

Daniel Munro

PHIL 449

Professor Christina Hendricks

7 March 2014

On the Viability of Nietzsche's Perspectivism: A Dialogue between a Perspectivist and a
Universalist about Truth

PERSPECTIVIST: So, did you read Nietzsche's Third Treatise for class today?

UNIVERSALIST: Yes—I was up most of the night getting through it, it's longer than the first
two treatises! How did you find it?

PERSPECTIVIST: I enjoyed it—I think there are a lot of ideas in this book that I relate to. What
did you think?

UNIVERSALIST: I enjoyed reading it, but I find it hard to wrap my head around a lot of
Nietzsche's arguments, perhaps because I just don't agree with a lot of them.

PERSPECTIVIST: What did you have trouble with?

UNIVERSALIST: Particularly the parts where Nietzsche talks about how there are no such
things as universal or objective truths, or objective knowledge about anything. I think he
brings it up most explicitly in Section 12.¹ I have trouble really seeing that as a coherent
view.

PERSPECTIVIST: I think his view is called "perspectivism"—it's actually one of the reasons I
like Nietzsche so much!

¹ Unless otherwise noted, discussions of Nietzsche refer to: Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 84-85.

UNIVERSALIST: Well, before we go to discuss it in class do you want to run through some of the details of this view together? Then I'll be more prepared to discuss it today—and I'll also let you know whether I start to buy into it.

PERSPECTIVIST: That sounds good! I'll see if I can somehow convince you.

UNIVERSALIST: Try your best!

PERSPECTIVIST: As you said, Nietzsche's perspectivism is in contrast with the view that there are objective truths or objective knowledge independent of and detached from our subjective perspectives, which we can access with some kind of faculty of "pure reason."

UNIVERSALIST: To be clear, what exactly do you think Nietzsche is referring to when he discusses the "perspectives" that we each have?

PERSPECTIVIST: I think he essentially just means the place from which we approach any object of knowledge, and the direction from which we approach it. This includes our previously held beliefs, background knowledge, and values, as well as the purposes that led us to investigate an object in the first place.

UNIVERSALIST: And when Nietzsche is talking about objects of knowledge, is he referring more to physical things, or to metaphysical things?

PERSPECTIVIST: I think it's both. But, he definitely seems more concerned with criticizing belief in objective truths about metaphysical things, and particularly morality, given that so much of this book is concerned with investigating the origins of Christian morality.

UNIVERSALIST: That's true—I suppose Nietzsche is arguing that there is no objective, perspectiveless truth in general, but, in terms of his book's overall project, it will be moral truths specifically that are most important, so let's focus on that right now.

PERSPECTIVIST: That sounds like a plan to me. So, Nietzsche says that the “ascetic ideal,” which is epitomized by Christianity, believes that it is a perspective with access to objective truth. How exactly to define “ascetic ideal” is another big issue in itself, but it doesn’t matter so much for our discussion of Nietzsche’s perspectivism—the main point is that the ascetic ideal holds that its methods of investigation produce—or, at the very least, are capable of producing—objective truths.

UNIVERSALIST: And Nietzsche thinks that such an objective point of view cannot exist, but rather only individual perspectives. I remember he calls the idea that we can reach an objective perspective an “absurdity.” But how exactly does Nietzsche argue that it’s impossible to have such a perspective? Prima facie, this doesn’t seem like a very convincing view to me, although maybe I haven’t thought it through extensively enough yet!

PERSPECTIVIST: Actually, I think Nietzsche’s arguments for perspectivism have a lot of intuitive pull once you hear them, which is part of what makes them effective. The main thrust around which his arguments center is simply that the ascetic ideal (or any system or person that claims to have objective truth) is not truly accessing transcendental, objective truths, because the ascetic ideal is itself one among many perspectives, with its own point of view and purposes for seeking knowledge.

UNIVERSALIST: Could you elaborate on this?

PERSPECTIVIST: Think about an analogy to truths about physical objects—this book here, for example. It is incoherent for me to say that I have knowledge of what this book looks like from an objective perspective, because it is impossible to look at (or even imagine) the book other than from a specific distance, angle, etc. The same goes for knowledge about

metaphysical things—I approach my investigation of morality with purposes for knowing, or at the very least even just a desire to know—a “Will to Truth,” as Nietzsche says. The Christian’s knowledge will always be a product of his or her subjective purposes for seeking knowledge, so how can Christians say that their knowledge is objective and perspectiveless? By claiming this, the ascetic ideal is denying its own perspectival nature.²

UNIVERSALIST: Okay, I think I can actually see what you mean about these arguments having intuitive pull.

PERSPECTIVIST: Another, similar line: really, all we know of anything is the way that it appears to us. So, to say that we know something outside of any perspective—any way that it appears to us, as part of our subjective experience of the world—is incoherent; if we take away a thing’s appearances, we really don’t know it at all.³

UNIVERSALIST: So, instead of there being one perspective that has objective knowledge and many other wrong perspectives, Nietzsche thinks that there are simply many, competing instances of perspectival knowledge, among which none are objectively true—but does he think that every perspective is equally valid?

PERSPECTIVIST: I don’t think so—Nietzsche doesn’t seem to be a relativist, so he must think that some perspectives are better than others. For example, he presumably thinks that the ascetic ideal perspective is less valid than his own perspective, based on how much he criticizes it.

² David Owen, *Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morality* (Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing Ltd., 2007), 124-126.

³ *Ibid* .

UNIVERSALIST: This seems to be where Nietzsche's perspectivism starts to come apart for me, the more I think about it. Do you think Nietzsche is making truth claims with his statements about the ascetic ideal, and about perspectivism—about all of these things we're discussing?

PERSPECTIVIST: It seems like he is.

UNIVERSALIST: It seems like he is to me, too. Take, for example, the claim that the ascetic ideal is a deficient perspective—this sounds like a truth claim that Nietzsche makes about the ascetic ideal, but this truth claim will have to be a product of Nietzsche's own perspective. Any knowledge that Nietzsche claims to have about the ascetic ideal perspective must be, like all knowledge, a product of Nietzsche's own purposes for seeking knowledge, his pre-established background beliefs, etc. So, do we have any reason to take his truth claims seriously, if we don't already share Nietzsche's perspective?

PERSPECTIVIST: Well, Nietzsche's own perspectival knowledge is a product of a perspective that he probably thinks is at least as good as any other perspective, otherwise he wouldn't hold it himself. So, if Nietzsche gives good arguments that his own perspective is a good one to hold, and then successfully argues from this good perspective that the ascetic ideal perspective is deficient, then it follows that we have good reason to agree with him.

UNIVERSALIST: Do we really, though? You say that Nietzsche makes good arguments that his own perspective is a better one than the ascetic ideal.

PERSPECTIVIST: Yes—the entirety of the Genealogy of Morality is riddled with reasons why the ascetic ideal is a deficient perspective. Nietzsche goes to great lengths to expose, for

example, the origins and motivations behind Christian morality, and he casts a very negative light on them.

UNIVERSALIST: Okay, but the truth claim that Nietzsche's perspective is a valid one is itself a product of his perspective. His arguments for this claim will once again be from reasons and premises that are persuasive from the point of view of his own perspective, but not necessarily in mine or in anyone else's. So, again, do I have to take them seriously? It doesn't seem like he has very deep justification for his views. It seems that it would be difficult for Nietzsche to argue for his own perspective against anyone who holds a completely different perspective from his own.

PERSPECTIVIST: You're right; depending on your perspective, you might indeed view many of Nietzsche's truth claims in this way. However, for those who agree with you here, Nietzsche also engages in another type of argumentative strategy. This strategy is one of *immanent criticism* of the ascetic ideal perspective. Nietzsche appeals to values held *within* the ascetic ideal perspective itself, and uses that perspective's very framework to show those who hold it that it is an invalid perspective by its own lights.⁴

UNIVERSALIST: That's an interesting strategy—can you explain an example?

PERSPECTIVIST: Of course. One explicit example is when Nietzsche points out a Christian belief that non-Christians will be eternally damned, and that in their afterlife Christians will experience pleasure in observing these non-Christians' eternal suffering. Nietzsche wants to show that this value is in direct conflict with Christian values like compassion and mercy, because these latter values don't seem to allow for taking pleasure in the

⁴ Bernard Reginster, "Perspectivism, Criticism, and Freedom of Spirit," *European Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2000): 47

suffering of others.⁵ By doing this, Nietzsche shows the Christian that his or her perspective is not internally coherent, and so he or she should shift to a new perspective.

UNIVERSALIST: This is an example of Nietzsche making an argument *against* the Christian perspective, but not *for* his own perspective. The argument doesn't seem to compel the Christian to shift to Nietzsche's perspective specifically, because it only gives reasons for shifting away from the Christian perspective.

PERSPECTIVIST: I suppose that's true. Rather than just offering an internal criticism of the ascetic ideal perspective that makes his readers shift away from it, Nietzsche needs some sort of argumentative mechanism by which to convince his readers to shift from their perspective into *his* perspective.

UNIVERSALIST: Do you think Nietzsche uses such a mechanism?

PERSPECTIVIST: I think he does. In addition to appealing to values held within the ascetic ideal perspective in order to show that those who hold it should shift away from it, I think Nietzsche also appeals to values that are shared between the ascetic ideal perspective and his own, in order to convince people to shift towards his perspective. Common ground like this gives Nietzsche's readers a stable point around which to shift from their perspective to his.⁶

UNIVERSALIST: What kind of commonalities does Nietzsche appeal to?

PERSPECTIVIST: Nietzsche argues that we all have an inherent Will to Truth, and I think this is the most prominent example of a shared value. Even though Nietzsche might not be trying to uncover objective, perspectiveless truths, I think we can presuppose that

⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, 28-30.

⁶ Owen, *Nietzsche's Genealogy*, 41 and 70-72.

Nietzsche does want to investigate truth of some sort, even if that is just truth relative to his perspective—otherwise, he wouldn't undertake his entire project in the first place.

UNIVERSALIST: Okay, so after Nietzsche has criticized many of the values in the ascetic ideal perspective, there will be some values remaining that are held in common with Nietzsche's perspective. His reader will then shift to a new perspective that he or she builds up around these remaining values, and it will be one more like Nietzsche's—this is how you're proposing it would work?

PERSPECTIVIST: Yes, it is.

UNIVERSALIST: I think that picture is a bit too neat and tidy.

PERSPECTIVIST: How is that?

UNIVERSALIST: For example, I think we need to keep in mind the extent to which many of the beliefs found in Nietzsche's perspective versus the ascetic ideal perspective are *very* different from one another. One obvious example is that the ascetic ideal perspective believes it has access to objective truth, whereas Nietzsche's perspective includes belief in perspectivism; these beliefs directly oppose one another. So, yes, Nietzsche might use immanent criticism to expose contradictions in values held by the ascetic ideal, leaving intact some values that are shared by his perspective. But, from this point, it seems that the most rational course of action for the person who holds ascetic ideal values would be to shift to a new perspective that is as close as possible to the ascetic ideal perspective, just without the contradictions in question.

PERSPECTIVIST: I don't know if I follow, exactly.

UNIVERSALIST: Let's consider the example you brought up earlier. Nietzsche points out an internal contradiction in the Christian perspective in that it values mercy and compassion,

but it also values the fact that faithful Christians will one day be able to take pleasure in others' suffering. Let's assume that this is indeed a contradiction which the Christian will find troubling. What will the Christian do now? I think it is likely that she will shift to a new perspective that is as close as possible to the Christian perspective, minus the troubling contradiction. To eliminate this contradiction, the Christian could, for example, shift into a perspective that simply doesn't hold the belief that those in heaven take pleasure in the suffering of damned souls. Overall, this new perspective will be very similar to the Christian Perspective, and still very far from Nietzsche's perspective.

PERSPECTIVIST: Fair enough, and I agree that pointing out this one contradiction in the Christian's perspective won't be enough to shift the Christian all the way over to Nietzsche's perspective. However, Nietzsche gives multiple instances of immanent criticisms of the ascetic ideal perspective. I think the very fact that Nietzsche is engaging in a genealogy of Christian morality shows that he is very concerned with revealing contradictions between values held within the Christian perspective. He exposes that the Christian has some dark, unconscious values—for example, unconscious, stewing hatred and vengefulness.⁷ These clearly contradict many, more pacifistic Christian values, and so Nietzsche thus shows how multiple values that are held within the Christian perspective (some consciously, some unconsciously) conflict with one another. If Nietzsche can successfully expose a great many of these contradictions, then the perspective that the Christian shifts into in order to eliminate them will be drastically different from the original Christian perspective.

UNIVERSALIST: Perhaps, but, given how different Nietzsche's perspective is from the Christian perspective, I'm skeptical that Nietzsche will be able to give enough criticisms

⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, 26.

that are convincing to the Christian to result in such a drastic shift in perspective. It just really doesn't seem plausible to me. Of course, this is not a hard and fast argument that I'm giving—perhaps our intuitions just differ on this matter.

PERSPECTIVIST: It sounds like they do.

UNIVERSALIST: Well, let's move on for now, then. I have another question for you about perspectivism, in fact. Nietzsche speaks of his own notion of "objectivity" to which we can strive, which is to be able to see a matter from as many different perspectives as possible. Is that right?

PERSPECTIVIST: Yes. Since there is no objective truth in the traditional sense about anything, Nietzsche says that to really have more complete knowledge about something is to be able to see how it is known from many different perspectives. To have this type of knowledge means that we are not confined by our own perspective, but that we are able to see things through many different lenses. I don't know if Nietzsche thinks we can ever completely achieve this type of objectivity, but he at least thinks we can work towards it.

UNIVERSALIST: If perspectivism is true, then I think this picture makes sense—that to really be able to know something more fully means to know the many different, subjective ways in which that thing can be known. Nietzsche is a sort of skeptic about knowledge in that he says objective knowledge in the traditional sense doesn't exist, but positing that this alternative type of "objective" knowledge is attainable, or at least approximately attainable, saves him from being radically skeptical. Most people are not very sympathetic to extreme epistemological skepticism, and I think Nietzsche's arguments that we can work towards his brand of objectivity show that he does not want to be an

extreme skeptic, either. It's a good way to try to save perspectivism from being skepticism.

PERSPECTIVIST: So you think Nietzsche is convincing on this idea?

UNIVERSALIST: Actually, no, I don't think I do.

PERSPECTIVIST: Why is that?

UNIVERSALIST: Until now, we've been discussing perspectives as if each perspective is one that is held by a large group of people. For example, that many Christians share the same beliefs and system of purpose, and that these constitute one, overarching Christian perspective. However, I don't think speaking about perspectives this way is entirely accurate; it's more like we're engaging in loose talk about perspectives.

PERSPECTIVIST: How, exactly?

UNIVERSALIST: It's really quite simple, if we speak a bit more literally. Think about this: it would be extremely difficult to find two Christians who *really* share exactly the *same* perspective. Everyone has a great many different beliefs, as well as different, subjective purposes for wanting to seek knowledge, for wanting to act the way they do, for forming the beliefs that they do. Even if two people share exactly the same purposes for these things, they will likely still differ in that they place more importance on some beliefs and purposes than on others. And, on top of all the perspectives that people currently *do* hold, it seems that there are nearly infinitely many *possible* perspectives that could potentially be held. For any perspective we could imagine, we could imagine another perspective that differs from it in miniscule ways, but which nevertheless is its own, unique perspective.

PERSPECTIVIST: So, what bearing does this have on Nietzsche's notion of objectivity? As I already said, Nietzsche doesn't necessarily think that we can *completely* reach his type of objectivity. It is enough that we are able to work towards being able to see matters from *many* different perspectives, but not necessarily that we would be able to see from *all* of them.

UNIVERSALIST: Right, but if there is practically an infinite number perspectives between which it is possible for us to shift, then the number of perspectives into which we are successfully able to place ourselves will always be only a negligible fraction of all possible perspectives. I don't think this is what Nietzsche means when he speaks about objectivity—we can't really say that we are considering "many" perspectives when we are considering only a very small amount relative to such a massive amount.

PERSPECTIVIST: I suppose that's true...so maybe we *can't* ever even come close to reaching Nietzsche's objectivity.

UNIVERSALIST: That means that a consequence of committal to perspectivism is a committal to a pretty radical epistemological skepticism: perspectivism already denies that we can have anything like objective knowledge in a traditional sense, since objective truths don't even exist, but, as I've just shown, perspectivism doesn't even allow us to have objectivity in Nietzsche's sense. Nietzsche doesn't seem to realize this skeptical consequence of his own theory—do you feel like *you* can accept it?

PERSPECTIVIST: I don't think I want to accept such a strong epistemological skepticism.

UNIVERSALIST: Then do you still think Nietzsche's perspectivism is true?

PERSPECTIVIST: I don't know...I suppose I will have to think through the view some more.

UNIVERSALIST: Maybe we can talk about some of this in class, today, and see what other people think about it.

PERSPECTIVIST: That's a good idea—why don't I write down some of what we talked about in case it comes up in class. Can you remind me what some of your arguments against perspectivism were?

UNIVERSALIST: Well, thinking back on our discussion over the last few minutes, I think there are two main criticisms that I have. Firstly, I gave a couple of reasons why Nietzsche likely cannot effectively argue against the ascetic ideal perspective or for perspectivism in a way that will convince anyone who does not already hold his perspective. The first of these reasons was that anyone who disagrees with Nietzsche might just say that many of his arguments are products of his own perspective, based on premises that are convincing to someone in his perspective, but not necessarily in any other.

PERSPECTIVIST: Right—you said premises like these cannot be very deeply justified. I responded that Nietzsche also appeals to immanent criticism and to shared values to be able to give arguments against the ascetic ideal perspective, as well as for his own perspective, that someone who holds the ascetic ideal perspective can accept.

UNIVERSALIST: Yes, and then I said that I don't think even these arguments are likely to compel someone in the ascetic ideal perspective to shift to Nietzsche's perspective. This is because every time Nietzsche criticizes a value that is held in the Christian perspective, someone in that perspective is likely to shift to another perspective that is as close as possible to the Christian perspective. Even if Nietzsche successfully criticizes a *lot* of the Christian's values using immanent criticism, it just doesn't seem likely—given that the Christian will probably shift as little as possible after each criticism—that Nietzsche will

succeed in creating a shift to his own perspective, which is drastically different from the Christian perspective to start.

PERSPECTIVIST: Yes—I remember. And then we talked about skepticism—what was the general nature of your argument here?

UNIVERSALIST: Right. Nietzsche says that to have a more complete knowledge about a thing is to be able to view that thing from a multiplicity of perspectives. Since Nietzsche is already a skeptic about our ability to obtain traditional objective knowledge, positing that we can still work towards some kind of objectivity in this multi-perspectival manner keeps Nietzsche from being a complete epistemological skeptic. However, I argued that, given that each person essentially holds their own, unique perspective, and that there are an infinite number of possible perspectives, it is impossible for us to see anything from more than a tiny fraction of all perspectives. This means that, unbeknownst to him, Nietzsche's perspectivism actually does lead to a strong epistemological skepticism, which many people would not want to have as a consequence of their views.

PERSPECTIVIST: Well, you've given me a lot to think about. A lot of what you've said, though, have simply been attempts to try to tear down Nietzsche's arguments—do you have positive beliefs of your own about these matters?

UNIVERSALIST: Yes, but it's getting late and I think we need to head to class now! Perhaps we can save that discussion for afterwards?

PERSPECTIVIST: Alright, let's continue our discussions later today!

References

- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality*, translated by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998.
- Owen, David. *Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality*. Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing Ltd., 2007.
- Reginster, Bernard. "Perspectivism, Criticism and Freedom of Spirit." *European Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2000): 40-62.