (for an overview see [1], pp. 127–131), relativistic [2,4,5] or non-relativistic [6], p. 14 and [7], p. 27, realistic or anti-realistic [8], and pragmatic interpretations—this list is not exhaustive. They try to give systematic accounts of perspectivism that would overarch his authorized/published and unpublished works. Some argue that Nietzsche held multiple ‘perspectivisms’ (as [3,9–11]). The more they speak in unison about ‘Nietzsche’s perspectivism’, the more suspicious it should become to them and to anyone acquainted with Nietzsche’s anti-systematic spirit, his joy both in masking and unmasking, and his lively picturesque language.

In the wake of this spirit, I will argue that Nietzsche was no and is no perspectivist, although ‘perspectivity’ is a recurrent motive in his thinking. This may contradict the first intuition of the mentioned authors and other peers—except of Cox ([12], pp. 109–110), Berry ([13], p. 106),<sup>1</sup> and Dellinger ([14], pp. 90–92)—and it did once contradict mine. But let us play skeptics for a moment, “the only honorable type among the equivocal,



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quinguivocal tribe of philosophers" (EH [15], Why I am so Clever, 3).<sup>2</sup> Why should one use and ascribe the label 'perspectivism' to Nietzsche's thought (Section 2)? Why should one believe that he is taking a labeled side (Section 3)? Why should one pay so much attention to Nietzsche's comparatively few uses of the word 'perspective' (Section 4)? And why should anyone hold that some doctrinal assumptions can be undoubtedly associated with the label 'perspectivism' (Section 5)?

## 2. Using the Label

The skeptics' task is to look around more carefully than others did and check for something that others have missed (or purposively hidden). The first straightforward thing to do is to consult the corpus of Nietzsche's works and letters. Did he at any point consider himself a perspectivist? The corpus overall contains *six* mentions of the term 'perspectivism' (cf. [14], p. 87), and to compare, I have already mentioned it twice as many times; Hartmut von Sass, in his introduction to an anthology on perspectivism [6], more than 40 times, and Michela Massimi, in her recent book on perspectivism [17], ca. 150 times. The few mentions in only four passages (1882, two in 1886, and 1888) are by no means consistent. The only passage that appears in a published work, "The Gay Science" (1882), is the following:

This is the essence of phenomenism and perspectivism as *I* understand them: Owing to the nature of *animal consciousness*, the world of which we can become conscious is only a surface and sign-world, a world that is made common and meaner; whatever becomes conscious *becomes* by the same token shallow, thin, relatively stupid, general, sign, herd signal; all becoming conscious involves a great and thorough corruption, falsification, reduction to superficialities, and generalization. (GS [18], p. 354)

Here, perspectivism is used in combination with phenomenism and the cautious formulation "as *I* understand them"—something that [1], p. 131 and others did not consider. Similarly, and six years later, Nietzsche speaks of a "logic of perspectivism of the consciousness" (NF-1888 [19], 14(186), my translation) as a mechanism that undermines the physicists' belief in the objectivity of their knowledge. They have forgotten to count this world-construing mechanism into their conception of the "true being" (ibid.). Perspectivism is "a complex form of specificity" (ibid., my translation)—it makes the world specific. In one passage, 'perspectivism' is also used in brackets as a possible 'keyword' for the observation that the world can be interpreted in numerous ways, whereby each need and drive develop a different perspective (NF-1886 [20], 7(60)). The briefly mentioned "*perspectivism of desirability (ideals)*" (NF-1886 [20], 7(21), my translation) seems to be one special case of perspectivism.

These passages neither contain a theory or 'theories' (cf. [11], pp. 12, 183) of perspectivism nor a confession of a position. Instead, Nietzsche describes perspectivism as a certain *feature* of human (and non-human cf. NF-1888 [19], 14(186)) beings, of their consciousness, interactions, desires, drives, and ideals. As the origin of the suffix '-ism' in the Ancient Greek '-izein' (English '-ize') suggests [21], they act, proceed in a certain way, namely by interpreting and specifying by developing 'perspectives'. 'Perspectivism' signifies some processes and a 'fact' that Nietzsche observes. Similarly, we speak of 'volcanism' to refer to the volcanic processes connected to the eruption of magma onto the surface of a celestial body. It is just as inadequate to say that a certain scientist is a holder of the position called 'volcanism' as to claim that Nietzsche was or is a perspectivist.

Of course, one can also argue that in contemporary linguistic practice, we are inclined to use the suffix 'ism' to designate positions like capitalism and relativism without caring for the historical morphology of words. By perspectivism, as someone may say, Nietzsche has meant a certain feature of the consciousness, drives, etc., but what *we today* mean by this word is a certain position that we deliberately assign to Nietzsche. The structure of the justifying argument could look as follows: if person X has recognized a feature 'Y', then her position is 'Y-ism'. But then, Nietzsche scholars would have to use 'perspectivism' in two different senses, which would be confusing. Above that, given the variety of Nietzsche's

discoveries, one would have to attribute to his thought the whole palette of ‘isms’ (such as phenomenism, skepticism, relativism, psychologism, etc.). Dellinger’s proposal to bracket ‘perspectivism’ in statements on Nietzsche’s position (see [14], pp. 91–92), paradigmatic examples of which I have given in the introduction, does not provide a remedy for the confusing and relentless labeling.

### 3. Taking Sides

A proponent of the non-Nietzschean use of the term ‘perspectivism’, i.e., someone who holds that ‘perspectivism’ stands for something like a ‘position’, ‘doctrine’, ‘stance’, ‘attitude’ or a ‘methodology’ with such and such properties, could give a series of counter-arguments. One of them could be a pragmatic one: as labels can be useful to distinguish, classify, and communicate different views in philosophy, the term ‘perspectivism’ is good enough to refer to Nietzsche’s position as it relates to one of his important discoveries. If we give up on labels, we lose this possibility.

I do not think that this is a good argument for a number of reasons. As stated above, it is confusing and rather not pragmatically warranted to double the use of ‘perspectivism’ in the context of Nietzsche scholarship. Furthermore, there is an interference with other possible labels. The only published mention of perspectivism occurs in combination with ‘phenomenism’, and it is unclear whether “the world of which we can become conscious is only a surface and sign-world” (GS [18], p. 354), and the following statements refer rather to perspectivism, phenomenism, or a mixture of both. Indeed, Nietzsche uses the term ‘phenomenism’ more often than ‘perspectivism’ throughout his writings, and he has also been characterized as a ‘phenomenist’ [22].

The problem does not only occur if one asks the question: What is Nietzsche’s central position: perspectivism, phenomenism, will to power, philosophy of life, or anything else? It is rooted in the basic levels of philosophical inquiry (more specifically, metaepistemology and semantics) and concerns the topology of ‘isms’ and the variety of meanings of ‘perspectivism’. For example, Michela Massimi ([17,23,24]) has followed the footsteps of Ronald Giere [25] in developing an account of perspectivism based on the solid soil of realism, which has the potential to be the final word in the ‘Science Wars’. She named it ‘perspectival realism’. The formula is the world as we know it plus “perspective-sensitivity” ([24], p. 173) qua awareness of historical and cultural situatedness of cognition and scientific frameworks (see [23,24]). The idea is, as she admits, not new and is also known from Nietzsche and Kant. But is Nietzsche’s *alleged* perspectivism a perspectival realism, perspectival phenomenism, or simply a (pure) perspectivism? If the latter, what distinguishes it from constructivism? Nietzsche’s six mentions of ‘perspectivism’ do not provide us with any authority to stipulate a meaning for something that is not per autorem understood as a position. The supposed ‘re-construction’ will inevitably turn out to be our construction, our perspective on perspectivism that is neither Nietzschean nor what Nietzsche would have welcomed. ‘Nietzsche’s perspectivism’ is a highly misleading phrase.

Nietzsche’s supposed perspectivism is sometimes considered to be a variant of relativism (see [2,4,5]; see [6], p. 14 and [7], p. 27 for a different view), which is yet another curious phenomenon. ‘Relativism’ is one of those labels that was first introduced by adversaries of an alleged position, not by its proponents—other examples are ‘psychologism’ and ‘German Idealism’.<sup>3</sup> Baghramian and Coliva’s ([2], pp. 25–61) reconstruction of the history of relativism illustrates that an archetypical relativist can scarcely be found. Walking through the history of relativism is like looking for a human on the streets of Athens with a lit lamp. Everyone seems to be a kind of relativist, yet not really a relativist. For example, the Pyrrhonian skeptics are supposed to be relativists (see *ibid.*). Yet, relativity is one of the ten (older school), respectively five (Agrippa), tropes. If one adds the suffix ‘ism’ to the name of each trope, they would be, besides, ‘infinite regressists’, ‘dissentists’, etc. One could deem this a valid argumentum ad absurdum.

Irlenborn ([5], p. 36) argues that it is easy to reject any ‘ism’ that Nietzsche is said to have represented by pointing at the multiplicity of ambiguous aphoristic conceptions

that contradict any systematization. But my further argument against labeling Nietzsche's position "relativistic perspectivism" (ibid.) is another one. Neither in the history of philosophy nor in the contemporary debates do we possess clear, prevailing, and ready-at-hand concepts of relativism and perspectivism. Sometimes, authors follow intuitive conceptions, and sometimes, they try to elaborate on general features of positions under the guise of the idea of widespread agreement. The latter is by no means a better procedure. Baghrarian and Coliva ([2], pp. 6–11; see also [27], p. 36; [28], pp. 117–118; and [29]) count six possible doctrinal components of relativism: (1) *non-absolutism*, (2) *dependence*, (3) *multiplicity*, (4) *incompatibility*, (5) *equal validity*, and (6) *non-neutrality*. These, as they say, "core features of the doctrine" ([2], p. 26) are neither a result of a regressive conceptual analysis nor of a linguistic analysis of the word 'relativism'. They are based on an interaction between preliminary stipulations on the one hand and abstractions from the history of philosophy on the other hand—a hand-in-hand theoretical composition that obtained the name 'relativism'. A measurement of Nietzsche's achievements or contributions to such an unwieldy construction is not of much use for the understanding of his original thought. The latter has more value for philosophy if it is considered in its own right. Hence, I cannot follow the conclusion that "Nietzsche's perspectivism, if not quite identical to relativism, comes very close to it, as he seems to affirm some of the core features of relativism" (ibid., 52; see also [5], p. 39).

This statement and such formulations—regardless of whether they are labels for Nietzsche's position or technical terms—as "relativistic perspectivism" ([5], p. 36), "relativist perspectivism" ([30], p. 2), and "perspective-relativity" ([24], p. 349) require a general clarification. Is perspectivism a variant of relativism or vice versa? Do they rebut or complement each other? Apart from the point that this is not a Nietzschean question, the Nietzschean answer cannot be built on a comparison of theoretical superstructures made of labels and their doctrinal contents. For example, the statement "a positive reception of Nietzsche as *the* philosopher of perspectivism is accompanied by rejection of exaggerated relativisms" ([6], p. 14, my translation) does not sound Nietzschean. Here, the existence of ready-made labeled theoretical superstructures is already taken for granted. One possible idea could be that Nietzsche may regard relativism as a *feature* of consciousness, drives, desires, etc., in analogy to his use of the word 'perspectivism' and, hence, see no tension between both concepts. But with only one explicit and irrelevant mention of 'relativism' in his writings, it would be a daring thesis.<sup>4</sup>

The opponents may argue that, nevertheless, the *content* of Nietzsche's statements allows for the use of such labels as 'relativistic perspectivism' as they are simply external contemporary descriptions. One should, as they could add, not think too much about them (something like a very general idea that the current communication community might have) and simply focus on the content. But let us take a look at the passages that are mentioned in the context of the question of whether Nietzsche's perspectivism is a kind of relativism. Sass ([6], p. 13) claims that the following passage from *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) may sound relativistic:

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, supposing we were capable of this—what would that mean but to *castrate* the intellect? (GM [32], III, 12)

Here, as Sass claims, we can observe an anti-realistic stance that some scholars may associate with relativism. I do not, however, read the word 'relative' or any synonyms or similar expressions in this passage. There are no linguistic hints. The seeker for relativism must tacitly reformulate Nietzsche's statements to something like "objective reality is relative to perspectives" or "affects". But with the same heuristic attitude, one could interpret an immense variety of propositions, such as "you will understand me in 20 years" and "I had no other choice" as relativistic by reading them as "X is relative to the age of Y"

and “the choice X is relative to circumstances Y”. This would make either all or none of us relativists. Furthermore, Nietzsche writes that the growth of the ‘concept’ or ‘objectivity’ is a consequence of the use or emergence of multiple perspectives. Even if he consciously brackets the vocabulary of his adversaries, he does not explicitly argue against realism.<sup>5</sup> This passage can even be read as a certain plea for objectivism (see for this reading [9], pp. 264–267). No relativism or relativistic perspectivism is observable here.

To prove that Nietzsche holds an ‘alethic relativistic perspectivism,’ Irlenborn ([5], p. 38) cites the following sentences from *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (1873, published by Nietzsche’s sister in 1896), and Baghranian and Coliva use a similar passage on ‘truth’ (see [2], p. 51):

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. (TL [33], p. 1)

Irlenborn argues that this passage is about “the relativization of the understanding of truth” ([5], p. 38, my translation). I do not see this. The main body of information is about the guises and features of the so-called ‘truth’. Analogically, the proposition from any textbook on epistemology that “one can distinguish between the correspondence and coherence theories of truth” is not about the relativization of the understanding of truth—it is about different theories of truth. Nietzsche does not ask the reader for any extra metatheoretical reflection on relativity. The existence of relations that are responsible for different guises, ‘the sum of human relations’, is taken as a simple fact. In the same text, a few paragraphs later, he writes:

After all, what is a law of nature as such for us? We are not acquainted with it in itself, but only with its effects, which means in its relation to other laws of nature—which, in turn, are known to us only as sums of relations. Therefore all these relations always refer again to others and are thoroughly incomprehensible to us in their essence. (TL [33], p. 1)

Here, again, the “sum of relations” is a description of a cognized matter of fact, not an invitation to further higher-order reflections on relativization. Why should we believe that an inference from an object of observation to a corresponding position of an author is valid? Hegel also speaks of a network of relations: “truth ‘is relation itself’” ([34], p. 336). Does it make him a relativist, too? ‘Alethic relativistic perspectivism’ is a flatus vocis.<sup>6</sup>

The arguments presented so far indirectly contribute to Ryle’s general view: “There is no place for ‘isms’ in philosophy” ([35], p. 317). Nietzsche uses the term ‘perspectivism’ as a state or process description, which is a different story. But what would it take to not simply describe ‘perspectivism’, but to actually hold a position called ‘perspectivism’ or ‘relativistic perspectivism’, as some of the above-mentioned scholars believe Nietzsche does? Ryle’s answers are clear, partially convincing, and still up to date—they challenge the proponents of ‘analytic philosophy’ (see [36], pp. 5–9). Cleaving to a labeled position, following Ryle, often goes hand-in-hand with (1) unclear and incomplete tenets (sometimes the tenets are ascribed to a position by its adversaries); (2) tenets that need to be very narrow and refined (for otherwise, it would be hard to distinguish one position from another and to follow an ‘ism’ or a school); (3) sheer credulity (one entertains no doubts about the whole or a part of a position); (4) underestimation of the opponent (the dispute is won long before it began); and (5) top-down-argumentation (one argues for something in recourse to some ready-made principles associated with a label instead of developing new context-sensible argumentative strategies). Does Nietzsche anywhere show a willingness to bear the burden of such a style of reasoning?



Nietzsche is a master of masks. It is often not clear whether he takes a side for or against something. The power of poetic, lively, and descriptive language and the heavy use of dashes stand in high contrast with the theoretical combat mode between theses and antitheses or discussions of truth and falsity. For example, “‘know thyself’ addressed to human beings by a god, is almost malicious” (GS [18], p. 335) does not reveal Nietzsche’s attitude towards self-knowledge and does not suggest any normative direction (should we stop cognizing ourselves or not?). In some passages, it seems as if Nietzsche would disclose one or another of his positions, yet the subtle touch of irony, exaggerations, and other tricks let the readers riddle: his books, as he writes in *Ecce Homo* (1888–9, published 1908), here and there “achieve the highest thing achievable on earth, cynicism” (EH [15], Why I Write Such Good Books, 3). Is he a follower of cynicism? If skeptics are “the only honorable type among the equivocal, quinquivocal tribe of philosophers” (EH [15], Why I am so Clever, 3) and Nietzsche admits: “I think well of all skepticism to which I may reply: ‘Let us try it’”. (GS [18], p. 51)—does it make him a skeptic? And is Nietzsche a philosopher or a psychologist (see BGE [37], p. 295 and EH [15], Why I Write Such Good Books, 6)? Nietzsche is playing with his readers. It seems that the theorists of “Nietzsche’s perspectivism” simply have been played.

Nietzsche is clever enough not to wear the burden of ‘isms’, just as the Pyrrhonists were inventive enough to speak of ‘tropes’ instead of ‘theories’. Attempts to single out and extrapolate ‘tenets’ or ‘principles’ of a supposed ‘Nietzschean perspectivism’ look like self-assured attempts to grapple with a master of guises. But once interpreters believe that their deconstruction of Nietzschean masks and construction of a ‘perspectivism’ were successful, which is unlikely, they will find themselves amidst the avalanche of problems associated with labeled positions. One of them will surely be the charge of self-refutation of perspectivism (see [38], p. 42 and [14], pp. 97–101). But this problem only arises if one uses ‘perspectivism’ not as a state and process description but as a name of a position directed against some forms of non-perspectivism. Nietzsche, indeed, exposes weaknesses of thoughts and theories that result out of a poor understanding of perspectival processes; but this does not make him a holder of a position called ‘perspectivism’ (or ‘phenomenalism’, ‘naturalism’, ‘subjectivism’, ‘affectivism’, ‘aspectivism’, ‘relativism’, ‘skepticism’, or whatever other ‘ism’ one wants). The word ‘perspective’ is just one of the many weapons he has at hand.

#### 4. Choosing the Right Words

Some readers may still be unconvinced and decide to stick with the label ‘Nietzsche’s perspectivism’. They could counter: Why should we focus on Nietzsche’s six direct uses of the word ‘perspectivism’? We could search in his texts for the word ‘perspective’ and related word combinations, analyze them, and reconstruct a deeper-lying concept of perspectivism. Six direct uses do not suffice to understand what he actually had in mind. This proposal ignores the argument that it is confusing, i.e., pragmatically not warranted to have two different concepts of perspectivism in Nietzsche scholarship (one that is his own, as presented in Section 2, and one that would result out of the scholar’s reconstruction of the use of ‘perspective’ and related word formations). But authors may also argue that the second ‘deeper’ concept either replaces or somehow unproblematically complements the other.

Alfano is one of those opponents who could subscribe to the above-mentioned counterargument and opt for the complementation strategy:

However, if we expand our focus to all uses of ‘Perspective’, ‘Perspektive’, and their cognates, we find thirty-nine passages in his published and authorized works. This is still not enough to determine a unique best reading, but it’s much better than the more common practice of building a whole theory based solely on GS [18], p. 354. ([1], p. 131)

The author immediately embarks on a quest for the reconstruction of a ‘theory’ of ‘perspectivism’ without questioning beforehand whether such heuristics and choice of words do justice to Nietzsche’s thought. For if not, the elaborate work could have been done in

vain. Indeed, the ‘digital humanities approach’ (ibid.) (e.g., the use of digital tools to search the texts for specific terms) alone cannot decide whether or not Nietzsche held systematic views that can be bundled under the common title ‘perspectivism’. Dellinger, whose work is not considered by Alfano, has found 199 uses of ‘Perspective’, ‘*Perspektive*’, and the corresponding word formations (such as ‘moral perspective’, ‘herd-perspective’, ‘angle-perspective’, etc.) in Nietzsche’s authorized/published and unpublished manuscripts ([14], p. 1). Yet Dellinger does not base his view on whether Nietzsche entertains a position called ‘perspectivism’ on his performance of semantic analysis, but rather on some metaphilosophical reflections on ‘perspectivism’ as a possible label for Nietzsche’s thought. Such reflections are not present in Alfano’s paper. He gives an interesting account of Nietzsche’s ‘summoning’, as he calls it: Nietzsche uses certain tricks to make readers think about perspectives. This was undoubtedly one of his goals. Nevertheless, it is not an indication that he was a proponent of ‘perspectivism’. Nietzsche’s uses of the term ‘perspective’ do not force or invite going beyond the descriptive level, the level of ‘knowing how’, and joining reflections or the development of a conceptual or semantic metatheory of perspectivity. The word ‘perspective’, from Latin ‘*perspicere*’ (‘to see through’, ‘to see’, ‘to scrutinize’), has been a terminus technicus in geometry/optics since Boethius and in the science of art (used, for example, by Leonardo da Vinci, Leon Battista Alberti, or Albrecht Dürer) before it was introduced by Leibniz to philosophy ([14,39–41]). Dürer has translated ‘perspective’ into German as ‘*Durchsicht*’, i.e., a glimpse through an object. Such an object could be a window, which shows only a part of the world outside. An optical illusion (central, light, color perspective) is usually associated with the word ‘perspective’, but this does not concur with the original meaning. The German word ‘*Perspektiv*’, which is today almost out of use, retains this meaning and means ‘a small telescope’ (‘*perspectivum*’, something that allows us to see through, to see further through space). Nietzsche is obviously aware of this when he uses the pleonasm ‘perspectival glimpses’ (German ‘*perspektivische Durchblicke*’):

To distance oneself from things until there is much in them that one no longer sees and much that the eye must add in order to see them at all, or to see things around a corner and as if they were cut out and extracted from their context, or to place them so that each partially distorts the view one has of the others and allows only perspectival glimpses, or to look at them through coloured glass or in the light of the sunset, or to give them a surface and skin that is not fully transparent: all this we should learn from artists while otherwise being wiser than they. (GS [18], p. 299)

Nietzsche’s figurative use of the word ‘perspective’ also, in a way, retains the original meaning. For this reason, Nietzsche’s thinking can be regarded as one of the examples of a successful, non-confusing metaphorical use of this term [42]. Consider, for example, the following passage:

Buying and selling, together with their psychological appurtenances, are older even than the beginnings of any kind of social forms of organization and alliances [...]. The eye was now focused on this perspective; and with that blunt consistency characteristic of the thinking of primitive mankind, which is hard to set in motion but then proceeds inexorably in the same direction, one forthwith arrived at the great generalization “everything has its price; all things can be paid for”—the oldest and naivest moral canon of *justice*, the beginning of all “good-naturedness”, all “fairness”, all “good will”, all “objectivity” on earth. (GM [32], II, 8)

Nietzsche’s talk of metaphysical perspectives, pessimistic perspectives, herd perspectives, frog perspectives, change of perspectives, etc., ([14]) is not accompanied by any further supportive semantic theory. The 199 mentions of a commonly used word (in a lifetime, while I have mentioned it over 50 times in this paper alone) shows that it is a useful but peripheral term, one of the instruments Nietzsche takes up for various purposes: to point at narrowness, to refer to a theory without using the word ‘theory’, or to bring up

certain images, where it fits well and is required. These purposes may be related to the will to power, a conception of healthy willingness, a discussion of pertinent values, biological, and psychological phenomena, etc., which all cannot be reductively subsumed under the terms ‘perspective’ and ‘perspectivism’.

But the theorists of ‘Nietzsche’s perspectivism’ could go even further by claiming that one should not focus on the word ‘perspective’ alone; there are other complementary terms, and altogether they represent the apparatus of perspectivism. Indeed, Leibniz did not introduce ‘perspective’ into the philosophical discourse without the related term ‘point of view’, from which each monad represents the universe. A perspective, a ‘glimpse through something’, does not occur from nowhere. The German philosopher Friedrich Kaulbach suggested a very wide notion of perspectivism: each philosopher who permanently uses such words and formulation as ‘perspective’, ‘standpoint’, ‘horizon’, ‘view’, ‘change of perspective’, and ‘world view’ could be regarded as perspectivist ([43], pp. 2–10). Perspectivists have their specific vocabulary—this allows Kaulbach to claim that Kant and Hegel were also perspectivists.

Aside from the obvious—the stipulative understanding of perspectivism and putting Nietzsche in one row with Kant and Hegel—these creative attempts face another problem. The supposed ‘perspectivist vocabulary’ is used on a daily basis by the current communication community, which would even make non-philosophers perspectivists—it will blur all possible lines. The other way to put it is to say that we all use, or may use when needed, ‘perspective’ and its complementary terms to *orient* ourselves. Stegmaier tried to order this vocabulary as a sort of a system of coordinates: *The ‘standpoint’ or ‘viewpoint’ is the local reference point of the observer, the ‘direction’ is a certain orientation of the agent, the ‘horizon’ is the boundary of the visible, and ‘perspective’ is characterized by two lines drawn from the point of view to the horizon. Everything that lies between these lines is ‘in perspective’* ([44], pp. 191–225). Anyone can make use of it as she likes; this does not make her a ‘perspectivist’. Furthermore, one can enrich this conceptual matrix by adding other relevant interrelated concepts, such as ‘picture’, ‘aspect’, ‘angle’, ‘relation’, ‘context’, etc. What we acquire is an ordered system of general epistemic vocabulary, something that rational agents use to make discoveries, to order knowledge, and to communicate with each other. One could even argue that this system reveals some basic, quasi a priori epistemic structure and that knowledge of this structure could improve our cognition (see [41,45]). One could, if one wants, call the result of such theoretical enterprise ‘perspectivism’—but why should ‘perspective’ be more central than ‘relation’, ‘context’, ‘position’, etc? Why not ‘relativism’, ‘contextualism’, ‘aspectivism’, ‘positionalism’, or, which is more adequate, simply ‘epistemology’? This approach is new and not present in Nietzsche. Nietzsche, who, inter alia, spoke of ‘angle-perspective’ and ‘horizon-perspective’ (see for all the different uses [14]), did not bother to distinguish all these concepts from one another with precision. One will also not encounter any theoretical attempt to interrelate them. All attempts to discover a hidden solid ‘theory of perspectivism’ in Nietzsche based on linguistic analyses are futile.

## 5. Doctrinal Assumptions

The opponents could object that in the previous sections, I have put too much weight on linguistic analysis. One should rather reconstruct the *content* by interrelating the *thoughts* that Nietzsche offers—the choice of words and formulations is secondary, they may claim. Indeed, it may seem that if one lowers the demands for correct and non-confusing labeling, the problem with ‘Nietzsche’s perspectivism’ and ‘Nietzsche’s relativistic perspectivism’ disappears in a flash.

The lowering of demands is almost Nietzschean and almost as good as Stirner’s trick: a philosophical problem disappears if one simply stops thinking ([46], pp. 164, 388, and 400). Yet, even if we care less for the choice of words, we will not be able to reconstruct one unified doctrine of X that some scholars want to call ‘perspectivism’ in Nietzsche. The reason is simple. Both development and reconstruction of a doctrine imply exposition of doctrinal content—of tenets and assumptions, a ‘hard core’ of a program, in Lakatosian



words. As Nietzsche did not explicitly formulate such a hard core and did not have the intention to do it, the searchers for perspectivism assume some hidden theoretical structure that can be identified and expounded. As mentioned above, scholars working on relativism have problems with defining its doctrinal content. Similarly, analytic philosophers cannot agree on the general tenets of ‘analytic philosophy’, if there are any (see [47]). Accordingly, as Conant writes,

[h]ardly any two commentators ever seem to agree on just what the doctrine in question is supposed to be. According to some commentators, the term ‘perspectivism’ stands for something quite banal and platitudinous; according to others, for something quite eye-opening. According to some, it stands for some form of realism; according to others, for some form of anti-realism. According to yet others, it stands for some extreme and perhaps wonderful or perhaps disastrous form of relativism or skepticism. ([6], pp. 6–7)

Conant, therefore, suggests triggering a multiple-staged “*dialectic of perspectivism*” ([6], p. 7), which he then applies to illuminate Nietzsche’s thought. The interpretative assumption is that Nietzsche himself struggled for a good understanding of perspectivism (ibid.), both in his ‘early’ and ‘mature’ perspectivism. Similarly, Thomä [9] recognizes three different ‘perspectivisms’ in Nietzsche: a simple or naïve perspectivism, a perspectivism that takes the problem of objectivity into account, and a perspectivism that deranges existing structures (see also [11], pp. 12, 183).

Even if such approaches circumvent the problem of one unifying systematic reconstruction of doctrinal tenets of the supposed ‘perspectivism’, they run up against the wall of arguments I have presented. Firstly, they use the word ‘perspectivism’, which already has received a specific meaning in Nietzsche, in a different way, which is misleading (Section 2). Secondly, they suppose that Nietzsche cleaves to clear tenets (that are constantly being replaced throughout his work)—which is highly contentious for reasons given in Section 3. And thirdly, they associate these tenets with the word ‘perspective’, which lacks evidence and conflicts with the use and semantics of ‘perspective’ and complementary vocabulary (Section 4).

Conant labels different theoretical constructions from the ‘dialectic of perspectivism’ (developed independently of Nietzsche’s thought) as ‘perspectivism’ simply by adding the word ‘perspective’ or ‘perspectival’. For example, the *primary quality of realism* is supposed to be perspectivism because

[s]ome of the qualities that we perceive objects as having are qualities of the objects themselves, while others are due to features of our perceptual perspective on them. [...] *All secondary qualities are merely perspectival*: no one such quality is any more “real” than another. ([10], p. 21)

But following this procedure, we can turn any epistemological position into perspectivism. The general formula would be *X plus Y equals Y-ism*. Using this trick, we could turn *primary quality realism* into relativism either by directly mentioning ‘relative’ or ‘relativity’ (of secondary qualities) or presupposing that these terms are implicitly present. I think that this procedure is popular and unquestioned in contemporary philosophical practice. It also explains how authors come to the idea that Nietzsche holds a perspectivism or relativistic perspectivism. They use the formula *X plus Y equals Y-ism*: X is a sequence of thoughts in Nietzsche; Y is an interesting term, and variations of this term that authors for any reason focus on (e.g., ‘perspective’, ‘perspectival’, ‘perspectivity’); if it is not explicitly there, interpreters read and understand the sequence of thoughts as if this term or its variations are present; hence, they regard X as a contribution to Y-ism (e.g., ‘perspectivism’). Conant ([6], p. 40) cites the passage “[t]ruths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions” (TL 1) as one of the first of Nietzsche’s steps on the path to ‘perspectivism’. According to the formula *X plus Y equals Y-ism*,<sup>7</sup> Conant reads something like ‘the illusory character of truth results from perspectivity or perspectival access to truth’. Hence, the illusory character of truth must be one of the tenets of the supposed Nietzschean perspectivism. Yet,

another reader, following the heuristics of relativism, may find here that Nietzsche speaks of the relativity of images of truth and considers the illusionary character of truth as a tenet and consequence of the doctrine of alethic relativism. One could also deploy heuristics of anti-realism or skepticism or any other ‘ism’, doctrine, or school that one wants to impute Nietzsche with.

I think that this practice is unreasonable and contributes scarcely anything to the understanding of Nietzsche’s genuine thought. This also applies to debates on the varieties of possible interpretations of the supposed Nietzschean ‘perspectivism’, such as metaphysical, semantic, and epistemic (for a good overview, see [1], pp. 127–131). Perhaps, Wild’s [38] psychobiological interpretation is an exception. It is scholarly valuable to employ semantics of ‘perspective’ and closely related vocabulary and trace the functions of the use of the word to understand Nietzsche’s ideas—which are irreducible to terminology related to ‘perspective’. However, any attempt to reconstruct an alleged Nietzschean doctrine of perspectivism is futile.

## 6. Conclusions

Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely *shallow*, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives. (BGE [37], p. 40)

How did the mask of the doctrine of perspectivism grow? First, authors have come across six mentions of ‘perspectivism’ but did not realize that Nietzsche meant a state and process description, a ‘fact’, something we also mean when we speak of ‘volcanism’ and ‘metabolism’. Then, they assumed that Nietzsche was taking sides but were confused—was he a perspectivist, a phenomenalist, a realist, or a relativist? Tracking the 199 mentions of the word ‘perspective’, the related word formations and complementary vocabulary have led them to invent ‘Nietzsche’s perspectivism’. But it was not enough. They believed in a hidden system of doctrinal tenets and that all it takes to reveal it is to always read ‘perspective’, ‘perspectivity’, and ‘perspectival’.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Berry rightfully complains about the “(almost unquestioned) assumption [...] that there is a doctrine of perspectivism central to the overall scheme of Nietzsche’s thought and it therefore demands unpacking” ([13], p. 106).
- <sup>2</sup> For Nietzsche’s relation to skepticism see [16]. I use the following abbreviations: BGE for *Beyond Good and Evil*, EH for *Ecce Homo*, GM for *On the Genealogy of Morals*, GS for *The Gay Science*, NF for unpublished fragments (‘*Nachgelassene Fragmente*’), TL for *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*. I refer to text numbers.
- <sup>3</sup> Krug was the first to introduce the term ‘relativism’ into the philosophical discourse to denounce “the assumption that everything which we experience and think (the self, the idea of reason, truth, morality, religion etc.) is only something relative, and therefore has no essential endurance and no universal validity” (Krug [26] 1838, p. 224).
- <sup>4</sup> In [31], I have developed a different theory to solve the tension between relativism, perspectivism, and other epistemological approaches. The other way is to systematically conceive relativization as one of the many epistemic acts available to rational agents. It is not a genuinely Nietzschean solution, but it is closer to Nietzsche than to the contemporary epistemological practice of battle between ready-made ‘isms’.
- <sup>5</sup> Thomä ([9], pp. 264–267) reads this passage even less cautiously, as a certain plea for objectivism that complements the perspectival creativity.

- <sup>6</sup> Irlenborn [5], pp. 36, 40 and Baghrmian and Coliva [2], pp. 52–55 also claim that somebody can be considered as relativist if she had impact on subsequent generations of scholars who can be regarded as relativists. But this will open the door to any arbitrariness.
- <sup>7</sup> The formula is a short roundup of Conant's 'argument-form' ([6], p. 41). He believes that this is the key to decipher Nietzsche's hidden messages to his readers—look for the word 'perspective': "The argument-form in question, when broken down into its ingredient steps, involves the following eight-step movement of thought: (1) in order for a cognizing subject to come into cognitive contact with a potential object of cognition, some transaction must take place between the cognitive equipment of the subject and the potential object of cognition, (2) in every such transaction, in order for the object to come into view for the subject, certain structural features of the cognitive equipment of the subject must come into play and mediate the subject's encounter with the object, (3) these structural features of the cognitive apparatus furnish the cognizing subject with a cognitively slanted perspective on the object, (4) the ensuing manner in which the object appears to the subject necessarily reflects an ineliminable contribution on the part of the subject due to contingent features of his cognitive perspective, (5) when viewed by other sorts of subject (or by the same subject, from other, cognitively equally parochial, perspectives) the same object will appear different, (6) all humanly available perspectives on the object are cognitively equivalent in this respect—are equally subjective—there is no such thing as a cognitive perspective on the object that is unmediated by any structure of human subjectivity, (7) objective knowledge—knowledge of the object as it is in itself—would be knowledge of the object as it is apart from the mediating agency of human subjectivity, (8) it is humanly impossible to attain such knowledge".

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