Science, Truth, and Virtues: In Defence of Nietzsche’s Perspectivism

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This paper is a response to Remhof’s (2008) interpretation of Nietzsche’s views on scientific knowledge and methodology. I argue that Remhof fails to properly distinguish between constructivism and perspectivism and that this undermines his account of Nietzsche’s views on the nature and value of science. This can be easily repaired by appeal to contemporary literature on scientific perspectivism, such as the work of Ron Giere, an appeal further justified by their common views on the status of truth and the role of virtues in scientific enquiry. I conclude by arguing that Nietzsche is a perspectivist because his account of scientific knowledge stresses the interaction of human epistemic activities with the world in a way that is more metaphysically restrictive than constructivism can tolerate.

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1. Introduction

In a recent issue of *Philosophical Writings*, Remhof (2008) argues that Nietzsche defends a form of ‘scientific constructivism’. Our scientific practices reflect a variety of human interests and the knowledge they produce is therefore ‘constructed’ according to ‘all-too-human’ values and concerns. Nietzsche rightly rejected older, positivist conceptions of scientific knowledge as objective and independent of the ‘human contribution’, a point which has aligned him with a host of relativist, postmodernist, and constructionist epistemologies (see, for instance, Baghramian 2004, pp. 60-61ff and Rorty 1990, p. 106). However Remhof himself alternately describes Nietzsche as a ‘perspectivist’ and a ‘constructionist’ but fails to draw a distinction between these positions; indeed, they are often presented as interchangeable terms. I argue that Remhof’s failure to draw this distinction conflates two very different epistemologies of scientific knowledge and suggest a few strategies for responding to this problem.

2. Perspectivism and constructivism in Nietzsche’s philosophy of science.

Nietzsche’s philosophy of science is the subject of a burgeoning literature. There are by now a handful of monographs dedicated to it (see Babich 1994; Babich and Cohen 1999) and a current research project at the University of Berlin. Much of this literature has focused upon Nietzsche’s ‘perspectivism’ (see Clark 1990: Ch5). It is well-established that in his later writings Nietzsche developed a perspectival theory of knowledge but what is less well-understood is what such perspectivism amounts to, and how it relates to the specific case of scientific knowledge. As Magnus and Higgins observe, ‘What seems to be occurring among Nietzsche scholars is not only a difference of detail—a difference about how to construe Nietzsche’s remarks about “knowledge”, “truth”, “correspondence”, and “perspective”—but a metaphilosophical split about the point of Nietzsche’s perspectivism’ (Magnus and Higgins 1996, p. 4).

A key concern of these discussions has therefore been to articulate the ways in which perspectivism is distinct from constructivism, especially in the context of the philosophy of science which, after the social constructivism debates and ‘Science Wars’ of the 1980s and 1990s is especially sensitive to the charge that scientific knowledge is ‘constructed’ according to mere contingency and caprice (see Sokal
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and Bricmont 1998 and Hacking 1999). These worries are invariably prompted by a concern to preserve some substantial commitment to scientific realism whilst also acknowledging the role of contingent social and material factors in scientific inquiries.

Remhof fails to draw a crucial distinction between perspectivism and constructivism. Often, he uses these two terms interchangeably, or conflates them in a way that leaves his account of Nietzsche’s epistemology of science open to familiar criticisms of constructivism (see, for instance, Remhof 2008, pp. 44, 48). Remhof rightly notes that Nietzsche affirms the dependence of science upon contingent human interests: ‘we play an active role in delineating the identity conditions of the objects to which our scientific descriptions refer’, such that scientific theories are ‘essentially relative to certain interests’ (Remhof 2008, pp. 42, 48). For Nietzsche, scientific knowledge is something ‘all-too-human’ because its constituent values and practices reflect identifiably human concerns. Although this claim was intolerable to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century positivist philosophies of science, recent years have seen a welcome shift towards a more open stance towards the ‘value-laden’ nature of the sciences (see, for instance, Kincaid, Dupré, and Wylie 2007). Contemporary philosophers of science are increasingly sympathetic to the idea that the sciences can be infused with human values and concerns without this necessarily causing any detriment to their realist credentials.

The distinction between constructivism and perspectivism hinges on the compatibility of scientific realism with the ‘human dimension’ of science. A social constructionist maintains that knowledge is generated entirely through the social and material particularities of human epistemic activity; in the case of the sciences, these include experimental arrangements and the sociological structures of research communities. Some radical social constructionists argued that scientific entities—like elementary particles—only exist insofar as they are generated by our social and material practices; on this account, the world itself plays little to no substantial role in determining the ontological commitments of scientific practices. As Remhof puts it, ‘constructivism’ entails that ‘perspectivist facts will be products of a system’s internally-demarcated standards’, rather than of interaction with the world itself (Remhof 2008, p. 44). A constructionist is committed to the metaphysical thesis that the world imposes no strict constraints upon the range of efficacious epistemic activities that human beings can engage in; one can ‘construct’ any sort of world one likes. Constructivism is therefore allied with scientific antirealism.
Perspectivism, by contrast, is not committed to any form of anti-realism. Indeed, one great virtue of perspectivist theories is that they reconcile robust forms of realism with the active role of human agency. Our perspectives are indeed constituted by material, social, and intellectual conditions which are contingent upon human agency, but they are nonetheless perspectives upon an objective reality which has some mind-independent structure and properties. Remhof often conflates this point, for instance by writing that ‘[p]erspectivism implies that we play an active role in delineating the identity conditions of the objects to which our scientific descriptions refer’, but then stating that ‘perspectives are only conditions of uncovering facts, and [are] not constitutively related to the facts uncovered’ (Remhof 2008, pp. 42, 41).

Both of these remarks contain some truth. Our perspectives ensure that we ‘play an active role’ in determining the aspects of the world that our epistemic activities latch onto, such that they provide ‘conditions [for] uncovering facts’; however, this does not mean that our perspectives are ‘not constitutively related to the facts uncovered’, for the reason that the definition of those facts depends upon the parameters set by the perspective. Perspectives help to co-constitute our knowledge of the world (‘facts’) by imposing certain conceptual and theoretical schemes onto the world; there is therefore arguably a neo-Kantian aspect to perspectivism.¹

3. Distinguishing constructivism and perspectivism

Perspectivism thus far may still sound like constructivism. The crucial difference arises with the perspectivist’s emphasis upon the fact that reality resists certain perspectives, thus preserving a commitment to realism. Although one can develop any sort of perspective one likes, reflecting any number of mundane or esoteric ‘all-too-human’ concerns, only certain of these will ‘fit’ the world, in the sense of successfully identifying certain features of the world. A perspectivist understands the process of scientific research as trying to find the most effective interaction between reality and our perspectives.

This search for stable interaction is, I think, the point that Remhof makes when he describes Nietzsche as defending the idea that scientific method provides a ‘suitable means for generating knowledge of the environment’, on the one hand, whilst rejecting ‘faith in science’s traditional goal of grasping a world independent of our

¹ Magnus and Higgins similarly identify a neo-Kantian strain in Nietzsche’s perspectivism (Magnus and Higgins 1996, p. 5).
descriptions of it’, on the other (Remhof 2008, p. 38). Certainly Nietzsche argued that human beings possess ‘no organ for knowing, for truth: we ‘know’ exactly as much as is useful to the human herd’. So although Nietzsche denies the possibility of knowledge of reality as it is ‘in itself’, he does allow that we can come to some knowledge of it; what is denied to us is our ever identifying how reality is independently of our ‘perspectives’, for our cognitive capacities are ‘far too little’ for us to ‘even be entitled to make that distinction’ (Nietzsche [1882] 2001, §354).

A perspectivist can fulfil both of these claims, since she can understand science as a successful means of generating knowledge about the world, whilst appreciating that the contingencies that shape those sciences impose limitations on the range of aspects of the world we can explore. Whereas the constructionist simply emphasises the creative role of human agency, a perspectivist includes a caveat about the limitations imposed by the objective structure of reality. A perspectivist, writes Nietzsche, is not a ‘theoretical optimist’, hoping that ‘the nature of things can be discovered’, because that entails that ‘error [is] inherently evil’, whereas, in fact, error is an essential part of the ‘dialectic of knowledge’ (BT 74). The worry here is that constructionist confidence in their ability to provide such knowledge of ‘the nature of things’ is ‘tragic’, since their misplaced epistemic optimism will ‘break up’ as they approach their limits (Nietzsche [1872] 1999, p. 75; cf. pp. 86-87).

The importance of the distinction between constructivism and perspectivism can be illustrated by considering a section from Nietzsche which Remhof (2008, p. 42fn11) cites as proof of his ‘constructivism’. In The Will to Power, Nietzsche writes that: ‘“Truth” is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered— but something that must be created and gives name to a process … [it is an] active determining—not a becoming conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined’ (Nietzsche 1968, §552). A constructionist reading of this passage stresses the role of ‘creation’ and our ‘active determining’ of truths. This is granted, but it does not necessarily entail constructivism. Nietzsche’s emphasis upon the active, dynamic character of our truth-making activities stresses the fact that our epistemic activities participate in the ‘will to power’, our active attempts to impose structure and order upon the world. This, in turn, of course implies that some interpretations are more successful than others and that the world therefore resists certain of them. Otherwise, one would be hard pressed to explain the need for such active, creative activity in the first place.

Nietzsche therefore cannot be a constructionist because his account includes the fact that there are certain objective limitations upon the range and form of
perspectives that we can generate. Indeed, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche ([1882] 2001, §374) had asked ‘what other kinds of intellects and perspectives there might be’ and he rejected the ‘ridiculous immodesty’ inherent in the claim that our own preferred epistemic activities were uniquely successful descriptions of reality. This is not anti-realism, since Nietzsche’s point is that the perspectival character of our knowledge ensures that other possible perspectives are available, perhaps premised upon alternative values and interests. Realisation of the perpetual possibility of perspectival pluralism should therefore prompt us to appreciate that ‘the world [has] become “infinite” for us all over again: inasmuch as we cannot reject the possibility that it may include infinite interpretations’ (Nietzsche [1882] 2001, §374).

Remhof does allow for a perspectivist interpretation of Nietzsche which is detached from social constructivism. For instance, he writes that one must abandon the epistemic aim of identifying ‘a world independent of the contingencies of human interpretation will inevitably undermine the very conditions that allow for scientific knowledge’ (Remhof 2008, p. 48). Such an aim is untenable if it would consist of providing knowledge of the world independent of human perspectives; that is impossible, since any and all forms of our knowledge of the world will rely upon our employing certain concepts and practices rather than others. However, the passage just quoted continues with the remark that it is an ‘erroneous “metaphysical faith’’ to believe that ‘there are final constraints beyond the context of human interpretation’ (Remhof 2008, p. 48). There is no error in the claim that there are objective metaphysical limits to the range and forms of interpretation of the world that human beings can successfully generate and sustain.

Indeed, as argued earlier, the existence of such metaphysical limitations is essential to the intelligibility of Nietzsche’s emphasis upon the role of human cognitive and creative agency. It is, says Nietzsche, ‘enough … to create new names … in order to create new “things”’, in the sense that our enquiries into the world are active, not passive (Nietzsche [1882] 2001: II, §58). Specifically, scientific enquiry is better understood as ‘*vis creativa*’, a life of creation akin to that of the artist, rather than the passive ‘*vis contemplativa*’ which ‘overlooks the fact that [we are] also the actual poet and ongoing author of life’ (Nietzsche [1882] 2001: IV, §301). ² So the constructionist is correct that our epistemic activities are active and creative, but wrong to think that the epistemic buck stops there; put another way, scientists, like

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² Giere also proposes that scientists should be understood as ‘create[ing] perspectives within which to conceive of aspects of the world’ (Giere 2006, p. 59), as I discuss in the next section.
artists, actively and creatively engage with the world, but during our attempts to ‘construct’ certain perspectives, we meet the resistance of the world itself.

Indeed, active, creative agency becomes increasingly important into Nietzsche’s later period, such that, by the end of his life, one finds him affirming that ‘This world is will to power – and nothing besides’ (Nietzsche 1968: §1067; see Clark 1990: Ch7). Therefore, constructionist gets only half the story right, such that Remhof is wrong in suggest that it tells the whole story. There is an objective world that exists independently of human perspectival knowledge but it cannot be known in itself because our epistemic engagement with it requires us to employ contingent and conditioned modes of inquiry – that is, to employ perspectives.

One can illustrate the incompatibility of constructivism and perspectivism by considering a recent defence of a robust form of perspectivism. The contemporary philosopher of science Ron Giere defends a form of ‘perspectival realism’ about the sciences in Scientific Perspectivism (Giere 2006). Giere suggests that ‘[c]omparisons between my scientific perspectivism and the perspectivism of earlier thinkers ... would be a worthwhile enterprise’ and offers a list of suggested antecedent perspectivists, including Leibniz, Kant, and Nietzsche (see Giere, 2006, p. 117n6). Giere explains that his perspectivism is explicitly intended to provide an account of scientific knowledge that ‘mediates between the strong objectivism of most scientists, or the hard realism of many philosophers of science, and the constructivism found largely among historians and sociologists of science’ (Giere 2006, p. 3). Perspectivism fulfils this aim by providing an account of scientific knowledge that stresses the role of interaction between contingent epistemic activities and the objective world. This is neither objective realism nor social constructivism because both human agency and the world are afforded a constitutive role in generating scientific knowledge. Giere’s aim is therefore to explore in detail ‘how the actual practice of science limits the claims scientists can legitimately make about the universe’ (Giere 2006, p. 15).

The conditioned and contingent nature of our epistemic activities does not undermine the realist credentials of the knowledge they produce; its only conflicts with certain exaggerated accounts of the nature and limits of human epistemic agency. As with Nietzsche, knowledge of the nature and structure of objective reality is ruled out and claims to possess it are criticised being indicative of gross ‘hubris’ (Giere 2006, p. 95f). In a typically vivid remark, Nietzsche lambasts the ‘arrogant and mendacious … pride’ of those who suppose that human beings possess an ‘organ of truth’ (Nietzsche 1979: pp. 79-80). The reason for this strong
moral rhetoric—or ‘hubris’ and ‘pride’—is that for Giere also affirms, like Nietzsche, that scientific practices are ‘interest-relative’, serving the interests of creatures like us, with the sorts of interests we happen to have (Giere 2006, p. 73). When Peter Poellner writes that, for Nietzsche, scientific explanations are ‘dependent on fairly obvious interests of subjects like us’, such as ‘predicting and manipulating’ certain of the events which appear ‘in the course of our experience’, he may well be speaking for Giere, too (Poellner 1995: pp. 95-97; see further Cooper 2002: pp. 197-202).

Perspectivism therefore entails certain transformations in our intellectual attitudes towards our epistemic activities and the aims and ambitions associated with them. Remhof similarly writes of the value of ‘honesty and intellectual integrity’, understood as one’s being ‘open to the conditional status of truth’ (Remhof 2008, p. 46f). Nietzsche similar refers to ‘training in truthfulness’ (Nietzsche 1989, III, §27). Solomon develops this theme at length, arguing that one important reason that Nietzsche appealed to ‘models and metaphors from diverse sources’ was to avail himself of the diverse ways of thinking associated with them ‘precisely in order to play them off against each other, and to avoid become locked into any one or particular cluster of them’. The intended outcome of such epistemic pluralism was the cultivation of a set of intellectual virtues including ‘agility’, ‘comprehensiveness’, a ‘capacity and readiness to learn’, ‘conceptual and interpretative creativity’, ‘honesty’ and ‘intellectual integrity’ (Solomon 1996, p. 166).

These remarks on virtues recall the similar rhetoric, discussed earlier, of the ‘hubris’ and ‘arrogant … pride’ which Nietzsche and Giere associate with objectivist realism. Such moral language is not, I think, mere rhetoric, but instead relates to an important feature of their perspectivist positions: namely that the requirement that one makes only qualified knowledge claims, ones properly reflective the contingent nature of the epistemic activities that generated them, is a sign or characteristic of a virtuous epistemic agent (see Roberts and Wood 2007). An epistemic agent with the requisite virtues will, on this view, only make truthful claims about the explanatory status of their theories—for to fail to do this is not simply to misrepresent the explanatory power of those theories, but to evince a moral failing.

As Giere puts it, for a perspectival realist ‘the strongest claims a scientist can legitimately make are of a qualified, conditional form’:

According to this highly confirmed theory (or reliable instrument), the world seems to be roughly such and such.” There is no way legitimately to take the further objectivist step and declare unconditionally: “This
theory (or instrument) provides us with a complete and literally correct picture of the world itself (Giere 2006, pp. 5-6).

Giere’s perspectival realism provides a well-articulated account of how our contingent perspectives reflect human explanatory interests which then provide delimited views of certain aspects of the world with a certain degree of accuracy as determined by our cognitive and practical needs.

Giere’s perspectivism is realist insofar as it incorporates objective features of the world but it preserves and affirms the essential role of human agency because this provides the material and theoretical conditions for scientific inquiries. Constructivism is avoided because there are objective constraints upon human epistemic agency, yet ample license is still preserved for a plurality of perspectives upon the world. Giere is therefore very close to that of Nietzsche and it helps us to understand how and why perspectivism can and must steer a course between objectivist realism and constructivism.

4. Conclusions

I conclude that Remhof fails to draw an adequate distinction between constructivism and perspectivism. The resulting ambiguity undermines his claims about Nietzsche’s epistemology of scientific knowledge which Remhof erroneously suggests is both constructionist and perspectivist. I argued that Nietzsche is not a constructionist because of his emphasis upon the fact that the objective structure of the world delimits the range and forms of perspective that we can employ. This runs contrary to the generous metaphysical license which comes as standard with social constructivism. Nietzsche insists that human beings must exercise their ‘will to knowledge’ and actively and creatively generate and modify their perspectives upon the world, an activity which, done properly, both exercises and expresses one’s virtues. This is the core of his perspectivism and it is consonant with other perspectivist epistemologies.3

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3 I thank Ron Giere for useful discussions of the relationship between his perspectivism and that of Nietzsche.
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