

# Chapter 2

## Nietzsche's Epistemic Perspectivism



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**Abstract** Nietzsche offers a positive epistemology, and those who interpret him as a skeptic or a mere pragmatist are mistaken. Instead he supports what he calls *perspectivism*. This is a familiar take on Nietzsche, as perspectivism has been analyzed by many previous interpreters. The present paper presents a sketch of the textually best supported and logically most consistent treatment of perspectivism as a first-order epistemic theory. What's original in the present paper is an argument that Nietzsche also offers a second-order methodological perspectivism aimed at enhancing *understanding*, an epistemic state distinct from knowledge. Just as Descartes considers and rejects radical skepticism while at the same time adopting methodological skepticism, one could consistently reject perspectivism as a theory of knowledge while accepting it as contributing to our understanding. It is argued that Nietzsche's perspectivism is in fact two-tiered: knowledge is perspectival because truth itself is, and in addition there is a methodological perspectivism in which distinct ways of knowing are utilized to produce understanding. A review of the manner in which understanding is conceptualized in contemporary epistemology and philosophy of science serves to illuminate how Nietzsche was tackling these ideas.

**Keywords** Nietzsche · Perspectivism · Understanding · Knowledge

### 2.1 Introduction

In this paper I will argue that Nietzsche offers a positive epistemology, and that those who interpret him as a sceptic or a mere pragmatist are mistaken. Instead he supports what he calls *perspectivism*. So far this is not a new take on Nietzsche, as perspectivism has been analyzed by many previous interpreters. I present a sketch of what I think is textually best supported and logically most consistent treatment of perspectivism as a first-order epistemic theory. What is new in the present paper is

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an argument that Nietzsche also offers a second-order methodological perspectivism aimed at enhancing *understanding*, an epistemic state distinct from knowledge. One could consistently reject perspectivism as a theory of knowledge while accepting it as contributing to our understanding. In fact, I believe he accepts both.

One thing Nietzsche loves is the hyperbolic smackdown followed by (partly) walking it back. He uses this tactic on practically every topic he touches. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE 108) and *Twilight of the Idols* (TI VII:1) Nietzsche declares that there are no moral facts whatsoever and then goes on to enunciate formulas for greatness and recipes for virtue (*Ecce Homo* II:10; AC 11).<sup>1</sup> He denounces philosophers' obsession with the will (BGE 19) and then promotes the will to power.

Nietzsche's audacious decrees are usually meant to shock the reader out of a complacent conformity to traditional dogmas. By artificially turning up the contrast, he casts rival ideas into high relief and highlights the alternative ideas that he is proposing. Nietzsche is fond of dismantling philosophical structures, taking their components and re-using them in new ways. He says as much in *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* (AOM 201): "The philosopher believes that the value of his philosophy lies in the whole, in the building: posterity discovers it in the bricks with which he built and which are then often used again for better building: in the fact, that is to say, that that building can be destroyed and *nonetheless* possess value as material." Of course, Nietzsche's own positive views are famously hard to pin down, since he approaches "deep problems like cold baths: quickly into them and quickly out again" (*The Gay Science* 381). The matter of his epistemic perspectivism is no exception, as he touches on it, moves on, and then returns to it many pages or even books later.

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<sup>1</sup> HATH = *Human, All Too Human*, ed. and trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984; original edition: 1878).

AOM = *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; original edition: 1879)

D = *Daybreak*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982; original edition: 1881).

GS = *The Gay Science*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974; original edition: 1882).

Z = *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1954; original edition: 1885).

BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966; original edition: 1886).

GM = *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967; original edition: 1887).

AC = *The Antichrist*, ed. and trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Viking Penguin, 1968; original edition: 1895).

TI = *The Twilight of the Idols*, ed. and trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Viking Penguin, 1968; original edition: 1889).

EH = *Ecce Homo*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967; original edition: 1908).

WP = *The Will to Power*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

Nietzsche's blitzkrieg is not as successful a rhetorical strategy as he might have hoped. It is far too easy to latch onto some portion of his work and treat it as a synecdoche that represents the whole. The result is a secondary literature that contains only pockets of agreement and little satisfactory unification. Nietzsche worried a good bit about being misunderstood (*GM* III 1, *AOM* 137, *EH* preface 1), while also impishly admitting that "I obviously do everything to be 'hard to understand' myself!" (*BGE* 27). It's hard to tell what sort of readers Nietzsche was hoping for, since he certainly had no optimism that philosophers were going to figure it all out. As he puts it in *The Gay Science* (§333), "Conscious thinking, especially that of the philosopher, is the least vigorous and therefore also the relatively mildest and calmest form of thinking; and thus precisely philosophers are most apt to be led astray about the nature of knowledge."<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2 The Skeptical and Pragmatic Interpretations

In practice, the result is that when Nietzsche writes things like "the biggest fable of all is the fable of knowledge" (*The Will to Power* 555); "delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation" (*GS* 107); "there are *no eternal facts*, nor are there any absolute truths" (*Human, All Too Human* 2), or when he repeatedly hammers against the sensibility of Kantian things-in-themselves that could be the objects of knowledge, as he does in the fourth chapter of *Twilight of the Idols*, many readers assume that he is an epistemological skeptic.

Babette Babich, for example, writes, "Nietzsche contends that knowledge — even as a limited perspective — is impossible" (Babich 1994, 80). R.J. Hollingdale concurs. He claims that according to Nietzsche, "[i]n the sense in which philosophers are accustomed to use the word ... there is *no knowledge*" (Hollingdale 1973, 131). Jean Granier also agrees that for Nietzsche "the traditional concept of knowledge appears as a pseudo-concept" (Granier 1977, 192). Alan Schrift thinks that Nietzsche rejects epistemology entirely as a result of his skepticism: "[he] does not provide a theory at all; it is a rhetorical strategy that offers an alternative to the traditional epistemological conception of knowledge as the possession of some stable, eternal 'entities', whether these be considered 'truths', 'facts', 'meanings', 'propositions', or whatever .... Nietzsche views these 'entities' as beyond the limits of human comprehension, and ... he concludes that we are surely incapable of 'knowing' them" (Schrift 1990, 145). Peter Poellner sees Nietzsche as part of a Cartesian skeptical tradition, where "even if we were able to rationally justify a thought ... we would have no good reason to regard it as true" (Poellner 1995, 63). Willard Mittelman sums up the skeptical interpretation: "for Nietzsche knowledge of the world is impossible" (Mittelman 1984, 8).

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<sup>2</sup>As Socrates asked Theaetetus, "do you fancy it is a small matter to discover the nature of knowledge? Is it not one of the hardest questions?" *Theaetetus* 148.c.

Jessica Berry offers a subtle analysis of Nietzsche as belonging to the Pyrrhonian skeptical tradition, something quite distinct from the more common readings of him as a Cartesian skeptic. For ancient skeptics like Pyrrho of Elis and Sextus Empiricus, the peace of mind they termed *ataraxia* was to be achieved through suspending judgment about everything that is less than self-evident. Arguments can be mounted for and against any propositions, making them uncertain and inconclusive, leaving the inquirer indefinitely indecisive and unsure what to believe. For the Pyrrhonian skeptic, that is the proper frame of mind. Berry holds that Nietzsche's perspectivism is primarily epistemic — he recognizes a variety of perspectives as equipollent, which leads to the Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment and a rejection of dogmatic views that take one perspective as superior to another. Perspectivism as a doctrine or positive position of any kind would be just another sort of dogmatism on her reading (Berry 2011, chapter 4).

It is puzzling that those who regard Nietzsche as a skeptic not only skip over his criticisms of skepticism, but somehow miss the occasions when he walks his more extreme claims about knowledge back. In *BGE* 208 Nietzsche remarks that “when a philosopher suggests these days that he is not a skeptic ... everybody is annoyed”. Why are they annoyed? Is it because skepticism is so clearly right that only retrograde, dogmatic troglodytes still claim to have knowledge? No, skeptics are “delicate” and “timid”; they suffer from “nervous exhaustion” and “sickness.” Skepticism, Nietzsche claims, is a fashionable decadence, a soporific sedative; “entertaining no hypotheses at all might well be part of good taste”. In other words, the rejection of skepticism is a social *faux pas* in fashionably effete circles, whereas the claim of knowledge — *that* is dangerous, an explosive rumbling in the distance. In the same section Nietzsche equates objective knowledge with dressed-up skepticism, which he regards as mere epistemic trendiness. But he is not dismissing knowledge; in the same breath that he denounces skepticism, Nietzsche rejects absolutism as a kindred crime. Skepticism and absolutism are opposite sides of the same devalued coin.

Nietzsche does not sentence knowledge — in some sense of the term — to the gallows. Consider that “no honey is sweeter than that of knowledge” (*HATH* 292) and his assertion that “whoever seriously wants to become free ... his will desires nothing more urgently than knowledge and the means to it — that is, the enduring condition in which he is best able to engage in knowledge” (*HATH* 288). He also connects knowledge with both pleasure and happiness: “Why is knowledge, the element of researchers and philosophers, linked to pleasure? First and foremost, because by it we gain awareness of our power ... Second, because, as we gain knowledge, we surpass older ideas and their representatives, become victors, or at least believe ourselves to be. Third, because any new knowledge, however small, makes us feel superior to *everyone* and unique in understanding this matter correctly” (*HATH* 252). Likewise, happiness is positively undesirable without knowledge: “our drive for knowledge has become too strong for us to be able to want happiness without knowledge ... Knowledge has in us been transformed into a passion which shrinks at no sacrifice and at bottom fears nothing but its own extinction” (*Daybreak* 429). Nor is the happiness provided by knowledge cheap or

ephemeral: rather, “the happiness of the man of knowledge enhances the beauty of the world and makes all that exists sunnier; knowledge casts its beauty not only over things but in the long run into things ...” (D 550).

The quotations in the preceding paragraph are from *Human, All Too Human* and *Daybreak*, two of Nietzsche's earlier works, and those enamored of the idea that Nietzsche's thought progressed through distinct phases (like Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter) might be inclined to regard those passages as examples of an early, “positivistic” phase, rather than of his mature thinking. It is true that Nietzsche did change his mind about some topics. Richard Wagner is the most obvious, where the hagiography of *The Birth of Tragedy* gave way to the vitriol of *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* and *The Case of Wagner*. However, a close examination of Nietzsche's writings from throughout his life demonstrates that he displays continuing respect for knowledge. Even in *The Gay Science*, the source of much of Nietzsche's epistemological critique, he characterizes himself as a lover of knowledge (GS 14), a seeker of knowledge (GS 380), and as someone greedy for knowledge (GS 242, 249). The most famous announcement of *The Gay Science*, the death of God, is taken to be a welcome epistemic harbinger; now that God is dead, “all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never been such an ‘open sea’” (GS 343). Nietzsche is clear in *The Gay Science* (§324) that this is cause for rejoicing: “and knowledge itself ... for me it is a world of dangers and victories in which heroic feelings, too, find places to dance and play. ‘Life as a means to knowledge’ — with this principle in one's heart one can live not only boldly but even gaily, and laugh gaily too.”

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* one finds Zarathustra saying “With knowledge the body purifies itself; making experiments with knowledge it elevates itself; in the lover of knowledge all instincts become holy; in the elevated, the soul becomes gay” (ZI:22.2). In the first section of the preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche writes that the treasure for “we men of knowledge” is “where the beehives of knowledge are”. This sort of praise for knowledge continued to the end of his productive life. In *The Antichrist* (48, see also 49) he criticizes Christianity on the grounds that it opposes science and knowledge, characterizing knowledge as “emancipation from the priest”; and in *Ecce Homo* (“The Birth of Tragedy”: 2) he writes, “Knowledge, saying Yes to reality, is just as necessary for the strong as cowardice and the flight from reality — as the ‘ideal’ is for the weak, who are inspired by weakness”.

So Nietzsche has some kind of positive attitude towards and program regarding knowledge and a program. But what is it? *Beyond Good and Evil* opens with him questioning the value of truth, and why its pursuit should be seen as the highest value. “Knowledge for its own sake” is a form of unexamined moralizing (BGE 63). Nietzsche often writes about the practicality of beliefs as a distinct virtue from their truth. Consider *The Gay Science* 354: “we simply lack any organ for knowledge, for ‘truth’: we ‘know’ (or believe or imagine) just as much as may be *useful* in the interests of the human herd, the species ...”. In the same passage, Nietzsche goes so far as to speculate about conditions in which we would be so severely mistaken about what is useful for us that it would cause human extinction. In *The Will to Power* (493)

he writes that “truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live”, and suggests in *WP* (515) that our goal is “not ‘to know’ but to schematize — to impose upon chaos as much regularity and form as our practical needs require”. In *BGE* 4 he writes, “the falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection ... the question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating”. We need to recognize untruth as a condition of life (*BGE* 4).

It is not surprising that these sorts of passages led some interpreters to conclude that Nietzsche was a pragmatist, where knowledge just consists in accepting those doctrines that are helpful or productive for our lives. Arthur Danto led the way, writing “Nietzsche ... advanced a pragmatic criterion of truth” (Danto 1965, 72), and he was followed by Reudiger Grimm, who writes, “the criterion to be met by any of these perspectival ‘errors’ [that Nietzsche discusses] is not one of veracity, but rather one of utility. In point of usefulness there is a great deal of difference between interpretations ...” (Grimm 1977, 70). More recently, Tsarina Doyle interprets Nietzsche as defending *internal realism*, a view that Hilary Putnam regarded as the heir to the American pragmatist tradition (Doyle 2009, chapter 2). Neil Sinhababu is even more explicit: “Nietzschean pragmatism is the view that one should believe whatever best promotes life, even things that are untrue ...” (Sinhababu 2017, 56).

### 2.3 Nietzsche’s First-Order Perspectivism

Nietzsche’s pragmatist interpreters have a case to be made, but like the skeptics’ reading, it is incomplete, as we will see. Probably the most popular analysis of his epistemology is that he defends *perspectivism*, a sort of relativism about truth and knowledge that has tendrils throughout his work. Perspectivism in contemporary philosophy of science has to do with human limitations and focused interest. For example, we see colors only along a very narrow band of electromagnetic radiation, which restricts our connection to the external world. In addition, our scientific theories often aim to model the world only at some interest-relative scale, as we see moving from atomic physics to chemistry to biology. Scientific perspectivism of this sort is arguably a realist theory. Nietzsche’s perspectivism is broader and less focused. For him, perspectivism is not one precisely defined doctrine, but a cluster of related ideas about the subjectivity of truth, anti-realist metaphysics, a bundle theory of objects, the revaluation of values and the creation of one’s own virtues, and the role of varying interpretations in knowledge (Hales and Welshon 2000). It is the latter that I will focus on here.

Recall that in *HATH* 2 Nietzsche writes that “there are *no eternal facts*, nor are there any absolute truths”. The gripping thing about this passage is that Nietzsche is plainly not denying the existence of *truth*, but the existence of *absolute truths* or *eternal facts*. He elaborates on this theme in *The Genealogy of Morals* (III:12), which is worth quoting at length:

Let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject'; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as 'pure reason', 'absolute spirituality', 'knowledge in itself': these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective knowing; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity' be.

Plato and Kant are the obvious targets of Nietzsche's criticisms. Plato's forms were the ideal, self-instantiating paradigms of concepts, the perfect examples of rightness, beauty, and goodness (*Parmenides* 130b). Our apprehension of those ideas through the muddled testimony of the senses is inadequate for true knowledge, and it is only by recollection of the forms prior to birth that we can properly grasp them. Kant's doctrine of things-in-themselves similarly posits unmediated objects that exist in a noumenal realm beyond the ken of human apprehension, and our knowledge of those things (such as it is) occurs only after filtering through the categories of experience. In both cases the "real world" is unattainable, the God's-eye view tantalizingly out of reach. Human knowledge is a pale simulacrum of true contact with reality.

For Nietzsche, Plato and Kant were united by their otherworldliness — both the metaphysical view that reality is something beyond or other than the empirical world of sensation and the epistemological view that we see that world through a glass, darkly. "Pure reason" Nietzsche dismisses as a falsification of the senses, a means of telling ourselves that the true nature of the world is fixed and unchanging. He accuses philosophers of conceptual idolatry, dehistoricizing our categories and concepts and treating them as unalterably eternal. Kant's pure concepts of the understanding and Plato's ideal forms he regards as examples of this "rude fetishism" (*TI*, "'Reason' in Philosophy" 5). Nietzsche regards modern Christianity, with its belief in an eternal afterlife beyond our earthly experience and an abstract notion of an immutable God, as of a piece with the metaphysics of Plato and Kant (cf. *AC* 16–19). It is this epistemology of the other — somehow more authentic or genuine — world offered by Christianity, Plato, and Kant that Nietzsche wishes to declare, at last, a myth (*TI IV*).

Instead of absolute truths and impartially objective knowledge of a supra-empirical world, Nietzsche offers a vision of partial, fragmentary, perspectival knowledge. His regular praise of Heraclitus's acceptance of flux and becoming instead of the Platonic longing for an unchanging invisible world suggests the epistemology Nietzsche supports. We are not prevented from ideal cognition by our this-worldly empirical limitations; Nietzsche wants to abolish the *apparent world/real world* dichotomy altogether. Rather, the very nature of truth, and therefore our knowledge of those truths, is in some way dependent on perspective. Nothing is true outside or independent of perspectives; the idea of extra-perspectival knowledge is too redolent of those Kantian or Platonic epistemologies that Nietzsche has already dismissed. As he comments in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (III:11.2), "'This is my way;

where is yours?’—thus I answer those who asked me ‘the way’. For the way — that does not exist.” There is also the testimony of *The Will to Power* (540), “There are many kinds of eyes. Even the sphinx has eyes — and consequently there are many kinds of ‘truths’, and consequently there is no truth.” One doesn’t simply know or not know a claim, because claims are not true or false without being embedded in a particular perspective.

Perspectives themselves are more than mere beliefs, an error that would make everyone infallible. If what’s true for a person is a matter of his or her perspective, and a perspective is just his or her set of beliefs, then the believer could never be wrong. Fortunately, Nietzsche is aware of this, and makes explicit the distinction between being believed true in a perspective and being true in a perspective. In *The Antichrist* (23) he writes “truth and the belief that something is true: two completely diverse worlds of interest”. Perspectives instead have something to do with centers of interest, or attitudes organized around a common concern: “all evaluation is made from a definite perspective: that of the preservation of the individual, a community, a race, a state, a church, a faith, a culture” (*WP* 259). Perspectives are both local and abstract, they are “the basic condition of all life” (*BGE* preface). Nietzsche is not precise about exactly what he considers to be a perspective, but they are best characterized as ways of knowing, or doxastic practices.

According to William Alston, a doxastic practice is “the exercise of a system or constellation of belief-forming habits or mechanisms, each realizing a function that yields beliefs with a certain kind of content from inputs of a certain type” (Alston 1991, 155). Doxastic practices for Alston are abstract types; concrete specific practices are tokens of those types. Alston is especially interested in what makes a particular doxastic practice Christian, and states that Christian practice “takes the Bible, the ecumenical councils of the undivided church, Christian experience through the ages, Christian thought, and more generally the Christian tradition as normative sources of its overrider system” (Alston 1991, 193). Similar reasoning would apply to a scientific perspective, or an aesthetic one. A scientific doxastic practice includes something like the norms of data collection and analysis, the methods of empirical observation and testing, the assumptions and puzzles of normal science, and an epistemological commitment to wide reflective equilibrium. It is only from within, or with reference to, such perspectives that anything could be said to be true.

Without a doubt, the most troublesome aspect of this reading of perspectivism is how the doctrine might be applied to itself. If *the* way to the truth does not exist, because there are many kinds of truths, then what shall we make of those very claims? Isn’t perspectivism itself just another perspective? Isn’t it supposed to be true for everyone that there are distinct interests that constitute the different perspectives? Writing in 2001, Bernard Reginster describes this paradox of perspectivism as dominating the previous 20 years of English-speaking Nietzsche scholarship (Reginster 2001), and certainly it has bothered Nietzsche’s commentators going back at least to Danto. If perspectivism is a perspective, then there are perspectives in which statements are untrue only in a perspective; if perspectivism is not a

perspective, then it is untrue that every statement is true in some perspectives and untrue in others (Danto 1965, 80).

One way to salvage Nietzsche's perspectivism is the following: instead of insisting that *everything is perspectival*, one could aver that *everything true is perspectivally true*. The vital difference between the two formulations can be brought out with an analogy. Compare *everything is possible* to *everything true is possibly true*. No one except the pathologically optimistic would defend the idea that *everything is possible*, but *everything true is possibly true* is so obvious as to hardly rate a comment. *Everything true is possibly true* allows the possibility that there are necessary truths that are true in all worlds and it permits that some truths are merely contingent ones that are true in some worlds but false in others. Analogously, *everything true is perspectivally true* is compatible with there being absolute truths that are true in all perspectives while also permitting that there are merely perspectival truths that are true in some perspectives and false in others. Nietzsche is then free to argue that there are perspectives, that truth is indexed to perspectives, that there is no such thing as truth outside of or independent from perspectives, and so on. Those structural claims are true in all perspectives, without risk of self-refutation.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.4 Nietzsche's Second-Order Perspectivism

All the discussion of perspectivism so far has been treating it as a first-order theory, where our knowledge is perspectival because truth itself is. This has been the (or at least a prominent) mainstream way to understand Nietzsche's perspectivism, and has been the way I have defended and presented it in the past. However, I think there is another way into his perspectivist thinking that has not been previously discussed in the literature and is an intriguing new lens through which we can see his work. That is to regard perspectivism not as specific theory of knowledge, or even a collection of theories, but as a *strategic methodology*. The right analogy here is to Descartes's discussion of skepticism.

In the first *Meditation*, Descartes is troubled by how often he has been wrong in the past. This is especially bothersome because some areas of human inquiry — geometry, for example — seem set on firm foundations from which further facts can be rigorously derived. Ordinary empirical knowledge seems much shakier. Descartes's worries lead to two further lines of reflection: the first is doubt about the possibility of any kind of empirical knowledge, as raised in his famous skeptical arguments. The first skeptical argument is the contention that there are no detectable differences between the wakeful perception of reality and a realistic dream. Since we cannot distinguish between dreaming and reality, we cannot be sure that the testimony of our senses provides us with a window into the truth. The second

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<sup>3</sup>These ideas were first developed in (Hales and Welshon 2000). Lightbody 2010, footnote 1 writes of this view "I believe it is the only consistent perspectivist position possible." A more general discussion of approaches to self-refutation is in (Hales forthcoming).

skeptical argument imagines the possibility of an evil demon “of utmost power and cunning” who devotes all of his energies to our deception. Like witnessing the world’s greatest illusionist, we can never trust our experiences as representing the way the world really is. Of course, Descartes argues later in the *Meditations* that we do have knowledge, and that these skeptical arguments ultimately fail.

Pretty much all later epistemologists have thought that it is Descartes’s rebuttals that ultimately fail, but that doesn’t matter here. The point is that Descartes raises skeptical concerns, takes them seriously, and finally rejects them. This sort of first-order skepticism was one of his two lines of investigation stemming from the recognition of human fallibility. The second, which Descartes does not reject, is *methodological* skepticism. His methodological skepticism is contained in his proposal that “I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false” (*Meditations* I 18). The method of doubt does not presume that there cannot be empirical knowledge or that the dream and demon arguments have any purchase at all. Rather, it sets out an approach to further inquiries, namely the psychologically challenging attempt to suspend judgment about everything that can be doubted, until proven otherwise.

Descartes rejects first-order skepticism as a positive epistemic theory while promoting skepticism as a second-order methodology. It is consistent to accept both or reject both as well—the key thing is that they are demonstrably different ideas. There are good reasons to believe that Nietzsche’s perspectivism, like Descartes’s skepticism, is also two-tiered. Nietzsche does present and promote perspectivism as a first-order theory or collection of philosophical theories, as discussed above (and as I defended in earlier work). But he also offers perspectivism as a second-order epistemological methodology.

Why would Nietzsche want methodological perspectivism? What is the point or advantage of it? The answer is to provide and enhance *understanding* — of the human condition, of society, morality, religion, science, music, politics. There are not only distinct perspectival truths, but the very manner in which these domains can be understood, and the systematic approaches we can take to provide that understanding, are diverse to the point of incommensurability. Nevertheless, our understanding is broadened precisely through the recognition of that diversity. The Uruguayan poet Eduardo Galeano observed in *Walking Words* that “The Church says: the body is a sin. Science says: the body is a machine. Advertising says: The body is a business. The Body says: I am a fiesta” (Galeano 1995, 151). Each of these is a legitimate perspective on the body, each can generate perfectly true claims within its investigative paradigm, and still each alone is incomplete, stunted, and provincial. It is only by appreciating all of these perspectives that a richer sort of understanding can be achieved. With first-order perspectivism Nietzsche is (partly) offering a theory of knowledge in which diverse perspectives generate distinct kinds of knowledge. Second-order perspectivism is a way of taking a stance on those first-order points of view and utilizing them to produce understanding.

## 2.5 Understanding

Understanding is a separate epistemic state from knowledge and has only recently received critical scrutiny. There are five ways in which epistemologists have distinguished understanding from knowledge. The first is *epistemic luck*. Jonathan Kvanvig has argued that while knowledge can be undermined by epistemic luck, understanding cannot be (Kvanvig 2017). For example, imagine someone who can correctly answer any question about the Comanche dominance of the southern plains in North America from 1775 to 1875. They have a good understanding of Comanche dominance even if they acquired this information in a way riddled with epistemic luck. They might have read a book on the Comanches that was filled with errors, but misremember the book in a way that corrects its mistakes. Such a scenario would typically be regarded as one in which the subject lacks knowledge due to the presence of epistemic luck, but it would still be a mistake to insist that they have no understanding of Comanche dominance.<sup>4</sup>

Some, notably Linda Zagzebski, have argued that “understanding, in contrast to [propositional knowledge] not only has internally accessible criteria, but is a state that is constituted by a state of conscious transparency. It may be possible to know without knowing one knows but it is impossible to understand without understanding one understands” (Zagzebski 2001, 246). The transparency thesis is the second claim often made on behalf of understanding.

Understanding is also supposed to be *valuable* in a way distinct from knowledge. Duncan Pritchard has argued that one might have knowledge without it being particularly connected to any kind of cognitive achievement (Pritchard et al. 2010, 80–84). A child who accepts a true belief about dinosaurs on the basis of parental testimony might have knowledge about dinosaurs, but that knowledge is not really creditable to the child’s cognitive abilities. Pritchard thinks understanding is different, that it is a genuine cognitive achievement and is an epistemically internalist notion. Like Zagzebski, Pritchard holds that if one has understanding then it should not be opaque that one has such understanding. As a result, understanding is distinctively valuable. The value of knowledge runs the risk of being swamped by the value of merely possessing the truth, but the value of understanding consists in the virtue of achievement.

The transparency thesis of Zagzebski and Pritchard is dubious. People routinely do not know the things they think they know and can find out that they don’t really believe the things they take themselves to believe. Studies in perceptual construction show that subjects routinely report seeing a light flash or a pinprick when told to expect one, even though there was no flash or prick. In short, our minds are far more opaque than we’d like to think, which makes it dubious that any particular

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<sup>4</sup>Pritchard, Millar, and Haddock (2010, 77–78) challenged Kvanvig on this point, arguing that understanding is subject to some but not all forms of epistemic luck.

mental state like understanding should be perfectly transparent.<sup>5</sup> Certainly Nietzsche was doubtful about our continuing overestimation of consciousness (*GS* 11): “By far the greatest part of our spirit’s activity remains unconscious and *unfelt*” (*GS* 333), and he calls “the absurd overestimation of consciousness” a “tremendous blunder” (*WP* 529). However, there are other common theses about understanding that are very Nietzschean indeed.

Knowledge is straightforwardly Boolean: either you know that  $p$  or you do not know that  $p$ . Understanding, on the other hand, comes in degrees. As Catherine Elgin writes, “A freshman has some understanding of the Athenian victory [at Marathon], while her teaching fellow has a greater understanding and her professor of military history has an even greater understanding” (Elgin 2017, 58). Or consider theories of planetary motion. Ptolemy had some understanding of the motion of the heavens — he realized that the sun, moon, stars, other planets, and Earth were in motion relative to each other, that the stars seemed not to move and that the sun and moon moved in a very regular pattern, whereas sometimes the planets seemed to loop back on their own orbits (retrograde motion) and that this needed explanation.

Copernicus had a better understanding, placing the sun stationary at the center of the system instead of the Earth, but his theory was just as false as Ptolemy’s, since he still believed that orbits were circular. Kepler’s astronomy provided a better understanding as he replaced Copernicus’s circular orbits with elliptical ones. His flawed understanding was demonstrated by Newton, who showed that because the planets exert gravitational force on each other, orbits cannot be perfectly elliptical. Newton did not get the last word in either, as relativity theory establishes that there is no absolute space from which we can measure the motion of bodies. Instead of the Sun moving around the Earth, or the Earth moving around the sun, a better understanding recognizes that there is no absolute space or absolute motion in the way Newtonian mechanics suggested. The preceding is not a tale of one false theory being supplanted by another false theory, but of increasing degrees of understanding of a complex topic.

Perhaps the most distinctive and vital element of understanding is that false theories and erroneous models not only can lead to understanding, but understanding some phenomena may be impossible without them. In this way falsehood is an essential component of understanding the world. No one begins their scientific education by studying quantum mechanics and general relativity. Instead everyone starts with Newton’s mechanics, his three laws of motion, and assumption of absolute space, even though all physicists reject Newton’s physics and think that at best it is a special case of relativity physics. It would be a mistake to insist that studying Newton gives us no understanding of how the world works, even though his theory is, strictly speaking, false. Or take Euclidean geometry, which at most is true of ideal Platonic lines, points, and plane figures, but is not a true description of our imprecise and vaguely bounded material world. Not to mention the fact that Lobachevskian or Riemannian geometry more accurately describes spacetime.

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<sup>5</sup>On the fallibility of conscious introspection, see Schwitzgebel (2011).

Nonetheless learning Euclidean geometry enhances one's understanding of area, volume, and angularity, and is essential to draftsmanship and the building trades.

Once you see how one can understand phenomena imperfectly, or by accepting imperfect theories, examples come up everywhere. Elgin offers Boyle's Gas Law, which states that the volume and pressure of a gas in a closed container vary inversely. She points out that Boyle's Law falsely treats gas molecules as dimensionless, frictionless, perfect spheres that exhibit no intermolecular attraction (Elgin 2017, 61). Still, recognizing the relationship between gas volume and pressure was an important bit of scientific progress. In philosophy the assumption of causal determinism advances debates in action theory even though no scientist thinks it is true of the quantum world. Or take the justified-true-belief analysis of knowledge — another false theory whose long-term acceptance advanced our understanding of many topics in epistemology.

A cartographic example of how false models can provide understanding is the London Underground. Compare the tangled mass of spaghetti strands that most accurately represents the topology of the tube lines to the more familiar, highly stylized map of the Underground.<sup>6</sup> A London resident or expert may prefer the first, more accurate map, but a first-time tourist will understand how to get around the city, grasp the general relationship of prominent locations, and navigate their way to their desired destination much better with the stylized map. It's no coincidence that it is the second map that is in all the tube stations and not the first. The spaghetti-strand map is similar to the problem of model overfitting in statistics. Imagine a scatterplot of data points. One can always find an equation that draws a curve through the data that matches it perfectly, but doing so is inferior to finding the curve or line that shows the general trend of the data. Figuring out the general trend allows us to better predict future observations than essentially memorizing each piece of past information.

Kvanvig (2017, 181) argues that understanding is at least quasi-factive — genuine understanding cannot be *too* far removed from the truth. In many cases he is right; a tube map with stations randomly scattered all over the city is no help at all, and a cosmology in which no part of the heavens moves at all gives us much less understanding of our experiences than Ptolemy. But our understanding is much improved with models that are not overfit, stylized maps, and (except in extremely specialized cases) Euclidean geometry.

The mainstream literature on understanding treats it as a matter of degree and resulting from idealized models. It bears mentioning that there are recent criticisms of allowing idealizations (which perforce include falsehoods) to provide any sort of epistemic value. Sullivan and Khalifa (2019), for example, argue that if idealizations produce any epistemic value at all, it is always inferior to that yielded by more accurate models. As a result, there is no motivation to use them when a better model is available. More promising, they suggest, is a treatment of understanding that is non-epistemic, and that the proper use of idealizations is had “by flagging

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<sup>6</sup>Accurate map: <http://content.tfl.gov.uk/london-connections-map.pdf>. The familiar stylized map: <http://content.tfl.gov.uk/standard-tube-map.pdf>

irrelevancies, explaining, structuring contrastive explanations, isolating causes, and imparting modal information”, all tasks they regard as pragmatically useful, but not of epistemic value. A deep dive into these waters is beyond the scope of this paper (and Khalifa and Millson address perspectivism and truth in Chap. 6 in this collection). It is enough here to give a novel interpretation of Nietzsche as offering a rudimentary perspectival treatment of understanding that anticipates some of the contemporary discussion in epistemology and philosophy of science.

The idea that methodological perspectivism aims to enhance our understanding gives a new way to interpret Nietzsche’s claims about untruths being a condition of life and the epistemic value of errors. In fact, it predicts that he would say such things. If when Nietzsche discusses knowledge he is at least sometimes fumbling towards the idea of understanding, then what he says about the usefulness of errors snaps neatly into place. “Delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation”, Nietzsche writes (*GS* 107), “we simply lack any organ for knowledge, for ‘truth’: we ‘know’ (or believe or imagine) just as much as may be *useful* in the interests of the human herd, the species...” (*GS* 354). In *WP* 503 he writes, “The entire apparatus of knowledge is an apparatus for abstraction and simplification”. Perhaps the best known passage along these lines is *BGE* 4, in which Nietzsche writes,

the falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment .... The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating ... without accepting the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a constant falsification of the world by means of numbers, man could not live — that renouncing false judgments would mean renouncing life and a denial of life. To recognize untruth as a condition of life ... a philosophy that risks this would by that token alone place itself beyond good and evil.

Those ideas sound shockingly radical, unless you read “knowledge” as “understanding” and interpret his endorsement of fictions and falsehoods as essential to life as an acknowledgment of the epistemic value of idealized models. Seen through that lens, the passages just cited become perfectly sensible.

For all the reasons discussed above, our understanding of the world is improved by false models, and we understand just as much as may be useful to us. Nietzsche argues in *GS* 307 that when we give up former beliefs we mistakenly chalk it up to a victory for reason. Rather, it was an opinion useful for our former selves that we no longer need, like a snake shedding a skin it has outgrown. So the understanding provided by Newtonian physics to a novice student is outgrown by the mature scientist, and the navigational understanding that the London tube map provides to a tourist is ultimately surpassed when the tourist becomes a long-time resident. What we really want is “to schematize — to impose upon chaos as much regularity and form as our practical needs require” (*WP* 515); that is how we make the world intelligible and useful to us. In an early fragment of a critique of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche wrote that “The errors of great men are venerable because they are more fruitful

than the truths of little men.”<sup>7</sup> Why are they more fruitful? Because those great errors – the erroneous yet magnificent edifices of Ptolemy, Galileo, Newton, Aristotle – all contributed to how we understand the world far more than the tedious minor truths worked out by their followers.

Nietzsche's second-order epistemological methodology is that understanding is improved through the adoption of different perspectives, like recognizing that polar coordinates are trigonometric transforms of Cartesian coordinates. “Physics too is only an interpretation ... and *not* a world-explanation”, he famously writes in *BGE* 14. How can physics, our most fundamental and successful science, just be an *interpretation*? But if instead *BGE* 14 is really a statement of methodological perspectivism, then it sounds downright reasonable. Physics is one tool to understand the world, one perspective of great reach and fecundity. At the same time it would be foolish to expect physics to help us understand the aesthetic dimensions of *Starry Night* or *Mass in D-Minor*. Nor are we going to settle the relative merits of deontology and consequentialism using the mathematical language of final physics. Physics isn't a world-explanation because there are so many parts of reality — art, music, love, meaning, virtue — beyond its purview. Nietzsche is not denying that science produces knowledge. He is denying that it is the lone method by which we should understand reality (*GS* 373–374).

The idea that understanding a topic is improved by multiple standpoints is given additional support by Nietzsche's own practice. His literary style is the most diverse of any philosopher: with aphorisms, extended essays, an intellectual autobiography, a quasi-religious book with characters and action, poetry, and critical papers. All are examples of perspectival practice, addressing problems and ideas from the greatest multiplicity of approaches. If an analytic argument does not enlighten us, maybe the Songs of Prince Vogelfrei will. If brief aphorisms aren't helping us figure things out, maybe a long parable will. Couldn't make heads or tails of what he's after in the aphoristic *Beyond Good and Evil*? Let's try the nearly analytic essays of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. The great variety of tones, or voices of style, also lend support. Nietzsche can be elegiac, scornful, bombastic, ironic, witty, and seldom engages in the plodding self-seriousness of most philosophic writing. His pyrotechnics are the very opposite of Kant, whose writing Nietzsche described as something to be endured, the result of a “deformed concept-cripple” who cannot make his words dance (*TI*, “What the Germans Lack” §7). His verbal fireworks are meant to do more than entertain, though, each is intended in its own way to illuminate.

Nietzsche's first order perspectivism is a genuine part of his thought, and something he seriously advances. But it should be seen as a component of his larger architectonic, his kaleidoscope of voices, approaches, and arguments, all aiming at the greatest understanding possible. Nietzsche did not make the distinction between knowledge and understanding, and the extent to which he muddled these concepts together helps explain the difficulty in making sense of his epistemic perspectivism.

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Kaufmann (1982, 30).

Once that difference is kept firmly in mind, first-order perspectivism and second-order methodological perspectivism naturally divide and help make sense of a great deal of Nietzsche's epistemological ruminations.

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