“Contra Leiter’s Anti-Skeptical Interpretation of Nietzsche’s Perspectivism”

The purpose of this paper is an extremely narrow one. I hold that Friedrich Nietzsche’s account of human cognition—from now on referred to as “perspectivism”—entails, among other things, a radical skepticism such that we can never have adequate justification for knowledge of any kind. Brian Leiter in his essay, “Perspectivism in Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*,” argues that it is a mistake to see Nietzsche’s perspectivism as entailing a skeptical position. He makes this argument based on what he takes to be the implications of Nietzsche’s favored metaphor for human cognition, the perspectival nature of optical vision. My only purpose in this essay is to show that Leiter’s analysis of the optical perspective metaphor is not sufficient to undermine my thesis that perspectivism entails skepticism. I do not argue for the positive thesis—that it does in fact entail skepticism—here, nor do I attempt to give a detailed interpretation of Nietzsche’s perspectivism. I will only give a brief account of Nietzsche’s position on human cognition and some reasons to think that it entails skepticism in order to set the stage for Leiter’s argument and my critique of it.

The clearest and most famous passage where Nietzsche discusses perspectivism occurs in the Third Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (GM). Since it is the implications of this passage that are at stake in my debate with Leiter, it is worth quoting at length:

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. But to eliminate the will altogether, to suspend each and every affect, supposing we were capable of this—what would that mean but to castrate the intellect? (GM III §12)

Any complete account of perspectivism would require understanding the context in which this passage appears, but for our purposes I will skip this discussion in interest of getting to my disagreement with Leiter. Nietzsche rejects several important theses here, namely that the knowing subject (i.e. human cognizer) is “pure, will-less, painless, [and] timeless.” What, with each of these adjectives, is Nietzsche rejecting? First, the knowing subject is not “pure.” I take it that here Nietzsche is rejecting the idea that human beings are exclusively or even primarily thinking beings, and more importantly that our faculty of cognition is unmixed with other non-cognitive functions or faculties (i.e. pure). This would be, I take it, to reject the Kantian idea of a pure reason that is any more than conceptually separable from other aspects of our mental life or the Cartesian idea of a *res cogitans* that is separate from the extended being that makes up our animal nature. Instead Nietzsche thinks that human knowing is mixed with non-cognitive functions, i.e., the mind is a part of our animal nature, and reason has other interests and ends besides reason itself.

Second, the knowing subject is not “will-less” for Nietzsche. I think it is doubtful that the view he is rejecting is that human beings do not have wills or something like a will. Rather he is rejecting the idea that cognizing is unmixed with willing. On the standard view of belief formation (at least with respect to most beliefs), we do not exercise volitional control over what we take to be true. For example, I did not choose to believe that there is a computer in front of me, that massive objects exert gravitational force on one another, and that the earth is round. Not only did I not choose to believe these things but also I cannot choose to cease believing them. Contrary to this fairly straightforward and seemingly obvious observation, Nietzsche’s position, I take it, is that something like willing plays a more important, central role in belief formation than is generally granted by the philosophical tradition and common sense.

Third, Nietzsche rejects the view that the knowing subject is “painless.” I take it that the view he is rejecting here is that cognition is unmixed with feeling or affect, that our assent to truth-claims is not responsive to, and therefore independent of, our life of feelings, emotions, and drives. What he rejects here is that we are able to attain a degree of objectivity about the mind-independent world regardless of how we are affected internally. Rather, Nietzsche argues that it is precisely the life of the affects which has the most determining power over how we cognize things and whose influence over our cognition we cannot separate from the influence of the things cognized. Far from being “painless” knowing subjects, our internal lives of pleasure and pain (as well as other more subtle affects) are essential in determining how things seem to us and how we divide up the world with concepts.

Finally Nietzsche rejects the idea that the knowing subject is “timeless,” i.e. that it is able to get a hold of eternal truths about the world. In other words, even though the human being exists at a particular time, the truth of his or her knowledge is not time bound, e.g. it is true that a time *t*, there is one pair of glasses on the table in front of me, and at another time *t2*, there is not a pair of glasses on the table in front of me. So in a certain sense much of our empirical knowledge about objects in the world is time bound and not “timeless.” However, in another sense—the one relevant to Nietzsche’s point—the truth-value of the proposition “At time *t*, there is one pair of glasses on the table in front of me” does not change over time. It will be and has always been true that at that particular time there are/were/will be glasses on this table. What is Nietzsche’s point here? I think it is that human cognizers do not have epistemic access to these kinds of eternal truths.

These rejected accounts of the knowing subject along with “pure reason” and “knowledge in itself,” Nietzsche thinks, “demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction.” Rather he claims that “there is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective ‘knowing.’” Nietzsche’s point here is that just as necessarily, we cannot see something except from a particular optical perspective, we cannot cognize something except from a particular cognitive perspective. The relevant features of an optical perspective for seeing an object are the position of the seeing subject relative to the object seen, the lighting conditions for the object seen, the size of the object seen relative to the size of the other objects in the subject’s visual field, etc. If any of these factors change, what shows up in the viewer’s optical field, his or her phenomenal experience of the object, will also change. In other words, the phenomenon of what is seen (as opposed to the object as it is in itself) depends in part on the conditions under which it is seen.   
 Analogously, Nietzsche holds that when we cognize something, there are various relevant factors about the cognizing subject such that when they are different the phenomenal experience of the thing cognized is also different. According to the text in the third essay of GM, these subjective factors include “active and interpreting forces,” “affects,” and “the will.” Granted, at this point precisely what Nietzsche means when he says that these factors are analogous to optical perspective in the phenomenal experience of seeing something is unclear. However, what is clear is that Nietzsche is rejecting the idea that cognition gets at the unmediated thing itself in the act of cognition, just as seeing does not get at its object in an unmediated, perspective independent way. This fact, Nietzsche thinks, precludes us from having knowledge as it is traditionally conceived hence his use of quotation marks around “knowledge” when he refers to “perspective ‘knowing,’” i.e. the knowledge human cognizers have according to Nietzsche’s perspectivism would not count as knowledge according to traditional conceptions.

This skeptical implication of Nietzsche’s perspectivism is more clearly seen in the first Book of *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE), entitled “On the Prejudices of Philosophers.” Very briefly, he argues there that our thought is “secretly guided and forced into certain channels by [one’s] instincts” (BGE §3), such that we cannot tell whether our reasons for accepting a judgment are for truth-indicative reasons that have to do with the object cognized or because of the guiding of the instincts which is completely independent of the truth about the object. This leads Nietzsche to his skeptical conclusion regarding the content of philosophy itself.

Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant had grown. (BGE §6)

What one takes to be true (for what seem to be good reasons) is a product, not of reasons that are sensitive to the truth of the claims in question, but rather this “taking to be true” is a product of the drives that are constitutive of a particular type of human life. Truth is not what is aimed at, and if truth it is hit, it is by accident (and we would never know that it was hit), and so it does not count as knowledge as it is traditionally understood.[[1]](#endnote--1) Nietzsche puts it this way in *The Gay Science* (GS), “Thus the strength of knowledge does not depend on its degree of truth but on its age, on the degree to which it has been incorporated, on its character as a condition of life” (GS §110). Nietzsche’s skeptical argument is based on the fact that the explanation for why we have the cognitions could just as easily be facts about the cognizer as it could be facts about objects of cognition. Given this, in order for us to know that our cognitions correspond to the truth we would need a faculty that was shown to be truth-sensitive. However, as Nietzsche points out “we simply lack any organ for knowledge, for ‘truth’” (GS §354).

Against this view, Leiter argues that Nietzsche’s use of the optical perspective analogy in GM undermines any interpretation of his account of cognition as entailing a radical skepticism. Leiter identifies four “uncontroversially” true claims regarding our visual grasp of objects that are analogous to our cognitive grasp of objects:

Necessarily, we see an object from a particular perspective: for example, from a certain angle, from a certain distance, under certain conditions (perspectivism claim).

The more perspectives we enjoy—for example, the more angles we see the object from—the better our conception of what the object is actually like will be (plurality claim).

We will never exhaust all possible perspectives on the object of vision (infinity claim)

There exists a catalogue of identifiable factors that would distort our perspective on the object: for instance, we are too far away or the background conditions are poor (purity claim).[[2]](#endnote-0)

He then writes, “Now what is striking about these four claims is that they do not appear to entail any optical analogue of the Received View [the view that Nietzsche’s perspectivism entails radical skepticism].”[[3]](#endnote-1) Specifically, the plurality claim entails that by taking more visual perspectives on an object “the more we will know about its actual nature,” and the purity claim entails we can “maintain some sort of ‘[epistemic] visual hierarchy’: some visual perspectives will simply be better than others—better, that is, in virtue of their adequacy to the real visible nature of the object.”[[4]](#endnote-2) If cognition is analogous to vision in these respects, then Leiter claims that Nietzsche cannot have in mind a skepticism entailing account of cognition when using the optical perspective analogy. Contra Leiter, I argue that while the purity and plurality claims have the implications that he thinks they have, they are far from being uncontroversially true and in fact are false without significant modification. Once these claims have been modified such that they are plausible, they do not entail an anti-skeptical position. Therefore, Leiter is unsuccessful here in showing that perspectivism does not entail skepticism.

Starting with the plurality claim, certainly it is *often* true that by taking more perspectives on an object, we are provided with more information about the object’s nature. However, it is not clear that taking more visual perspectives on an object necessarily entails that our conception of the object will be better. Some objects or ways of viewing objects may be such that no matter how many additional visual perspectives we take on the object, our conception of the object will not be made more accurate. In fact, we can imagine an object that is obscured from our visual grasp in such a way that taking more perspectives on the object actually reinforces or extends an erroneous conception of the object. But why should we think this? My claim that we can imagine an object that is obscured from our visual grasp such that taking more perspectives on it extents an erroneous conception of it is logically consistent. An example of such a case would be if we were presented with a convincing (down to the microscopic level) three-dimensional hologram of a chair. The more visual perspectives one takes on the chair-image, the more convinced one would be that it is actually a chair, and one would, with each additional perspective, build a more and more complex and detailed conception of what he or she takes the chair to be like. So, at the very least taking more perspectives on the chair-image does not extend our knowledge of that at which we are really looking (since we take it to be a real chair), and I would argue that the more properties we attribute to a thing that the thing does not actually have, the more erroneous our concept of the thing is. The plurality claim, as stated by Leiter, is therefore not at all secure, and it must be modified. I think the strongest version of the Plurality claim is:

Modified Plurality Claim: The more perspectives we enjoy, all else being equal and in the absence of certain kinds of distorting factors, the better our conception of what the object is like will be.

This modification of the plurality claim connects it directly to Leiter’s purity claim. If the purity claim remains intact, as stated by Leiter, then his argument for the anti-skeptical implications of the perspective analogy are unaffected despite the modifications I made to the plurality claim. This is because the purity claim states that we can identify those factors that would distort our visual grasp of an object such that taking more perspectives would not yield a better grasp on the object’s actual nature. Thus the purity claim allows us to meet the conditions I added to the plurality claim.

But how secure is the purity claim as stated by Leiter? Certainly there are many factors that would distort our visual grasp of an object that can be identified, e.g. a straight object’s being half submerged in water such that it appears bent and a round object’s being at such distance that it appears rectangular. However, it is unclear what Leiter means by stating that “a catalogue” of such factors exists. If he means that there is a fairly large set of distorting factors that we *are* able to identify, he is certainly correct, but if he means that we are (even in principle) able to identify all of the possible factors that could distort our visual grasp of an object, the claim is rather implausible. It is possible that there are factors that distort our visual grasp of an object of which we could never be aware. Given this, while we can and should maintain a “visual hierarchy,” such a hierarchy will be based solely on those factors that distort our visual perspective that we *can* identify. Given the possibility of distorting factors that we could (in principle) never identify, an absolute “visual hierarchy” is impossible. Certain optical perspectives are better than others on the assumption that there are no non-identifiable distorting factors, so, for example, my close inspection of a cut diamond under a magnifying glass is better for identifying flaws in the diamond than your quick glance from a distance. However, we cannot eliminate the possibility that there are distorting factors common to both of our visual grasps of the diamond that prevent either of us from having an adequate or veridical conception of what we see. The purity claim cannot stand and the argument Leiter makes based on it therefore fails.

This, I take it, is enough to undermine the argument against a skeptical reading of perspectivism Leiter makes based on his use of optical perspective metaphor. Leiter has other reasons for rejecting such a reading, and I think those reasons are insufficient to establish his position as well, but examining those reasons is a topic for another paper.

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1. By “knowledge as it is traditionally understood” I mean true belief plus whatever positive epistemic status is required for knowledge. For this argument to work this extra criterion would clearly have to be an internalist one. If the extra criterion required for knowledge is externalist, then the most we can conclude from the skeptical argument Nietzsche offers is that we can never know that we know something. This is, as far as I’m concerned, not an interestingly different than the conclusion that we can never know anything. [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. Leiter 1994, 344. [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. Leiter 1994, 345. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. Leiter 1994, 345. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)