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Relativism, Perspectivism, and the Universal Epistemic Language

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Michael Lewin

University of Wuppertal,

Gaußstraße 20, 42119 Wuppertal, Germany.

Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University,

Ul. Aleksandra Nevskogo 14, 236041 Kaliningrad, Russia.

Recent research gives perspectivism the status of a stand-alone epistemological research program. As part of this development, it must be distinguished from other epistemologies, especially relativism. Not only do relativists and perspectivists use a similar vocabulary—even the supposed tenets (features of the doctrine) seem to partially overlap. To clarify the relation between these programs, I suggest drawing two important distinctions. The first is between the (1) terminological and (2) doctrinal components of epistemologies, the second between the (2a) analytical and (2b) synthetical doctrinal elements. The method of the *originalistic linguistic analysis* that I introduce in this article shows that both relativism and perspectivism are using the same matrix of interconnected linguistic expressions that belong to what I call *the universal epistemic language*. Furthermore, this method reveals which doctrinal components necessarily follow from this linguistic basis and the terms “relativism” and “perspectivism” and which are a result of deliberate philosophical constructions. As for the linguistic basis and analytical doctrinal components, relativism and perspectivism are complementary members of *one* epistemology. Doctrinal additions that transform the original meaning of the terms “relativism” and “perspectivism”, such as “indifferentism” and “non-absolutism”, should be always explicitly mentioned to avoid confusion and strawmen debates in philosophy.

Keywords: relativism, perspectivism, analysis, linguistic originalism, epistemology, epistemological positions, metaepistemology, philosophical terminology.

1 Introduction

Epistemological positions, such as relativism, perspectivism, skepticism, realism, and contextualism include (i) pre-philosophical, (ii) terminological, and (iii) doctrinal components.

(i) The pre-philosophical part is usually a cognition or belief that arises from the everyday rational practice, such as “it depends on how old you are” and “I have a different perspective on this”. The former could yield relativism, the latter perspectivism.

(ii) The terminological basis contains the toolkit of an epistemic agent to express this cognition or belief. Relativism usually relies on a heavy use of “relation” and “dependence”, while perspectivists focus on “perspective”, “view”, and “standpoint”.

(iii) The tenets of relativism and perspectivism are either

(iii’) original and analytic, if they are immediately derived from (ii), or

(iii’’) additional and synthetic, if they are mixed with different conclusions that do not analytically follow from (ii). For example, the alethic relativist’s proposition “truth is relative” (to a person, context, age etc.) does not analytically contain the conclusion “ergo, no universally valid truth exists” [1, p. 72], just as not “ergo, truth ‘is relation itself’ [2, p. 332]”¹—they are external additions based on different theoretical assumptions. Conceptions of relativism and perspectivism often contain such external additions (see section 2).

The conceptions of relativism and perspectivism can benefit from dropping (iii’’) and focusing on (ii) and (iii’), i.e., on the analysis of relativist and perspectivist vocabulary, the terms “relativism” and “perspectivism”, and the doctrinal core that follows from this analysis. Both relativism and perspectivism have their origin in what I will call the *universal epistemic language* (UEL).² From the viewpoint of the UEL, there is no strict difference between relativism and perspectivism—they are part of one linguistic and epistemic network. Some scholars suggest that perspectivism is a subtype of relativism (see [4], [1], [5], [6]). Some use widespread perspectivist vocabulary in literature on relativism (see, e.g., [7], [8], [9], [1], [10, p. 253], [6]) and guess that relativism and perspectivism are (very) different yet somehow related (see [11, p. 14], [12, p. 13], [14, p. 243])—Rescher even speaks of a “relativist

¹ In short: Hegel means the interrelated objective reasonable structure of the world. The parts, including the mind of the philosopher, are so interconnected (relative to different constitutive parts and parameters) that it belongs to a deficient mode of reasoning (“abstract thinking” or “reasoning of the understanding”) to divide the undividable—see [3, p. 198-208].

² This is also true for other epistemologies, but I will focus on relativism and perspectivism in this article.

perspectivism” [7, p. 2]. All of them seem to tacitly or unconsciously suspect a connection. The ground for this connection is what I call the UEL.

In the section 2 of this article, I will contest the commonly recognized, albeit confusing procedure of defining relativism and perspectivism via doctrinal additions without distinguishing between (iii’) and (iii’). Obviously, if I start this article with explicit intention to criticize the commonly recognized procedure, I will not define relativism and perspectivism right away. Otherwise, I would make the same mistake that is the subject of my criticism. The linguistic analysis is a stricter approach to definitions. After reconstructing the matrix of relativist and perspectivist vocabulary within the framework of the UEL in the section 3, I will draw some analytic conclusions (iii’) regarding the doctrinal elements of relativism and perspectivism in the section 4. This section will contain my description of relativism and perspectivism and how far one can get with the labels “relativism” and “perspectivism”. The overall objective of the paper is a profound criticism of the confusing use of “isms” in the mainstream epistemology by the examples of “relativism” and “perspectivism”. I suggest a different access to epistemology based on *care for words* provided by the method of linguistic originalism and the theory of UEL as well as preference for critical rational autonomy over side-taking and the use of labels in philosophy.

2 The Problem with Synthetic Doctrinal Elements (iii’)

2.1 Doctrinal Additions to Relativism

In their recent study, Baghramian and Coliva suggest six general “core features of the doctrine” [6, p. 26], [6, p. 6-11], of relativism, i.e., what I call “doctrinal components” or “tenets”: (1) *non-absolutism*, (2) *dependence*, (3) *multiplicity*, (4) *incompatibility*, (5) *equal validity*, and (6) *non-neutrality*.³ Let us for instance examine the first one. Non-absolutism is considered a necessary condition for relativism—all different versions of relativism that the authors know of reject “*absolutism*, and its closely linked allies, *universalism*, *objectivism*, *monism*, *invariantism*, and *realism*” [6, p. 6]. At the same time, they remark that it is not a sufficient condition, as one can reject absolutism without being a relativist (rather: antirealist or subjectivist etc.). And here, in my view, lies the problem of the attempt of the general description of the doctrinal features of relativism: the unclear intension and extension of the

³ Martin Kusch [15, p. 36] counts five essential features: dependence, exclusiveness, notional confrontation, and symmetry, and four additional: contingency, underdetermination, groundlessness, and tolerance. See also [16, p. 117-118], [17].

term “relativism”. “Relativism” does not refer to an empirical fact like, e.g., the word “human” does. “Human” is understandable by reflection on multiple marks (such as: “body”, “language”, “culture”, “rational acting”). Many or most of them are provable by a comparison with billions of real humans. The description of the history of relativism that Baghramian and Coliva offer (see [6, p. 25-61]) does not render enough paradigmatic examples of philosophers who are relativists per self-ascription. For example, “relativists” is a misleading label for the Pyrrhonian skeptics (see [6])—relativity, especially in the Agrippinian school, is only one of several powerful tropes to fight the arguments of the dogmatists. One can point at the relativity of a view without being a “relativist” or even a “skeptic”. A follower of the school of skepticism who uses the trope of relativity for the purposes of skepticism can be unproblematically labeled “skeptic”, but the label “relativist” still does not fit. Perhaps, a “relativist” would be a certain Agrippinian skeptic who specializes in using one trope to destroy dogmatist’s ambitions instead of using the full power of the five or ten skeptic tropes. But there is no example of such a skeptic in the history of philosophy.

Similar argument can be brought up against “non-absolutism” as the supposed feature of relativism. It is possible to be a non-absolutist without being a relativist, but also to be a relativist without being a non-absolutist. One could even use relativism as a core feature of a specific doctrine of absolutism [2, p. 332]. Relativism does not necessarily entail non-absolutism.

Also consider this: If you want to show “equal validity” (see also [18]) of epistemic products or values, relativism will do well, but it will also be at your service if you want to unveil their unequal validity (in cases where a challenge of seemingly universal claims is needed—see also [19, p. 274-276], [20]). One could come to similar conclusions regarding at least several other features. The label ‘relativism’ can serve different purposes and different masters. It is not plausible to start explanations of relativism with description of the supposed doctrinal constituents and to conceptually engineer relativism in any possible way. What use is such a construction in philosophy?

2.2 Doctrinal Additions to Perspectivism

Perspectivism has been considered *a middle way between absolutism and relativism or skepticism* ([21], [22, p. 342]), *a subtype of relativism or a moderate (local) relativism* ([6, p. 17-19, p. 257-260], [1], [4]), *a middle way between realism and constructivism* ([23], [22, p.

342], and *a way of reasoning that leads to binary logic and aggression* [24].⁴ It is often based on the theory that knowledge, opinions, and views are *standpoint-dependent* ([21], [25, p. 5-6], [14, p. 245], [12, p. 10], [14, p. 3]), *partial or incomplete* [26], *plural* ([14, p. 245], [14, p. 3], [25, p. 7], [12, p. 18]), *temporal* [14, p. 245], *different* (ibid.), *non-exclusive* or *non-absolute* ([12, p. 17], [27, p. 165]), *represent the human point of view* ([14], [28]), and *must be accompanied by epistemic humility* [14, p. 2]. The terms ‘perspective’ and ‘standpoint’ or ‘position’ have been of assistance to many different, even counterposed views—e.g., of Nicholas of Cusa, Leibniz, Nietzsche, Kant, Hegel, G.H. Mead, Nicholas Rescher, Ronald Giere, and Michela Massimi.⁵ Monism, objectivism, subjectivism, pluralism, pragmatism, relativism, realism etc.—perspectivism has, just as relativism, many masters. For Massimi, e.g., perspectivism is not a standalone position, but rather an addition—qua “perspective-sensitivity” [27, p. 173]—to the realist program. For Baghrarian and Coliva [6, p. 17-19, 257-260] it is a servant of relativism and for Crețu and Massimi [28] of the human point of view, which, however, excludes the metaphysical perspectivism of Leibniz or Amerindian perspectivism of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro [29].

Like in the case of relativism, there are scarcely examples of explicit perspectivists on the one hand and a plurality of possible features and epistemological superstructures that are being used to describe perspectivism on the other hand. One can do with relativism and perspectivism whatever one wants, even made-up epistemologies.⁶ In the past decades, scholars seem to have recognized that perspectivism is best accessible via the analysis of perspectivist vocabulary. Friedrich Kaulbach [32] suggested that philosophers, who frequently use such terms as “perspective”, “perspective change”, “standpoint”, “view”, “world view”, “attitude”, “horizon” etc. can count as perspectivists. Werner Stegmaier [33] suggested that perspectivist’s vocabulary must be ordered: Two lines are to be drawn in a certain “direction” from a certain “position” to a certain “horizon”: anything between these lines is “in a perspective”. That meanings of these terms are logically interconnected obviously appeared to Leibniz, who could not introduce the originally geometrical (optical) term “perspective” into philosophy without the supplementary term “standpoint”: one cannot think of a perspective without thinking of a standpoint (see [29]). Sass [12, p. 10] has recognized that “standpoint”, “object”, and “horizon” are interconnected and *held together* by a “perspective”, which goes far beyond the standard minimalistic definition of perspectivism as standpoint-dependence [21], [14, p. 242]. Asmuth

⁴ Gebser believes that perspectival reasoning is based on three-dimensional vision, a kind of a fixated tunnel vision. Perspectivism must and will become “aperspectivism” (a higher order perspectivism that integrates different perspectives). In my view, a well understood perspectivism can do the same.

⁵ For a concise overview over the history of perspectivism see [29].

⁶ See, e.g., Plümacher’s [31] defense of perspectivism against the backdrop of an unsatisfying understanding.

and Landenne [25, p. 5-6] suggest understanding perspectivism via the understanding of terms “standpoint”, “aspect”, “horizon”, and “relation”. Plümacher [31] would add “focus” to this line. Some authors subsequently suggest that perspectivism reveals a “fundamental structure of cognition” ([25], [14]).

I think that the suggestion coming from researchers working on perspectivism to access perspectivism via the analysis of the semantic network of “perspective” and complementary terms is valuable. Direct attempts to define relativism and perspectivism and their supposed tenets and features rather lead to construction of new “conceptions” than analysis of what the terms “relativism” and “perspectivism” are supposed to express. However, if we turn to linguistic analysis of basic epistemic terms used in research on relativism and perspectivism as well as of the terms “relativism” and “perspectivism” themselves, we will have to revise the mainstream conception of epistemology. The mainstream understanding is that in epistemology, there is a never-ending battle between positions. The idea that entering the epistemological discourse equals taking a position and fighting the opposing position is not justifiable if—as I have intended to show in 2—epistemological positions consist of labels that refer to more or less freely modifiable set of tenets or doctrinal core features. This would make epistemology a fight between strawmen—one could easily win by engineering the concept of one’s own position or the position of the opponent. One further argument against the mainstream epistemology stems from the fact that both relativists and perspectivists use one and the same universal epistemic language.

3 Universal Epistemic Language (UEL)

When we obtain knowledge or do epistemology, we use a limited number of interrelated linguistic operators with a very familiar semantic content. Some of them are obvious (easily empirically demonstrable), such as “place”, “limit”, “relation”, “dependence”, “act” etc., others are rather obscure, for example “perspective”, “view”, “picture”, “epistemic” etc. How do we get to know what the latter actually mean? One possible semantic explanation could be: metaphorology (see, e.g., [14, p. 243]). The political, scientific or epistemic perspective is thought in analogy to the optical illusion of the linear (or color, aerial, and reverse) perspective. But this does not help to understand the meaning of the term “perspective” as it is used in philosophy: While any politician standing amidst of an alley will succumb to the same illusion, relativists and perspectivists want to point at exactly the opposite—at the differences among perspectives. Such phrase as “political perspective” would be rather a misuse of the metaphor,

a “dead metaphor” (see for this view [34]). Another possible semantic explanation could be the use theory of meaning. The problem is, however, that the current general community of speakers seems to equate “perspective”, “position”, and “view”, which is obviously a linguistic confusion caused by an uncaredful choice of words. What should the sought meaning “X” be that these words have in common? The term “epistemic”, to give another example, is used in such a variety of ways that it is often either vacuous or can be substituted by more precise expressions (see [35]). Neither the metaphorological nor the usage-based account of meaning can offer a solid basis for analysis of terms used in research on relativism and perspectivism.

A solution to this problem is the semantic approach that I want to call *linguistic originalism* or *originalism about words and their meanings* (from Latin “origo”, source). Each word was given an original, often very simple, and logically clear meaning by a certain community of speakers that first formed the word—sometimes hundreds or thousands of years ago. Subsequent generations have kept the signs (words) but altered the meaning without necessarily taking care of the original codes to decipher the signs. While the original community of speakers was able to use these codes to understand the parts and the whole of a word, the contemporaries are too underinformed: they normally reconstruct their meanings via different bits of information, such as metaphorical analogies and contemporary uses. This is the reason why some *concepts or meanings* seem to be obscure—the semantic content is assigned more or less arbitrarily to existing *words* without knowledge of original codes and rules. To clarify the concepts, one must retrieve the latter. To retrieve the latter, one must *learn old and new languages* and *use dictionaries*. What linguistic originalism is can be shown by the actual performance of the analysis qua retrieval of the original codes or clues to understand the meanings of epistemic terms. I will not describe the theory of linguistic originalism in this paper. This would be a larger excursion. The task here is to show that the epistemic terms actually form a network, i.e., to work for another argument against the mainstream epistemology that tends to regard relativism and perspectivism as two distinct and/or battling epistemological positions and doctrines. The existence of the network of interrelated epistemic terms casts doubts on the rational sustainability of the project of developing “isms” to play them off against one another.

Relativists and perspectivists use many similar terms, some of which are:

epistemic	horizon	situation	change of perspective
position	direction	perspective	relation
view	focus	picture	factors / parameters (relata)
area	angle	aspect	context

They are—following the idea of some researchers who work on perspectivism (see 2)—interrelated and constitute a matrix that is held together by the term “perspective”. By retrieving the codes of the interrelated terms from this matrix, originalism reveals basic epistemic operators, or what I call the “universal epistemic language” (UEL). The UEL-theory suggests that epistemic terms are based on interrelated original, often very simple pictures or models, which are (immediately or via a dictionary or linguistic knowledge of epistemic agents) rationally available both to the *earlier* and to the contemporary community of speakers, as well as relativists, perspectivists, realists, contextualists, and proponents of any other form of epistemology. Even if words change their meanings throughout time, the original pictures or models linked to words remain present. Often, they are even easily detectable. For example, the German word “begreifen” and English “to grasp” both originally express a haptic act. It is easy to recognize this fact and hard to ignore it once one has become aware of it. Indeed, it would be highly counterintuitive and counterproductive to claim that the contemporary meanings of these words have nothing in common with this original picture. Ignoring the haptic act as a clue would “kill” the linguistic sign, make it an arbitrary set of letters that could be replaced by any other set. Linguistic originalism is a method that cares for words and the original pictures. The originalist uses the clues to reconstruct original meanings and get a better understanding of terms we use in everyday life, science, and philosophy. By the UEL I mean the originalistically clarified language. It is universal in the sense that everyone who understands the link between a word and the original picture will not be able to arbitrarily alter the meaning of a word without at the same time “killing” the word. By “killing” the word I mean bereaving it of any connection between its first formation and meaning and making it an arbitrarily replaceable set of signs. Everyone who is using the same word must be able to know or to get to know the original meaning of this word and its parts and must use it in a way that at least does not contradict this meaning. The universal part in a language despite of its development and transformation in time are the original pictures and models that were inextricably linked to the first word-formations. Many philosophers “kill” words by considering them as an arbitrary collection of mere signs, which obtain their meanings in contemporary discourses or via ruthless re-definitions. In the same breath they regard the etymological method as fallacious, because older uses of a word conflict with contemporary uses and it seems that nothing urges us to prefer an older use over a newer one. But in one regard, the etymological fallacy is itself fallacious. Those who argue against the etymological method do not distinguish between uses of a word throughout time and the original picture linked to a word. The original picture—often retrievable via an etymological inquiry, knowledge of historical morphology and old and new languages—is

telling us something about the word, its constituent parts, and their introduction into the language that we use by the earlier community of speakers. It must give us at least some guidance in the understanding of its contemporary meaning, for otherwise we could replace the word by any other set of arbitrary signs, for example, “to grasp” by “pzxvf”. But this is not how we normally proceed.

The method of originalistic analysis differs from the etymological method as it is often understood and used. Hazlett [35] suggests that the use of “epistemic” in contemporary debates is either underdetermined, superfluous, or overstrained. “Epistemic” could have a variety of meanings, such as “related to cognition in general” or “related to belief” or even “non-affective” or “non-practical”. One way to deal with this problem is to use “epistemic” less frequently and replace it with more precise and context-attuned terms, such as “justificatory”, “alethic”, or “intellectual”. But this is rather an evasive move—the problem with “epistemic” remains. Hazlett has found out that “epistemic” derives from “the Ancient Greek word ἐπιστήμη, which the *Liddel-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon* defines with: ‘acquaintance with a matter, understanding, skill,’ and ‘generally, knowledge’” [35, p. 540]. Also, that “Aristotle used ἐπιστήμη to refer specifically to knowledge of causes (i.e. understanding), contrasting this with mere propositional knowledge” (ibid.), but that none of these historical analyses, as he states, would help understanding the contemporary meaning of “epistemic”. He is certainly right, as such historical analyses are focused on uses, not on the original patterns: they are *not originalistic enough*. This is not the approach of the linguistic originalism. The linguistic originalist must look at the constituent parts of the term itself and their original meaning.

The Ancient Greek “episteme” is based on the morphemes “epi-“ (upon) and “histanai”. The later has either the transitive meaning of “to cause something to stand” or an intransitive of “to stand, to remain standing”.⁷ This contains a clue (see [38, 957]: If I stop walking the objects around me become fixed as well, therefore, I will be able to scrutinize them.⁸ “Epistemic” must therefore mean “related to fixation of something from a certain standpoint”—this is logical, clear, and the linguistic confusion disappears. The original patterns “cause to stand” and “to stand” reappear in the verb “to understand” (German “verstehen”) and even doubled in the widely used phrase “epistemic situation”, where *situs* is Latin for “a place” or “a position”: one finds oneself “situated”, placed, or positioned if one catches oneself standing and causing the epistemic objects to stand. This analysis reveals us that such marks as “non-affective” or “non-

⁷ In my reconstructions I use, besides of my personal knowledge, the following sources: [36] for Ancient Greek, [38] for German etymology, [37] for etymology of Latin and other Italic languages, and [39] for Greek and Latin roots.

⁸ Aristotle has obviously stressed the degree of fixation in his use of “ἐπιστήμη“ (as knowledge of causes in difference from propositional knowledge), which is already a specific interpretation of this compositum.

practical” are synthetic non-necessary additions to “epistemic” and that a certain standpoint or position is a necessary condition of cognition, just as relativists and perspectivists would claim. There is no standpointless epistemic process, i.e., one cannot cognize without a spatiotemporal or cognitive, emotional, conceptual, experiential etc. locus as the starting point of epistemic process. Philosophers who ignore the original picture “kill” the word “epistemic”. They do with this word whatever fits best their purposes in philosophical debates. Any attempt to re-define “epistemic” must at least not contradict the original picture, if the choice of the word “epistemic” over other words or any arbitrary set of letters should have any justifying reason.

One other feature of the UEL-theory is that words and the original pictures are pointing at each other or constituting a common logical sphere. I have started with the word “epistemic” and drew a line to “situation”. From there, one can try exploring the set of epistemic terms that I have mentioned in the table above. To map a part of the epistemologist’s word-stock and the logical interrelation between the epistemic terms, I will use both the analytic originalistic and a genetic method. The analytic method is aimed at discovering the original pictures and models, the genetic method at the reconstruction of the network of terms and models. The genetic method reveals the functions of singular terms in relation to others within the network of epistemic terms.

To reconstruct an epistemic situation, one needs to ask oneself, what the position is, who is taking the position (epistemic agent or subject), what is being fixated (object), that it is being fixated (process, perspective), how it is being fixated (via a view, in a certain direction, focus, horizon etc.), why it is being fixated etc. One can use a variety of operators to understand the epistemic situations. All these operators are analyzable in the same manner as “epistemic” and contain bits of the network of the UEL. Just as it is the case with “position”, there are obviously further necessary conditions and constituent parts of any epistemic situation. I will give other examples without striving for any completeness in this article.⁹ To localize a standpoint (position), one needs several *relata*. One of them is the object, the “obiectum” is something that has been cast (from “iacere”) against (“ob”) something, opposed to something. The German “Gegenstand” (object) is clearer—something stands against or in front of the epistemic agent. One can localize the position in relation to the object—it can be relative to the chosen or encountered object (and would be different regarding another object), but also in relation to such *relata* as the horizon (from Ancient Greek “horizon”, i.e., “limit”) of experience, knowledge etc.; the area of objects (the reach of cognition, in German “Bereich”, reach until); the chosen direction (from Proto-Indo-European root “reg-“, “move in a straight line”,

⁹ For a more complete analysis see [40, p. 13-34].

orientation in epistemic process), focus (from Latin “hearth, fireplace”, a point of concentration); and personal features of the agent (genes, age, experience, knowledge and expertise, etc.).

The terms “picture”, “view”, and “perspective” have different complementary functions in this linguistic framework. “Picture” is obviously not the same as the object—it is the image, originally: a result of the painting activity, or, more generally, a product of an epistemic act. A systematic representationalist like Kant would prefer speaking of “representation” instead. The representation is the genus for all possible mental images, such as sensation, intuition (empirical, pure), and concept (empirical, pure, notion, idea) (see [41, p. 345-346]). Like Kant, the Pyrrhonists would give the picture or representation as product of an epistemic act the status of “appearance”, which is one of the strongest doctrinal commitments of skeptics (strangely enough, it was not considered by [6] Baghrarian and Coliva). As we only know how the world appears (e.g., because the statements are relative to different parameters), theories are not universally valid: ergo, one should refrain from theorizing and keep oneself busy with practical arrangement of everyday living. The early Wittgenstein as well as many contemporary scholars (see, e.g., [42, p. 7, 55, 317, 318] use the expression “picture” without this connotation—a picture (a product of epistemic act) may be wrong or false, corresponding or contradicting the supposed state of affairs, be coherent with itself, with an experts’ opinion etc.

“View” is another necessary functional epistemic operator, which is, just as “evidence”, “theory”, and “idea” based on the Ancient Greek “horao” (to see) respectively the aorist “eidon” (earlier form contains a Digamma (“F”, sound [w]) that later disappeared from the alphabet: “e-f-idon”). The optical basis, however, is only giving a clue for the understanding of a general epistemic action. “My view” is often replaced by “in my understanding” or the haptic “how I grasp it”. A more originalistic formulation would be “how I see the epistemic object fixating it from a certain standpoint”.

“Picture” and “view” are not to be confused with “perspective”, which is based on the prefix “per-“ (“through”) and the root “spek” (“to see”). The Ancient Greek “skep” (as in “sceptic”) is the result of a metathesis (see [38, p. 579]). While the sceptic is looking around and cautiously examining the epistemic object, the perspectivist tries to epistemically pierce the object, to see through the object. “Perspicere” is therefore one of the most fundamental epistemic acts: we want to know what the object is, what it contains, what parts it consists of, how it functions etc.—we want to make it translucent, “perspicuous”. This is what cognition is about—it is not enough to get a picture of something, a view, or a theory: one wants to “pervade to the interior

of things”. “Perspectiva” (as Latin translation of the Ancient Greek “optike”) is “scientia vel ars bene videndi” [43, p. 18]—we want to see or cognize things as well as possible.

While “Perspektiv” (German) as the old proper name for small telescope more or less immediately follows from the Latin word (one wants to see through some space to examine the object), such formulations as “it is only a perspective” or “it is a matter of perspective” and the use of “perspective” qua optical illusion (linear, color, aerial or reverse perspective) are confusing.¹⁰ We understand them because we tacitly presuppose the logical structure of the UEL, into which the term “perspective” is embedded. The “ars bene videndi” presupposes that we understand *the sources of illusion*. A perspective or any attempt to “see through” is always conditioned by such factors as the standpoint, the object, the area, the horizon, and all other subjective and objective parameters of the epistemic situation. It leads to a certain picture (the product of the epistemic act) that is valid in relation to a specific set of parameters. If the parameters change, the perspective and the picture change.

In explaining truth relativism, Coliva and Moruzzi [8, p. 49] define “perspective” as “a parameter to which the truth-property is relativized. In less abstract terms, a perspective can be a feature of a context from which the truth of a proposition can be assessed”. Such a parameter would be, e.g., a moral standard. From the viewpoint of linguistic originalism, it is a misleading, the original linguistic clue ignoring definition. A moral standard is a parameter, but not a perspective. A perspective is an attempt or a tendency to “see through” (perspicere). To use the example of the authors: the proposition “Female infibulation is wrong” is a perspective (a certain access to a problem) and a moral standard is a parameter, to which this proposition is relative—depending on the specific epistemic situation, a moral *standard* (“to stand”) could be a position, a property of the epistemic agent, or a context.

One could give basic, minimal definitions of the interconnected epistemic vocabulary based on original linguistic clues and bring order into the structure:¹¹

¹⁰ I will not discuss the pros and cons of linguistic originalism in this article. Obviously, this method faces some difficulties just as any other. For example: In English, a person, who is stupid or slow in learning, is sometimes called “dunce”, which—unexpectedly—comes from Duns Scotus (I thank Timothy Williamson making me aware of this example). But even in such cases, there are at least some clues to reconstruct the meaning of a word. In the case of “dunce”, one must know of the history of the Dunsmen and that Duns Scotus believed that pointed hats help thinking and receiving knowledge (hence, the so-called “dunce hats” were used in schools for disciplinary reasons).

¹¹ Original clues can be used to understand the content of terms. Language has been developing from concrete to abstract forms: the abstract forms contain operations that are already present at a more concrete, empirical level. This is the reason why we can use “position” to describe a conceptual or moral commitment, “picture” to point at a product of an epistemic act, or “direction” for “the direction of research”—not because we simply transfer (“metapherein”) one image to another, but because we are familiar with the original picture at the empirical level, which we then reinterpret at a more abstract conceptual level. Whether one can defend a certain (weak) apriorism regarding the structure of the UEL—see [40, p. 13-34] and [42]—is debatable.

The epistemic situation is the structure of different relata into which the epistemic process (the process of causing an object to stand from a certain position) is embedded. Examples: *the view of Edinburgh from Arthur's Seat, when I have read this passage a year ago, the development of the theory of linguistic originalism.*

The position is the (spatial, conceptual etc.) localization of the epistemic agent in relation to the object of cognition. Examples: *from the viewpoint of naturalism, based on the Newtonian laws of motion, original meaning of words and their parts.*

A view is a subjective process from a particular position, the act of seeing something and creating some (preliminary) picture. Examples: *I share this opinion, a better description, an outdated theory.*

An area or a sphere is a group of related objects to which the view is potentially or actually directed in an epistemic situation. Examples: *these examples show, the data base is incomplete.*

The horizon is a limitation of the sphere of epistemic objects covered by the view. Examples: *the limits of my language mean the limits of my world, this theory can be possibly proven in the future, this is the line that cannot be crossed.*

The focus of the view is the sustained concentration of the epistemic agent on a particular epistemic object. Examples: *this is most significant for our theory, here lies the problem, you have to write more about this point.*

Direction is the (known or preliminary imagined) side or point, which the epistemic process targets. Examples: *the direction of my research, I want to focus on different topics.*

The angle (of view) is a limited view conditioned by the characteristics of the epistemic agent and/or the epistemic demands of focusing on a certain area of epistemic objects. Examples: *this research program has ignored the anomalies for a long time, you better focus on a few problems to finish in time.*

Perspective is a conditioned attempt to epistemically pierce through the object of cognition, to see it extremely clearly, to make it transparent. Examples: *I want to finally understand what analytic philosophy is, in the way I see it, I have a different access to this problem.*

Relata (the conditioning factors or parameters) are elements of the epistemic situation (position, view, focus, horizon) and all kinds of other relata (such as experience, preconditions, and object properties) that determine a perspective. Relations are existing, known, or suspected links between the members of the structure of epistemic situations. Examples: *this perspective is relative to the knowledge you had back then, this results from your exclusion of counterexamples, it depends on where you have previously lived.*

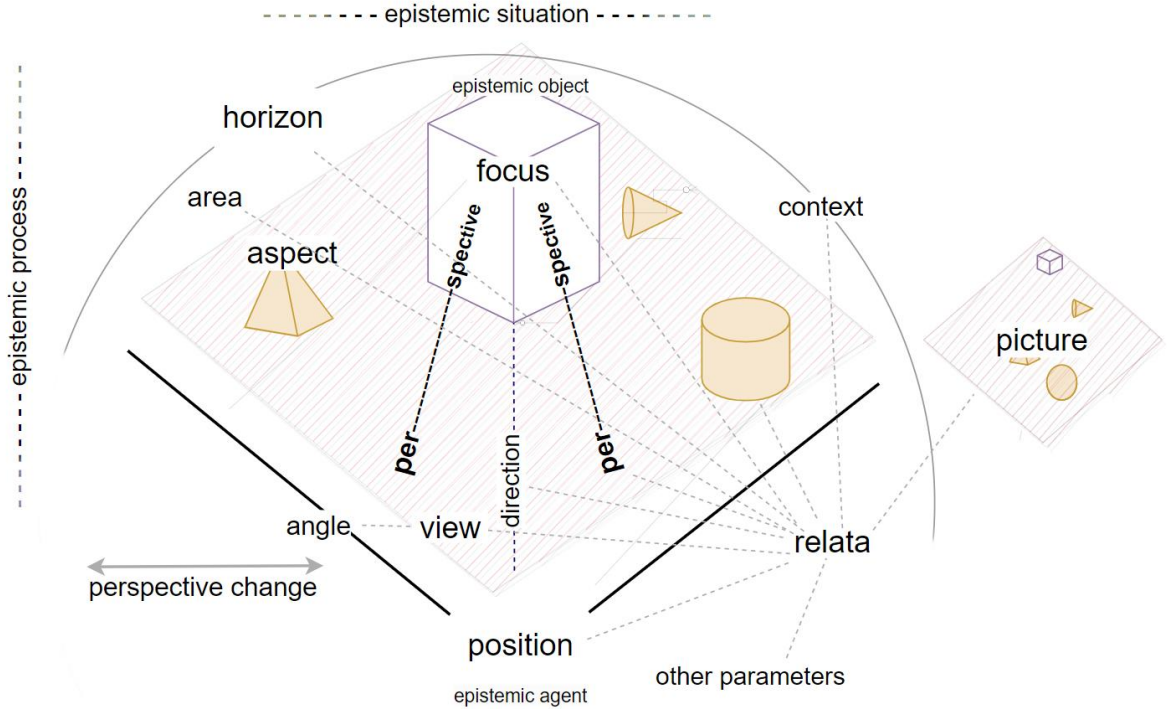
The context is an individual factor (such as the area) or a set of factors affecting a perspective or requiring a particular perspective. Examples: *this perspective is relative to the knowledge (the context) you had back then, if you work in a similar field, you will be probably able to help me, this situation, this semantic network allows for no other interpretation.*

A picture is the result of an attempt to epistemically pierce the object of cognition, revealing it in a limited way. Examples: *it appears that, let us widen the picture, your knowledge of this historical fact is incomplete, it is true what you say.*

The aspect is the seen, assumed or imagined picture or a part of the picture (e.g., a quality or quantity) that the focus and process of cognition is aimed at. Examples: *let us consider this point too, this fact gives a clue.*

A change of perspective is a change in the factors of the epistemic situation for the sake of a new attempt to epistemically pierce the object. Examples: *you should alter your basic assumptions, this context allows for a better insight, I will reconsider it after this widening of my horizon.*

The corresponding graphic of the analyzed part of the matrix of the UEL can look as follows. This graphic contains a spatial dimension but is meant also to represent purely conceptual epistemic situations. It is a model, and as any model, be it in physics or philosophy, it is a simplification of the matter of fact.¹²



¹² For current debates on models see, e.g., [44] and [42, p. 372-385].

4 Analytic Doctrinal Components of Relativism and Perspectivism (iii')

At the basic level of the UEL, “relation” and “perspective” are interrelated parts of the whole of any epistemic situation. A perspective qua attempt to see through an object is always relative to the parameters which constitute the framework of epistemic acts. To think of relativity, one needs relata—members of a structure. A perspective can be relative to something, a standpoint, a feature of the agent etc. It seems unwise to separate parts of terminology that epistemologists need to express themselves and to base different epistemological positions on either the word “perspective” or the term “relation”. The problem is that epistemologists will not get far if they care for words and meanings they express. In the following, I will show to what extent a possible *epistemological* doctrine of “relativism” or “perspectivism” can be developed without deliberately “killing” the words. I stress *epistemological*, because one can also understand an “ism” as a fact or process (which does not contradict the originalistic analysis and the original meaning of the suffix “-ism”), as in “metabolism” or “vulcanism”. This is how Nietzsche used the term “perspectivism” (see [45]).

If the epistemologists are not *genii maligni* and take the titles of their programs seriously, they must contain clues for their content. The main marks of the designations “relativism” and “perspectivism” are clearly “relation” and “perspective”. The suffix “-ism” is based on the Ancient Greek “-izein”, which means “to act in a certain way” and can be found in the English “-ize” [46]. The suffix “-ion” is used to substantivize an underlying process and “-iv” (Latin “ivus”) originally means “to tend to” (see [39, p. 217]). The (not crucial) difference between “relativism” and the alternatively used term “relationism” (see [18, p. 49-51, 73, 84]) would be that relationists relativize and relativists tend to relativize. The ground-levelled (the constitutional) proposition that follows from this analysis is:

- (1) Relativists relativize and perspectivists perspectivize (which must mean something like “tend to repeatedly see through”).

An iterating act sooner or later leads to its rationalization by the experienced agent via doctrinal tenets. And these tenets may immediately follow from the act or be a result of addition of arbitrary external views. Relata that relativists correlate must not causally *depend* on each other at this ground level, they can be recognized as members of a structure. The next step towards the “doctrinalization” of iterating acts is the proposition:

(2) Relativists proceed by relativizing and perspectivists proceed by perspectivizing.

Relativists and perspectivists can standardize their procedure if they deem it purposively rational. The iterating acts can become fundamental pillars of methods (from Ancient Greek “methodos”, a way towards something) if their value is recognized via successful epistemic operations.¹³ The method leads to basic cognitions (3) and further development of methodology (4):

(3) Relativists recognize relativity and perspectivists the limits of the attempt to perspectivize.

By applying the method of relativization, relativists come to an affirmative result—one can recognize relativity whenever one aims for it. The perspectivist, by trying to see through the epistemic objects, will come to a rather negative conclusion. One is partly precluded from an absolute penetration of things as they are because of different relata, on which the cognitive act is dependent. Epistemic situations differ from each other and represent different sets of interdependent parameters as relata of one structure. To confirm and account for recognized relativity and limits,

(4) relativists and perspectivists destruct statements and theories that are deemed to result from partial or complete ignorance of relativity and limits of perspectivity; they reconstruct and re-assess epistemic situations.

Based on the insights (3), relativists and perspectivists develop corresponding epistemic strategies. For example, “the relativist about a given domain, D, purports to have discovered that the *truths* of D involve an *unexpected* relation to a parameter” [47, p. 13]. The relativist is watching out for parameters (relata), especially for non-obvious and undiscovered.¹⁴ For the sake of it, she might question all kinds of truths, even empirically proven and widely accepted—this is required by the method of questioning that does not stop before any authority. Analogically to the principle of equal treatment before the law, all epistemic situations and results must be accountable and questionable [48, p. 22-23]. Reconstructing epistemic

¹³ This is not a derivation of an “ought” from an “is” (naturalistic fallacy). One can decide which way to proceed and develop normative statements based on experience and one’s best knowledge of how things work.

¹⁴ I disagree with Paul Boghossian that the relations must be necessarily unexpected. Something may be unexpected to one agent of a communication community, but well known to the other.

situations and products, relativists rely on the same UEL as perspectivists. New truth-relativists (operating in the field of semantics) can hardly avoid articulating relativism without the terms “perspective” and “context”—their logical function in the structure of cognition cannot be replaced.¹⁵ Perspectivism, in its turn, needs the term “relation” just as any other relevant expression from the UEL to understand and analyze the structure of epistemic situations and factors that limit cognitions. The full emergence into a perspective, i.e., a powerful attempt to cognize epistemic objects and defend the epistemic results, is welcomed, but it must be accompanied by the knowledge of the structure of epistemic situations and corresponding laws. They can result in such doctrinal instructions as:

- (i) Avoid bias and incautious overvaluation of your perspectives (ask yourself, how universal and valuable your perspective really is).
- (ii) Be aware of the law of perspectival reciprocity, i.e., the hermeneutic circle that results from an interaction of a certain attitude (standpoint) and focus of an epistemic agent with the epistemic object. One tends to recognize in the things what one has put into them via different factors within an epistemic situation.
- (iii) Consider the complex structure of epistemic situations and do not omit important elements of this structure.
- (iv) Differentiate enough, where differentiations are needed.
- (v) Creatively develop new perspectives.¹⁶

If one follows the originalistic analysis in general and the linguistic reconstruction of “relativism” and “perspectivism” in particular, one finds that both terms suggest some procedural directives. Relativists tend to (as per Latin “-ivus”) do epistemology by cognition of relativity and perspectivists by cognition of the limits of perspectives, but besides of it, there is scarcely any difference. It is not clear why (i)-(v) should not satisfy the needs of a relativist and discoveries of unexpected or hidden relations the needs of the perspectivist. There is only *one epistemology*, and different names of epistemologies are only expressing linguistic and operational preferences of scholars.

¹⁵ As Baghramian and Coliva [6, p. 70] point out, Kölbel, as one of the pioneers of the new truth-relativism, did not fully explain what he means by the term “perspective”. Kölbel [16, p. 101] states that perspectives assign truth-values to propositional contents (a content is true according to a perspective), which is in a way close David Lewis’ theory of possible worlds: “[p]erspectives are theoretical entities very similar to (but in crucial respects different from) possible worlds” [6, p. 91].

¹⁶ For an example of the concrete use of these instructions in the analysis of metaphilosophical positions see [40].

One could claim that the difference between relativism and perspectivism appears on the level of development and construction of epistemological positions. But if it is so, the use of the term “relativism” and “perspectivism” becomes confused, since one could add to them as many hidden predicates as one desires. There is, for example, no sign of “absolutism” or “indifferentism” in “relativism” and “perspectivism”. The “original sin” can be attributed to the inventor of the compositum “relativism” Krug (who succeeded Kant in Königsberg). He writes that relativism is “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” [49, p. 224]. But this conclusion is not necessary, and one can claim exactly the opposite (see [2, p. 336]. What Krug means, is a certain form of relativism, not relativism per se. He tacitly adds a foreign predicate to relativism without making it explicit. What he defines could be called “anti-universalist relativism”, but not “relativism” in general. In contemporary scholarship, Rescher gives a good example of avoiding this mistake. He opposes contextualism to “indifferentist relativism” (indifferentist’s doctrine synthetically added to relativism—see [7, p. 2], [50, p. 31-32, 192-193]. And this is right, as contextualism is not opposed to relativism, as the UEL theory would be able to show in analogy with the current analysis. Massimi [27, p. 164], similarly, is right to call her version of perspectivism “perspectival realism”. Strangely enough, Boghossian [18, 49-51, 73, 84] wants to get the concept “relativism” out of a mixture of relationism (as explained above, “-ivus” and “-ion” do not make any significant difference), pluralism and non-absolutism. Why not calling it “pluralistic non-absolutist relativism” instead of simply “relativism”? When it comes to names of epistemological positions, scholars should make the implicit synthetic predicates, which they add, explicit, instead of confusing each other with polysemy of “relativism” and “perspectivism” and initiating strawmen battles in philosophy. My plea is: If you want to add something to relativism and perspectivism that is not detectable via analysis of words, use the formula “X plus relativism” or “X plus perspectivism”.

5 Conclusion

The originalistic analysis bears several consequences for the understanding of relativism and perspectivism. Both epistemologies are based on constituent interrelated parts of the UEL. To do epistemology well, we need the whole variety of such interconnected linguistic operators as “view”, “position”, “perspective”, “context”, “picture”, “relation”, “aspect” etc. and their logical functions to describe epistemic situations. A relativist relies on the structure of the UEL

just as much as a perspectivist, contextualist, aspectivist etc. Furthermore, relativists and perspectivists share analytic procedural doctrinal goals. Based on the linguistic and procedural preference, one can focus on perspectivity or relativity to reconstruct epistemic situations, i.e., to do epistemology.

Is there any difference besides of the linguistic and procedural preference? No. The synthetical doctrinal level does not concern relativism and perspectivism per se—it concerns differences between foreign additions (the supposed “core features of the doctrine”, as Baghranian and Coliva put it). Such proposition as “perspectivism is not the same as relativism” can be short for

(1) “perspectivism takes the concept of perspective and the analysis of its limits as the starting point, whereas relativism begins with relations, including relation of a perspective to hidden parameters”, which is totally fine and does not contradict the titles “perspectivism” and “relativism”, but also for

(2) “perspectivism is not the same as indifferentist relativism”. In this case, it is crucial to mention “indifferentist” and refrain from using the short version “perspectivism is not the same as relativism”, which otherwise would confuse colleagues in philosophy and provoke unnecessary debates.

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Author's information:

Michael Lewin — Dr. phil., Senior Researcher; michael.lewin.di@gmail.com

Релятивизм, перспективизм и универсальный эпистемический язык

Михаил Левин

Университет Вупперталя,

Германия, 42119, Вупперталь, Гауссштрассе 20.

Балтийский Федеральный университет Им. И. Канта,

Россия, 236041, Калининград, ул. Александра Невского 14.

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Последние исследования придали перспективизму статус самостоятельной эпистемологической исследовательской программы. В рамках такого подхода его необходимо отличать от других эпистемологий, особенно от релятивизма. Релятивисты и перспективисты не только используют схожую лексику – но и их установки (доктринальные характеристики), кажется, частично совпадают. Чтобы прояснить взаимоотношения между этими двумя программами, я предлагаю установить два важных различия. Первое – между (1) терминологическими и (2) доктринальными компонентами эпистемологий, второе – между (2a) аналитическими и (2b) синтетическими доктринальными элементами. Метод оригиналистского анализа, который я применяю в этой статье, показывает, что и релятивизм, и перспективизм используют единую матрицу взаимосвязанных лингвистических выражений, которая

принадлежит тому, что я называю «универсальным эпистемическим языком». Кроме того, он определяет, какие доктринальные компоненты с необходимостью следуют из этого лингвистического базиса и терминов «релятивизм» и «перспективизм». Что касается лингвистического базиса и аналитических доктринальных компонентов, то релятивизм и перспективизм являются взаимодополняющими частями одной эпистемологии. Доктринальные дополнения, трансформирующие исходный смысл терминов «релятивизм» и «перспективизм», такие как «индифферентизм» и «неабсолютизм», должны быть всегда явно обозначены, во избежание путаницы и пустых споров в философии.

Ключевые слова: релятивизм, перспективизм, анализ, лингвистический оригинализм, эпистемология, эпистемологические позиции, метаэпистемология, философская терминология.

Контактная информация:

Левин Михаил — PhD, ст. науч. сотр.; michael.lewin.di@gmail.com