

# Perspectival Methods in Metaphysics

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## Abstract

There seems to be a difficulty in the practice of metaphysics, in that any methodology used in metaphysical study relies on certain presuppositions, whereby it seems that metaphysical results are relative to those presuppositions. What is needed is a methodology that can yield objective metaphysical results that are not limited by the presuppositions of that methodology. This paper argues for a way to triangulate on stable metaphysical results by using existing methodologies as perspectives on metaphysical topics, and by reducing the differences between those perspectives to non-perspectival truths, if possible.

## 1 The Question of Methodology in Metaphysics

It seems that the question of methodology arises in general in cases where there is a problem or difficulty in accessing something. So, for example, one might indeed raise the question of the best method to access a deposit of gold or silver buried deeply under many layers of rock. Yet where access is clear, the question of methodology does not seem to arise. If there is a jewel lying on the ground directly in front of me, I do not question the best method of accessing that jewel. I typically would simply reach down and pick it up.

So asking a question concerning the methods for investigating metaphysics would seem to imply that there is some problem in metaphysics with access to something. However, it is not immediately clear what is supposed to be accessed in metaphysics.

For Immanuel Kant, the question of access arises with regard to things-in-themselves, which are not directly accessible, but only mediated by concepts of the pure understanding [Kant 1999]. However, it seems that the structure of this apparent problem itself contains a key to its own solution. The method for practicing metaphysics according to Kant consists in performing a critique of pure reason and uncovering those concepts that are necessary in order to make science possible.

However, as Arthur Schopenhauer points out, there is at least one thing-in-itself that is directly accessible, namely the inquirer, who is a thing-in-itself that is self-accessible [Schopenhauer 1966]. As an inquirer, I might indeed represent myself to myself, and the resulting representation would still fall within

Kant's critique as being mediated by concepts. Yet Schopenhauer emphasizes that there is another aspect in which the inquirer might appear, namely not as representation, but as will. In the exercise of my will, I seem to transcend the representational gap between subject and object and to bypass the need to mediate access to myself as thing-in-itself through concepts.

One might see Martin Heidegger's metaphysical methodology as a variation on Schopenhauer's insight. For Heidegger, one is always already thrown in the world and therefore immersed in being. However, there is a problem in accessing this primordial sense of being, since it is obscured by the concepts by which any inquirer represents various beings, including the inquirer himself. Here again, it seems that the structure of the apparent problem contains a key to its own solution. The method for recovering the primordial nature of being for Heidegger consists in focusing on the inquirer as *Dasein*, one whose being is an issue for itself, and in making *Dasein*'s own being transparent to itself through phenomenological analysis [Heidegger 1962].

Yet Heidegger's method presupposes that the primordial constitution of being is something that *can* be made transparent through the inquirer according to some methodology. Perhaps being is something that is always obscured by the very act of inquiring. Perhaps the only way to access being as such is to stop inquiring at all, possibly by sitting in deep meditation. Of course, Heidegger seems to acknowledge this presupposition, but denies that it is problematic. Rather, it represents a kind of hermeneutic circle according to which one can determine whether this methodological approach is correct "only after one has gone along with it" [Heidegger 1962, p. 487].

Unfortunately, it would seem that every methodology relies on certain presuppositions, and it is not clear that only Heidegger's phenomenological method would constitute a hermeneutical circle in this regard. This observation would apply also to more recent analytical methods, whether characterized in terms of an analysis of language, or intuitions, or possible worlds, all of which rely on certain presuppositions. Thus it seems that the fundamental problem in the question of methodology for metaphysics, and indeed for all of philosophy, is that the presuppositions of the various methods for practicing metaphysical inquiry are not perfectly innocent, but constrain and shape the inquiry such that the results conform to those presuppositions. It would therefore seem necessary to investigate those presuppositions to test which are valid and which are not. However, such an investigation itself would seem to require the employment of some philosophical methodology, and that methodology would seem either to introduce further presuppositions that would need to be investigated, or to rely on the same presuppositions that are under investigation.

Framing the problem in this way does not seem to offer any clear solution, so in order to make any progress on this problem, it may need to be approached more obliquely, from a different angle. Rather than evaluating the presuppositions to determine which are correct, I propose using those presuppositions as varying perspectives on metaphysics and seeking a way to triangulate on stable metaphysical results using those perspectives. As background for this proposal, I will start by reviewing the different attitudes toward presuppositions taken by

R. G. Collingwood and Edmund Husserl.

## 2 Collingwood and Husserl on Presuppositions

R. G. Collingwood expounds a view of the nature of metaphysics precisely in terms of presuppositions, in accordance with his logic of question and answer. Collingwood claims that every proposition represents an answer to some question, where each question has certain presuppositions. Accordingly, he distinguishes between relative and absolute presuppositions. A relative presupposition is a presupposition of some question, but an answer to some other question. An absolute presupposition, though, is a presupposition to some question, but answers no question at all [Collingwood 1998].

The function of metaphysics for Collingwood is to investigate the absolute presuppositions of the natural sciences. These are ultimately the presuppositions that concern existence and time and other topics that traditionally fall within metaphysical inquiry and that shape the questions that scientists ask. Thus metaphysics for Collingwood does not concern propositions at all, since propositions answer some question, and metaphysics is concerned with absolute presuppositions that answer no questions.

Several decades before Thomas Kuhn wrote of paradigms and scientific revolutions [Kuhn 1996], Collingwood recognized that science changes from era to era, and claimed that these changes can only occur when the absolute presuppositions of science likewise change. Scientists ask different questions now than they did in ancient or medieval times, and those different questions ultimately rely on different absolute presuppositions, which form the object of study for metaphysics. Consequently, metaphysics for Collingwood is fundamentally a historical discipline, in that metaphysical questions ultimately become historical questions. In asking about the nature of existence, for example, the metaphysician can only properly ask what conception of existence forms an absolute presupposition to the scientific questions of some historical era.

By contrast, Edmund Husserl stoutly opposes the kind of historicism that Collingwood embraces, along with practically every other form of relativism [Husserl 2001, pp. 75-82], writing several decades before Collingwood. Husserl's solution to the kind of relativity that emerges from differences in presuppositions is to turn away from those presuppositions and to turn toward what he calls the things themselves. Yet for Husserl, these things are not Kantian things-in-themselves, but rather the intentional objects that appear phenomenally to the consciousness of the investigator [Husserl 1982].

Of course, there would seem to be a problem with these intentional objects in that some of them clearly seem to exist, such as rocks and trees, while others do not, such as centaurs and golden mountains. An investigation into what does not exist would not seem to have the same value as an investigation into what does exist, if indeed there is any value in investigating non-existents at all.<sup>1</sup> However, it is not always clear how to determine what exists and what

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Routley [Routley 1980], [Routley 1982] and Graham Priest [Priest 2007] think

does not. While rocks and trees seem to exist, Peter van Inwagen has notoriously argued that what exist are only living organisms and the elementary simples that compose them [van Inwagen 1990]. So trees exist since they are living organisms, but rocks do not. Of course, van Inwagen's arguments rely on certain presuppositions or constraints, as he put it, and he is perfectly honest about these constraints. As he says, "most of what is said in this book can be of little use to someone who accepts different constraints. And, sadly, the reverse is true" [van Inwagen 1990, p. 14]. So the fundamental metaphysical question of existence appears inextricably entangled in presuppositions, such that it seems that any philosophical account of existence would be relative to the presuppositions adopted in the methods of the investigator.

For Husserl, as with Kant and Heidegger, it seems that the structure of the apparent problem suggests a clue to its solution. If the problem is that presuppositions concerning existence influence the investigation into things themselves, the solution for Husserl is simply to bracket the entire question of the existence of the intentional objects that appear to consciousness and thereby to focus attention on those objects as such and their structural relations to other such objects in intentionality. Husserl claims that what emerges is a presuppositionless science.

Yet it is not clear that Husserl's method is completely free of all presuppositions. I would note that Schopenhauer had earlier claimed, "Every method in philosophy which is ostensibly *without any assumption* is humbug; for we must always regard something as given in order to start therefrom" [Schopenhauer 2000, p. 33]. So while Husserl banishes existential presuppositions from his phenomenological methodology, he does not thereby escape reliance on any presuppositions at all. Worse still, in bracketing away existential presuppositions, Husserl seems to be bracketing away much of traditional metaphysics that focuses specifically on questions of existence. So perhaps the phenomenological method is useful in some fields of study, but for most metaphysical inquiry, it would seem to be disastrous.

So, Collingwood and Husserl seem to offer bleak options with regard to metaphysical inquiry. If presuppositions are fully acknowledged and embraced, as with Collingwood, then metaphysical study becomes merely a relativist historical inquiry. If, on the other hand, those presuppositions are eliminated or at least minimized, as with Husserl, then metaphysics becomes significantly impoverished as a field of study.

### 3 Perspectival Reduction

I have referred several times to the principle that the structure of an apparent problem provides a clue to its solution. If the problem is that philosophical and metaphysical results are relative to the presuppositions inherent in the methods that yield those results, the structure of this problem accordingly suggests a solution. I would propose that the apparent relativity of metaphysical results

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there is some value, and I am sympathetic to their arguments.

to methodological presuppositions be accepted as a methodological expedient, though not necessarily as an assertion of truth. There is an appearance of relativity, but there is a further question whether this relativity is merely apparent or is real.

To test this apparent relativity, what is needed is a better understanding of relativism itself, in order to determine what are the crucial theses in supporting any claim of relativism. If any of these theses can be denied with regard to the apparent relativity according to presuppositions, then the relativity is merely apparent, not real. What emerges from this proposal is a meta-methodology whereby any and all other methods are employed as perspectives on metaphysical and philosophical topics, but these perspectives are used in order to triangulate on more stable, non-perspectival results. I call this meta-methodology *perspectival reduction*. What follows is only a brief summary of a more complete explication of this method [Ressler forthcoming].

So, for some metaphysical topic, let any number of methods be used and let the presuppositions of these methods be identified. Then there would appear to be an instance of relativity of the results of these methods to their presuppositions. Now let the structure of this apparent relativity be examined in order to determine whether this apparent relativity can be reduced to some non-relativistic form.

In a previous study of relativism and its logic [Ressler 2009], I identified three theses that must hold in any instance of relativism:

1. *Formal Requirements*: Whatever requirements must be satisfied in order to claim that something is relative to something else.
2. *Objective Equity*: None of the perspectives is objectively preferable to any other.
3. *Incommensurability*: The various perspectives cannot be fully coordinated or calibrated between each other.

If any of these theses can be denied with regard to the apparent relativity by presuppositions, then the apparent relativity will collapse into some non-relativistic form. There is insufficient space here to investigate these three theses in detail, but the way these theses can be denied with regard to metaphysical methodology can be summarized as follows:

1. There are many formal requirements for relativity, but the most important is that there must be disagreement between the various perspectives. If every perspective agrees on certain metaphysical results, then it cannot be said that those results are relative to anything. So if the same metaphysical results emerge regardless of the presuppositions of the methods, then the various perspectives will have triangulated on a single result, thus reducing the apparent relativity. However, given widespread disagreement in metaphysics and in philosophy in general, this way of reducing the apparent relativity seems unlikely.

2. If one perspective is objectively preferable to the others, then the apparent relativity would also be reduced, since the objectively preferable perspective would appear to be the best candidate for truth, and the others would seem to constitute errors. The key to this way of achieving perspectival reduction is ensuring objectivity. If there are different standards of preferability, then the judgement of a preferable perspective will appear relative to those standards, thus introducing another layer of relativity and subjectivity in addition to the relativity according to presuppositions. It seems the way to ensure objectivity in the judgement of a preferable perspective is to ensure that each perspective endorses the same standards of evaluation. However, since different methods seem precisely to presuppose different standards of evaluation, this way of reducing the apparent relativity also seems unlikely.
3. While most accounts of commensurability and incommensurability throughout the twentieth century focus on semantic concerns with meaning, I claim that the best way to understand commensurability with regard to relativism is as a structural transformation of one perspective into another, regardless of the meanings of terms within the various perspectives. The paradigm model of this kind of commensurability is the Lorentz transformations in the special theory of relativity, which provide equations for transforming measurements of spatial and temporal intervals between different inertial frameworks. Incommensurability is when no such transformation is possible. So if the various perspectives on some metaphysical topic can be transformed into each other by means of similar transformational rules, then it would seem that the account of this transformational rule would itself constitute a metaphysical theory on that metaphysical topic, just as the special theory of relativity that employs the Lorentz transformations constitutes a theory of space and time. So if there were a set of transformational rules that could coordinate all the various theories of the nature of truth, for example, then the philosophical account of those transformational rules would constitute a more comprehensive theory of truth than any of the other theories, which would merely constitute perspectives on truth.

The search for commensurability rules seems the most promising way to achieve perspectival reduction. While the first two ways seem already well known in philosophical practice, most of which seems devoted to arguments about why some favored position is preferable to all the others, the search for commensurability rules does not seem to be well appreciated within philosophical practice, though there are some precedents in the history of philosophy. Because this technique is not much used within philosophical practice, I am encouraged to think that there could be great progress within metaphysics and philosophy in general once this technique becomes more widely employed.

## 4 The Dimensions of Metaphysics

Just as the Lorentz transformations rely on the recognition of spatial and temporal dimensions across which the transformations are performed, so too the search for commensurability rules as part of a meta-methodology in metaphysics will need to identify a number of dimensions across which transformations between the various perspectives on metaphysics topics can be achieved. While it is possible that these dimensions might be epistemological or even ethical in nature, it seems more likely from the nature of metaphysics itself that the fundamental dimensions for commensurability between perspectives on metaphysical topics will be metaphysical in nature. For example, some likely dimensions might be:

- Being and existence
- Object and entity
- Concrete and abstract
- Particular and universal
- Appearance and reality
- Fact and fiction
- Possible and actual
- Relative and absolute
- Truth and falsehood

Of course, these dimensions represent precisely the metaphysical topics on which disagreements and differences between perspectives arise. Consequently, there is a concern that the various problems in metaphysics are so intertwined that no problem can be solved on one topic without also solving every other metaphysical problem, with the consequence that metaphysics would seem to require the formulation of grand unifying systems, as in the Hegelian period of philosophy. Such systems are both difficult to formulate and difficult to evaluate.

Yet it is not clear that the identification of transformational dimensions must result in such all-encompassing grand systems. Rather, it may be that perspectival reduction could identify some minimal account of metaphysical topics across other metaphysics dimensions without requiring the solution of all problems within those dimensions themselves. So for example, in seeking commensurability rules between various perspectives on the nature of truth and falsity, a transformation might be performed across the dimension of relativity and absoluteness, let us suppose. However, not all problems concerning relativism would need to be solved in order to devise transformation rules concerning the nature of truth. Rather, it would seem that the role of the dimension of relativity and absoluteness in the transformational rules concerning truth, coupled with the problematic nature of relativism, would thereby provide an explanation of

why the question of relative truth would arise. Once the problems concerning relativity and absoluteness are also solved, then the question of relative truth would thereby be answered, but the account of the transformational rules across the dimension of relativity and absoluteness would provide an minimal account of the nature of truth that would hold regardless of how questions of relativism get resolved.

Thus the hope is that metaphysical problems can be solved in this incremental manner without requiring grand unifying metaphysical systems. With the identification of more solutions to metaphysical problems, an increasingly more complete metaphysical system would begin to emerge, but such complete systems would not be needed at the beginning in order for the method to proceed. Of course, whether this hope can be realized will only be determined by working out particular commensurability rules on specific metaphysical topics, not by speculating about it in the general manner adopted here.

## 5 Methodological Iteration

While perspectival reduction operates against the presuppositions of other philosophical methodologies, I do not claim that the method of perspectival reduction has no presuppositions itself. It must surely have some presuppositions, even if I cannot articulate them all at this point.

Some may be tempted to see this situation as incoherent. Perspectival reduction presents itself as a methodology that operates against the presuppositions of other methodologies in an attempt to transcend those presuppositions as a means to triangulate on non-perspectival results. Yet this meta-methodology has presuppositions of its own that would need to be transcended as well. However, I do not see any incoherence in the acknowledgement of presuppositions in the method of perspectival reduction. Rather, what those presuppositions suggest to me is that the implementation of perspectival reduction cannot be completed within a single attempt, but must be part of an iterative process.

Suppose that an instance of perspectival reduction is completed on some metaphysical topic, yielding some account of that topic by virtue of commensurability rules. This resulting account would seem to be another perspective on the topic that is dependent in part on the presuppositions of the method of perspectival reduction. Then let there be a second iteration of the method that incorporates the results of that first iteration of perspectival reduction, along with all of the perspectives employed within the first iteration, and let another attempt at a perspectival reduction be performed.

The hope is that with further iterations, the process of perspectival reduction will converge asymptotically on a single stable result that recurs regardless of further iterations and regardless of whatever other perspectives are incorporated within the implementation of perspectival reduction. Of course, there is no guarantee at this point that such a stable result will always emerge. It may happen that subsequent iterations of the method will alternate between several different results, or that some other pattern will emerge. Such a circumstance



would ultimately need to be evaluated in the specific context in which it emerges, so I will not speculate here on what such patterns might mean.

Still, it should not be a surprise that the method of perspectival reduction would turn out to be an iterative process, since the dialectics of philosophy from the beginning appear to have required seemingly endless iterations. What perspectival reduction provides, though, is a framework within which those dialectics can operate and in which progress on metaphysical and philosophical topics can be gauged. That progress would consist in incorporating increasingly more perspectives within a common account by means of commensurability rules.

I have outlined here a perspectival method for addressing the potential relativity of metaphysical results according to the presuppositions of the methods used to generate those results. There may indeed be other perspectival methods, but I think that there is a compelling case for pursuing the method of perspectival reduction further. Since it incorporates all other methods and approaches as perspectives, this method uses everything that has transpired in the history of philosophy and wastes nothing, unlike some other methods that would discard earlier approaches as representing confusions or as faltering on pseudo-problems.

With regard to metaphysics and philosophy in general, access to the objects of study is somewhat problematic. On the one hand, these objects seem always to be around us and within us, but on the other hand, the endless controversies and disagreements in philosophy suggest that our cognitive access to these objects is not perfectly clear. One reason for this lack of clarity seems to be that the methods by which we access those objects rely on differing presuppositions, whether about those objects themselves or about the nature of knowing them.

Accordingly, I think it is important to take the problem of the apparent relativity of metaphysical results to presuppositions very seriously, rather than merely trusting some single methodology, whether it relies on an analysis of language, on intuitions, on possible worlds, or on something else. Philosophy in general, as with other disciplines, should always be seeking greater objectivity in its practice. My argument here is that the use of perspectival methods is a way to attain such objectivity.

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