

These

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Subjective Thought

James Conant

Résumé

La question à laquelle je m'intéresse dans cet essai est de savoir s'il existe une manière de rendre logique une idée qui est à la fois subjective et objective. Ou en termes hégéliens : la pensée peut-elle atteindre un véritable équilibre entre la subjectivité et l'objectivité ? Je suivrai certains axes de la pensée de Nietzsche qui mènent à une telle conclusion.

The question I want to explore in this paper is the following: is there a way to make sense of the idea of a thought that is both subjective and objective? Or to put the point in more Hegelian terms: can thought achieve a genuine equipoise between subjectivity and objectivity? I will follow certain lines of thought in Nietzsche that trace a route towards such a conclusion.

I would like to work towards a possible form of affirmative response to my Hegelian question by considering first a way of thinking that rules out the possibility of a positive response altogether, on the grounds that to the extent that our thought is characterized (though perhaps it would be better to say now: compromised) by our forms of subjectivity, its claim to objectivity must also be diminished. Such a way of thinking is bound to lead to the conclusion that the very idea of objective thought must contain a contradiction in terms, in so far as the involvement of cognitively constitutive forms of subjectivity is a condition of any form of world-directed thought. It is a conclusion to which the early Nietzsche was led.

Subjective Thought
James Conant

In order to see how the early Nietzsche arrives at this conclusion, let us look at a few passages from his essay *Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense*, beginning with the following:

[T]he insect or the bird perceives an entirely different world from the one that human beings do, and the question as to which of these perceptions of the world is the more correct is quite meaningless, for this would have to be decided by the standard of *correct perception*, which means by a standard which is *not available*. But in any case it seems to me that “the correct perception” – which would mean “the adequate expression of an object in the subject” – is a contradictory nonentity [*ein widerpruchvolles Unding*]¹

This passage quickly arrives at the conclusion that the very concept of *correct perception* involves an inherent contradiction. Nietzsche's gloss on what the concept requires is “the adequate expression of an object in the subject”; and the rest of the essay makes clear what such a relation of “adequate expression” would require: a mode of representation of the object by the subject in which the process of representation in no way alters or distorts the nature of the object. What Nietzsche here designates by means of the concept of *correct perception*, he also calls, elsewhere in the essay, “pure knowledge”. *Purity* here means pure of any cognitively perspectival element. The point of the early essay as a whole is to argue that the attainment of the requisite purity in our modes of perception or knowledge is impossible. Nietzsche employs a raft of arguments to this end. The one in

¹ “Truth and Lie in the Ultra-Moral Sense” [henceforth TL], in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, translated by Daniel Breazzeale (Humanities Press: Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 2979), p.86 – I have amended the translation.

the above passage tries to derive this conclusion from the observation that “the insect or the bird perceives an entirely different world from the one that human beings do”. I will not pause over the specific shortcomings of this argument (or over those of most of the other specific arguments deployed in this early essay). What I will do instead is to lay bare (what I will henceforth call) *the early Nietzschean argument-form* of which this specific argument – along with so many others in Nietzsche’s early writings – is an instance.

The argument-form in question, when broken down into its ingredient steps, involves the following eight-step movement of thought: (1) in order for a cognizing subject to come into cognitive contact with a potential object of cognition some transaction must take place between the cognitive equipment of the subject and the potential object of cognition, (2) in every such transaction, in order for the object to come into view for the subject, certain structural features of the cognitive equipment of the subject must come into play and mediate the subject’s encounter with the object, (3) these structural features of the cognitive apparatus furnish the cognizing subject with a cognitively slanted perspective on the object, (4) the ensuing manner in which the object appears to the subject necessarily reflects an ineliminable contribution on the part of the subject due to contingent features of his cognitive perspective, (5) when viewed by other sorts of subject (or by the same subject, from other, cognitively equally parochial, perspectives) the same object will appear different, (6) all humanly available perspectives on the object are cognitively equivalent in this respect – are equally subjective – there is no such thing as a cognitive perspective on the object that is unmediated by any structure of human subjectivity, (7) objective knowledge – knowledge of the object as it is in itself – would be knowledge of the object as it is apart from the mediating agency of human subjectivity, (8) it is humanly impossible to attain such knowledge.

Nietzsche’s early account of human cognition (as hopelessly tainted by the distorting lens of subjectivity) presupposes an implicit

conception of how the contrast between subjectivity and objectivity is to be drawn. The picture here (of all human cognition as hopelessly “anthropomorphic”) turns on an implicit conception of what it would be to know “the essence of things”. The claim that we distort nature in subjecting it to the mediation of, say, concepts presupposes a notion of nature as it is prior to our distorted representation of it – a notion about which already the early Nietzsche realizes he is no position to say anything more than the following: “nature”, thus understood, corresponds to “an X which remains inaccessible and indefinable for us.” As thin as Nietzsche’s conception of this X is, it plays a central role in shaping his early epistemological thought. The picture at the center of Nietzsche’s early philosophy – one of cognitive confinement within our forms of human subjectivity – presupposes that at least some minimal degree of sense can be made of talk about such an X. It thus presupposes – to borrow a formulation which only the mature Nietzsche is in a position to attack with a clear conscience – that we can at least *think* such an X even if we cannot know it.

In arriving at this conclusion, the early Nietzsche places himself squarely within the bind of what I will call *pseudo-Kantianism*. As long as he remains at this early juncture in his thought, he finds himself saddled with a notion of “objectivity” – of the bare X, the thing-in-itself – “almost empty”, he says. However close to empty this concept threatens to become, it must continue to retain a modicum of content; for it to be able to perform the central structural role it is called upon to play in anchoring Nietzsche’s early arguments concerning the merely perspectival character of all human cognition. Its role is to complement the concept of subjectivity with which he here works, and to cast a shadow back over every cognitive achievement that exhibits the least admixture of subjectivity, thus licensing the conclusion that all such achievements amount, in the end, to nothing but “illusions”.

This is a familiar position in the recent history of philosophy. Its central doctrine – that all human knowledge is merely perspectival

– is identified by Nietzsche (and by no means only by Nietzsche) as that of “the Kantian philosophy”. (Since I think it figures in Kant’s mature thought only as an object of critique, I have preferred to call it pseudo-Kantianism.) The pseudo-Kantianism of *On Truth and Lie in Their Extra-Moral Sense* is evident in a passage such as the following: “If we are forced to comprehend all things only under these forms, then it ceases to be amazing that in all things we actually comprehend nothing but these forms.”²

Nietzsche here sums up in a single striking sentence the step that is central to pseudo-Kantianism. The crucial move here can be reformulated as the transition from the first of the following two claims to the second:

- (1’) All cognition involves forms of subjectivity, i.e. forms of apprehension and/or comprehension that can be enjoyed only by a cognizing subject antecedently constituted in particular ways.
- (2’) All our cognition is merely subjective, i.e. does not yield genuinely objective knowledge.

In the course of his subsequent philosophical development, Nietzsche first worries about what it would mean to try to take this conclusion seriously, then becomes increasingly suspicious of the route via which he earlier allowed himself to reach it, and, finally, becomes centrally concerned to expose and criticize both it and the tacit opposition between the subjective (or affective) and the objective (or knowledge-involving) that he comes to diagnose as its crucial presupposition.

The time has come to take a closer look at the fundamental commitments of Nietzsche’s early perspectivism. I will identify three of

² TL, pp. 87-8.

these, the first of which comes forcefully into view in connection with his reflections on the topic of transcendence. The very idea of transcendence strikes the early Nietzsche as inherently suspect. But if he throws the concept of transcendence away altogether, he threatens to saw off the branch he sits on when he employs his favorite philosophical metaphor – the metaphor of a perspective. In order for us to be able to understand a metaphorical application of this concept, we must first be able to make *some* sense of its literal application. That is, we must allow that the ordinary concept of a perspective is an example of the sort of thing which *does* admit of transcendence. To say that something round looks elliptical when viewed from a certain perspective presupposes the idea that there is something that counts as transcending that perspective. Nietzsche needs to hold on to some version of that idea if the rest of his argumentation is to make much sense. His argument requires that we be able to understand what words such as ‘distort’ and ‘true estimation’ are supposed to mean. He needs us first to be able to understand *what it would mean* for us to be able to transcend our perspective, if only we could, and he then wants us to be able to go on and conclude that *we cannot do this* – where the “this” is meant to stand for something impossible but nonetheless intelligible.

It is important that it be intelligible. For the early Nietzsche takes himself to be giving voice to an important philosophical discovery when he concludes we cannot transcend our perspective. Previous philosophers thought our perspective could be transcended; early Nietzsche aims to show that they were wrong. But since the original logic of the concept of a perspective would seem to entail the possibility of transcendence, Nietzsche takes himself to have made an extraordinary *discovery*: his philosophical reflections have disclosed the existence of a very special, particularly fundamental, kind of perspective – one that cannot be transcended. In his eagerness to declare his discovery that our perspective cannot be transcended, Nietzsche displays (what I will call) the *first fundamental commitment* of his early perspectivism that Nietzsche later subjects to close

scrutiny – the supposition that what the pseudo-Kantian wants to mean (when he claims, e.g., “we cannot transcend our perspective and attain a view of the object as it is in itself”) is intelligible, that it is the sort of thing that one could discover to be true or false.

One way of putting the conclusion of pseudo-Kantianism is as follows: We are unable to attain truly objective knowledge – all of our knowledge is merely subjective. One of the things “*merely* subjective” clearly is supposed to mean in this context is *not objective* (whatever that means). But the question arises whether there is an available and pertinent sense of the term ‘subjective’, when it is employed in such contexts without the modifier ‘merely’, where what is intended is not just to be identified with what is meant by ‘not objective’. If (as early Nietzsche clearly thinks) it requires some argument – i.e., something along the lines of the early Nietzschean argument-form – to secure the conclusion that no exercise of human subjectivity is able to deliver objective knowledge (and if such an argument is one that someone else can intelligibly dispute), then terms such as ‘subjective’ and ‘subjectivity’ must in some contexts have a sense that admits of specification independently of whatever sense may be conferred upon them when they enter into a contrast with terms such as ‘objective’ and ‘objectivity’.

A *subjective* property, in one relevant independently specifiable sense of the term ‘subjective’, is a property whose very conception involves essential reference to how a thing which possesses the property affects the subject. For properties that are subjective in this sense, no adequate conception of what it is for a thing to possess such a property is possible apart from a conception of the sort of (as Nietzsche likes to put it) *Wirkung* the thing typically has, in relevantly standard circumstances, *upon a subject*. I will sometimes refer to properties that are subjective in this sense as *subject-dependent* in order to distinguish this independently specifiable sense of the term ‘subjective’ from the one in which it simply signifies, without additional philosophical premises, that which is not objective. Although the paradigm of a subjective property in this

independently specifiable sense of the term is a (so-called) “secondary quality” (such as color), the later Nietzsche tends to prefer to adduce examples of affective properties other than the usual secondary qualities – such as the category of the amusing or the nauseating, as well as traditional aesthetic properties, such as the beautiful and the ugly, and even (as further putative examples of affective properties) moral concepts such as the noble and ignoble. But the early essay Nietzsche wants to include within the scope of the concept of subjectivity, putatively so understood, categories as fundamental as those of quantity, quality, substance and relation. Here we have the *second fundamental commitment* of Nietzsche’s early perspectivism – that the category of subjectivity, so understood, can be coherently extended in this way.

One immediate corollary of this commitment is worth flagging separately: a conception of appearances as *opaque*, screening that which appears in experience from view. Once he has taken this step, he has arrived at a conception according to which anything that is properly termed an “appearance” is *ipso facto* not a glimpse of reality. There is no longer anything admissible to say about that which does the appearing in an appearance. Thus, on this hyperbolic extension of the concept of a perspective, early Nietzsche arrives at a conception of the relation between appearance and reality in which the ordinary grammar of appearance – the original internal relation between an object that appears and *its* appearance – breaks down.

Even if the scope of the category of subjectivity is usually not stretched as far as the early Nietzsche here tries to stretch it, the schema offered above for what it is for something to be a subjective property still suffices to specify a fairly straightforward and time-honored conception of subjectivity. It also gives rise, however, to the following fateful formula for specifying in substantive terms what it means for a property to be *objective*. Any property that is not (in the above sense) subjective (i.e., subject-dependent) is objective. Objective knowledge of the world, thus understood, must involve knowledge of properties of the world that in no way depend upon

the effects such properties typically have upon the cognizing subject. This has the following consequence: objective knowledge will be possible only for those beings who are able to piece together a picture of the universe which eschews all description in terms of properties that can be understood only through an essential reference to their effects on such beings. This is the *third fundamental commitment* of Nietzsche's early perspectivism – a conception of objectivity that it shares with those forms of perspectivism that it seeks to reject.

The literal concept of a perspective involves an interplay of objective and subjective moments. What happens when the concept is philosophically extended is that it becomes increasingly difficult to hold these two moments together. They start to push each other out: the objective moment starts to push out any room in which a faculty of subjectivity might operate (“we can think the thing-in-itself but we cannot know it”) and the presence of any moment of subjectivity appears to start to threaten any claim to objectivity (“all knowledge is perspectival and we cannot transcend our perspectives”). It helps here to think of the perspectivist as confronted by a dilemma – where the horns of the dilemma in question might be termed *the problem of vacuous objectivity* and *the problem of untranscendable subjectivity* respectively. Each of the horns of this dilemma has already figured in the passages from Nietzsche canvassed above. But, by the time he writes *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche is drawn to consider them in immediate juxtaposition with one another, beginning to appreciate the extent to which they feed on and sustain one another.

The problem of vacuous objectivity threatens to come into focus, for early Nietzsche, whenever he begins to reflect on just how empty his own early concept of “the real essence of things” – the unknowable X – actually is. The problem is nicely summed up in the following, much later remark (from 1888): “As if a world would still remain over after one subtracted the perspective!”³. If

³ *The Will to Power* [henceforth WP], section 567.

our conception of the real essence of things does not possess any determinate content, any determinate specification of how things are – of their being *this* way rather than *that* – if it is merely a matter of conceiving of the world as however it is apart from how we are obliged to conceive it, then there is no *way* that we are (in conceiving it to be “as it is in itself”) thereby *conceiving* it to be. What is required to break out of the philosophical bind into which Nietzsche placed himself for much of his philosophical career is to hold on to this insight without thereby falling into the trap of folding the world itself into our concept of what a “perspective” is (so that there is nothing left for our perspectives to be perspectives on).

The initially attractive way around the first horn of the dilemma is to require that our conception of the way the world is as it is in itself not be vacuous – that we attempt to frame a determinate conception of “the way” things are in themselves, of what is left when we subtract all our perspectives. This, however, leads to the second horn of the dilemma. Any putatively objective conception threatens to turn out to be nothing more than the attainment of yet another particular perspective on the world. Such a perspective will furnish us with nothing more than a conception of how things appear from *that* vantage point – thus merely furnishing us with yet one more appearance to add to all the others, while failing to furnish us with any means of transcending our subjectivity – thus failing to furnish us with what the perspectivist really desires: a set of objective categories in terms of which all the apparent (merely subjective) properties of the world are to be encompassed. It begins to seem as if all that can come into view are perspectives and more perspectives – and beyond that nothing.

What the very early Nietzsche does is to settle for the first horn of the dilemma and, when first faced with the problem that thereby opens up, simply to bite the bullet. He concludes that there is an objective reality, though we cannot know it. The middle-period Nietzsche, sensing the vacuousness of such a concept of “reality”, becomes dissatisfied with this answer and, instead, starts to

succumb to a more nihilistic tendency in his thinking – one that threatens to impale him on the second horn of the dilemma: there is no way the world is (even) in itself, there are just are untranscendable forms of subjectivity: forms of mental operation that fetter our minds, conducive to a quest for survival but of no use in a quest for knowledge. A dim recognition of the incoherence of any attempt to take a step in this direction does not altogether elude him, even in those of his writings in which he is most inclined to succumb to this tendency in his thinking. This, in turn, triggers an oscillation in his thinking between the twin horns of this dilemma – one that he eventually becomes increasingly conscious and wary of, until he finally sets about the task of trying to diagnose its sources.

The mature Nietzsche's initial path out of this deadlock involves coming to see that the two horns of the dilemma sketched above do not represent two substantive philosophical options between which one must – or even can – choose. This requires breaking with the first of his fundamental commitments. Once this step has been taken, it becomes possible to see that each horn of the dilemma is the mirror image of the other – that any attempt to affirm or deny either plunges one equally fatefully into the affirmation of a piece of nonsense. Already as early as *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche begins tentatively to work his way towards this insight. In that book, he predicts that the day will come when...

... we will recognize that the thing-in-itself is worth a Homeric laugh: that it seemed so much, indeed everything, and is actually empty, namely empty of meaning.⁴

The first-person plural and the future tense are both worth taking seriously here, in as much as Nietzsche himself has not, at

⁴ *Human All Too Human*, section 16

this point in his trajectory, yet thought through the consequences of the claim that the notion of the thing-in-itself is “empty of meaning”. To think this through would be to see that this emptiness infects the contrast between objectivity and subjectivity that informs both his own position and those he seeks to reject. And, as we have already seen, thinking this through is no easy matter. For if one simply jettisons the thing-in-itself, without thinking the consequences of its “emptiness” through, while allowing the other fundamental commitments operative here to remain firmly in place, one simply plunges oneself into nihilism.

To take seriously the idea, broached already in *Human, All Too Human*, that the upshot of this line of thought is (not a substantive philosophical thesis, but “actually” something which is) “empty of meaning” – to think *that* through – requires taking up the question whether the negation of something “empty of meaning” can itself, in turn, constitute a substantive philosophical insight. To press that question all the way is to begin to question whether the entire picture of *confinement* (of being trapped inside our forms of subjectivity) which animates stages much of Nietzsche's thought is compulsory. It is to begin to see that the attempt to affirm the upshot of *either* horn of the dilemma in substantive terms is to fall prey to a “seduction of words”; and to see this is to see that there is nothing to choose between here.

After a number of nods in its direction, Nietzsche's first begins to embrace this thought more fully in *Beyond Good and Evil*. In sections 15 and 16 of that work, in rapid succession, he rejects the problems of vacuous objectivity and untranscendable subjectivity as equally unintelligible. The exposure of the first horn has been under preparation for some time and has, by this time, been repeated a number of times in Nietzsche's previous works, so that he is by now able to put it succinctly:

That [expressions such as] “immediate certainty”, as well as “absolute knowledge” and the “thing-in-itself”, involve a *contradictio in adjecto*, I shall repeat

a hundred times: we really ought to free ourselves
from the seduction of words!⁵

The thing-in-itself is rejected here not on the grounds that he earlier rejected it (because it represents an impossible attempt to transcend our perspective and speak of something that lies outside of it). It is rejected here because it is a seductive form of words that has yet to have been given any clear meaning. If this is true, then to affirm its existence and to deny it are equally empty. What is a comparatively recent note to be struck in Nietzsche's work comes next, in his emphasis on the consequent unintelligibility of the second horn of the dilemma:

To study physiology with a clear conscience, one must insist that the sense organs are *not* phenomena in the sense of idealistic philosophy... What? And others even say that the external world is the work of our organs? But then our body, as a part of this external world, would be the work of our organs! But then our organs themselves would be... the work of our organs! It seems to me that this is a complete *reductio ad absurdum*.⁶

We see Nietzsche here also wanting to break with the second fundamental commitment of his earlier philosophy, thereby carving out a space for the reintroduction of distinctions effaced in his prior hyperbolic extension of the concept of a perspective. A desire to break with the second commitment is signaled by Nietzsche's no longer being willing to equate that which is disclosed by our sense organs with "phenomena" in the sense of idealistic philosophy. (What it means, for later Nietzsche, to understand something as a "phenomenon" in this sense is still just what it meant for early

⁵ *Beyond Good and Evil* [henceforth BGE], section 16.

⁶ BGE, 15.

Nietzsche: a phenomenon is the opaque appearance of an underlying noumenal reality – a reality that remains screened from view.) If one simply denies the existence of the (pseudo-Kantian) thing-in-itself – or noumenon – while holding the other commitments of pseudo-Kantianism in place, one ends up affirming that all there can be are "phenomena in the sense of idealistic philosophy". But, for later Nietzsche, this (pseudo-Kantian) conception of a phenomenon is now fingered as the philosophical complement of the *contradictio in adjecto* of the "thing-in-itself". He now sees that if our forms of sensibility are to be understood as able to furnish *perspectives* on the external world, then that which they provide a perspective *on* must not be understood as itself belonging to that perspective, else we saddle ourselves with a conclusion of the following form: Our perspectives themselves would be... the work of our perspectives! This *reductio ad absurdum* of the hyperbolic extension of the concept of a perspective is a *reductio* of Nietzsche's own former position.

To follow the movement of Nietzsche's thought here, it is helpful first to go back and consider the progress, previous to this point, in his reflection on the fateful concept of an appearance that he inherits from the (pseudo-Kantian variety of) idealistic philosophy. A number of these remarks found in his middle-period writings can be seen as pointing the way to his later philosophy. Consider the following pair of passages:

What is "appearance" for me now? Certainly not the opposite of some essence: what could I say about any essence except to name the attributes of its appearance! Certainly not a dead mask that one could place on an unknown X or remove from it.⁷

⁷ *The Gay Science*, section 54.

The antithesis “thing-in-itself” and “appearance” is untenable; with that, however, the concept “appearance” also disappears.⁸

The second of the remarks is often quoted. But it is helpful, in order to avoid a common misreading of it, to consider it in conjunction with the first. We find Nietzsche in these two remarks beginning to grope his way towards the insight that if the concept of a “thing-in-itself” is empty then the entire “idealist” antithesis between “thing-in-itself” and “appearance” falls apart. If the (pseudo-Kantian) contrast between “thing-in-itself” and “appearance” is untenable, then the (pseudo-Kantian) concept of appearance must be rethought as well. If we really think this through, we will be left with no way to formulate his earlier perspectivism – for that just was the doctrine that there is a thing-in-itself but, since we cannot reach it, all we enjoy are mere appearances (in this dubious sense of “appearance” in which that which appears is screened from view by its appearances).

Nietzsche now seeks a way to conceive of an “appearance” in terms that do not exclude conceiving of (what shows itself in an appearance as) an essence. When he exclaims “What could I say about any essence except to name the attributes of its appearance!”, he acknowledges something that is both a truism and a surprising thought in the light of the commitments of his early philosophy: namely, that a thing’s nature can be disclosed – can appear, can come into view – in and through experience (i.e., in an encounter whose very possibility depends upon human forms of subjectivity). To take this thought on board is, as he here sees, to concede that an appearance must not be thought of as “a dead mask” that screens an unknown and unknowable X from view. This means that if a particular perspective on a thing offers a distorted view of the thing, it may be transcended; and thus not every alteration of

⁸ WP, 552.

perspective is *ipso facto* the exchange of one distorted perspective for another equally “merely subjective” one. If sense can be made of the idea that the appearance disclosed by a particular perspective masks the true shape of things, then it must also be possible to make sense of the idea that we can remove the mask and look the world in the face.

It is worth pausing, now, to say something about how the next critical step in Nietzsche’s thought is sometimes understood by commentators on Nietzsche’s work. The second of the quotations regarding the nature of appearances presented above as a pair (the one that declares that “the antithesis ‘thing-in-itself’ and ‘appearance’ is untenable; with that ... the concept ‘appearance’ also disappears”) is often read as if all that it were recommending were that we re-label the stuff that we previously called “mere subjectivity” and “mere appearances” by terms (putatively) designating their opposites (say, “objectivity” and “objects”) and eliminate the troublesome contrast by dropping all talk of “pure knowledge” and “the thing-in-itself”. One utterly misses – and indeed reverses – the thrust of Nietzsche’s mature thought if one thinks it can be summarized by some such motto as the following: “Since all our ‘knowledge’ depends upon untranscendable forms of subjectivity, and since there is nothing else left to mean by the word ‘knowledge’, we might as well call whatever these forms of subjectivity deliver up to us ‘forms of knowledge.’” Simply to withhold the word ‘appearance’, and to start redeploying concepts like ‘truth’ (as in, e.g., “truths are those illusions we cannot do without”) and “objectivity” (as in, e.g., “those features of our perspective that we cannot transcend are objective for us”) in ways that utterly distort their original grammar, will not hold at bay what Nietzsche, from remarkably early on, predicts will be the ultimate consequences of a strategy of philosophical denial when faced with this problem – nihilism. This re-labeling maneuver fails to think the problem through and thereby to recognize itself for what it is – a strategy for covering the difficulty up and leaving it to fester.

So what does it take to progress here? One must make both the fateful (pre-Kantian) concept of the “true world” and its equally fateful counterpart concept of a “mere appearance” disappear together. To do this, Nietzsche must find a way to let go of the third fundamental commitment of his earlier perspectivism and thereby rethink the common presupposition of the earlier stages of the dialectic: namely, the way the contrast between objectivity and subjectivity is drawn. According to the mature Nietzsche, it is this presupposition that is the fundamental engine that drives the dialectic, and it is only once it is fully exorcized that the dialectic can be defused. The character of the contrast between objectivity and subjectivity presupposed by prior philosophical perspectivisms fails to permit the sort of interplay between objective and subjective moments of experience presupposed in any literal employment of the concept of perspective. In order to allow that an essence is the sort of thing than can appear – that can come into view – in experience, we need to be able to regard our modes of sensibility as involving operations of subjectivity *and* as affording us genuine glimpses of the world. It must no longer be taken for granted that what is subjective in the sense of involving operations of subjectivity is not objective, and thus that objective knowledge (conceived as knowledge of the “true world”) must be couched solely in terms of properties whose nature in no way depends on how they affect the subject.

In the third book of *The Genealogy of Morals*, there are signs that Nietzsche is well on his way to doing this. Section 12 announces the need to re-think “the entire conceptual antithesis ‘subject’ and ‘object’” in such a way as to avoid “the ascetic self-contempt and self-mockery of reason [that] ... declares: ‘*there is* a realm of truth and being, but reason is *excluded* from it!’.” He immediately goes on to point how even in “the Kantian philosophy” such ascetic self-contempt and self-mockery of reason are at work:

[E]ven in the Kantian concept of the “intelligible character of things” something remains of

this lascivious ascetic discord that loves to turn reason against reason: for “intelligible character” signifies in Kant that things are so constituted that the intellect comprehends just enough of them to know that for the intellect they are – *utterly incomprehensible*.⁹

This criticism of the Kantian concept of the “intelligible character of things” applies equally to his own early concept of the unknowable X. But here he sees clearly that is not enough merely to reject such a concept, one needs to think through its *utter incomprehensibility* in order to be able to come out the other side and attain to a concept of knowledge over which the ascetic self-contempt and self-mockery of reason no longer cast their shadow. The passage continues:

[P]recisely because we seek knowledge, let us not be ungrateful to such resolute reversals of accustomed perspective and valuations with which the spirit has, with apparent mischievousness and futility, raged against itself for so long: to see differently in this way for once, to *want* to see differently, is no small discipline and preparation of the intellect for its future “objectivity” – the latter understood not as “contemplation without interest” (which is nonsensical absurdity), but as the ability *to control* one’s Pro and Con and to dispose of them, so that one knows how to employ a *variety* of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge.¹⁰

⁹ *The Genealogy of Morals* [henceforth GM], III, 12.

¹⁰ GM, III, 12.

We see here how, in Nietzsche's mature perspectivism, the concept of perspective is deployed in such a way that one can now move back and forth between a *variety* of perspectives without their impugning one another. Objectivity is no longer identified with the wholesale transcendence of all that is perspectival in our view of reality. On the contrary, recourse to alternating perspectives is here identified as a means to objectivity. The perspectives and affective interpretations to which we attain (rather than serving as nagging reminders of our degree of confinement within forms of subjectivity) are taken here to be the very instruments that enable us to overcome epistemic confinement.

The immediate apposition here of "perspectives" and "affective interpretations" is itself significant. It indicates that the aforementioned expansion in Nietzsche's conception of what falls within the scope of the category of objectivity (so that it is now able to encompass, e.g., appearances) is accompanied by a correlative contraction in his substantive conception of what falls within the scope of the category of subjectivity. Nietzsche here equates the realm of the perspectival (the subjective in the sense of that which is subject-dependent) with the domain of (what he here calls) "affective interpretation". Nietzsche's handling of the metaphor now takes seriously the *affective* aspect of subjectivity in a way that his previous handling of it did not (thereby encouraging the elision of the two different senses of 'subjective' distinguished above). Nietzsche throughout his later work construes the domain of affectivity very broadly so as to include not only our modes of perception but also our modes of valuation. Nevertheless, the employment of the metaphor of perspective here does not range beyond those properties that are "perspectival" (or "subjective") in this still comparatively restricted sense. Nietzsche's later employment of the metaphor thus differs radically from the earlier indiscriminate use that he makes of it. It now requires neither that every cognitive or intellectual capacity – e.g., the capacity to draw logical inferences – be regarded as the

function of a perspective (or form of subjectivity), nor that those features of experience that are perspectival (or subjective in the pertinent sense) be regarded as *a fortiori* subjective in the other sense of 'subjective' (i.e., not objective, merely perspectival). This way of unpacking the metaphor continues to allow many features of our experience – including our perceptions of humor, beauty, and nobility – to be perspectival (or subjective in the relevant sense), without the metaphor running out of control and plunging us into either the philosophical fantasy of there being a "true world" hidden behind the apparent one or the *reductio ad absurdum* of having to claim: "Our perspectives themselves are... the work of our perspectives!"

We begin to see here what is required: It is to appreciate that a property can be subjective (i.e., one whose very conception involves essential reference to how a thing which possesses such a property affects the subject) *and* objective (i.e., one that applies not only to how things seem, but to how things are). It is to allow not only that the moment of subjectivity in our experience that invites the metaphorical extension of the concept of a perspective (thus giving rise to its initial employment in naive perspectivism) and the moment of objectivity in our experience that is required by any coherent conception of knowledge (allowing us to distinguish between something's looking elliptical and its being elliptical) are perfectly compatible moments – that one and the same moment of experience can be both (in the relevant senses) subjective and objective.

The continuation of the passage quoted above furnishes a vivid illustration of how, in Nietzsche's later philosophical writings, the metaphor of a perspective comes to be employed:

Henceforth, my dear philosophers, let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a "pure, willing, painless, timeless knowing subject"; let us guard against the snares

of such contradictory concepts as “pure reason,” “absolute spirituality,” “knowledge in itself”: they 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?¹¹

One immediate and straightforward sign that Nietzsche has here broken free of the shackles of his immature perspectivism is that he no longer feels the slightest need to qualify or hedge the claim that we can see things or know things or that there are truths. The concepts *truth* and *knowledge* have here been recovered and distinguished from their mythical philosophical counterparts, so that the words denoting them can once again be unabashedly employed without scare-quotes. Moreover, to attempt to deny the mediation of perspectives (forms of subjectivity) a significant role in the achievement of knowledge, Nietzsche now thinks, is to *castrate* the intellect. Not only are the operations of subjectivity exonerated of the charge of being merely perspectival, but now “the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing the more

¹¹ GM, III, 12.

complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing be”. The more perspectives we are able to bring to bear on our experience, the more complete will our objectivity be. He now likens a mode of objectivity that has no recourse to subjectivity to an eye that cannot move – “an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces are lacking”. Just as the eye needs to alternate perspectives (in the literal sense of ‘perspective’) in order to see anything, the human subject needs to alternate perspectives (in a metaphorical sense of ‘perspective’) in order to *know* anything.

Nietzsche puts his finger in the above passage on the fatal flaw in his own earlier analysis of the concept of an appearance: such an analysis does not permit seeing to be seeing *something*, hence rendering the very idea of perceptual knowledge of an *object* “an absurdity and a nonsense”. Nietzsche’s mature conception of “a perspectival seeing” and “a perspectival knowing” no longer pushes the concept of objectivity out of the picture. It replaces an earlier (incoherent) concept of objectivity with a (coherent) one, undoing the distortions in the grammars of the concepts of “seeing” and “knowing” perpetrated by prior philosophical misappropriations of the metaphor. Indeed, the warning that introduces his recourse to the metaphor here (to “be on guard” against “dangerous old conceptual fictions” and “contradictory concepts”) again suggests that the primary aim of Nietzsche’s later employment of the metaphor is not to supplant previous metaphysical conceptions with an alternative such conception, but rather to diagnose and exorcize the “conceptual fictions” and “contradictory concepts” spawned by such conceptions, thereby correcting the prior (mis)employments of the metaphor that have so often been encouraged and inculcated in our thinking by philosophers of the past (including his own earlier self). The feature of philosophy’s past that Nietzsche here seeks to correct still widely characterizes its present.

The “conceptual fictions” and “contradictory concepts” that Nietzsche, in this passage, seems most concerned to criticize are

the very ones that any stage-four perspectivist would immediately single out for criticism. So, in order to grasp the transformation that Nietzsche's own perspectivism undergoes in the transition to his later thought, we need to understand the transformation in his understanding of how such fictions and concepts are to be criticized and how this criticism places all the varieties of philosophical perspectivism canvassed in Part II under a single indictment. What do the following four philosophical notions – all mentioned in the passage above – have in common?

- (1) "a pure, willing, painless, timeless, knowing subject"
- (2) "pure reason",
- (3) "absolute spirituality"
- (4) "knowledge in itself"

Each equates the attainment of objectivity with a form of "purity" or "absoluteness" that requires the pruning away of every admixture of subjectivity. Nietzsche calls these "contradictory concepts" because he now views the quest for objectivity (i.e., the true estimation of how things are) without recourse to forms of subjectivity (i.e., capacities for apprehending properties that are subject-dependent) as a contradiction. The later Nietzsche here remains a critic of those philosophers whom he had earlier sought to criticize – those whom Zarathustra dubs "the pure perceivers" with their ideal of "immaculate perception"¹² – but the criticism no longer rests on its earlier ground. The point of attack in the criticism of the metaphysics of pure perception has shifted significantly in his later work. The middle-period Nietzsche rejected the philosophy of the early Nietzsche because of its reliance on the pseudo-Kantian concept of the

¹² *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II, 15.

thing-in-itself. But the early and the middle-period Nietzsche were equally led to the disastrous conclusion that a rejection of the possibility of "pure knowledge" must entail the impossibility of any form of genuinely "accurate perception" because they both continued to retain (what later Nietzsche seeks to highlight as) the crucial presupposition of the metaphysics of pure perception: namely, that any degree of dependence on our forms of subjectivity entails a correlative loss in the degree of objectivity. By his later lights – contrary to his own middle-period characterizations of himself – in his middle-period work he had not yet truly emancipated himself from the pure perceivers' longing for immaculate perception. An unacknowledged nostalgia for such an unattainable form of knowledge continued to haunt his philosophy. Full emancipation from this seductive philosophical ideal comes only with an appreciation of what it is that is really "dangerous" about the contradictory conceptual fictions of the philosophers: namely, the identification of objectivity with the elimination of every admixture of subject-dependence. It is this identification that blocks the possibility of the sort of interplay between the moments of subjectivity and objectivity in our experience that any coherent employment (literal or metaphorical) of the concept of perspective presupposes.

As long as this philosophical block remains in place, with its misplaced horror of the very forms of subjectivity we cannot do without, an oscillation is bound to ensue between an insistence upon a vacuous conception of objectivity and a misdirected recoil into a celebration of just the sorts of subjectivity we can do without – an oscillation that is vividly enacted in the halting and tortured transition between Nietzsche's early and his middle-period attempts to find a firm footing somewhere along the later stations of the dialectic of perspectivism. The crucial final step that enables Nietzsche's mature employment of the metaphor to escape this oscillation, lies in his coming to appreciate that a proper understanding of the dimension of subjectivity in our

experience that invites the metaphorical identification of subjectivity with perspectivity in no way precludes a feature of our experience from being subjective (in the sense of depending on our perceptual or evaluative perspective) and at the same time objective (in the sense of affording a true estimation of how things are).

Making up One's Mind

Pascal Engel

Résumé

Dans cet article, l'auteur essaie de décrire le rapport entre savoir ce que l'on veut, qui est une manière de se connaître soi-même, et être quelqu'un de responsable. En replaçant ces réflexions à la fois dans un contexte néo-kantien récent et à travers les reformulations de ce problème opérées par la philosophie analytique, l'auteur évoque dans le détail deux manières d'être responsable de ses croyances, une manière forte et une manière faible. Ce faisant, l'article remet en question plusieurs tentatives de considérer la formation des croyances comme constituant une sorte d'action, et de considérer la connaissance de soi comme étant le fruit d'une capacité à réfléchir qui permettrait au sujet de créer pleinement ses propres croyances.

1. Introduction

A number of writers have recently rediscovered the Kantian idea that there is a close connection between the notions of having a thought, of being a reflexive being and having a self. One way in which this connection is often expressed is through the theme of the responsibility that a reflexive being has for his beliefs and judgments. Here are some expressions of this idea in recent writings:

(1) Judging, making up one's mind what to think, is something for which we are, in principle, responsible – something we freely do, as opposed to something that merely happens in our lives. Of course a belief is not always, or even typically, the result of our exercising this freedom to do what we think. But even if a belief is not freely adopted, it is an actualization of capacities of a kind, the