The Perspectival Nature of Knowledge

Exploring Different Accounts of the Theory of Perspectivism

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Abstract:

Perspectivism of knowledge, in conjunction with common epistemic assumptions, entails that perspectives are an inherently distortionary force in the knowledge relation. Often reduced to the thought that “there are no facts, only interpretations,” perspectivism can seem to lead to a skeptical or relativist theory of truth and knowledge. When interpreted as an extension of the Kantian notion of the thing-in-itself and the Correspondence Theory of Truth, it is assumed that a view from nowhere, or a non-perspectival knowledge, would be preferable. This thesis explores the basis of these different assumptions about knowledge, and the aspects of perspectivism that make them untenable. Different versions of perspectivism arises in the works of Arthur Danto, Alexander Nehamas, and Maudemarie Clark, who each argue for a characterization of the theory which in various ways misconstrue the role of the cognitive perspective in knowledge. Perspective always impels access to knowledge, and sometimes impedes it – knowledge originates from an approach to the world which is always taken through a perspective. In some cases, the perspective adopted can confuse our understanding, but that understanding is always made initially possible by the perspective. Rather than making knowledge meaningless through distorting the interpretations made by cognizing subjects, perspectives enable the cognitive relation to occur, and has a structural role in the relation between a cognizing subject and objects of their cognition.
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1. Introduction

The term perspective originates from language surrounding perception, but is used metaphorically to frame things like knowledge and belief. When we want to discuss how things appear to us without committing ourselves to the claim what we have is knowledge, we preface our statement with “from my perspective;” if we want to expand or question our preconceptions we say we need to “approach things from a different perspective;” when we want to get a better idea of how things are in relation to other things, we might say we need to “put things into perspective.” The concept of the perspective is given a metaphorical life that so exceeds its application in visual language that we scarcely notice the inconsistency of its use. In the first statement, a perspective is a personal thing that has little to do with how things actually are and more to do with how they are interpreted. In the second, a perspective is malleable, adaptable, and adoptable, and this mutability can reveal new aspects of the way things are. On the third, we are confronted with a specific perspective that is the way things are – putting things into perspective is to view them as they truly are relative to all other things and relations.

Perspectivism, a theory most commonly attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche, motivates the claim that knowledge is inherently perspectival. This claim causes confusion and stirs thought – perspectives are a feature of vision, and are not formally attributed to cognition outside of the aforementioned colloquial uses. The common modern conception of knowledge has been as a relation between knowers and knowns; a cognitive capacity which involves representations of aspects of reality. Through a metaphorical comparison with the concept of visual perspectives, perspectivism builds a robust definition of cognitive perspectives; the collections of contextual elements which alter the way aspects of the world seem to be to cognizing subjects. Perspectivism offers a compelling account of the knowledge relation, which rejects the thing-in-
itself, truth as correspondence, and the notion of a cognitive “view from nowhere.” Perspective always impels access to knowledge, and sometimes impedes it – knowledge originates from an approach to the world which is always taken through a perspective. In some cases, understanding the way the world is can be wrong on a given perspective, and access to another perspective can give us better insights into the state of affairs, but that understanding is always made initially possible by the perspective.

Critiques of perspectivism are mired in Nietzsche’s body of work to the detriment of the theory itself. Some scholars, such as Arthur Danto, attend to perspectivism as they see it outlined in a specific period of Nietzsche’s thought; Maudemarie Clark treats Nietzsche as having a multi-stage progression in his thought on the theory; Steven D. Hales and Rex Welshon approach Nietzsche’s writings as a cohesive whole, deriving a specific characterization of perspectivism from the sum of his works. The goal of this project is not to engage in an analysis of Nietzsche’s perspectival theorizing, but rather to construct a version of perspectivism which does not suffer from the contradictions and flaws put upon it by various readings of it.

This paper seeks to outline a theory of perspectivism that incorporates the work of the aforementioned scholars, while dispelling a few contradictory and fallible lines of thought which arise both in their work and beyond. To this end, this paper will begin with a full discussion of the term perspective as it is originally used in visual language and theories of perception. It will then translate the metaphor to its use in describing cognition, as well as assumptions about perspectivism that one might logically draw from the notion of cognitive perspectives. The paper will then engage with Nietzsche scholars directly, establishing where their specific characterizations of the theory go right and wrong. Finally, it will conclude with a summation of perspectivism given what the prior sections establish about cognitive perspectives – while this
summation is incomplete, it sets up the groundwork for a more cohesive perspectival theory of knowledge.

2. Visual Perspectives (Prefacing the Metaphor)

Arguments for and descriptions of perspectivism all draw from a central metaphorical leap between the notion of perspective in perception and the role proposed for it in cognition. (Nehamas 50-52; Clark 128-139). Danto does the most to avoid directly referring to the metaphor, but still relies on visual language, speaking of “views,” and “perceptions” when referring to the knowledge of cognizing subjects.¹ (Danto 67-68). Not only does the language found in theories of perception work its way into discussions of the perspectival, but the function of perspective in visual experience parallels the function of perspective in cognition in several ways. It is therefore both useful to our understanding of perspectivism and responsible to the greater intellectual and academic context of the theory to remain with visual experience as metaphor throughout any discussion of the theory. In order to do this our understanding of visual perspectives must first be grounded. Once the aspects of visual perspective are properly detailed, how we metaphorically extend them to cognitive perspectives will be made apparent.

Perception is a relation established between perceivers and things perceived. A visual perspective involves the spatiality of that relation as well as additional relations that may impact the appearance of a perceived object in a given scene. This includes (but is not necessarily limited to) the following features: height, width, depth, lighting and position of both object and perceiver all affect the way a perceiver experiences the object of their perception. These features

¹ Danto’s view also happens to be the least convincing, which might give credence to the value of the metaphor in discussions of perspectivism.
will induce a different visual experience if they are changed; without necessarily impacting the properties of the object or the perceiver themselves.²

The first aspect of visual perspective to note is that it is a *necessary* part of perception. Visual experience is always had from a perspective, such that the concept of a “perspective-less perception” is nonsensical. A visual experience is afforded by one’s eyes, and one’s eyes are always spatially located in the world. A visual experience that would not be perspectival would have to also be non-spatial and involve a perceiver that was totally disconnected from the world and all of its relations. A perceiver’s embodiment in relation to the object of their perception makes perception possible; the embodiment always implicates, at the very least, a location for that body to be in. To stand outside of perspective is to remove oneself from the things which make vision possible; it is to make oneself unrelated to the object of their perception.

A visual experience is a spatially located relation between perceivers and things perceived. A visual perspective involves all of those features which frame that relation – height, width, depth, lighting and position of both object and perceiver. When a perceiver looks at an object, their visual experience is impacted by these elements, such that a change in any of them results in a change in the appearance of the object. The way an object looks varies greatly between different visual perspectives. Because of the spatiality of the relation, visual perspective is also freely alterable, to the degree that the perceiver can position themselves and the object in the relation. While the ability to alter one’s perspective is limited by one’s physiology and the laws of physics (one cannot just position themselves in any and every way, nor can one move certain objects that exceed a certain size and mass), perception involves and often demands the alteration of perspective to furnish the perceiver with visual knowledge. When one moves around an object,

² There are, of course, features that might impact the material states of the object or the perceiver, but in this project it is practical to ignore cases involving non-standard perceivers.
or moves an object around, the perceiver is afforded more perspectives on it, the totality of which
gives them perceptual knowledge about the object. While an object may appear to be one shape
on a single perspective, through more perspectival viewings the object can be revealed to be
completely different than once assumed.

We know that objects have different ways of appearing, depending on the visual perspective
adopted, but the things that contribute to that perspective are often outside of the relation
between the perceiver and the object of their perception. In some cases, the difference in
appearance is born out of the spatiality of the visual relation, in others, this appearance might be
caused by other non-spatial relations. For example, different lighting can make things appear not
only different colors, but different sizes and shapes as well; other objects that are not the focal
object of perception (that is, things like background coloration, translucent foreground objects
like windows or glasses, and so on) can likewise affect the appearance of an object’s color or
size (one example of the latter being the Ebbinghaus illusion, in which circles of equivalent areas
appear larger and smaller than one another when surrounded by smaller and larger circles
respectively). Spatial features may make for simpler explanations, but part of what can make
perspective so philosophically interesting is how complex it can be, and how there are often
perspectival elements that are either taken for granted, considered inconsequential, or ignored
entirely.

Because visual perspective is alterable, it might be tempting to attribute to perspective a
distortionary effect. We can accept that things look different at different angles, from different
distances, in different lighting, but if we are aiming for knowledge, to know things and states of
affairs as they really are, this knowledge ought to at least account for the effects of perspective.
Luckily, our perceptual understanding already accounts for visual perspective; we constantly
adopt new visual perspectives, and our understanding of the appearance of objects adjusts according to the comparison of different perspectives. Take, for instance, the color of an object: it is tempting to think that an object ought to have a single “true” color, free from perspectival effects. If there is a contradiction between perspectival accounts, we should be able to establish that some, all or none of the accounts are valid. This leaves us with a couple of options; that one or more of the appearances are correct and the others invalid, or that objects have a way of appearing that is free from perspective. The latter of the two is easily dispelled – things cannot ‘appear’ any way that is not a part of perception, and if perception is always perspectival, then they cannot ‘appear’ any way that is free from perspective. The former option is less simple to counter, and will be dealt with later.

James Conant gives a list that serves as an effective summation of the features of visual perspective. (Conant, “The Dialectic of Perspectivism, I,” 15). (1) A visual perspective is “freely” alterable; that is to say that the perspective employed in a perceptual experience is not only liable to change, but it can be changed to some degree at the discretion of the perceiver. ³ (2) A visual perspective “affords a view of an object.” It is important to note that the view afforded by a perspective is not the object itself; views are of a single facet of an object, while objects are multi-faceted things. (3) A visual perspective does not exist in a vacuum. There exists a spatial “matrix” of perspectives, in which each perspective has singular and specific location. (4) Perspectives can be of the same object – because objects are multifaceted and perspectives deal with only one of those facets, different perspectives exist and deal with different facets of objects. (5) Multiple perspectives dealing with a single multifaceted object “collectively furnish

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³ All embodied movements (of the eye, head, and entire body) can effectively alter perspective. One’s perspective can also be altered involuntarily, but this goes without saying.
knowledge,” 4 and access to more perspectives opens more possibility to “correct for distortions.” (Conant, 15). These features will be returned to when the concept of the visual perspective is used as a metaphor for cognitive perspectives; for now, they work well to flesh out our understanding of how a perspective impacts the appearance of perceived objects.

Conant uses the example of a coin, which is spoken of “as looking round from one perspective and elliptical from another;” however, it is not apparent that this example is particularly useful for a few reasons. (Conant, 14). Firstly, the coin does not really look like it is elliptical when turned to its side; it might be more accurate to say that the silhouette of the coin changes between viewings, but even this does not seem to get at the real experiential character of cases of perception. One does not experience a coin turned to its side as elliptical, they experience a coin viewed from one side. The claim is too theory-laden to apply effectively to the notion of a perspective – examples used to flesh out our understanding of visual perspectives should reflect actual perceptual experiences. Further, Conant’s list does not seem to exhaust the different features that can bear upon the experiential character of a perception – he describes perspective as a “line of sight on an object,” characterizing the relationship in purely spatial terms. If we remain focused on spatiality we may lose some important insights into the nature of perspectives, namely how they can be impacted by objects and relations outside of the central spatial relation between perceiver and object of perception.

A better example is found in the case of viewing a mountain. The identity of a mountain is not easily known by perceiving it from multiple locations. Without contextual information, it can be downright impossible to know if a specific peak when viewed from one side is the same as the peak viewed from another side. The features found on each face of the mountain might differ

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4 Specifically perceptual knowledge.
completely, and the sheer size of the mountain can make using landmarks impossible. The mountain can look to be different, not only in the trivial way that a coin looks different when turned on its side but in the sense that we now might mistake two faces of an identical mountain for faces belonging to two non-identical mountains.

One concern that can be raised in the discussion of visual perspectives (and will be important once the metaphorical leap is made by perspectivism from the visual to the cognitive realm) is the issue of distortion. On some basic levels, we want our perceptual knowledge about objects to be anchored beyond our fallible sensory capacities, and in many ways it seems reasonable to think that they are. It does not seem that visual perspectives distort, unless some standard of non-perspectival visual representation to which perspectival views can be compared is presupposed.

3. **Cognitive Perspectives and a Perspectivism of Knowledge (Employing the Metaphor)**

Now that the basis of the metaphor has been accounted for, we can shift away from the realm of perception towards knowledge and cognition. The account perspectivism aims for involves cognitive perspectives rather than visual perspectives, which alter the appearance of objects of cognition\(^5\) rather than the appearance of objects of perception. It is important to keep in mind that, while the metaphor does a decent job of explaining the perspectival nature of knowledge, it is still a metaphor, and should not be considered a perfect model of the thing it seeks to analogize.

Before broaching the subject of a perspective of knowledge, it is important to get clear on the concept of knowledge that we are working from. Knowledge is commonly conceived of both as a relation between a knower and a known, and as the justified true belief possessed by the knower.

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\(^5\) Objects of cognition are what a cognizing subject’s cognition is aimed at – in the case of knowledge, these are aspects of the world, while in the case of not-knowledge beliefs it might be more accurate to state that the subject’s cognition is not aimed at anything at all.
about that relation; even objections levied at this description accept the tripartite construction.  

When a cognizing subject (knower) has a belief about an aspect of the world (a known), when that belief is true, and when the subject has proper justification for that belief, they can be said to have knowledge. The first of these tenants seems undeniable – to have knowledge, one needs to actually have the relevant notion in the first place. On a representational picture, the belief serves to represent something, and if the second property holds, then the representation is an accurate depiction of the world (or at least, some aspect of it). This second property is more problematic – the belief in question needs to be a part of a relation to truth, but what role does it play in this relation? If our beliefs are representational, then the Correspondence Theory of Truth is an appealing prospect. The Correspondence Theory explains truth as correspondence to fact, which would make knowledge a belief that corresponds to fact. The correspondence is a matter of representation, not of identity: truths are not facts, and neither are the things knowns, yet all run parallel to one another. Knowledge constitutes a relation between knower and a known, and on the common conception, this relation is indirect, as it is mediated through a corresponding representational cognitive item. This view does not immediately address the issue of perspectives, so how and why does a term from visual perception work its way into an epistemological framework?

The fact that the term “perspective,” as discussed in the introduction, has been more broadly applied than just to matters of perception, should give us some reason to think that our cognitive activity in affected by contextual elements. Our knowledge of the world changes constantly, not just on the level of the individual, but in ways that alter entire fields of study. These changes are often due to the discovery of new information, but frequently they are also the result of the

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6 Edmund Gettier’s “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” objects to the conception as sufficient, but still accepts that the three properties hold.
development of new ways of thinking about the information that is available to us. While what we aim for is knowledge, that is, beliefs which correspond to truths, we also must be cognizant of the fact that there are contexts which frame the ways that those beliefs correspond to truths, and that the assumption that our knowledge is privileged over knowledge born out of other contexts can harmfully restrict our approach to the world – we should “want to see differently,” and not be resistant to the possibilities offered by new perspectives (Nietzsche, *Genealogy* III, 12).

So what is a cognitive perspective, and why might the visual metaphor be useful to explain its role in knowledge? To answer the second question: the usage of visual language to describe our cognitive relation to the world is fairly common. When we want someone to understand something, we might ask if they “see” the facts as they are; if we want them to understand things as we understand them, we might ask them to see things from our own point of view. The language used to describe cognitive perspectives is, from the inception of the theory of perspectivism in Nietzsche’s work, decidedly visual. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he defines knowing in visual terms – knowledge of something becomes “seeing something,” while the organ for knowing something (the obvious candidate for this being the brain) becomes “different eyes, we can use to observe one thing.” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy* III, 12). Perceptual knowledge is also a form of knowledge that we are intimately familiar with, and one which dominates our everyday experience of the world. Nietzsche could have related it to any other form of sensory knowledge, but as he focused on perception, it is perception which has dominated discussion of perspectivism. In keeping with the visual perspective as a guide for our definition, a cognitive perspective will be something that, to borrow from Clark, “affects the intellectual “look” of the object, that affects how it is understood or interpreted.” (Clark 130). A
cognitive perspective, neither a window into nor an organ for knowledge, is the totality of things which impact the way the world seems to be to a cognizing subject. “Some transaction must take place between the cognitive equipment of the subject and the potential object of cognition,” and the structure which enables this transaction is, on perspectivism, metaphorically similar to visual experience. (Conant, 41).

A perspective is sometimes referred to as a “view” or an “interpretation” of the world. (Danto, 59). To suggest that a perspective is the interpretation disregards the fundamental role of a perspective on cognition. The perspective frames interpretations of the world; interpretations are had on a specific perspective. Consider the concept of the visual perspective, and its place in perception. On a visual experience, one has a specific perspective, generated by different features which impact the appearance of an object of perception to a perceiver. “What is seen is simply the world…from that perspective,” the perspective is neither the object of perception, nor is it the experience of the perceiver or their beliefs about the thing perceived. (Nehamas 50). A cognitive perspective is this, just for a cognizing subject and the object of their cognition.

Cognizing subjects have different interpretations of the world that are influenced by the perspective which frames their relation to the world. These interpretations can differ given the same perspectival framework; different interpretations can be true or false on a particular perspective, but the perspective itself cannot be given a particular truth value. (Hales & Welshon, Truth 106). This suggests that a perspective is a part of the knowledge relation that sets the truth value of individual beliefs had on that perspective. When one interprets something cognitively, the interpretive act produces a belief, but a perspective is not a body of knowledge or a collection of beliefs; a perspective is something by which any interpretation, view, belief or fact is comprehended and made legible.
The question of the origin of perspectives is more difficult to establish, because there is such a broad array of both seen and unseen factors at play in the development of an individual’s perspective. If the appearance of cognitive objects is altered by “the perspective from which they are viewed,” (Conant I 8) we might even question the value of our own understanding of what a perspective is (as we will see is done by other authors). Individuals have perspectives, and these perspectives differ as trivially as saying that every person lives through different circumstances and has a (at least marginally) different context for their cognition. After all, we all have lived experiences which are uniquely our own, which might shape the way we interpret aspects of the world. But these individual perspectives are also impacted by broader, shared contexts such as religions, cultures, socio-historical circumstances, and all kinds of local and global systems and communities. Nietzsche may have conceived of perspectives as being generated by these different loci of power; for the purposes of this paper, it will suffice to just note how broadly communal and individual the different factors contributing to a particular perspective can be. (Hales & Welshon, *Truth* 107).

What makes knowledge inherently perspectival? Perception is inherently perspectival due to the spatiality of the perceptual relation. But cognition is non-spatial, so on what grounds does perspectivism claim that all knowledge is perspectival? To have knowledge is still to stand in a relation with the object of cognition. While this relation is not a spatial one, it nevertheless is always a relation. In order to cognize any object of cognition that knowledge is aimed at, a subject needs to be perspectivally located. This applies to both the most basic and the most complex examples of knowledge. If we consider perceptual knowledge in a vacuum, that is to say, ignoring all anterior knowledge that might contribute to perception, it appears to lack any of the complexities which might impact other cognitive processes. Still, perceptual knowledge
demands that the cognizing subject has a presence in the world and all of the relevant perspectival aspects of perception apply – to perceptually know an object of perception is to perceive it from at least one perspective. If knowledge is a relation between knowers and knowns, then that relation will always be similarly “located” – the knower has to get at the known from some vantage point, for it to still be a relation. For knowledge to be non-perspectival, it would no longer be a relation, and any being that was hypothetically capable of cognizing objects to which it was unrelated would have no context to base their understanding on.

To illustrate the concept of a cognitive perspective, one can think of different approaches in mathematics as different perspectival accounts of mathematics. The conceptual framework adopted by the ancient Greeks was geometrical, rather than algebraic. Certainly, one can translate between geometrical and algebraic descriptions of mathematical concepts, but “Greek mathematical practice is not algebraic;” it involved no algebraic language or signification. (Macbeth, 59). The geometric “language” of the Greeks was not some mask put over algebraic concepts to make them more diagrammatic, and to put it in this way is to misunderstand how Greek mathematics functioned. The geometric analysis preceded the mathematic conclusions, and the fact that they can later be translated into a Cartesian system does not make their ancient formulation have foundations in algebraic symbolic systems.

In modernity, Descartes introduces algebraic mathematics to the modern world, and fundamentally changes the general approach to mathematics both academically and pedagogically. A student in a modern classroom is not taught ancient Greek geometry; not because it has been disproven, but because the in the context of the modern day, Cartesian algebra is more relevant and useful than diagrammatic math. The point made by Macbeth in
Realizing Reason is that the ancient Greek approach to mathematical problems is not an offshoot or an aesthetic choice to represent algebraic concepts; their reasoning itself was fundamentally geometrical even if Euclidean and Cartesian mathematics can both be used to reach the same mathematical truths. Regardless of the mathematical methodology employed, a cognizing subject needs some mathematical framework to get at mathematical truths; this framework is the perspectival “location” of the cognizing subject with respect to mathematics.

If we return now to Conant’s features of visual perspectives as described in the previous section, we find that they are not fully translatable to the features of cognitive perspectives. On (1), optical perspectives can be intentionally changed, and one’s perspective in vision is constantly changing. The alterity of visual perspective is not something which requires deep contemplation or some equivalent labor in the visual process. In fact, this alterity seems necessary for human visual experience to be successful; we are embodied beings in relation to three dimensional objects, and part of our embodiment involves spatial movement around these objects. Alternatively, perspectivism implies that altering one’s cognitive perspective is a laborious process, if not one which is impossible for most people. It would appear that the two accounts of perspective are already made incompatible – surely, if visual perspective involves (and even demands) constant modification, then it will not have that much in common with the ‘perspective’ in knowledge if on that use of the term modification is inessential.

Features (2-4) seem problematic for similar reasons. On (2), the fact that a perspective “affords” a view is purported to count against it actually being able to furnish knowledge about objects. On this misconception, knowledge is really about objects-in-themselves, not about facets of those objects. The fact that perspectives deal only with singular facets and not all facets at once is thought to indicate that a single perspective is insufficient for knowledge. On the account
of visual perspective, this is correct – if a perceiver was confined to a single visual perspective at all times, and could not intentionally modify this perspective, then their visual experience would be ineffective at best. The distinction between the facets of objects and objects-in-themselves is assumed to cause many problems for perspectival knowledge – if knowledge is of things-in-themselves, and if perspectives are only of facets of things, then knowledge cannot be perspectival. The fact that on (3) there exists a spatial “matrix” of perspectives implies that no single perspective could account for knowledge of a thing-in-itself, and on (4) the existence of alternative perspectives aimed at the same object implies that knowledge of things-in-themselves could only be achieved through the simultaneous employment of all perspectives at once. In combination with the conclusions drawn above, the idea that different perspectives can “correct” for the distortions of other perspectives leads to the notion that all perspectives are distortionary in a way, and that knowledge (as a relation between knowers and things-in-themselves) is an impossibility.

To better grasp the theory of Perspectivism, it is important to discuss the pervasive theories with which it is incompatible, and in what ways these theories go wrong (and right). The Correspondence Theory of Truth holds that knowledge is had when a relation between mental representations and reality obtains. When one has knowledge, they have knowledge of “how the world really is.” But how is the world, and what is the perspective from which this “true knowledge” is intelligible? If knowledge is a relation between knowers and knowns, then it seems absurd to try to remove the knower from that relation. The Correspondence theory leads us to believe that these representations are an obstacle between knower and truth, and that we must either overcome it or make it so transparent that what we know is in constant correspondence with reality. The Correspondence Theory should not be tossed out entirely –
without it, all that remains is skepticism (if knowledge does not correspond to things in the world, then the relation seems completely arbitrary, and possibly non-existent). One has knowledge when what one thinks is the case really is the case. Insofar as it advances this claim, the Correspondence Theory is correct – the knowledge we strive for is knowledge of cases as they really are. A problem arises when one concludes that, because truth is a relation with reality, in order to know truth one must divest from the things that make knowledge possible in the first place.

3.1 Things-in-themselves/the view from nowhere

The concept of the thing-in-itself can make the notion that knowledge is representational problematic. The thing-in-itself is concerned with an object’s “essence or nature that is independent” of observation. (Clark 136). This works well with how truth is commonly conceived, as “independent of background, interests or values.” (Nehamas 53). If our cognition deals with representations of how objects in the world appear to us, then if there is a way that objects are that is free from all subjective observation (things-in-themselves), then it seems that our cognitive experiences are distorting how these objects truly are, and therefore cannot be grounds for knowledge. These experiences are “of the world,” but the fact that the world appears in certain ways to us already implies distortion – the experiences do not correspond to the way things are in themselves, but to the way they seem to be. (Conant I, 28). If this is the case, then genuine knowledge would have to come without any perspectival viewpoint; coupled with the notion of the thing-in-itself is that of a view from nowhere, or a God’s eye perspective.

Given how perspective has been defined thus far, a view from nowhere or a God’s eye perspective seem to be a plainly false way of approaching either matters of vision or cognition. The concept involves rejecting the fundamental connection between perspective and knowledge,
proposing that an extra-perspectival is a coherent concept. If one accepts that things-in-themselves are inherently unknowable, this seems like a plausible account – there are things which cognizing subjects cannot have access to on a perspective and are still appropriately titled objects of cognition. A subject that has some way of cognizing objects of cognition without having any perspective would stand outside of all relations, not have any perspective alter their understanding of aspects of the world, and yet still be capable of knowing them. Such a hypothetical subject would thus “see things from nowhere” – if we relate this back to perception, they would be able to perceive objects without standing in a spatial relation to them.

One way to conceptualize the hypothesized view from nowhere is to think of two vessels passing by one another in space. Assuming there are no landmarks to identify their position and no device to measure the vessel’s velocity, a person on either ship will be unable to know what speed they are moving at relative to anything. The passengers aboard can affirm movement in the vaguest sense, but cannot be sure of either ship’s relation to the movement – is one ship standing still, or are both moving? Is one ship moving faster than the other, and if so, how much faster? Is it the ship that is moving, or is it space itself? Only an outside observer with the proper tools and systems of relative measurement would be able to discern. Here, it seems that the perspectival location of the passengers is what prevents them from knowing their velocity, and the only way to gain this knowledge is to be located outside of the relation. The outside observer is detached from the ship, and their perception of the situation is undistorted. The notion of the view-from-nowhere extends this metaphor of objects in physical space to all of physical space. The passengers aboard the ship become any being within the world, and the location of the outside observer is outside of the world (nowhere).
If the thing-in-itself and the Correspondence Theory are maintained along with perspectivism (along with, by association, the notion of the view from nowhere), then perspectivism has to reject knowledge as something accessible to embodied human beings. This is how perspectivism is often read; in readings of Nietzsche, it has been suggested that his perspectivism forces him to “jettison knowledge and, concomitantly, epistemology as an enterprise,” adopting a purely skeptical outlook. But this skeptical approach can be viewed in the context of Nietzsche’s greater body of work as merely “an initial movement” in the construction of a perspectivism of knowledge. (Hales, Welshon 111-112). Next, this paper will explore the ways these misunderstandings of the function and nature of perspectives can lead to the belief that perspectivism is a form of skepticism or relativism.

3.2 Perspectivism as Skepticism

One way of approaching knowledge is to assume that there is an ideal formulation of it that is different from how we normally (perspectivally) have it. On such a view, any knowledge that is dependent upon a specific perspective is faulty – genuine knowledge can only come from a view that eschews the knowledge relation as from a singular perspective. This is the thesis of perspective-as-distortion, and it can be very appealing given certain presuppositions about the metaphysics of knowledge. If the assumption of an ideal is taken, the conclusions drawn about the knowledge relation amount to a skepticism. The basic skeptical account of perspectivism is that individual perspectives distort reality, and that, even though we may never be capable of achieving it because our own access to the world is always perspectival, there is an ideal knowledge that is independent of how it is accessed by us. This skeptical account can be reached in two possible directions.
One skeptical approach to perspectivism treats the ideal not as a combination of all perspectives, but as the jettisoning of perspective from the knowledge relation entirely. This follows from the perspective-as-distortion thesis – if perspective inherently distorts or obscures our access to the world, then the ideal knowledge would be one that rejects perspective altogether. This approach makes for less solid grounding of a skeptical interpretation, because it becomes unclear whether the ideal is appropriate any more. There are no examples of a perspective-less perception (a thing which is contradictory on its face), so visual experience no longer functions as a metaphor. Because having a cognitive perspective is integral to having knowledge, there are also no obvious ways of getting away from cognitive perspectives, which makes the effort to strive towards the ideal seem pointless.

If we remain with the visual metaphor, it is easy to see why one might think perspectives are distortionary - if a perspective effects the way things appear, it seems intuitive to suggest that perspectives can distort or at least obscure the way things really are. There are innumerable real world encounters in which it appears that perspective is the cause of perceptual misconceptions. Not all are as grand as discerning the identity of a mountain; our distance from a person can cause us to misidentify them, colors of objects can appear different depending on the color of their background environment, and so on. Here it seems like perspective (that is, the specific and circumstantial elements of the perceptual relation) negatively alters our capacity for effective visual experience – once there is a shift in perspective, the distortion either disappears or is revealed to be a feature of vision that can be recognized and accounted for (we are able to move closer to a person and identify them successfully, we can change the backdrop of colored objects and see how their surroundings alter their appearance). Visual art is full of interactions with and the exploitation of perspective; painting, photography, film, sculpture, and so on draw the eye to
various places to various artistic ends. The accomplished artist not only accepts that her work must inherently be experienced perspectivally, but she also takes advantage of the perspectival relationship between the viewer and the piece. On this line of thought, it is natural to assume that a non-perspectival account would be the truest to the way the world is as is possible to have. As we will see, not only is having this account problematic, but the possibility of this account as an unachievable ideal is also thrown into question.

If the skeptic instead believes that the knowledge ideal is a collective, then our inability to realize this ideal is a consequence of our perspectival limitations, not of perspective itself. In the way that one imagines a three dimensional image to be produced by adding up all of the two dimensional faces of an object, this skeptic believes that the ideal of knowledge is the sum of all perspectival accounts of the way things are. The perspectival nature of vision allows us to, in moving around an object, come to a more cohesive perceptual understanding of that object through the comparison of different perspectives. While it may be coherent to suggest that we can get enough differing visual perspectives for objects of a certain scale to perceptual knowledge, it seems impossible to get all of the cognitive perspectives necessary to satisfy the skeptic’s conception of the ideal – the socio-historic context of any cognitive object is too broad and the possible perspectives taken too numerous.

Regardless of how the skeptic comes to the conclusion that the ideal is both coherent and useful, the commitment to genuine knowledge as an ideal makes it impossible for them to accept perspectivism. Perspectivism specifically denies the core assumptions of the skeptical account: that it is necessary to have all perspectives to have knowledge, that the lack of a non-perspectival way of having knowledge is problematic, and that a non-perspectival way of having knowledge is possible.
3.3 Perspectivism as Relativism

The relativist account of perspectivism differs from the skeptical account in a few key ways. While the relativist account still claims that the perspectival nature of knowledge makes knowledge in the skeptical ideal impossible, it does not do so through distortion. Instead, the relativist account holds that knowledge is merely perspectival, and that there is no non-perspectival ideal to distort or deviate from in the first place. All perspectival accounts of the world are equally incapable of getting at any representation of the thing-in-itself, and when there is nothing but the perspectival to behold, there can be no claims of superiority of one perspective over another. In a way, relativism continues to maintain the notion of a non-perspectival knowledge; the relativist might say that “if there were such a thing as a non-perspectival knowledge, it would be genuine knowledge, and it would be ideal; however, the concept of a non-perspectival knowledge is incoherent, so all perspectival knowledge fails to get at the ideal.”

“In order to be motivated to produce a new view… one must not think that it is simply one among many equally good alternatives; one must believe that it is a very good, perhaps the best, view.” (Nehamas 59) While it may be detrimental to follow relativism when approaching our various perspectives, this point has little to do with the theory’s validity. What is important about this claim is that it sets relativism apart from perspectivism again – interpretations might be relative inter-perspectivally, but within a specific perspective there are still interpretations which are true and false.

4. Alternative Perspectives

So far, this paper has described some basic features of cognitive perspectives, as well as some conclusions that may be drawn about perspectivism which, while tempting, are ultimately flawed. The following section will cover some Nietzsche scholars who, in different ways, both
fall into misunderstandings and also providing insight into the theory. These different authors have offered pithy descriptions of perspectivism to anchor their discussion, some borrowed directly from Nietzsche, others not. Danto offers up the statement that “there are no facts but only interpretations,” (Danto 59); Nehamas that “the will to knowledge is essentially related to the will to ignorance and that falsification is necessary for life,” (Nehamas 49); Clark offers up “the claim that all knowledge is perspectival,” (Clark 127). None of these descriptions are sufficient, and invariably contradict one another and the description of cognitive perspectives constructed in this paper. This is not to say that the dialectic involves completely different lines of thought; there are some core argumentative examples and rhetorical strategies employed across several analyses of the theory, to the degree that Conant notes that they make up a mostly linear progression of thought. (Conant, 7).

4.1 Danto; a Naïve and Nihilist Perspectivism

Danto’s characterization of perspectivism most closely aligns with the skeptical interpretation. This appears to come from his reading of Nietzsche’s philosophy (and, by extension, perspectivism) as “a philosophy of nihilism.” (Danto, 62). On this account, Perspectivism is straightforwardly “the doctrine that there are no facts but only interpretations,” a description drawn from Nietzsche on a particularly straightforward reading. (Danto 59). Here, “facts” refers to pre-perspectival objects, laws, properties, states of affairs, etc. in the world and “interpretations” refers to perspectival views regarding objects, laws, properties, states of affairs, etc. in the world.

For Danto, “there is no one perspective which is privileged over any other.” (Danto 59). The privileged perspective would be the one which aligns best with truth – but what perspectivism claims is truth is merely perspectival, and therefore can only be relative. Truth is defined “in
terms of what is useful to the welfare mankind,” and not of things-in-themselves. (Danto 61)
Danto’s perspectivism subscribes to the notion of the thing-in-itself as being the way things truly are, and if things cannot be known as they are in themselves, then truth is unattainable. If the thing-in-itself is rejected, then perspectivism must be a relativism, and if it is maintained, then we cannot have genuine knowledge at all. Without access to the thing-in-itself, it is impossible to view things the way they are outside of a perspective, and without this view-from-nowhere, it is impossible determine whether a perspective is better than any other. The better of two perspectives would be found only by comparison to a single foundational perspective, but as this foundational perspective does not exist, all perspectives must be given equal weight. Danto is not a relativist, but his skeptical portrayal of perspectivism leaves us without options but to treat perspectives with respect to their usefulness, rather than their correspondence to the truth.

Danto’s primary objections to perspectivism betray a fundamental misunderstanding of the theory. On his construction, for every interpretation of the way things are, there are perspectives on which that interpretation is true and another for which it is false. Danto claims that perspectivism (as he has defined it, a matter of non-corresponding interpretations) is itself an interpretation of the world, and therefore must apply to itself. If perspectivism can be false on a certain perspective, it entails that there is some perspective in which the views are not perspectival, and in which perspectivism is not true. (Danto 80). This objection via self-reflexivity only works if perspectives are considered equivalent to the interpretations which are made through them. If a perspective is what frames an interpretation, what can affect and alter it, then it is not an interpretation of the world.

One of the main objectives of perspectivism is to avoid relativism and skepticism, despite the way they spring up upon the rejection of the common view. With the thing-in-itself in place,
comparing different perspectives seems possible, if difficult – there are multiple perspectives, all bound to the way things are in themselves, and because they all relate in some way to the thing-in-itself (which is the way things really are, truthfully and undistorted), whichever one gets the closest to the thing-in-itself is the better perspective. However, without the thing-in-itself, “perspectives are incommensurable” – there is no standard to which conflicting perspectives can be compared. (Clark 128) In the visual metaphor, differing perspectives on an object afford radically different appearances of that object. The perspectives can better each other when compared, but only because there is a true multi-faceted existence of the object. Take, for instance, Conant’s coin example. The coin is really neither elliptical nor round, but a three dimensional object of which these shapes are two dimensional faces. In combination, the faces get us closer to the shape of the object. On Danto’s perspectivism, the thing-in-itself is that objective shape, and dispelling it from our theory means that there is no meaningful distinction between the two perspectival viewings of the object. Either there is a thing-in-itself, and the perspectival accounts are equally distortionary, or there is no thing-in-itself, and the perspectival accounts are equally valuable.

Danto assumes that perspectivism does not deny the existence of the thing-in-itself, and that the version of truth confronted by perspectivism is of the kind outlined in the Correspondence Theory. He suggests that perspectivism’s point might be to accept that the Correspondence Theory is true, but that truth, “in the sense of corresponding to reality, is perhaps not very important and possibly not at all useful.” (Danto 81). This idea seems like a shallow interpretation of the theory, which does not distinguish it from other forms of skepticism or anti-realism. Danto’s suggestion that without the thing-in-itself we cannot know anything at all might give one reason to think that perspectivism is false. But the fact that perspectivism could be false
is not the same as it being false; while it is possible that, given another perspective, we might find perspectivism less than adequate, it would take a perspectival shift to reveal this. In the meantime, the possibility of perspectivism being false should not be equated to its being false without more supporting evidence.

4.2 Nehamas; Knowledge as a Totality of Perspective

At one point, Nehamas articulates reality as “the totality of these various arrangements” – how does this claim work out for perspectivism? (Nehamas 46) This seems to just shift the distinction between apparent world and reality over to a distinction between the world as it appears on one point of view and the world as it appears in the totality of all points of view. Surely, the central claim made by perspectivism is a rejection of knowledge as an ideal in general, which would include the concept of a totality of perspectives. In fact, Nehamas’ use of an example from Nietzsche’s work seems to contradict this very concept. Nehamas points to Nietzsche’s thoughts on morality and freedom in Beyond Good & Evil, in which he argues that “the assumption that human nature is best expressed in perfect freedom… is unjustified.” (Nehamas 47). While Nietzsche might be critical of certain religious and social systems, their goals and their methods, he is not critical of the fact that they take on a singular point of view. This is at odds with the idea that one would need a totality of viewpoints to achieve knowledge – it is not an inherent problem, for Nietzsche or for perspectivism, that we are confined to one perspective.

At the same time he attempts to make it clear that the totality of perspectives is not a suitable ideal for knowledge, Nehamas continues to relate the perspectival nature of knowledge to this very ideal. Nehamas makes the claim that “a perspective that is best of all is not a perspective at all… our many points of view cannot be smoothly combined into a unified synoptic picture of
their common object.” (Nehamas 49). The perspective that would be best of all, were it a perspective in the first place, would be one which successfully combined all of these points of view into a perspectival totality. The point Nehamas appears to make is that the totality of perspectives is incomprehensible to the human perspective, but his account does assume that were the totality comprehensible, it would be more valuable than perspectival views of the world. Perspectives are “partial,” in the sense that a perspective must select against other perspectives if it is to be intelligible. It is a fruitless endeavor to attempt to know everything if all of our perspectival knowledge inherently forecloses knowledge on other perspectives.

Nehamas offers up one more valuable metaphor for perspectivism by way of literary interpretation. Literary interpretations are not always “mere” interpretations, in the sense that any one interpretation could be disposed of and replaced with any other. “Mere” interpretations do exist, in the sense that there are interpretations that are completely banal, uncreative and add nothing to the critical cannon. But the fact that there are alternative interpretations, many of which are “mere” interpretations, does not make those interpretations that are the most salient for their given historical, social, and cultural contexts disposable. As Nehamas notes, “a different history of romanticism, emphasizing different poems, different poets, and different events of the movement, could always be written,” but the possibility of a different perspective does not falsify the critical interpretation written within a specific perspective. (Nehamas 63).

4.3 Clark; Perspectives as Sets of Beliefs

Let us return to Clark’s full statement, that “to be analogous to the visual case, a cognitive perspective must be something on the side of the knower that affects the intellectual “look” of the object, that affects how it is understood or interpreted.” (Clark 130). One part of Clark’s analysis should stand out, given how perspective has thus far been defined – is a visual
perspective really “on the side of the knower?” In a trivial sense, a visual perspective is obviously very individual; a visual experience, had through a perceiver’s specific perspective, is had by them alone. But as has been discussed in previous sections, a perspective is not limited to things which might affect a perceiver’s experience from the inside – lighting, distance and the like are not internal factors in determining the appearance of an object, but are a part of how the perceiver and other objects are related to the object of perception.

This leads Clark to the statement that “our corpus of beliefs” is “an obvious candidate” to define a perspective; but this is problematic. (Clark 130). It does not stand to reason that a perspective, a thing on which different beliefs are generated, is either a collection of beliefs or something which is completely internalized – how could we come to new knowledge on a certain perspective, if that perspective were strictly formed on the beliefs we already have? Further, what would the interaction between exterior forces (the socio-historical contexts) and our knowledge be, if our perspective were limited to a personal set of beliefs? Even if the “corpus” is meant to be a holistic totality of all the beliefs in a certain context, how would new beliefs be introduced to this corpus? When truth is “defined in terms of one’s beliefs,” there would be no cause for any beliefs to change, and no possibility for them to be revealed as false. (Hales, Welshon, Nietzsche’s Perspectivism 20). Yet, false beliefs are exposed all the time, to the point that it is a near guarantee that we hold some false beliefs at any given time. While we may not recognize how or why exactly our beliefs might change, either individually or communally (on the order of scientific fields, cultures, shared histories, etc), we can at least recognize that they do genuinely change. The fact that things can be true or false on a perspective, and also believed to be true or false on a perspective, eliminates the possibility that a perspective is a set of beliefs. (Hales, Welshon, Nietzsche’s 20).
4.4 Nietzsche, Briefly Visited

The goal of this paper is not to engage in a close reading of any of Nietzsche’s works, nor is it to establish what his specific conception of perspectivism was. It would, however, be an injustice to the theory to not include some brief points about the account of the philosopher most responsible for its creation. There is no “smoking gun” in Nietzsche’s work that gives a perfect or even a cohesive defense of perspectivism; however, statements across his body of work can be used to reconstruct the theory. (Hales, Welshon, Nietzsche’s 16). Nietzsche’s play with language can also make statements appear contradictory; as Nehamas notes, Nietzsche uses the term “knowledge” both to refer to the loftier ideal held up by the skeptic, and as “an inherently conditional relation… that presupposes or manifests specific values, interests and goals.” (Nehamas 50).

Throughout Nietzsche, there is a consistent line of thought that seems to be an almost Darwinian characterization of cognition. In The Gay Science, Nietzsche seems almost to be in agreement with Danto at times. He posits that consciousness has arisen only in response to the specific conditions of life which make it useful for living. (Nietzsche, GS §354). However, he never makes the leap that Danto claims he does, to say that truth is also a product of practical convenience. For one, Nietzsche consistently establishes that truth is not always what is useful, and that falsehoods are perpetuated precisely because “untruth is a condition of life.” He says in this very section we lack an “organ” for truth, so any way that the world appears to us is not going to be absolutely true for all perspectives.

Nietzsche describes egoism as “the perspectival law of feeling according to which what is closest appears large and heavy, while in the distance everything decreases in size and weight.” (Nietzsche, The Gay Science §162). Nietzsche stays with visual language here, so what would a
visual egoism be? The aphorism encourages thinking through examples where our visual perspective “distorts” the size and weight of objects – one example of this is the Moon Illusion, on which the moon appears to grow larger relative to its proximity to the horizon. What would be an example of perspectival egoism in a cognitive sense? A cognitive egoism would be one under which the things that are most relevant to one’s cognitive perspective are privileged over any others, something which seems to be a feature of all cognition given its perspectival nature.

5. A New Perspectivism

Formulating a cohesive theory of perspectivism is difficult, and not possible given the scope of a paper this size. There are a few core tenants of perspectivism that can be given based on the characterization of cognitive perspectives through the visual metaphor. Knowledge is neither omni-perspectival nor non-perspectival, but is always achieved within and through a certain perspective. After rejecting truth as correspondence, the thing-in-itself and the view from nowhere, perspectivism shows that it is not perspective in general which limits us, but the responses taken towards perspectives. If something seems wrong with the perspective held by a cognitive subject, the fault lies not with that perspective or perspectives more generally, but with a misunderstanding of how the cognitive perspective directed the way the world seemed to be. Whether getting over the problem requires abandoning a lesser perspective for a better one or reevaluating which of their beliefs are mere appearances or cases of actual knowledge, the point of perspectivism is to avoid both absolutisms and relativisms and more accurately account for the role of perspective in knowledge.

There can be no exhaustive perspective in the sense of a totality of perspectives, nor in the sense that one perspective might preside above all others in all circumstances. The thing-in-itself presumes that there is an exhaustive set of knowledge to which all perspectival appearances
are inferior; it is therefore impossible to accept the thing-in-itself and not see perspectives as always diluting knowledge in a way that makes appearances deviate from correspondence with truth. But the fact that on a perspective, all aspects of an object of cognition are not revealed does not mean that the object of cognition is obscured, if we eschew the traditional assumption that all genuine knowledge is free from perspectival influence. There is also something positive about limiting the available aspects of an object of cognition. If a perspective “falsifies” or “simplifies,” meaning if all aspects of a cognitive object are not revealed at one time, this is a feature, not a bug; revealing the way an object seems on all perspectives at once is strictly impossible. It would be a mischaracterization of knowledge to suggest that it must encompass all of the aspects at a single time to truly be knowledge. Without a perspective, knowledge is a nonsensical concept; “to use truth predicates outside of the human perspective, which is the conjunction of all individual and group perspectives, is to speak gibberish.” (Hales & Welshon Nietzsche’s Perspectivism 34).

What perspectivism does, in a quaint summation, is “give us perspective on perspectives.” It may not be possible to grasp all of the perspectival elements which influence how the world seems when we cognize aspects of it, but perspectivism should give us reason to pause and consider that what it seems like on our perspectives is never binding across all perspectives. At the same time, the theory avoids being either skeptical or relativistic, two theories which all too often lead to a nihilistic outlook on knowledge and our cognitive abilities.
Works Cited


