Nietzsche’s “Proper Perspectivism”

Elek Lane

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Abstract

The question of perspectivism in Nietzsche has a long history. This is somewhat strange, because Nietzsche answers the question (more or less) in 354 of The Gay Science in which he describes his views on “the proper perspectivism” and equates perspectivism with phenomenalism. Despite the long history of secondary literature on perspectivism, and despite the fact that Nietzsche tells us what he means by “perspectivism” in that passage, interpretations of Nietzschean perspectivism have only engaged with his remarks in that section superficially. I offer a remedy through an interpretation that places GS 354 at its center. On this new interpretation, it turns out that perspective has much more to do with consciousness than has been so far appreciated. Two upshots are these: (i) Perspectives do not really belong to individuals; instead they belong to a species as such. (ii) The nature of a species’ perspective is shaped by its biological shortcomings. Regardless of whether the particular details of my interpretation carry conviction, more focus should be given to GS 354 and Nietzsche’s explicit remarks on “the proper perspectivism” therein.

Keywords: Nietzsche; perspectivism; phenomenalism; consciousness; The Gay Science

1 Introduction

Over the years, myriad views have been ascribed to Nietzsche under the label “perspectivism”. According to the dominant interpretation, perspectivism is an epistemological view, one that comes with varying degrees of metaphysical overtones;\(^1\) others understand it to be at heart a biological theory.\(^2\) Given the diversity of interpretations, one feels there may be more disagreement than agreement about Nietzschean perspectivism. This could be due to the multifaceted uses of “perspective” talk in Nietzsche. Perspective is evidently taken to provide a highly useful—and flexible—metaphor for various different domains, which raises the question of the unity of such talk in his corpus.

\(^1\)Danto 1965; Schacht 1983; Nehamas 1985; Nehamas 2017; Clark 1990; Clark 2018; Leiter 1994; Anderson 1998; Janaway 2007.

\(^2\)Cox 1997; Gemes 2013.
This paper (i) defends the claim that 354 of *The Gay Science* should feature more centrally in interpretations of Nietzschean perspectivism. This is partly a claim about the secondary literature. But this paper also (ii) sketches what an interpretation of perspectivism that takes GS 354 as its basis might look like. Achieving (i) is the work of section 2 in which I adduce two main considerations. The first is that GS 354 contains the only actual mention of “perspectivism”—as opposed to “perspective” or “perspectival”—in Nietzsche’s published works. The second is that, in GS 354, Nietzsche writes, “This is the proper phenomenalism and perspectivism as I understand it”\(^3\)—and then goes on to tell us exactly what he has in mind.

Setting aside such meta-interpretive considerations, section 3 of the paper makes good on (ii) or sketching a 354-centric reading of Nietzschean perspectivism. On such an orientation, the notion of perspective looks to be much more closely tied to Nietzsche’s view of consciousness than has so far been appreciated. One key indicator of this is his equation of perspectivism and phenomenalism. My ultimate suggestion is that a perspective is a socio-biological notion and that perspetivism is Nietzsche’s account of the phylogenetic origins of consciousness and language.

In section 4, I consider whether the foregoing sketch is compatible current interpretations of perspectivism. My conclusion is that while it may be, unifying Nietzsche’s remarks in GS 354 with the claims made by several major readings poses serious challenges. In addition to outlining those challenges, I make a few suggestions about how they might be overcome.

### 2 The word “perspectivism” in GS 354

GS 354 is the only place in Nietzsche’s published work where he uses the term “perspectivism”, as opposed to “perspective” or “perspectival”.\(^4\) The conjugation may well be significant. Nietzsche picks his words carefully, and fact that he uses “perspectivism” shows that he has in mind a proper theory (or an “ism”, as is sometimes said). This contrasts with the passages in which various other conjugations of the word are found. In these, one finds “perspective” and “perspectival”—but never another “ism”. Thus while Nietzsche is undoubtedly discussing a full-blown theory—perspectivism—in GS 354, it is hard to always be certain that the same is true in other passages.

The point shouldn’t be overstated, of course. The passages in which Nietzsche uses “perspective” and “perspectival” may very well constitute expressions of his considered views of perspectivism. I by no means rule that out. Still, it is also possible that in some of those places he is using a different, non-theoretical notion of perspective; in them, he may be using perspective as a metaphor for some domain, though the metaphor has no relation to his view of perspectivism. In all likelihood, uses of “perspective” and “perspectival” outside

\(^3\)Nietzsche 1887. All references are to GS 354 unless otherwise noted.

\(^4\)Also noted in Cox 1997.
of GS 354 form a mixed bag—sometimes useful for understanding Nietzsche’s perspectivism, sometimes not.

It would be one thing if all of Nietzsche’s remarks in which “perspectivism”, “perspective”, and “perspectival” appeared to be consistent; but, while how consistent they are is up for debate, it is unlikely that they are all consistent with each other if we take every token of every conjugation of “perspective” to be employed in marking the same theoretical notion. Every interpretation of perspectivism on offer is obliged to explain away some passages in which Nietzsche uses (a conjugation of) “perspective”. (More on the difficulty of squaring all these passage in section 4.)

An even stronger reason to think that GS 354 deserves a kind of pride-of-place is that its mention of “perspectivism” is neither thoughtless nor passing. Nietzsche writes, “This is the proper phenomenalism and perspectivism as I understand it”—a declaration he then goes on to fill out at some length. In other words, GS 354 contains Nietzsche’s self-conscious declaration of his own view of perspectivism.5

I am yet to say anything about Nietzsche’s substantive remarks in GS 354 and have called on no special knowledge of him as a philosopher or writer. This form of “meta-textual” or “meta-interpretive” reflection is weak for the same reason that it is strong: it ignores all details about Nietzsche as a philosopher and writer. So, while this reflection may put us in a position to achieve a fresh outlook on the texts, there could yet be reasons which I am not taking into account—text-internal reasons—that this form of reflection may be misleading. Even so, there exists a prima facie case for taking GS 354 seriously insofar as one’s goal is to understand Nietzschean perspectivism.

I also said that the first goal of this paper is to argue that GS 354 should be more central to the secondary literature, but have not argued that it is in any way underrepresented or underappreciated. This is a hard case to make. One can cite numerous works on perspectivism that omit substantive discussion of GS 354’s bearing on perspectivism, but that hardly proves anything;6 and some interpretations do place more weight on this passage (though they read it substantially differently than I do).7 Yet my sense remains that its significance is underappreciated. In any case, with the remainder of this paper, I will sketch what a 354-centric reading of perspectivism might look like. This should in itself be interesting even for those unconvinced by the meta-interpretive considerations adduced here in section 2.

5§354 appears in the fifth section of GS, which was added to the first addition (1882) in a second edition (1887). So it was written during a period in which Nietzsche’s thought was fully mature, being published in the same year as the The Genealogy of Morality and a year after Beyond Good and Evil.


3 Perspectivism itself in GS 354

GS 354 is a few pages long, and the explicit discussion of perspectivism occurs mainly towards the end. I start at the beginning, though, so as to frame Nietzsche’s remarks in the right light. The passage begins with a discussion “the problem of consciousness”. For Nietzsche, this is the problem of explaining, from a historical-biological perspective, what consciousness is for. This is a particularly vexing problem because, on his understanding, 19th century physiology and zoology establish that consciousness is not in general necessary for thought; he writes:

we could in fact think, feel, will, and recollect […] and nevertheless nothing of it all need necessarily “come into consciousness” […] The whole of life would be possible without its seeing itself as it were in a mirror.

Nietzsche is committed to a higher-order-thought view of consciousness. The image of “[life] seeing itself in a mirror” is Nietzsche’s metaphor for consciousness: being conscious is like seeing oneself in a mirror; it is a form of reflecting on one’s existence, i.e., a meta-cognitive activity that involves higher-order thinking. Moreover, for Nietzsche, there is no need for consciousness that arises directly from the requirements of thinking, willing, or various other forms of cognition. All such mental operations could be performed without conscious awareness of them.

This leads to the question of what does require consciousness. Nietzsche asks, “What then is the purpose of consciousness generally, when it is in the main superfluous?”. Nietzsche answers by arguing that the special cause that gives rise to consciousness is a need for communication. Roughly, the idea is that human beings have had to communicate with each other in order to survive as individuals and as a species; in particular, it has been necessary to communicate about the various things we lack, but must have, if we are not to perish. In order to communicate about such things, as demanded by survival, it was necessary to become conscious of those things. Thus Nietzsche writes:

the subtlety and strength of consciousness are always in proportion to the capacity for communication of a man (or an animal), the capacity for communication in its turn being in proportion to the necessity for communication.

The very fact that our actions, thoughts, feelings and motions come within the range of our consciousness—at least a part of them—is the result of a terrible, prolonged “must” ruling man’s destiny: as the most endangered animal he needed help and protection; he needed his fellows, he was obliged to express his distress, he had to know how to make himself understood, and for all this he needed “consciousness” first of all: he had to “know” himself what he lacked, to “know” how he felt, and to “know” what he thought.

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8See Riccardi 2018 and Clark 2023 for commentary.
So consciousness is explained by the capacity for communication, and a capacity for communication is hypothesized as arising in order to address an expressive need: one must be able to communicate what one lacks and therefore needs from others (be it food, protection, or something less basic). Language and consciousness thus go hand-in-hand since awareness of one’s own need-related mental states (hunger, fear) is what enables one to then give voice to them; the process of noticing and articulating what one lacks and needs requires higher order thought.

One upshot of these hypotheses about consciousness is that, as Nietzsche puts it, “Consciousness is properly only a connecting network between man and man”. I take this to mean that consciousness belongs not to individuals, but rather to a species as a whole (or perhaps a speech community as a whole). Insofar as an individual can be said to be conscious, it is only because they are a node in the overall network. As a result, individuals do not have unique consciousnesses; Nietzsche writes:

> As is obvious, my idea is that consciousness does not properly belong to the individual existence of man, but rather to the social and gregarious nature in him

Two individuals who are a part of the same “connecting network between man and man” share a single consciousness—for, consciousness just is that connecting network of which they are a part. Insofar as they are connected to the same communicative network, they literally share a single consciousness on Nietzsche’s account.

These remarks could be read in another way. On the reading I prefer, a species taken as a whole instantiates one token consciousness, and it does so because the individual members of the species form nodes in the overall network. The other way to read these remarks would be as expressing the idea that the individual members of a species each instantiate their own token consciousness and that each of these is type-identical. To me, the former seems closer to the letter of Nietzsche’s words, but the I flag this other, plausible interpretation.

The result, for Nietzsche, is that consciousness is always of what is common or shared (this goes for either reading canvassed above). Nietzsche writes:

> consequently each of us, in spite of the best intention of understanding himself as individually as possible, and of “knowing himself,” will always just call into consciousness the non-individual in him, namely, his “averageness”; that our thought itself is continuously outvoted by the character of consciousness—by the imperious “genius of the species” therein—and is translated back into the perspective of the herd.

An individual can only be conscious of what is shared, since consciousness is by its nature a shared network of communication between various members of a speech community (or, on the other reading, because members of a species all instantiate type-identical consciousnesses). There is no communication about, and
therefore no consciousness of, things that are unique to individuals. Thus while Nietzsche allows that there exists thoughts that are unique to individuals, he denies that we can be conscious of such. This makes sense given Nietzsche’s views about why consciousness arises—that is, in order to facilitate communication—for to speak to another of something that is unique to the speaker and so, on Nietzsche’s account, something of which the hearer could not possibly be aware, would be a pointless exercise. Nietzsche’s overarching question is “What is consciousness for?”, and he sees no reason that it might be useful for an individual to be consciousness of things that are unique to her qua individual.

It is this line of thinking—these various hypotheses about the nature of consciousness and its phylogenetic origin—to which Nietzsche is referring when he makes the following claims.

Fundamentally our actions are in an incomparable manner altogether personal, unique and absolutely individual—there is no doubt about it; but as soon as we translate them into consciousness, they do not appear so any longer… This is the proper phenomenalism and perspectivism as I understand it: the nature of animal consciousness involves the notion that the world of which we can become conscious is only a superficial and symbolic world, a generalised and vulgarised world.

Perspectivism, as Nietzsche understands it, is a theory about consciousness; this is what he says, quite explicitly, in GS 354. An immediate consequence of his remarks in this passage is that a perspective is not something that belongs to an individual—at least not really. Perspectives belong to groups—particular species or speech communities—as such. Nietzsche is speaking quite literally when he refers to “the perspective of the herd” in GS 354. Strictly speaking, we can only ascribe perspectives of particular herds and not to individual herd-members; we can speak of the perspective of the human race or a particular speech community—perhaps a German perspective or a Roman one—for Nietzsche (while no examples are given, he claims that the capacity and need for communication—and thus consciousness and perspectives—co-vary “in relation to whole races and successions of generations”). Perspective is thus a kind of socio-linguistic notion: a given perspective is constituted by a kind of species-level awareness of certain things, so that if you detail the things that a particular species lacks due to its biological constitution—lacks and must therefore make up for—you will have elucidated the perspective of that particular species or “herd”.

One of the initially puzzling features of GS 354 is Nietzsche’s apparent identification of perspectivism with phenomenalism (“This is the proper phenomenalism and perspectivism as I understand it”). Phenomenalism originated in the later 19th century as a kind of anti-metaphysical positivism; it took “phenomena”, objects of conscious awareness, as its metaphysical and epistemological starting points. Nietzsche is offering a critique: the “phenomena”, he thinks, are not groundless; they can be accounted for by the socio-biological story that he tells about consciousness and communication. Thus Nietzsche is able to equate perspectivism

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10The ellipsis is Nietzsche’s.
with “the proper phenomenalism” or a version of the view purged of the idea that the phenomena are the
groundless foundations for metaphysics and epistemology.

4 Prospects for a unified account

Epistemological interpretations of Nietzschean perspectivism face the prima facie challenge of reconciling
the fact that GS 354 regards perspectivism as a thesis about consciousness with the fact that they take it
to be an epistemological doctrine. According to such interpretations, a perspective is constituted by a
body of beliefs (Danto 1965: 55-56), cognitive capacities and practical interests (Clark 1990: 133; Clark
2018: 22-23), a conceptual scheme (Anderson 1998: 1-2), one’s place in the spatio-temporal milieu (Leiter
1994), or some combination thereof. But a perspective, in GS 354, is not an epistemic notion—or at least
it is not immediately epistemic. While defenders of the epistemological reading might choose to try to
“explain away” Nietzsche’s remarks in GS 354—that is, explain why they should not really be counted as
expressing Nietzsche’s considered, theoretical view of perspectivism—given that it contains the sole mention
of “perspectivism” (and “the proper perspectivism” at that) in Nietzsche’s corpus, this seems difficult for the
meta-interpretive reasons of section 2.

The biological interpretations of Nietzschean perspectivism (Cox 1997; Gemes 2013) might fare better
when it comes to incorporating GS 354. Such views take as their starting point Nietzsche’s idea that
perspectives are tied to all (and not just human) life. Nietzsche writes in BGE:

perspective, the basic condition of all life\(^{11}\)

there would be no life at all if not on the basis of perspective estimates and appearances\(^{12}\)

In GS 374, moreover, Nietzsche discusses the “perspective character of existence” and seems open to the
possibility that perspectivity extends beyond life to all existence, period. This latter remark, of course, would
push us beyond a strict “biological” reading, but perhaps that can be accommodated by the approach.\(^{13}\)
Based on these remarks and others, proponents of the biological reading argue that Nietzsche’s notion of
perspective is not, in the first place, an epistemic notion but rather something else—a kind of biological
notion that has application to life as such. Thus one important question is whether Nietzsche’s remarks in GS
354 support an interpretation on which perspectives belong to all life-forms and not just human life. This
question in turn comes down to whether all life-forms engage in some form of communication with their
conspecifics, this being the origin of consciousness and perspective in GS 354.

\(^{11}\)Nietzsche 1886: preface, 2.
\(^{12}\)Nietzsche 1886: §34, 46.
\(^{13}\)A panpsychist Nietzsche, anyone?
Nietzsche allows consciousness to come in degrees—the “strength of consciousness” exists “in proportion to the capacity for communication” of a man (or an animal)—which is partly behind his apparent willingness to ascribe consciousness to animal life. But since consciousness is grounded in the capacity for communication, the biological reading must accept that either (i) all biological organisms have a capacity for communication or (ii) Nietzsche is exaggerating in BGE when he ascribes perspectives to all life-forms. It is dubious that all life-forms have a capacity for communication, but for those who prefer accepting (i) to accepting (ii), perhaps that claim can be defended. In defending it, one would have to focus on whether, e.g., jellyfish and mushrooms in any sense signal their needs to each other.

Considerations about the incompatibility of my 354-centric interpretation of perspectivism and other readings of Nietzschean perspectivism form a double-edged sword. The epistemological and biological readings have a textual basis. Thus while my method has been to focus narrowly on GS 354, this is ultimately a weakness of my interpretation. Nonetheless, any interpreter of Nietzschean perspectivism seems to be required to “explain away” certain passages—to argue, that is, that certain passages in which “perspective” or “perspectival” appear are not passages in which Nietzsche is giving voice to his theoretical perspectivism. This is because it seems impossible to square every remark Nietzsche makes in which “perspective” (or one of its conjugations) occurs if we assume each occurrence signals that Nietzsche is giving voice to his theoretical perspectivism. So one must choose which passages deserve pride-of-place. Seen in this light, there is a strong claim to be made for GS 354.

A final thought about squaring different interpretations of perspectivism. Nietzsche obviously does have epistemological views, views about truth and reality, views about Kant’s metaphysics, and so forth, and it could be that these views (or a subset of them) form a stable theory, one that latter day commentators find “perspectivism” an apt name for. This would be compatible with the claim that Nietzsche articulates a distinct theory—one that he calls “the proper perspectivism” and equates with phenomenalism—in GS 354. If this is the case, then there is all the more reason to exercise caution when reading Nietzsche on “perspective” and its conjugations. One would have to ask every time: Is this a place where Nietzsche is expressing a view that he would call (and does call in GS 354) “the proper perspectivism”—or is this instead a view that I myself would like to call “perspectivism”, though Nietzsche would find my use of the term foreign to his own sensibility? I am inclined to think that this question is of critical importance for contemporary interpreters. I leave it for future research to determine just how critical it is.

References


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