

Perspectivism and the ‘Objectivity’ of Value in the Genealogy of Morals

By Scotia Rollins, May 2025

It is noted in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that “because Nietzsche is an anti-realist about value, he takes neither his positive vision, nor those aspects of his critique that depend upon it, to have any special epistemic status, a fact which helps explain his rhetoric and the circumspect character of his ‘esoteric’ moralizing.” It goes on to assert that Nietzsche’s aim is “to free higher human beliefs from their false consciousness about morality (their false belief that this morality is *good for them*), not at a transformation of society at large” (Lemke 2023). This presents a striking irony, since Nietzsche’s critique of morality is strongly tied to the idea of freedom as problematic, seen especially in *The Genealogy of Morals*, where it is exposed as a construct associated with the internalization and legalization of morals. Moreover, the very idea of liberating individuals from false consciousness rests on the epistemic claim that Nietzsche’s diagnosis is more truthful than the moral beliefs he critiques, contradicting the assertion that his positive vision is given with no epistemic authority. His critique of morality, embedded with polemics regarding the customs and psychological tendencies of various cultures and individuals, certainly does not suggest epistemic arbitrariness. This essay explores how Nietzsche’s perspectivism informs his metaethical stance. By considering the implications of an anti-realist interpretation and exploring the epistemological concerns which it entails, I argue that Nietzsche’s epistemological stance does not seem to allow for a coherent realist or anti-realist interpretation.

As explained by Brian Lightbody in his essay, *Nietzsche, Perspectivism, Anti-Realism: An Inconsistent Triad*, Brian Leiter critiques what he terms the “Received View” of Nietzschean perspectivism, a widely held interpretation which he argues misrepresents Nietzsche’s epistemology. According to this view, central to Nietzschean perspectivism is the idea that the world has no determinate nature and that our ideas and theories do not describe or correspond to the world because of this fact. Consequently, no perspective can enjoy epistemic privilege over another (Lightbody 2010). This interpretation seems to align with the *Stanford Encyclopedia’s* depiction of Nietzsche’s metaethics, and both exemplify the ‘nihilism’ with which Nietzsche is frequently associated. In this reading of Nietzsche, moral truths are neither real nor can they find any grounding in psychology or through any understanding of human nature. Leiter prefers an alternate anti-realist interpretation of Nietzsche that emphasizes his naturalism and views it as a legitimate epistemological approach (Leiter 2002).

Lightbody explains that the Received View is problematic for multiple reasons (in agreement with Leiter), largely because its ‘hard’ anti-realism entails a metaphysical anti-realism about the world itself, which is a challenging epistemological stance to maintain. For one thing, the determination of the world as characterless seems to be an attribution of a character, which is contradictory since the means of knowing that the world is characterless could not be justified in this view. Another problem is that in a characterless world, every viewpoint is as valid as the other (Lightbody 2010). Nietzsche certainly doesn’t seem to maintain this given his critical assertions regarding uniquely German and English customs and behaviors. Surely, the Received View doesn’t grant any epistemic validity to Nietzsche’s naturalistic statements, particularly those concerning human psychology and physiology, prevalent in his genealogical method. For

instance, Nietzsche writes that “the ascetic ideal springs from the protective instinct of a degenerating life which tries by all means to sustain itself and to fight for its existence...the ascetic ideal is an artifice for the *preservation* of life” (GMIII:13). Nietzsche’s epistemology must at least grant the possibility having legitimate knowledge of the world (but not necessarily morals or values) in order for these naturalistic claims to have any meaning whatsoever. Given this, the ‘hard’ anti-realist metaethical stance instantiated in the Received View appears incoherent with Nietzsche’s broader project, motivating the consideration of alternative interpretations.

A particularly illuminating statement appears in the Third Essay of the *Genealogy*, where Nietzsche writes, “There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective ‘knowing’; and the more affect 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?” (GMIII:12) While this emphasizes a skepticism towards the notion of perspective-independent knowledge, it does not describe epistemological relativism or nihilism in suggesting that objectivity is comprised of multiple viewpoints. To further interrogate Nietzsche’s epistemological and metaethical stance, it is crucial to consider this perspectivism, which can be said to be the idea that all knowledge is influenced by one’s perspective, and in turn, that no statement can be said to be true in every perspective.

One obscurity in Nietzsche’s account of the ‘objective’ lies in what is entailed by a *perspective*. Specifically, it is unclear whether only the actual perspectives of individual persons

would constitute the ‘objective’, or whether the inclusion of all possible perspectives is required. Since the perspectivist thesis maintains that there exists no statement which is true in every perspective, yet presumably does not deny the possibility of global agreement (where everyone coincidentally is in agreement on some subject), it seems that the domain of perspectives should not differentiate between real and possible perspectives.

A further question is whether it is possible for an individual to grasp multiple perspectives at all, actual or possible, if all knowledge is shaped by his or her perspective. If not, comprehending or coming closer to objectivity seems like an impossibility—but by Nietzsche’s specific wording, that we may “allow” and “use” such perspectives, implies that it is possible to integrate other perspectives within our own. Nietzsche’s statement that “the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity,’ be,” appears to suggest that we have some faculty, such as reason or imagination, which can be legitimately employed to gain objectivity. However, Nietzsche’s skepticism towards reason, evidenced by his rejection of Kantian epistemology, and the fact that imagination is probably just as bound by perspective, seems to preclude either of these explanations.

Nietzsche’s subsequent remark, however, that “to suspend each and every affect...would be to castrate the intellect” provides crucial insight: rather than transcend affect, we must embrace it in order to become intellectually free or gain objectivity. In this sense, the best way to understand what a ‘perspective’ is for Nietzsche seems to be as the composition of affects—our natural inclinations and desires for different things—which seems to capture the notion of bias typically associated with subjective knowledge.

From this, I argue that keeping faithful to the perspectivist conception of knowledge proves difficult within the traditional framework of realism and anti-realism. Both views, insofar as they aim to account for the world or a feature of it in objective terms, inevitably describes the world in perspective-independent terms. While value realism describes values as metaphysically independent from human minds and anti-realism views them as mind-dependent, which initially seems to cohere with perspectivism, neither theory can offer an ontological account of values that does not involve a transcendence of perspective. Furthermore, consider Nietzsche's suggestion that 'objectivity' is comprised of a plurality of perspectives: with this in mind, the 'objective', or 'objective value', is both mind-dependent, being comprised by mind-dependent perspectives, and mind-independent, not being contained or given within any individual perspective or mind. Thus, the debate between realism and anti-realism is made trivial in perspectivist epistemology.

Although Nietzsche makes a sharp distinction between knowledge and objectivity, he also implies a fundamental connection between them. Knowledge may be considered 'true' to the extent that it approximates the average of all possible perspectives, even if such truth may be inaccessible to any individual via rational reflection or any other mode of thinking. This perspectivist account may extend to values as well, regardless of their normative character. Just as with empirical claims, a notion of value may be said to reflect 'truth' insofar as it aligns with the average of possible perspectives on that value. At the very least, values share the same epistemological tension between mind-dependence and mind-independence given by perspectivism.

Bernard Reginster argues that, for Nietzsche, the nihilist only regards a goal as worthy of pursuing if it satisfies some “agent-external sanction”, that is, if the value associated with that goal is unconditional or has an external origin. He states that “Values have an external origin when they are metaphysically independent from the contingent contents of the human will, that is to say, when their nature is not conditioned by that will” (Reginster 56-57). Understanding nihilism in this way, it presupposes a metaphysical conception of value that Nietzsche explicitly rejects, because Nietzsche’s perspectivism necessitates a degree of mind- or will-dependence in the knowledge of any empirical or normative claim.

Arguably, objectivity of the world is uncontroversial for Nietzsche—this is reflected in his naturalist methodologies in describing moral evolution and his epistemic emphasis on human nature. It is really in the idea of objective knowledge, or even just aiming to describe the relationship between knowledge and objectivity, where notions of realism and anti-realism (including nihilism) will encounter problems with perspectivism in mind. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche argues that “Consciousness is really only a net of communication between human beings,” (GS 298) and that “consciousness does not really belong to man’s individual existence but rather to his social or herd nature...Consequently, given the best will in the world to understand ourselves as individually as possible, ‘to know ourselves,’ each of us will always succeed in becoming conscious only of what is not individual but ‘average’” (GS 299). This supports the previous notion that for Nietzsche, objectivity is the average of all perspectives.

For these reasons, I maintain that Nietzsche may be viewed only effectively or practically as an anti-realist about value, meaning, because of our perspective dependence, we would be more correct to regard values as if they have no metaphysical reality—anti-realist interpretations

reflect this skepticism towards real values, but make the mistake of extrapolating it into an epistemological assumption (a global fact about the nature of value) which is not granted by perspectivism. Nietzsche's perspectivism entails that while no claims can bear complete truth, truth does exist in an abstract sense, though not in a way that is epistemologically accessible.

A similar view is held by Lightbody, who argues that the anti-realist interpretation of perspectivism is epistemically undesirable or problematic. He ultimately argues that "Nietzsche fully understood that 'perspectivism' moves beyond any empiricist/idealist or even realist/anti-realist impasse. To understand perspectivism correctly is first to understand that it is a radically new and profound way of comprehending the world from the 'inside'" (Lightbody 2010). Lightbody engages specifically with Leiter's anti-realist interpretation, which, unlike the Received View, focuses on the metaphysical status of morals and does not prevent empirical truth claims to be made. In what follows, I consider Lightbody's presentation of an epistemological problem raised by Leiter and argue that the problem dissolves when perspectivism is properly understood. This will support my broader claim that Nietzsche aligns with neither realism nor anti-realism—a conclusion shared by Lightbody, though I diverge from his specific reasoning.

From GMIII:12, Leiter derives four claims to characterize Nietzschean epistemology. First, the 'Perspectivism' claim states that knowledge of an object can only be from a certain perspective. Second, the 'Plurality' claim states that the more perspectives we can employ in understanding an object, the better the conception of the object will be. The third claim, the 'Infinity' claim, states that we will never exhaust all possible perspectives on an object. The fourth and final 'Purity' claim states that there exists a catalogue of identifiable factors that would

distort our knowledge of objects (Lightbody 2010). Leiter recognizes the Perspectivism and Purity claims as mutually problematic, but he offers solutions which he sees as allowing him to maintain an anti-realist interpretation of Nietzsche. The Purity claim is problematic for him because it seems impossible to catalogue distorting factors without fully knowing the object in the first place, which is impossible if knowledge is perspective dependent. Likewise, if knowledge of an object is always conditioned by interests and drives (presuming this is what constitutes its perspective dependence), then specifying the conditions for truth seems futile. This incoherence would be problematic for both a realist and anti-realist interpretation of value, since regardless of whether values are real or not, it is implied that the possibility of coming to know them is not granted due to the impossibility of perspective-independent knowledge.

To make this four-claim characterization of Nietzsche epistemically coherent requires reconciling the Purity and Perspectivism claims. Leiter argues that it is possible to distinguish between distorting factors and non-distorting ones by considering Nietzsche's idea of the 'strong' or 'choice individual', which he acknowledges as an unconventional solution (Lightbody 2010). This solution compliments an anti-realist interpretation of Nietzsche insofar as strength is understood to be a natural phenomenon, or in biological or physiological terms. In turn, by observing the perspective tendencies of the 'strong', the implication is that it would be possible to differentiate 'objectivity' from error, as it relates to strength only as a practically advantageous attribute, not a moral one. In this way, "Leiter adopts an anti-realist position in order to close the ontological gap, as it were, between the subject's perspective of an object and the object as it exists in and of itself" (Lightbody 2010).

However, granting Leiter's characterization of Nietzsche's epistemology, Lightbody objects to his solution by arguing that attempting to distinguish between distorting and non-distorting epistemic factors on the basis of 'strength' and 'weakness,' normative qualities which are understood in relation to one another and the world, such a criterion would be circular or groundless. Therefore, Lightbody concludes that Leiter's solution to the discrepancy between perspective-dependent knowledge and the possibility of gaining legitimate knowledge of an object is insufficient. On this basis, he also rejects Leiter's view that Nietzsche's perspectivism necessitates his anti-realism with regard to value. Nevertheless, he denies that value realism is a more viable interpretation, since the epistemic problems instantiated in Leiter's characterization of Nietzsche's perspectivism remain unresolved.

While Lightbody seems to accept Leiter's four epistemological claims as an accurate characterization of Nietzschean perspectivism, it may be the case that one of these claims is mistaken, or the set of them incomplete. I propose that the 'Purity' claim offered by Leiter, and which the epistemological problem discussed by both Leiter and Lightbody hinges from, is either interpreted incorrectly by both of them or altogether does not fit within an epistemological characterization of Nietzsche's perspectivist framework. One reason for this is that the epistemological tension between Leiter's Purity and Perspectivism claims seems to have a possible resolution when considering the Plurality claim—which seems to be not addressed by Lightbody or Leiter in their analyses of this problem.

The Plurality claim, that the more perspectives are employed the better an object is known, is explicitly described in GMIII:12, the chapter from which Leiter initially derived his four claims—the Purity claim does not seem as explicit in this chapter. The idea behind the Plurality

claim lends itself to the notion that the ‘objective’ is best understood as the average of all perspectives, as discussed previously. Arguably, there is no reason for ‘distorting’ and ‘non-distorting’ factors or claims to be differentiated in this idea of objectivity, and doing so may even be a crucial error.

The point of Nietzsche’s perspectivist argument, to reiterate, is that we cannot abstract from our individual perspectives without error. Any claim, whether ‘distorted’ or not, is a perspective, and so any attempt to discern ‘distorted’ factors necessarily appeals to a notion of perspective-independent truth. Moreover, the Purity claim that the catalogue of distorting factors is identifiable to us is arguably aimed at justifying the specification of a criterion of truth; this is strongly reflected in Leiter’s solution to discern non-distorted claims by observing ‘strength’—a notion which does not reflect the idea that ‘objectivity’ is comprised by *all* perspectives. From this, the requirement to distinguish between ‘distorting’ and ‘non-distorting’ factors is in fact unnecessary or mistaken, and the Purity claim does not belong within an epistemological characterization of Nietzsche’s philosophy.

Lightbody raises the concern that if two competing perspectives cannot be legitimately compared, Nietzsche’s perspectivism may just be a form of epistemological skepticism. He states, “If there is no aperspectival stance that would allow another subject to adjudicate between competing perspectives of the same object, then how do we know which perspective is more justified?” Notice that whether the Purity claim is included in the perspectivist framework or not, this epistemological problem remains unresolved. If there is a way to categorize distorting claims from non-distorting ones, the question remains how it is possible to do so. If the Purity claim is excluded and there is no such differentiation, then determining which perspectives are ‘justified’

on this basis is not possible. Broadly, Lightbody's concern is that perspectivism doesn't allow for the determination of epistemic validity. However, the notion of adjudication between perspectives seems to again appeal to perspective-independent truth criteria. Therefore, the legitimacy of this concern for perspectivism needs to be questioned, and in turn, the concern may be reframed in order to properly interrogate it.

Comparisons of subjects and objects involved in determinations of epistemic justification, which Lightbody's concern regards, involve acts of self-observation and self-conceptualization, providing an 'immediate certainty' with which Nietzsche maintained a strong skepticism towards (BGE 16). Moreover, the notion of epistemological justification hearkens to Nietzsche's original concern of the illusory dichotomy between truth and falsity. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he explains, "There would be no life at all if not on the basis of perspective estimates and appearances; and if, with the virtuous enthusiasm and clumsiness of some philosophers, one wanted to abolish the "apparent world" altogether—well, supposing *you* could do that, at least nothing would be left of your "truth" either. Indeed, what forces us at all to suppose that there is an essential opposition of 'truth' and 'false'? Is it not sufficient to assume degrees of apparentness and, as it were, lighter and darker shadows and shades of appearance—different 'values,' to use the language of painters? Why couldn't the world *that concerns us*—be a fiction?" (BGE 34).

Although Nietzsche's use of the metaphor of light and darkness may not provide a philosophically rigorous depiction of truth, it illustrates why his epistemology does not fit within the traditional epistemic frameworks in which justification relies on the possibility of certainty. Arguably, the concern for epistemological skepticism only exists insofar as it is constituted by

the impossibility of certainty. If knowledge is understood to exist in degrees, as Nietzsche suggests here, rather than within a binary of truth and falsity, then knowledge of objects can be legitimately gained and become closer or further to the ‘truth’ (the question still remains how). Already, arguably, an improvement in perspectival ‘truth’ is given in the acknowledgement of the epistemic limitation imposed by perspective dependence, since this accounts for there being perspectives which exist outside of one’s own. Having rejected this notion of epistemic justification, however, Lightbody’s concern that perspectivism doesn’t allow the determination of epistemic validity seems still unresolved.

It is crucial to note that Nietzsche’s perspectivism doesn’t seem to deny that arguments and claims may be coherent, well-reasoned, or well-evidenced. The perspective-dependence of knowledge arguably doesn’t concern logical connections, so much as it does concepts—this is evidenced by Nietzsche’s statement in GMIII:12 that “the more affect...we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity,’ be.” On this basis, there may be no issue for determining epistemic justification or validity in perspectivism as it regards the empirical verifiability or logical reasoning of a claim.

From this, because Nietzsche’s principal aim in the *Genealogy* is to critique morality, values, and the idea of ‘truth’, Lightbody’s concern with epistemological justification in perspectivism should be adapted to be focused on moral concepts, though non-moral ones are not excluded. How we may come to know moral ‘objectivity’, and how we can validate or justify that knowledge, remains deeply ambiguous. Returning to Nietzsche’s original depiction of perspective-dependent knowledge in GMIII:12, it is suggested that the accumulation of affects, and embracing the will, constitute the liberation of the intellect, and possibly what Nietzsche

means when he suggests that ‘objectivity’ is constituted by a plurality of perspectives. Although it is not obvious what it involved in the admission of affect or will, it is clear that to eliminate either of these things constitutes a rejection of perspective and objectivity, based on Nietzsche’s equation of this with a “castration of the intellect.”

This aligns with Nietzsche’s broader critique in the Third Essay, where he interrogates the meaning and nature of ascetic ideals. The answer to how we may employ epistemological justification, increase our ‘objectivity’, and improve our concept of an object in Nietzsche’s perspectivist framework, therefore, may be gleaned from his understanding of the inversion of the will involved in asceticism. Nietzsche describes the ascetic ideal, stating, “an attempt is made to employ force to block up the wells of force; here physiological well-being itself is viewed askance and especially the outward expression of this well-being, beauty and joy; while pleasure is felt and *sought* in ill-constitutedness, decay, pain, mischance, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, self-mortification, self-flagellation, self-sacrifice” (GMIII:11).

Thus, ascetic ideals can broadly be characterized as a suspension of affect and will. Wherever there is an inversion of the natural wills towards beauty, joy, strength, and anything else, there is simultaneously a rejection of one’s affects. Insofar as perspectivism entails that knowledge cannot contain or reflect full, true ‘objectivity’ because it is perspective-dependent, and insofar as a ‘perspective’ is understood to be constituted by an individual’s unique affects, it follows that the closest one can come to that objectivity is to admit to, grasp, and embrace one’s affects—this coheres with Nietzsche’s depiction of the ascetic ideal as an “impoverishment of life” (GMIII:25), in other words, an impoverishment of affect, alongside the notion that the

purpose of these ideals is to conceal a certain truth when he claims, “how often the real meaning of all this lies in the desire to keep something hidden from oneself!” (GMIII:23).

In contrast to Leiter’s proposed empirical determination of distorting and non-distorting factors via observed strength and weakness, the understanding that we may grasp greater objectivity insofar as we embrace affect arguably avoids the circularity which Lightbody objected to. Lightbody himself suggested that perspectives should be viewed as “environments of power,” which he saw as resolving the concern for epistemological skepticism since it is possible to “stand in the environment of another subject” (Lightbody 2010), aligning with his view that neither realism nor anti-realism offers a coherent account of perspectivism. This notion broadly coheres with my suggestion that objectivity and asceticism are anti-correlated, insofar as the ‘power’ for Lightbody is understood as embracing or acknowledging affect, though the notion of “standing in another subject’s environment” seems somewhat problematic for perspectivism, or at least, it doesn’t yet provide a rigorous epistemological account. Regardless, the coherence of either of these suggestions relies on granting the interpretation that Nietzsche is neither a realist nor anti-realist as epistemologically valid. While this essay argued that the epistemological concern for skepticism may only exist within an anti-realist/ realist framework, wherein certain knowledge of normative concepts (realism) or a lack of such certainty (anti-realism) are the only viable epistemological options, justification of the rejection of this framework may be found in developing the positive understanding of Nietzsche’s perspectivism, specifically with regard to how the objectivity of knowledge of concepts can be acquired.

Ultimately, Nietzsche’s perspectivist view reveals a complex relationship between human knowledge and ‘truth’, particularly with regard to values. While disallowing certainty or

immediate knowledge with regard to normative concepts, it also vindicates them by suggesting that objectivity is the perspectival average. In Nietzsche's perspectivist framework, whether moral statements correspond to an objective moral 'truth' or not, is simply not knowable, and claims of this nature are therefore erroneous insofar as they claim universality—this constitutes the 'error theory' of Nietzsche's moral philosophy. Therefore, it has been argued that neither a realist nor an anti-realist interpretation, both of which view value in perspective-independent terms, seems to fully capture the nuances of Nietzsche's epistemology.

Leiter's four-claim model of perspectivism highlighted this tension, particularly in the 'Purity' claim, which I have argued misinterprets the notion of objectivity in Nietzsche's framework by relying on a problematic distinction between distorting and non-distorting perspectives. The concern for epistemological justification is further clarified by my argument that perspectivism does not necessarily reject or diminish logical structures or empirical mechanisms, but rather concerns normative and conceptual knowledge (though logical structures and empirical mechanisms are often intertwined with concepts of this nature, so perspectivism will still apply). If perspectivism is understood to be describing concepts, including values, the notion of distorting factors, and the Purity claim, should be excluded from an epistemological characterization of it.

This alone, however, did not resolve all epistemological concerns, since the question of how knowledge of concepts, specifically of moral concepts or values, was to be validated or justified still remains. Based on Nietzsche's depiction of perspectivism in GMIII:12, I interpreted his notion of a 'perspective' as a constitution of affects, unique to an individual. From this, I suggested that insofar as ascetic ideals are aimed at suppressing affects, they can be

understood as antagonistic to objectivity in Nietzsche's perspectivism. Drawing from this, it may be possible to develop a more rigorous epistemological model of conceptual knowledge, including values. In conclusion, Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* presents a deeply nuanced account of morality that is fundamentally tied to epistemological notions of perspectivism. An accurate understanding of his perspectivism resists anti-realist and realist classifications and invites us to reconsider the notion of objectivity, particularly of values, not as detachment from perspective, but constituted by it.

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