**Title:** Nietzsche’s affective perspectivism as a philosophical methodology

**Abstract:** Nietzsche’s perspectivism is a philosophical methodology for achieving various epistemic goods. Furthermore, perspectives as he conceives them relate primarily to agents’ motivational and evaluative sets. In order to shed light on this methodology, I approach it from two angles. First, I employ the digital humanities methodology pioneered recently in my recent and ongoing research to further elucidate the concept of perspectivism. Second, I explore some of the rhetorical tropes that Nietzsche uses to reorient his audience’s perspective. These include engaging the audience’s emotions, apostrophic address to the reader, and what I’ve elsewhere called ‘Nietzschean summoning’. Each of these methods tugs at the affects and values of the audience, positioning them to notice, find salient, and be disposed to act in relation to certain (aspects of) things while ignoring, finding less salient, and being disposed to neglect (aspects of) other things. This suggests that, for Nietzsche, perspectivism may have less to do with cognition than the painterly metaphor of a visual perspective suggests. Instead, I’ll argue that for Nietzsche, perspectivism enables one to paint a polychromatic portrait of the full range of evaluative properties in the world and oneself.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, perspectivism, affect, emotion, epistemology, knowledge, inquiry

**Word count:** 8072

**1 Introduction**

Nietzsche’s perspectivism is a philosophical methodology for achieving various epistemic goods. Furthermore, perspectives as he conceives them relate primarily to agents’ motivational and evaluative sets. In order to shed light on this methodology, I approach it from two angles. First, I employ the digital humanities methodology pioneered recently in my recent and ongoing research (Alfano 2017b, forthcoming a, forthcoming b, forthcoming c) to further elucidate the concept of perspectivism. Second, I explore some of the rhetorical tropes that Nietzsche uses to reorient his audience’s perspective. These include engaging the audience’s emotions, apostrophic address to the reader, and what I’ve elsewhere called ‘Nietzschean summoning’. Each of these methods tugs at the affects and values of the audience, positioning them to notice, find salient, and be disposed to act in relation to certain (aspects of) things while ignoring, finding less salient, and being disposed to neglect (aspects of) other things. This suggests that, for Nietzsche, perspectivism may have less to do with cognition than the painterly metaphor of a visual perspective suggests. Instead, I’ll argue that for Nietzsche, perspectivism enables one to paint a polychromatic portrait of the full range of evaluative properties in the world and oneself.

Here is the plan for this chapter. In section 2, I review the literature on perspectivism. Next, in section 3, I explore all of Nietzsche’s engagement with the notion of perspective using a comprehensive digital humanities methodology. In section 4, I explore the rhetorical tropes Nietzsche uses to orient or reorient his audience’s affective or emotional perspective. Finally, in section 5, I employ close-reading to articulate a new account of Nietzsche’s philosophical methodology.

**2 Literature review**

It’s uncontroversial to say that, for Nietzsche, an agent’s perspective makes a difference to what they know, that certain perspectives are better — at least for some purposes — than others, and that cycling through multiple perspectives rather than getting stuck in a single perspective is valuable (Anderson 2017). Further questions immediately arise, however. What constitutes a perspective? The painterly metaphor suggests that a perspective is a perceptual position from which a thing is viewed or engaged. Nietzsche sometimes leans on this visual metaphor. For instance, in *BGE* 2 he questions whether traditional oppositions

that have earned the metaphysicians’ seal of approval might not only be foreground appraisals. Perhaps they are merely provisional perspectives, perhaps they are not even viewed head-on; perhaps they are even viewed from below, like a frog-perspective, to borrow an expression that painters will recognize.

Note, however, that, even when using the painterly metaphor contrasting the frog-perspective with the bird’s-eye view, Nietzsche associates perspectives with *appraisals*.[[1]](#footnote-1) This suggests that the kinds of perspectives he has in mind involve emotional or value-based attitudes rather than or in addition to perceptions. Given his consistent association of height metaphors with the upward-looking emotions of admiration and resentment and the downward-looking emotions of contempt and disgust (Alfano 2017b), the implication here seems to be that a philosopher who inhabited the frog-perspective would peer up at those above him. Depending on whether his upward-directed emotion was admiration or resentment, he would then be attuned to either the nobility or the lack of desert in the person to whom he attends. By contrast, a philosopher who inhabited the bird’s-eye view would look down (and perhaps also down his nose) at those beneath him, filled with pride, contempt, and perhaps an uneasy sense of pity.

Beyond the perceptual and emotional interpretations of perspectivism, commentators have argued for metaphysical, semantic, and epistemic interpretations. Metaphysical interpretations of perspectivism are the most extreme, holding that truth itself is relative to someone’s perspective. For example, Danto argues that Nietzsche accepts an interest-relative account of truth according to which, “p is true and q is false if p works and q does not” (1965, p. 72). While disagreeing about what exactly constitutes a perspective, Nehamas (1985) and Schacht (1983) also hold that truth is relative to perspective. These interpretations don’t help us to make sense of many of Nietzsche’s pronouncements about perspectives and perspectivism, nor do they explain how perspectivism constitutes a philosophical methodology.

By contrast, Janaway (2007) offers a semantic interpretation of perspectivism. On his view, Nietzsche aims to induce affects and evaluations in his audience, thereby shaping their perspectives. Depending on one’s perspective, one will lend different meanings to concepts such as agency, motivation, and morality. If this is right, then one must embody the right evaluative or emotional set in order to possess adequate philosophical concepts. Doing philosophy well — perhaps doing it at all — would then depend on inhabiting the right perspectives. A different semantic interpretation is offered by Katsafanas (2016, p. 53), who argues that two agents approaching the same phenomenon will have different experiences to the extent that their conceptual sets differ. If this is right, and if the concepts someone possesses are contingent and subject to change, then different people at the same time, as well as the same person at different times, will have different experiences of the same object.

The most popular interpretations of perspectivism are epistemic. The basic idea in each of these interpretations is that taking different and multiple perspectives on something is important or even essential to acquiring knowledge about it. For example, Clark (1990) argues that Nietzsche’s perspectivism amounts to a sort of anti-foundationalism about justification. Leiter (2002) argues that one’s interests partly determine which inquiries one engages in and how successful those inquiries are. As Gemes (2013) points out, though, this idea could be given a superficial gloss: it’s not very controversial to say that people know more about (because they investigate further into) the things they care about than they know about the things they don’t care about. A much stronger gloss would say that a person’s interests, affects, or values are somehow (partly) constitutive of their knowledge or other epistemic states. Establishing this conclusion, though, takes more argument than Leiter (2002) offers. In a later paper, Leiter (2017) close-reads *GS* 354 and *GM* III.12 in order to argue that certain features of the world become possible objects of cognition only via emotional or affective engagement. While this argument still does not establish that emotions or affects are partly constitutive of knowledge, it does — if sound — show that they are necessary for knowledge in some cases.

Other researchers offer alternative epistemic interpretations of perspectivism. Jensen (2013, p. 127) argues that perspectivism is the doctrine that objectivity is a matter of “intersubjective agreement about judgments from within a specific type” of person. On this view, a type of person is characterized by the set of values and affects that members of the type tend to embody, and “the distortive character of the affective component of judgments is neutralized among those judges who share a similar set of affects.” In a later book, Jensen (2016, p. 111) argues that, at least in HL, Nietzsche’s perspectivism is grounded in a kind of epistemic justice, which is delivered by a historian with “qualities of character that would enable him to stand above that which he judges. Those qualities include courage, honesty, resolution, and self-control.” By contrast, Berry (2011, p. 110) argues that perspectivism does not so much help one to acquire knowledge as to avoid error. On this view, taking multiple perspectives on the same thing leads, rightly and to some extent systematically, to suspension of judgment.

Nietzsche’s epistemology is not easily shoehorned into contemporary taxonomies. Whereas epistemology of the last half-century has tended to focus on the question under what conditions a subject knows a proposition, Nietzsche’s epistemology is dynamic, focusing on the activity of inquiry and epistemic virtues such as curiosity, intellectual courage, and honesty with oneself (Alfano 2013a). The success of such inquiries depends, I argue, on the cognitive agent’s ability to cycle through a variety of emotional perspectives in order to detect and appreciate the complex evaluative structure of the object of inquiry (Alfano 2017a, 2017b, forthcoming a, forthcoming b, forthcoming c).[[2]](#footnote-2) In addition, virtues are drives that calibrate with both the rest of the agent’s psychological set and the evaluations of the agent’s community. Since drives always aim at overcoming some resistance, the ones that motivate inquiry aim at overcoming epistemic resistance. Such resistance is offered both by the fundamental difficulty of answering certain complex questions and by human squeamishness in the face of terrible truths about our own lives and minds. In the context of philosophical practice, this means that approaching certain philosophical questions requires the adoption of a variety of evaluative perspectives. Along similar lines, Gemes (2013) argues that Nietzsche’s perspectivism is best understood in the context of his drive psychology. On this view, each drive has its own perspective on the world and seeks expression of that perspective. Since expressing one drive may be inconsistent with simultaneously expressing another drive, the agent must engage in a balancing act, allowing as many drives as possible to be expressed without one’s expression undermining the expression of the others.

In this chapter, I offer a new interpretation of perspectivism as a philosophical methodology. As will become clear below, my interpretation hews primarily to an epistemic line, though I also have sympathy for some aspects of the semantic interpretation.

**3 A digital humanities approach**

Like many of Nietzsche’s striking words and phrases, ‘perspectivism’ [‘*Perspektivismus*’] has received a great deal of attention in the secondary literature. However, Nietzsche uses the term only once in his published and authorized manuscripts (*GS* 354).[[3]](#footnote-3) In the relevant part of *GS* 354, Nietzsche introduces the “herd perspective,” which is defined by the needs and interests of the herd. He then says:

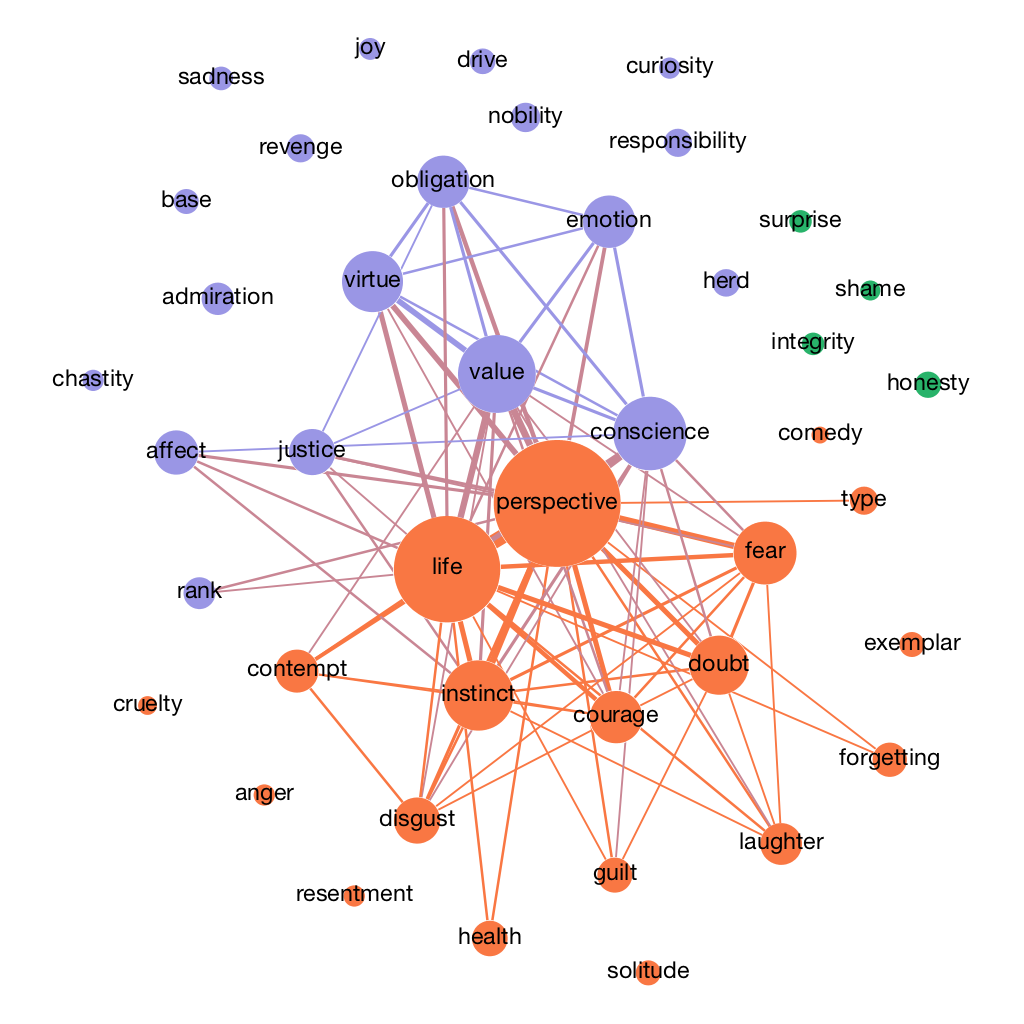
This is what *I* consider to be true phenomenalism and perspectivism: that due to the nature of *animal consciousness*, the world of which we can become conscious is merely a surface- and sign-world, a world turned into generalities and thereby debased to its lowest common denominator, — that everything which enters consciousness thereby *becomes* shallow, thin, relatively stupid, general, a sign, a herd-mark; that all becoming conscious involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization.

According to *GS* 354, then, each perspective makes certain things salient, makes others disappear, and biases or distorts things to a certain extent. While tantalizing, this single passage and the three fragments from 1886-8 radically underdetermine what Nietzsche could have meant by ‘perspectivism’.

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* 354.

In this section, I employ my digital humanities method to advance the discussion. The guiding insight behind this methodology is that the meaning of a term is adumbrated in the context of its use.[[4]](#footnote-4) I therefore canvass all of Nietzsche’s published and authorized texts for uses of ‘*Perspektive*’, ‘*Perspective*’, and their cognates,[[5]](#footnote-5) then annotate each of these passages for the presence or absence of each of the *other* main concepts in Nietzsche’s philosophy.[[6]](#footnote-6) Analyzing the resulting annotated dataset reveals the strongest inferential and associative connections between perspectivism and the other concepts that make up Nietzsche’s philosophical methodology (Figure 1).[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Figure 1: The semantic network of ‘perspective’ in Nietzsche’s corpus.** This network represents, using the ForceAtlas layout (Bastian et al. 2009), the co-occurrence patterns of *perspective* and other central concepts in Nietzsche’s writings. Node size indicates weighted degree; the larger the node, the more frequently the associated term occurs with other mapped terms. Width of connection between nodes indicates weight; the thicker the edge connecting a pair of terms, the more frequently they co-occur. To make the figure more visually legible, thin edges with a weight of four or fewer have been filtered out. Node color indicates modularity class, meaning that terms indicated by the same color tend to co-occur with each other and not with nodes of a different color.



A few remarks about Figure 1 are in order. First, the strongest connection of *perspective* is to *life*, followed by various moral-psychological concepts such as *value, conscience, instinct, fear, doubt,* and *emotion*. This supports Gemes’s (2013) contention that perspectivism needs to be understood in psycho-biological terms. Second, while the strongest connection is to *life* (23 co-occurrences), there are other strong connections: *conscience* (12 co-occurrences), *value* (11 co-occurrences), *instinct* (10 co-occurrences), *fear* (10 co-occurrences), *virtue* (9 co-occurrences), *courage* (8 co-occurrences), and *doubt* (8 co-occurrences). Third, considering the whole semantic network, when Nietzsche talks about perspectives, he refers both generically to *value, virtue,* and *emotion*, and to a wide variety of discrete values, virtues (*honesty, curiosity, integrity, nobility, chastity, justice*), and emotions (*contempt, disgust, doubt, fear, guilt, anger, resentment, shame, surprise, admiration, sadness, joy*).

This establishes that Nietzsche associates perspectives with affects, emotions, values, and the virtues that govern them, but it doesn’t make clear what the association is. In the next two sections, I close-read relevant passages to elaborate and elucidate these connections. Section 4 focuses on passages in which Nietzsche makes efforts to affect the perspective of his audience by modulating their affects, emotions, and virtues. Section 5 shifts from Nietzsche’s metaphilosophical *method* to his metaphilosophical *aims*, which I argue are epistemic.

**4 Exploring Nietzsche’s methodology through his rhetoric**

What kinds of speech acts are common to and distinctive of philosophical discourse? A common contemporary answer to this question is that philosophers make assertions and arguments, draw conclusions, ask questions, and propose counter-examples. In so doing, they express mental states such as knowledge, belief, error, doubt, and skepticism. They do not express non-epistemic emotions by, for example, inducing disgust or contempt in their audience, issuing commands, or attempting seductions. I here explore this under-theorized aspect of Nietzsche’s metaphilosophy. He does engage in assertion, inference, questioning, and counterexampling, but he also characterizes his own writings as a “schooling in contempt” (*HH* P1). He tells his readers — sometimes explicitly, especially in his prefaces — what to do. He invites his audience to embody character traits that he regards as noble. Thus, he exemplifies a broader conception of philosophical methodology and discourse than the dominant contemporary paradigm takes for granted. In this section, I explore the three main ways in which Nietzsche supplements the methodological menu: engaging the audience’s emotions, apostrophic address to the reader, and what I’ve elsewhere called ‘Nietzschean summoning’ (Alfano 2015).

The basic idea behind summoning is that, sometimes, ascriptions of psychological states and dispositions function as self-fulfilling prophecies. Someone embodies a virtue, vice, or attitude, but only because they’ve been labeled by someone else as embodying it (and accepted the label) or declared themselves to fit the description (and received uptake from their audience). In simple cases, this is done explicitly. “You are T*.*” “I am T.” Sometimes, however, it is less clear who the target of the attribution is. This is especially likely when the trait term is a coinage, such as a new eponymous virtue term. It’s also especially likely when the mode of reference is a plural pronoun (in Nietzsche’s case, often the first-person plural). When this happens and a trait is praised as a virtue, the audience is being invited to think of themselves as embodying the trait and feel pride (and a range of other emotions) about their virtue.

In existing discussions of these kinds of feedback loops (e.g., Hacking 1995), the reactions of the targets of labeling are foregrounded. Moreover, when the targets of labeling realize that they are targets, their reactions tend to be negative; they either deny the applicability of the label or modify their behavior in an attempt to squirm out of its extension. Nietzsche realized that when the extension of a term is unclear, people sometimes modify their behavior in order to squirm into its extension. Hence, by praising a kind of person where it’s unclear who belongs to that kind, one can induce kind-relevant behavior and dispositions in one’s audience: praising people of type T summons Ts. Let’s review some examples of this phenomenon.

First, in *GS* 78, Nietzsche argues that only by viewing ourselves as transfigured and perfected characters on a stage “can we get over certain lowly details in ourselves. Without this art we would be nothing but foreground, and would live entirely under the spell of that perspective which makes the nearest and most vulgar appear tremendously big and as reality itself.” In order to engage the feedback loops mentioned above, a degree of provisional self-ignorance and self-deception is required, which modulates one’s affective and emotional attitude towards oneself.

Next, in *GS* 115, Nietzsche argues that man “endowed himself with fictitious attributes” and “invented ever new tables of goods and for a time took them to be eternal and unconditioned — so that now this, now that human drive and condition occupied first place and was ennobled as a result.” While he labels these endowments and inventions “errors,” he also goes on to suggest that discounting them would amount to discounting “humanity, humaneness, and ‘human dignity’.” On a purely cynical reading of this passage, Nietzsche is just saying that there is no such thing as the virtue of humaneness. However, my contention is that he is instead pointing to a case of successful summoning. By praising our humaneness, we’ve made (some of) ourselves humane: namely, those individuals who found the label attractive and close enough to their own drives that they came to express their own drives as the virtue of humaneness. As before, summoning engages the affects, emotions, and drives of its audience; it works through their evaluative and emotional perspectives.

Next, in *GS* 301, Nietzsche contrasts the contemplative type with both the “so-called man of action” and the mere spectator. The contemplative type, he urges, possesses a creative power:

It is we, the thinking-sensing ones, who really and continually *make* something that is not yet there: the whole perpetually growing world of valuations, colours, weights, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations. This poem that we have invented is constantly internalized, drilled, translated into flesh and reality […]. Whatever has *value* in the present world has it not in itself, according to its nature — nature is always value-less — but has rather been given, granted value, and *we* were the givers and granters.

As we will see more below, Nietzsche’s use of the first-person plural is a telltale sign that he is engaged in summoning. In this passage, Nietzsche claims that philosophers engage in summoning. By valuing, affirming, and negating, they “*make* something that is not yet there,” which is then “internalized, drilled, translated into flesh and reality.” At a rhetorical level, though, he is also inviting his readers to join him in being philosophers, to respond with a “yes, that’s me” when he says “we.” This is part of what it means to do philosophy — at least as Nietzsche conceives of philosophy.

Next, consider *GS* 377, which bears the first-person plural title, “*We who are homeless*.” This passage begins with an example of summoning: “Among Europeans today there is no lack of those who have a right to call themselves homeless in a distinctive and honourable sense: it is to them in particular that I commend my secret wisdom and *gaya scienza*.” One can readily imagine a German reader in 1888 puzzling over this sentence, thinking, “I’m European. Am I homeless in this honourable sense that would entitle me to secret wisdom and gay science?” Nietzsche goes on: “For their lot is hard; their hope uncertain; it is a feat to invent a form of comfort for them — but to what avail! We children of the future — how *could* we be at home in this today!” As before, Nietzsche switches from the third-person to the first-person plural in an ecstatic reverie of praise. The 1888 German reader might well respond, “‘Children of the future’? That sounds like me! Tell me more!” Nietzsche delivers by praising the virtue of solitude: “We are unfavourably disposed towards all ideals that make one feel at home in this fragile, broken time of transition.” He then goes on to praise the courage of this homeless type (“we are delighted by all who love, as we do, danger, war, and adventure”), along with their curiosity (“we are too uninhibited, too malicious, too spoiled, also too well-informed, too ‘well-traveled’”).

Nietzsche continues this incantation over the remaining sections of the book. In *GS* 378, he celebrates “We who are generous and rich in spirit.” In *GS* 379, he glories in his type’s pathos of distance (“how much fine joy, how much patience, how much graciousness even do we owe precisely to our contempt! Moreover, it makes us ‘God’s elect’: refined contempt is our taste and privilege, our art, our virtue”), and courage (“We fearless ones, however, we more spiritual men of this age, we know our advantage well enough to live without fear of this age precisely because we are more spiritual”). In *GS* 380, he celebrates the curiosity and solitude of his type (“In order to see our European morality for once as it looks from a distance, and to measure it up against other past or future moralities, one has to proceed like a wanderer who wants to know how high the towers in a town are: he *leaves* the town.”), as well as its pathos of distance (“one has to rise, climb, or fly”) and courage (“That one *wants* to go precisely out there, up there, may be a slight rashness, a peculiar and unreasonable ‘you must’ — for we seekers of knowledge also have our idiosyncrasies”). In *GS* 381 he flatters his readers into thinking of themselves as a select, esoteric audience:

One does not only wish to be understood when one writes; one wishes just as surely *not* to be understood. It is by no means necessarily an objection to a book when anyone finds it incomprehensible: perhaps that was part of the author’s intention — he didn’t *want* to be understood by just ‘anybody’.”

Nobler spirits, he goes on to say, only “open the ears of those whose ears are related to ours.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In the next section, *GS* 382, Nietzsche praises his own eponymous type (“We who are new, nameless, hard to understand”) for its courage (“tougher, bolder”), curiosity (“whose soul thirsts to experience the whole range of previous values and aspirations, to sail around all the coasts of this ‘inland sea’ of ideals, anyone who wants to know from the adventures of his own experience how it feels to be the discoverer or conqueror of an ideal”), pathos of distance (“a spirit which has gone so far that the highest thing which the common people quite understandably accepts as its measure of value would signify danger, decay, debasement”), and sense of humor (our spirit “places itself next to all earthly seriousness heretofore, all forms of solemnity in gesture, word, tone, look, morality, and task as if it were their most incarnate and involuntary parody”).

In this extended reverie (*GS* 377-382), Nietzsche both tells us and shows us what it means to do philosophy in the way that he understands it. Philosophy is a matter of embodying a range of affective and evaluative perspectives that express the agent’s drives and virtues. It is also a matter of inducing similar affective and evaluative perspectives in (some of) one’s audience, thereby summoning or seducing them to virtue as well. Moreover, the virtues that Nietzsche most celebrates — at least in his own type — are not the standards from Plato and Aristotle (wisdom, temperance, martial courage, justice), but include traits such as curiosity, pathos of distance, having a sense of humor, and (intellectual) courage.

If we turn now to *Beyond Good and Evil*, we find another clearexample of Nietzschean summoning in sections 42 through 44. Here, Nietzsche says:

A new species of philosophers is coming up: I venture to baptize them with a name that is not free of danger. As I unriddle them, insofar as they allow themselves to be unriddled—for it belongs to their nature to *want* to remain riddles at some point—these philosophers of the future may have a right—it might also be a wrong—to be called *attempters* [*Versucher*]. This name itself is in the end a mere attempt [*Versuch*] and, if you will, a temptation [*Versuchung*]. (*BGE* 42)

Who are these new philosophers, these attempters? Nietzsche could, of course, just be making a prediction. I contend that, on the contrary, he is trying to summon the attempters from his readership. By praising them, he is (as he himself admits) attempting to tempt us to think of ourselves as the new philosophers, and thus to *become* the new philosophers. One reason to think that this is what’s going on is his bewildering use of pronouns and other markers of person (first, second, and third) in *BGE* 44. Nietzsche transitions from talking about the new philosophers in the third person (“they […] will be [*auch sie* … *werden*] free, *very* free spirits”) to talking about them in the first person plural (“that is the type of man we are, we free spirits [*wir freien Geister*]!”) to breathless apostrophic address (“you *new* philosophers [*ihr neuen Philosophen*]”). In this passage, Nietzsche invites his audience to think of themselves as new philosophers.

Later, in *BGE* 203, a passage that repeatedly addresses its readers as “free spirits,” Nietzsche makes the same invitational use of the first-person plural: “We who have a different faith [from the modern democratic movement] where do *we* need to reach with our hopes? — Towards *new philosophers*.” What are these new philosophers like, what virtues do they embody? They have a special “conscience” informed by their dangerous curiosity. Once again, then, Nietzsche reveals both his conception of what philosophy is and how it should be practiced (at least by those who aim to philosophize in the same way that Nietzsche himself does). To be a philosopher of this sort is to embody a range of affective and evaluative perspectives that express an idiosyncratic list of drives and virtues. And, at least as practiced by Nietzsche, it is to find ways to summon and seduce one’s audience to do likewise.

In *The Antichrist,* Nietzsche uses a similar approach. For instance, in *A* 1, he boasts, “We are Hyperboreans, — we are well aware how far off the beaten track we live.” He then characterizes these Hyperboreans in terms of their distinctive virtues, especially curiosity and courage. Later, in A 51, he says, “Nobody is free to become Christian […] you have to be sick enough for it… We who are different, who have the *courage* for health *and* also for contempt, imagine how much *we* can contemn a religion that teaches a misunderstanding of the body!” Here again Nietzsche celebrates the courage and pathos of distance of his type, which he associates with the instincts and other drives distinctive of that type.

Taken together, these passages demonstrate Nietzsche’s ongoing efforts to orient and reorient the perspective of his audience by engaging their emotions, addressing them apostrophically, and summoning a range of virtues in them. My contention is that these passages show us both what Nietzsche takes philosophizing to be and how he thinks it should be practiced. If this is right, then Nietzsche’s perspectivism is a psychological method for inducing affects, emotions, and evaluations. In the remainder of this chapter, I address the aim and purpose of this technique.

**5 Perspectivism’s aim**

In this section, I argue that Nietzsche’s use of emotions, apostrophic address, and summoning serves an epistemic purpose, in that he thinks that certain evaluative and aretaic properties are difficult or even impossible to detect and appreciate without emotional engagement of the right sort.

**5.1 Once more, with feeling**

The semantic analysis in section 3 suggested that, for Nietzsche, perspectives are deeply enmeshed with affects, emotions, values, and virtues. Let’s review some of the passages that make this clear. First, in *HH* 247, Nietzsche argues that, because his perspective shows him undesirable cultural prospects, he might be able to steer the culture in a way that avoids those prospects. Next, in *D* 170, he compares ancient Greek with contemporary Europeans perspectives (of feeling [*des Gefühles*]) on male and female beauty. Later in the same book, in a section titled “*Distant perspectives*,” Nietzsche stages a dialogue in which one character asks, “But why this solitude?” The other character answers, “I am not at odds with anyone. But when I am alone I seem to see my friends in a clearer and fairer light than when I am with them [….] It seems I need a distant perspective if I am to think well of things.”

If we move next to *The Gay Science*, we find Nietzsche arguing that “members of the knightly caste became accustomed to treating each other with exquisite courtesy” because they were “spurred by the good feeling of *this* perspective,” referring to the pathos of distance, which presents near-equals as affordances for overcoming while presenting those beneath one as contemptible. Later in the same work, in a passage cited already above, Nietzsche claims, “It is we, the thinking-sensing ones [as opposed to the men of action], who really and continually *make* something that is not yet there: the whole perpetually growing world of valuations, colours, weights, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations” (*GS* 301).

Turning next to *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche argues that we can never give a rational ground for our synthetic *a priori* judgments, but that we hold onto them nevertheless because they belong to “the perspectival optics of life” (*BGE* 11). Then, in *BGE* 32, he characterizes the shift from basing evaluations of actions on their consequences to basing evaluations on origins (motives) as a “reversal of perspective.” A couple sections later, he declares that “life could not exist except on the basis of perspectival valuations and appearances” (*BGE* 34). And in *BGE* 201 he says that, after escaping from the state of nature, when “the structure of society seems on the whole to be established and secured against external dangers, it is this fear of the neighbor that again creates new perspectives of moral valuation” (*BGE* 201). In this way, society shifts from valuing courage and cunning, which are useful during periods of insecurity and inter-group conflict, to condemning them as dangerous to internal cohesion.

In the third essay of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche makes several remarks about perspectives. He argues that “man’s ‘sinfulness’ is not a fact, but merely the interpretation of a fact, namely of physiological depression — the latter viewed in a religio-moral perspective that is no longer binding on us” (*GM* III.16). In the next section, he again refers to the priestly religio-moral perspective. And in *GM* III.28, he contends that the ascetic ideal placed “all suffering under the perspective of *guilt.*” Finally, in *TI* Skirmishes 50, Nietzsche scolds his audience, saying “you misunderstand great human beings if you look at them from the pathetic perspective of public utility.”

What all these passages have in common is the claim or presupposition that a perspective is — perhaps among other things — emotional and evaluative. The perspective someone inhabits leads them to see some things as good, right, noble, admirable, desirable, or enviable, while also leading them to see other things as bad, wrong, base, contemptible, disgusting, aversive, or pitiable. One’s perspective reveals and emphasizes (sometimes overemphasizes) some of the evaluative properties of the things in one’s ambit. The aim of philosophy as Nietzsche practices it is to induce the right perspectives: by engaging one’s audience’s emotions through apostrophic address and summoning, one reorients their perspectives. Where once they felt guilt or shame, now they feel pride; where once they felt admiration, now they feel contempt.

**5.2 Dogmatism versus multiple perspectives**

But the world is a complex place. Even admirable people have their contemptible foibles. Even pitiable people sometimes accomplish impressive feats. Inhabiting only one perspective is liable to make such complexity difficult or impossible to appreciate. This why Nietzsche opposes dogmatism, understood as commitment to a single perspective, to his own methodology. We see this opposition in multiple passages. For example, in *BT* Self-criticism 5, Nietzsche says that, behind the Christian dogmatic “way of thinking and evaluating” that recognizes only moral values he “always felt its *hostility to life*, a furious, vengeful enmity towards life itself; for all life rests on semblance, art, deception, prismatic effects, the necessity of perspectivism and error.”

Next, in GS 143 Nietzsche contrasts the single evaluative perspective of monotheism, which makes adherents narrow-minded and dogmatic, with the multiple evaluative perspectives afforded by polytheism: “In polytheism the free-spiritedness and many-spiritedness of humanity received preliminary form — the power to create for ourselves our own new eyes and ever again new eyes that are ever more our own — so that for humans alone among the animals there are no eternal horizons and perspectives.” In GS 357, he accuses Schopenhauer of “remaining and staying stuck in precisely those Christian and ascetic moral perspectives in which one had *renounced faith* along with the faith in God.” Next, in GS 373, Nietzsche heaps scorn and disgust on the “Spencerian perspective,” which — if adopted as the “ultimate perspective” of humanity — would lead to the last man, who is “deserving of contempt, of annihilation!” In the very next section, Nietzsche declares that “today we are at least far away from the ridiculous immodesty of decreeing from our angle that perspectives are *permitted* only from this angle.”

Next, in the preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche contrasts Platonic and Christian dogmatism with his own philosophical identity as a good European and free spirit. On the one hand, “talking about [pure] spirit and the Good like Plato did meant standing truth on its head and disowning even *perspectivism*, which is the fundamental condition of all life.” On the other hand, free spirits of Nietzsche’s sort are willing to try out new perspectives — indeed, even to seek out new perspectives for their own sake. Finally, in A 44, he argues that Christianity embodies a “fundamental will to use only those ideas, symbols, and attitudes that have been proven by the practice of the priests, the instinctual rejection of any *other* practice, any *other* perspective on what is valuable or useful.”

In these passages, Nietzsche reserves special scorn for perspectives that are liable to lead those who inhabit them to false and distorted evaluations. At the same time, though, he objects to getting stuck in any single perspective — even, presumably, a minimally distorting one. We can make sense of this if we understand perspectives as always presenting a partial view of evaluative properties and as prone to overemphasizing some evaluative properties at the expense of others. Since perspective-free inquiry is impossible (*GM* III.2), Nietzsche recommends combatting these unavoidable distortions by taking up different perspectives over time. If this is right, then the aim of perspectivism as a methodology is epistemic. It helps us see and appreciate facts and properties that we otherwise wouldn’t.

**5.3 Active perspectivism as getting control of one’s *pro* and *con***

But it’s not so easy. You can’t simply adopt an affective perspective. You can’t simply decide to feel contempt, anger, disgust, sadness, fear, joy, or surprise at something. Emotions are not voluntary in that way. Instead, they need to be induced and cultivated in more distal and indirect ways. This leads me to Nietzsche’s repeated injunctions to get control over one’s emotions.

Nietzsche seems to have first articulated the method of getting control over one’s *pro* and *con* in 1886, when he published *Beyond Good and Evil* and republished *Human, All-too-human* with new prefaces both for the main body of the book and for *Assorted Opinions and Maxim*. In *HH* P6, we read:

You shall get control over your For and Against and learn to display first one and then the other in accordance with your higher goal. You shall learn to grasp the sense of perspective in every value judgment — the displacement, distortion and merely apparent teleology of horizons and whatever else pertains to perspectivism; also the quantum of stupidity that resides in antitheses of values and the whole intellectual loss which every For, every Against costs us. You shall learn to grasp the *necessary* injustice in every For and Against, injustice as inseparable from life, life itself as *conditioned* by the sense of perspective and its injustice.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In this neglected passage, Nietzsche covers many of the themes we’ve seen above. He argues that evaluative perspectives are unavoidable, and that each one brings with it “displacement, distortion, and merely apparent teleology.” He responds to these distortions neither by trying to eliminate perspective altogether nor by seeking a perspective evacuated of value and emotion, but by getting control one’s emotions and learning “to display first one and then the other.”

Later, in *HH AOM* P7, Nietzsche claims that

there is a will to the tragic and to pessimism that is as much a sign of severity and of strength of intellect (taste, feeling, conscience). With this will in one’s heart one has no fear of the fearful and questionable that characterizes all existence; one even seeks it out. Behind such a will there stands courage, pride, the longing for a *great* enemy. — This has been *my* pessimistic perspective from the beginning — a novel perspective, is it not? a perspective that even today is still novel and strange? To this very moment I continue to adhere to it and, if you will believe me, just as much *for* myself as, occasionally at least, *against* myself.

Once again, Nietzsche emphasizes the benefits of alternating between *for* and *against*. According to this passage, the ability to take up alternating evaluative perspectives in this way signals “strength of intellect,” which lends one intellectual courage in the face of existential questions.[[10]](#footnote-10) Alternating one’s emotional perspective is presented here as having an *epistemic* payoff, as making possible inquiries that would otherwise be too daunting. In other words, the aim of the philosophical method of perspectivism is to advance knowledge, understanding, and other epistemic values.

Published in the same year as *HH AOM* P7, *BGE* 129 offers the following metaphor: “The devil has the broadest perspective on God, which is why he keeps so far away from God: — the devil, that is, as the oldest friend of knowledge.” Once again, we see a reversal in evaluative perspectives (from the God’s-eye-view to the devil’s-eye-view) in the service of knowledge. The implication seems to be that inhabiting an evil perspective enables one to understand and appreciate things that a purely good or divine perspective would mask or hide. Only someone who is willing and able to cast an evil eye on moral values is well-positioned to see the harm that morality sometimes engenders. Nietzsche makes the same point while calling for an essay prize in *GM* I.17: “The question: what is the *value* of this or that table of values and ‘morals’? should be viewed from the most diverse perspectives; for the problem ‘value *for what?*’ cannot be examined too subtly.” An essay prize in philosophy is the sort of thing typically associated with the aim or goal of philosophy. Thus, in this passage, Nietzsche shows us what he values in philosophical practice.

Turn now to perhaps the most-discussed passage in Nietzsche’s corpus on perspectivism, *GM* III.12. Nietzsche pauses his critique of the ascetic ideal and the priests’ revaluation of values to make a methodological observation and argument:

precisely because we seek knowledge, let us not be ungrateful to such resolute reversals of accustomed perspectives and valuations [i.e., the priests’ revaluation] with which the spirit has, with apparent mischievousness and futility, raged against itself for so long: to see differently in this way for once, to *want* to see differently, is no small discipline and preparation of the intellect for its future ‘objectivity’ — the latter understood not as ‘contemplation without interest’ (which is a nonsensical absurdity), but as the ability *to control* one’s Pro and Con and to dispose of them, so that one knows how to employ a *variety* of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge. 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.

Most of the points we’ve seen above are reiterated here. First, Nietzsche argues that shifting perspectives should be appreciated by a philosophical “we” with distinctively epistemic motivations. Second, in explaining what he means by “resolute reversals of accustomed perspectives,” he equates them with “valuations.” Third, he talks of disciplining oneself to be able to shift emotional perspectives, so that one has the “ability *to control* one’s Pro and Con” in such a way that one can cycle through multiple different perspectives “in the service of knowledge.” Nietzsche here contrasts his methodology with any approach that aims to achieve “contemplation without interest” by a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject,” as in the Kantian framework. This temporally dilated, emotionally complex process *is* what Nietzsche takes philosophy to be, and its aims are distinctively *epistemic*.

Finally, in *EH* Wise 1, Nietzsche brags,

To be able to look out from the optic of sickness toward *healthier* concepts and values, and again the other way around, to look down from the fullness and self-assurance of the *rich* life into the secret work of the instinct of decadence [i.e., with contempt, embodying the pathos of distance] — that was my longest training, my genuine experience, if I became the master of anything, it was this. I have a hand for switching *perspectives*.

For the last time, we see Nietzsche touting the epistemic advantages that accrue to a philosopher who is capable of switching evaluative perspectives, which, he contends, can only be managed by someone who has embarked on the “longest training.” What concrete steps this training involves, Nietzsche does not divulge in detail.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, contemporary research on strategic, long-term, and communalized inquiry that harnesses confirmation bias and motivated reasoning points in promising directions (Alfano 2017a).

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1. The painterly metaphor also crops up, and should be given a similar interpretation, in *GS* 162 and *GS* 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For contemporary arguments in the same vein, see Alfano (2013b) and Smith (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Berry (2011, p. 107) also remarks on the relative paucity of passages about perspectivism. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thus, this method complements approaches that attempt to elucidate the meaning of a term by tracing it back historically to the texts the author was reading and thinking about. In the case of Nietzsche and ‘perspective’, we have good reason to think that he was influenced by Teichmüller’s *Real and Apparent World*. Riccardi (2009) attributes a relational ontology to Nietzsche on the basis of this influence. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nietzsche switches from the Latinate to the Germanic spelling in the mid-1880s. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The list of concepts was built up in three ways. First, I consulted my own previous work and ongoing research for keywords and central constructs. Second, I consulted the secondary literature (via searching on [www.philpapers.org](http://www.philpapers.org)) for further keywords and central constructs. Finally, I shared the merged lists from steps one and two with several dozen experts in Nietzsche scholarship and moral psychology, whom I asked for additional constructs. Helpful suggestions were offered by Brian Leiter, Paul Katsafanas, Heather Battaly, Hanno Sauer, Jessica Berry, Andrew Higgins, Bradford Cokelet, Jesse Graham, and Neil Sinhababu. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In this chapter, I do not engage with Nietzsche’s unauthorized manuscripts, his philosophical fragments, or is letters. It is of course reasonable to consult these sources for clarification, but much mischief has been done by relying on these rather than the published and authorized manuscripts. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note again the switch to the first-person plural. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See also *BGE* 188, where Nietzsche argues that morality “teaches a *narrowing of perspective* and so, in a certain sense, stupidity as a condition for life and growth.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Note the similarity in language between this passage and *GS* 324, where Nietzsche says, “‘*Life as a means to knowledge*’ — with this principle in one’s heart one can live not only boldly but even gaily.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *D* 109 does offer a taxonomy of methods, but these are presented only in thumbnail sketch. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)