

Phenomenological Contextualism and the Finitude of Knowing

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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.—

Friedrich Nietzsche, 1887, p. 555

We cannot look around our own corner.... We are...far from the ridiculous immodesty that would be involved in decreeing from our corner that perspectives are permitted only from this corner.—Friedrich Nietzsche, 1882, p. 374

In this essay I want to show that the two foregoing quotations from Nietzsche provide the basis for an epistemic stance appropriate to *the finitude of knowing*.

In the first quotation, Nietzsche (1987) establishes himself as a consummate phenomenologist, pointing to the prereflective structures, i.e., the perspectives, that shape our perceptions and understandings. Such structures form what Heidegger (1927), refuting his teacher Husserl’s claims about “presuppositionless inquiry,” calls “the forestructure of understanding and the as-structure of interpretation” (p.192). Just as Nietzsche’s (1982) madman declared that God is dead, so too has the God’s-eye view become extinct. Expressed in another metaphor, there is no “immaculate perception” (Nietzsche, 1983, p. 233). Because of the perspectival nature of all perception and understanding, Nietzsche is claiming, truth can only be dialogic, taking form in the

interplay among many eyes and many interpreters. As Braver (2007) aptly puts it, Nietzsche provides “a non-metaphysical way to read [the perception of] chaos as the idea that the world is indefinitely pliable to various interpretations....” (p.158).

In the second quotation, closely related to the first, Nietzsche (1982/1974) establishes himself as an equally consummate contextualist, claiming that our interpretive perspective is always embedded in the corner of the world—the context—from which our seeing and understanding are constituted. And, he contends, there is no privileged corner that reigns supreme above all others. Thus, Nietzsche’s phenomenological contextualism of necessity gives rise to an attitude of epistemic humility.

Gadamer, who was Heidegger’s student, makes the surprising claim that “the true predecessor of Heidegger was neither Dilthey nor Husserl, ... but rather *Nietzsche*” (Gadamer, 1960/1998, p. 257, italics in original). The claim is quite plausible with regard to at least one aspect of Heidegger’s thought—namely, his phenomenological-contextualist perspective—for which Nietzsche’s perspectivism was a forerunner and which Gadamer developed even further.

Axiomatic for Gadamer (1960/1998) is the proposition that all understanding involves interpretation. Interpretation, in turn, can only be from a perspective embedded in the historical matrix of the interpreter’s own traditions. Understanding, therefore, is always from a perspective whose horizons are delimited by the historicity of the interpreter’s preconceptions, by the fabric of “fore-meanings” that Gadamer calls *prejudice*. Gadamer illustrates his hermeneutical philosophy by applying it to the anthropological problem of attempting to understand an alien culture in which the forms of social life, the horizons of experience, are incommensurable with those of the investigator. He also applies it to the

phenomenon of intersubjective conversation—“a process of coming to an understanding” (p. 385) with another person—a process that has enormous relevance for psychoanalysis.

The “hermeneutic attitude,” which, according to Gadamer, maximizes the possibility of expanded understanding within a conversation, consists in two components. First, each participant recognizes that his/her understanding is conditioned and delimited by his/her prejudices. These prejudices cannot be expunged, but their limiting impact on understanding can be recognized and acknowledged. Second and following from the first, there is recognition of the full value of the alien, as “each person opens himself/herself to the other [and] truly accepts his/her point of view as valid” (p.385). An expansion of understanding takes place through a “fusion of horizons” (p. 388), in which each perspective becomes enlarged by features of the other’s. Thus, “in genuine dialogue, something emerges that is contained in neither of the partners by himself/herself” (p. 462). In Gadamer’s phenomenological-contextualist vision, truth and understanding are dialogic, constituted in the interplay of differently organized worlds of experience.

It will probably come as no surprise that, like the philosophies discussed so far, *intersubjective-systems theory*, my collaborators’ and my (Stolorow, Atwood, & Orange, 2002) post-Cartesian psychoanalytic framework, is also a phenomenological-contextualist perspective. It is phenomenological in that it investigates and illuminates worlds of emotional experience and the structures that organize them. It is contextualist in that it holds that such structures take form, both developmentally and in the psychoanalytic situation, in constitutive intersubjective contexts. Developmentally, recurring patterns of intersubjective transaction within the developmental system give rise to principles (thematic patterns, meaning-structures, as-structures, prejudices, etc.)

that unconsciously organize subsequent emotional and relational experiences. Such organizing principles are unconscious, not in the sense of being repressed but in being prereflective; they ordinarily do not enter the domain of reflective self-awareness. These intersubjectively-derived, prereflective organizing principles are the basic building blocks of personality development, and their totality constitutes a person's character. They show up in the psychoanalytic situation in the form of transference, which intersubjective-systems theory conceptualizes as unconscious organizing activity. The patient's transference experience is co-constituted by the patient's prereflective organizing principles and whatever is coming from the analyst that is lending itself to being organized by them. A parallel statement can be made about the analyst's transference. The psychological field formed by the interplay of the patient's transference and the analyst's transference is an example of what we call an *intersubjective system*—a system that can attain a staggering degree of complexity.

We have found it useful clinically to distinguish two broad dimensions of transference or two broad classes of organizing principles. In one, the *developmental dimension*, the patient longs for the analyst to be a source of development-enhancing emotional experiences that were aborted, lost, or missing during the formative years. In the other, the *repetitive dimension*, the patient anticipates, fears, or experiences with the analyst a repetition of early emotional trauma. Each of these broad dimensions can be divided further into multiple sub-dimensions deriving from different developmental eras and experiences with different caregivers. The various dimensions shift between the background and foreground of the patient's emotional experience, often quite rapidly and unpredictably, depending on the meanings of activities or qualities of the analyst.

Tracking these figure-ground shifts as they occur in response to happenings within the intersubjective field can bring intelligibility to a therapeutic situation otherwise experienced as chaotic and incomprehensible.

As if this weren't complex enough, however, the same description also applies to the analyst's transference—multiple dimensions oscillating between the background and foreground of the analyst's experience depending on the meanings for the analyst of activities or qualities of the patient. We have a picture, then, of a complex system formed by two multidimensional, fluidly oscillating emotional worlds interacting with and mutually influencing one another, all in response to the meanings of goings-on within the intersubjective field. As I like to say, anyone looking for Cartesian clarity and apodictic certainty here has come to the wrong place!

In the old days of classical analysis, it was assumed that a neutral analyst could make objective interpretations of the patient's transference experiences as distortions of a reality that the analyst knew directly. Such epistemic arrogance would be completely out of place in a complex intersubjective system to which the organizing activities of both patient and analyst are contributing. And here we find the enormous value of the hermeneutic attitudes recommended by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer. When faced with such complexity, in which one is oneself implicated, an epistemic humility that recognizes and respects the finitude of knowing is essential.

Addendum: A Conversation with George E. Atwood¹

¹ This paper is another step in a collaboration that traces all the way back to the early 1970s. In two chapters appearing in the second edition of our book *Structures of Subjectivity* (Atwood & Stolorow, 2014), we described the pattern of

G.A.: I like all you have said in the above, Bob, but there is something that troubles me in Nietzsche's so-called perspectivism that you seem not to address or be concerned with. I will try to phrase the issue I am having in the form of a question: What is the nature of the viewpoint or perspective embraced by Nietzsche in making the claim that all interpretations of the meaning of the world we experience are perspectival? Since he is characterizing ALL human interpretations, does his idea implicitly ascribe to himself a God's-eye view of a universal truth?

What bothers me here is a bit like something that also comes up for me in thinking about so-called fallibilism in the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce (1931-1935). This philosopher argued that all our theories, all our beliefs, all our opinions, are fallible and therefore should always be "held lightly." Peirce was in rebellion against dogmatic certainties in all their forms and variations. But what about his belief that we should hold all our beliefs lightly? Did he hold that belief lightly too? The answer is No, he made of it a dogma. I find such inconsistency—such incoherence—troubling.

our intellectual and personal interaction as follows: "This pattern, we have realized, is dialectical in form. One of us has an idea or develops a perspective on some problem and communicates it to the other. The other enthusiastically embraces what has been offered, but then gives some contrasting or complementary viewpoint, and in the ensuing discussion an integration occurs. The result of the dialogue is thus one of combining and deepening each of our partial understandings in a more complex and inclusive structure" (p. 96-97). Our dialogue presented below in the present paper provides a particular instance of this dialectical pattern unfolding in real time.

R.S.: George, I completely agree that Nietzsche's formulation of perspectivism (like Peirce's assertion of fallibilism) must also apply reflexively to itself—the claim of perspectivism is itself perspectival. But why must this imply a God's-eye view of truth? Instead, to me it is a call for an epistemic humility that eschews a God's-eye view.

G.A.: Nietzsche was a man divided and at odds with himself, and his perspectivism has to reflect this personal disunity. He visualizes all interpretations of the world in which human beings live as expressive of and colored by the particular "corners" of that world which the interpreters occupy. At first blush, such a doctrine appears to lead to a commendable humility, reminding us of our finitude as observers and thinkers. But how is such a perspectival view seeing itself as it surveys the vast territory of viewpoints that are conceivable? Could there be an absolutism hiding in Nietzsche's ideas here, a God's-eye view of the essential, universal nature of interpretation itself, and of the human condition as comprised of arrays of unconsciously entrapping "corners" immodestly assumed by their occupants to be universally valid? Is Nietzsche in making such an argument implicitly ascribing to his own intelligence the capacity to transcend the presumed fact that human beings are universally "cornered"?

R.S.: If this question is answered in the affirmative, then the idea of a "corner" itself may appear to be operating within the structure of his narrative as a metaphysical absolute. I would add, however, that while there may be a tendency to reify the metaphor of human experience as made up of "corners," as you say,

George, we can resist the metaphysicalization of this idea by explicating its own constitutive contexts. Nietzsche's perspectivism is itself still another perspective, constituted by the "corner(s)" in which his own unique subjectivity was located. As you noted above, Nietzsche's personal world was one of deep conflict and disunity.

G.A.: Perhaps there is always a tendency toward metaphysicalization in the development of ideas about human nature and the human condition. Although one can never free oneself from this tendency altogether, one can pursue a radical perspectivism and contextualism that seeks reflective self-awareness as a work perpetually in progress.

R.S.: Yes! In a recent article (Stolorow & Atwood, 2017) we explored how human beings employ certain features of the phenomenology of language in the creation of reassuring metaphysical illusions that serve to evade the traumatizing impact of dimensions of human finitude. And in an earlier "conversation" (Atwood & Stolorow, 2012) we located the constitutive "corners" of some of our own theoretical ideas in aspects of our respective traumatic histories. I emphasized, for example, that my father was an epistemic tyrant, a *Besserwisser*. When our viewpoints were at odds, his was always the correct and valid one. Although he allowed me to argue with him, sometimes vehemently, he never acknowledged the truth and validity in what my eyes saw. Not surprisingly, I have been on the warpath against such epistemic tyranny in psychoanalysis for more than two decades (see Stolorow, 1997a). I love Nietzsche's perspectivism because of its

emancipatory power in leveling the epistemic playing field, so if he wants to absolutize and universalize it, so be it!

I think I tend to metaphysicalize the concept of a constitutive intersubjective context because, as a metaphysical entity, such a context provides eternal protection against epistemic tyranny. When faced with the pronouncements of a psychoanalytic *Besserwisser*, I can, by invoking the idea of constitutive context, reply, “Well, it all depends”! (Years ago a student gave me shirt with this claim written on the front.) I once (only once) tried to amalgamate the idea of an intersubjective system with the scientific paradigm of nonlinear systems theory (Stolorow, 1997b), an amalgamation that required that the idea of context be reified and metaphysicalized. Why didn’t you stop me, brother?

What is the contribution of your own history to the disagreement we were having? I suspect it has something to do with traumatic loss and invalidation. G.A.: The difference between us here concerned my sense, not initially shared by you Bob, that there might be a hidden metaphysical absolute in Nietzsche’s discussion of his perspectivism. There is something about a closeted absolute that just drives me crazy, and I find myself wanting to hold it up to the light and expose it as such. Even worse, I was afraid our intersubjective contextualism might have been infected by this hidden metaphysics, as we have both fallen heavily under the influence of Nietzsche’s philosophy. The danger to which I am responding is not that there could be metaphysics at work in our ideas; it is that this could be the case without our knowing it!

How does the fear of unidentified, unconscious metaphysical absolutes relate to my unique “corner” in this world? It occurs to me that it does so because of a series of lies I was told in the context of the tragic loss of my mother when I was a boy. I had been raised to believe that mothers are always there for their children; mothers do not die. That was the first lie. Second, when my mother was suddenly hospitalized because of unexplained cranial pain, I was reassured by friends of my family that she would be fine and coming home soon. That was the second lie. Third, when I was informed of her death by the minister of my church, he said I would see her again, but would have to wait until I too was in Heaven. I tried to believe this, but was unable to hold on to the idea that Heaven was real. So that was the third lie. The fourth and final lie was one I told myself. I became my mother once more (just as the four-year-old Nietzsche became the father he had lost; see Atwood, Stolorow, & Orange, 2011), undoing the shattering loss by identifying with her and adopting a personal identity centering on maternal caregiving. In the process of this identification, the boy I had been receded and seemed almost to disappear.

Each of the lies is a metaphysical deception of a kind, nullifying death’s dominion and denying the finality and inevitability of loss, thereby rejecting and invalidating my experience of devastating emotional pain. By assiduously exposing the evasive absolutes that may be hiding in the thought of various philosophers and theorists, including myself and Bob Stolorow, a sense of protection from such deceptions is tenuously achieved. My aversion to closeted

metaphysical illusions carries my determination never to be deceived and invalidated in that way again. Never again.

G.A., R.S.: The epistemic humility to which our ideas have led us includes a commitment to explore and understand sheltering metaphysical illusions, wherever they appear, in others' thinking or our own. This attitude, far from providing any sense of solace or any solid ground to stand on, is a crying thing that leaves us raw and bleeding, facing the vulnerability and everlasting uncertainty of finite human existing. It also, however, holds out the promise of an ever-deepening journey of self-reflection.²

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² An essential idea to which we have been led over the course of our collaboration is that of the intersubjective field, understood as a system of interacting, differently organized subjective worlds. This idea, symbolically mirroring the interactive process between the two of us that brought it into being in the first place, we characterized as having the following personal sources and meanings: “[This idea] universalizes and eternalizes relatedness itself, undoing the traumatizing impact of events in our lives that disrupted emotionally important connections and led to devastating feelings of abandonment and isolation.... [T]he specific vision of the intersubjective field as a system of interacting, differently organized subjective worlds enshrines at the heart of our theory the hope for a mode of relatedness in which the obliterations of epistemic tyrannies are neutralized and the distinctive structures of individual worlds are respected and preserved” (Atwood & Stolorow, 2014, p. 127).

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