

The Share of Perspective

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Conclusion

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perspectivism**

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Conclusion

In praise of the plural: for a new perspectivism

Why go back to this long history of perspective today? Why be interested in medieval treatises on optics, in engineering challenges in the Renaissance, in the dialogue between an art historian and a philosopher in the interwar years, in byzantine disputes about Plato manuscripts? An anachronistic undertaking, many would say. Anachronistic because none of these topics suffers from a lack of scholarly literature, and questions of perspective have been discussed at length and in great detail. Anachronistic also because it would be madness to reopen the files on so contentious an issue, which many were happy to see provisionally settled. Anachronistic, finally—and this is the core of the matter—because our world seems to be confronting much more burning issues.

Such doubts arose several times in the writing of this book. Let in on the secret of the project, certain friends and colleagues expressed admiration for its audacity, but this no doubt was merely the admiration all daredevils enjoy. Above all, it was probably the expression of a barely veiled perplexity: is it possible to say anything worth saying on the question? And yet as my investigation proceeded, current events paradoxically seemed to prove this somewhat crazy project right.

Post-truth and neofactualism

No doubt: in making “post-truth” the Word of the Year 2016, the editors of the Oxford Dictionaries captured a phenomenon in the air of the times. Working in tandem, the blatant use of lies for political ends, the proliferation of fake news, and the targeted development of disinformation technologies have given rise to the impression that we have fully entered a new age where lies win out over facts. Given the twisting and low punches it is subjected to, truth seems to be in a bad state, and there is no lack of examples to suggest that ostentatious disdain of truthfulness today has tremendous political, and capitalizable, power. The flourishing of rumors, the spreading of conspiracy theories, and the deliberate dissemination of fake

news, all this generates a cognitive dissonance that ends up undermining the belief in a common and shared world: the criterion of truth makes way for the law of the strongest.

What do these phenomena have to do with the problem of perspective? Today's disdain for truth is increasingly clad in a perspectivist rhetoric: the propagation of alternative information or even of "alternative facts" is justified with a diversity of points of view. Where they do not directly accede to the status of official discourse, such invocations of the right to difference are common currency among those who throw doubt on the discourse of the media, the sciences, or the government (hostility toward vaccinations, climate skepticism, conspiracy theories, et cetera). That is how in recent years the defenders of creationism have made headway with their demand to add creationism to biology curricula, with the same status as Darwin's theory of evolution: in a strange mixture of conservatism and neoliberalism, the argument consists in saying that in order to choose, individuals must have as wide a range of offers as possible, that everyone must be able to decide whether they prefer to think of the world being created in millions of years or within a week. This kind of reasoning also serves to advance cosmological arguments, for example when members of the steadily expanding flat earth societies claim that since good scientists always leave room for doubt, the earth could very well be flat after all, even if the conglomerate of space agencies, air traffic control services, and GPS device makers have a vested interest in making us believe it to be round. These are not just anecdotes: such arguments also serve revisionist discourses, when for example the acknowledgment of the genocides of the twentieth century have to confront claims to "alternative memories" or when, for decades, big tobacco managed to fend off more restrictive legislation on packaging by asserting the need for more exhaustive research on the health effects of smoking.

In the past, insisting on alternatives was a trait of the progressive camp, of those who thought that other ways of thinking and of doing things were possible, over against those who insisted that "there is no alternative" anyway (the so-called TINA principle Margaret Thatcher turned into a slogan). Since then, though, the cards have been reshuffled and now the regressive forces have a hold on the alternative. Alternative truths, alternative facts, alternative science, anything goes, including a part of the American ultraconservatives now identifying as "alt-right." An obscurantist regression is taking place at this very moment in the name of tolerance and of welcoming diverse opinions. Unlike the ecstatic company of "free spirits" Nietzsche called for, the plurality of points of view currently seems to clear the path for regressive policies.

The confiscation of alternatives must not be left without a reply if we do not wish to abandon the field to those who arrogate the right to assign

identities, the meaning of facts, and thus the horizon of possibles. In the last few years, alas, the reply has focused almost exclusively on defending true facts against alleged facts. Evidently, one of the most striking symptoms of this “crisis of truth” is the notion of “alternative facts.” The lies about the number of people assembled for the 2017 presidential inauguration or the invention of massacres that never took place (like the “Bowling Green massacre”) were justified by referring to parallel information, for which an adviser to the president, Kellyanne Conway, came up with the formula of “alternative facts.” Many have taken this notion to echo George Orwell’s dystopian *1984*, where “newspeak” fabricates a simulacrum of reality that citizens are then forced to assimilate. Yet a closer look shows this analogy to be misleading. While Orwell’s novel depicts a simple binary inversion (falsehood becomes truth and truth becomes falsehood) that constrains the citizens of 1984 to perform all kinds of mental acrobatics (the famous “doublethink”), Kellyanne Conway was asking for no such inversion at all. What she lays claim to with the notion of alternative facts and truth is the heritage of pluralism and the idea that a multiplicity of points of view must be taken into account.

Given such an onslaught, it’s only natural to be tempted to want to defend the facts, the raw and uncontested facts. Against those who deny the reality of climate change, against revisionists, and against those who claim that the universe was created 6000 years ago, there is good reason to want to defend something like an objective reality. These last few years, the response to post-truth has often consisted in a great return of factualism, which seeks, precisely, to get rid of the perspectivist error: of course there are several points of view, but the facts themselves are independent of our way of conceptualizing them. The situation thus easily explains the great return to realist aspirations in philosophy, and public debate has picked up on the neofactualist variant in particular. In the neofactualist optic, a realist position would consist in ridding ourselves of perspectives, which are necessarily always biased, to isolate virgin facts untouched by interpretation. In defending the right if not the necessity of perspective for all knowledge, we thus suddenly find ourselves in the hot seat, summoned to explain ourselves. Let’s revisit, therefore, some key elements of the debate, which polarized into two similarly fatal opposing options, post-truth and neofactualism, that mark the epistemological cliffs of our present, the Scylla and Charybdis between which we must learn to navigate.

Ramesses II, Jupiter’s moons, and Rembrandt’s birth

One book in particular has marked the debate about the factuality of facts, *Fear of Knowledge* by New York philosopher Paul Boghossian.¹ Aware of the dangers of negationism and of relativizing historical realities such as

the reality of a genocide,² the author incriminates constructivist and post-modernist philosophies that, for him, not only are incapable of curbing the current relativism but have actively prepared it. One of his examples is the “affair” concerning Ramesses II. In an article written quite some time ago, Bruno Latour reacted to the announcement by a team of Egyptologists who claimed finally to have shed light on what caused the death of pharaoh Ramesses II in 1213 BCE.³ From their study of the mummy, the scientists concluded that the king had succumbed to tuberculosis. Latour countered with the provocative affirmation that because the bacterium causing it was unknown to the Egyptians and only discovered by Robert Koch in 1882, the death of Ramesses II could not have been due to tuberculosis.

In *Fear of Knowledge*, Boghossian turns this example into a symptom of everything that’s wrong with constructivism and relativism: the bacterium did not wait to be discovered to come into existence. But what if Latour was not so much talking about an investigation into the cause of death of Ramesses than about the categories of knowledge and the history of its truth conditions? For, after all, just as the concept of a dog does not bark, so the concept of a bacterium is not responsible for the pharaoh’s death. And, moreover, what does it mean that a bacterium “exists”? What are we doing when we affirm that a bacterium is “alive” and when we deny that status to a virus, for example? What are we to make of bacteriology, which keeps revising its hypothesis concerning the precise date when bacteria were “born” and appeared on earth? The same goes for elementary particles: when we grant that atoms existed in the age of the dinosaurs, we still need to say what kind: the atoms of Democritus, of Ernest Rutherford, or of Niels Bohr.

Yet beyond the problem of categorization, on which some factualists would even be willing to cede ground, there is another, more serious one. In positing that facts are independent of the access to them, factualists are not content with affirming that facts are not determined by the interpretative schemata that endow them with meaning. They affirm that there is a factual reality of which there is only one true description. It may be the case that this truth is not yet accessible to a knowing subject (because science has not yet developed far enough, for example), and possibly even that we will never penetrate the mysteries of this truth but that changes nothing about the fact that there can be only one single description that can lay claim to the truth. Truth would thus be a matter of correspondence with reality. It is such a factualism—which is nothing but a correspondentism updated to appeal to contemporary tastes—that perspectivism distances itself from. The philistines of neofactualism like to pass over in silence that our categorization of “facts” is itself the result of changing regimes of knowledge. It is not incidental that the term *fact* etymologically refers to fabrication, to the *factum*. Trying to isolate facts from our access to them

is thus shortsighted. It may of course be noted in response that the problem consists in confusing our description of a fact with the reality of the fact: after all, neofactualists do not contest that our descriptions are fabricated (historically, socially, politically), but they contest that the facts these descriptions are said to represent are fabricated. They will therefore argue that the being of a thing precedes its being known (that ontology precedes epistemology, both logically and chronologically): the moon was already covered in craters when Galileo Galilei became aware of them. Any representation of natural facts, Boghossian claims, is measured by the standard of these facts, and it will therefore be either right or (more or less) wrong.

This is a way of excluding relativism regarding knowledge: just as the date of the birth of the world is not a question of preference, so I cannot say that “for me, Jupiter has thirty moons.” That would be a completely meaningless assertion because, Boghossian repeats, it concerns not a matter of belief but truth of fact. Nonetheless: when, in 1610, Galilei points his new telescope at Jupiter, he sees only four satellites gravitating around the planet. The numbers have been rising since. Some years ago, astronomers agreed on counting 67 moons for Jupiter, and the number has gone up to 79 since. Is it really nonsensical to say that for an astronomer in the Atacama Large Millimeter Array (ALMA) observatory in the Chilean desert, for Galilei in 1610, or for a passionate star gazer looking at the sky with the naked eye, Jupiter has, “for him” as it were, 67, 4, or no moons at all? Is there really one and only one correct representation of the real?

In this concrete case, some would no doubt suggest distinguishing between interpretations—which are always subject to social conventions—and facts—which are by definition unalterable. In that sense, it is wholly conceivable that we have not yet discovered all of Jupiter’s moons but, whether known or unknown, such an autonomous fact will in any case determine the soundness of our interpretations. John Searle, most notably, has pleaded in favor of such a distinction, which has since been taken up by a number of positions associated with the new realism.⁴ Searle opposes “brute facts” of nature to “institutional facts” that exist only because of human interpretations. To cite Searle’s example: we might disagree about whether Rembrandt was really history’s greatest painter, but there is no reason to contest the fact that Rembrandt was born in 1606. That seems obvious. And yet we must ask about the place from which we proceed to make the distinction between epistemology and ontology. As Hilary Lawson reminds us, the ontological objectivity claimed by a proposition of the type “Rembrandt was born in 1606” rests on a tightly woven web of social references and thus on the very conventions Searle wants to separate from “brute facts.” According to the calendar used (Chinese, Julian, Gregorian, Hebrew, Islamic, etc.), Rembrandt’s date of birth will be different—just as

it would be absurd to affirm that the October Revolution “objectively” took place in November, even if according to the Gregorian calendar, that would be the case. Even the proposition “Rembrandt was born” is far from unambiguous: an art historian might very well reply that while the individual who became Rembrandt was born in 1606, the great artist known by name is not really born until the 1630s. In the same vein, we might even imagine a paleoanthropologist beginning a lecture by asserting that “Rembrandt was born in the first cave paintings some thirty-five thousand years ago.” In short, several dates may claim the title of truth such that a factualist will have to make an ulterior distinction between literal and metaphorical truths to exclude alternative candidates and keep only the “raw” facts.⁵ Even then, though, we must realize that this kind of distinction between fundamental and derivative truths itself results from a certain social practice regulated by conventions.

An anecdote from almost a century ago might help illustrating how difficult it is to maintain the distinction between fact and opinion. When in 1931 a journalist asked Gandhi, who was attending a conference in London to discuss the political future of India, “Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of Western democracy?” he gave a baffling answer: “I think it would be a good idea.” To the journalist, the question was rather straightforward: it implied Gandhi giving his opinion on what the journalist took to be an existing factual reality, namely the fact of a given political order in western Europe that Indians might or might not choose for themselves were they to gain independence. Gandhi, however, sensed the trap. If he agreed that “Western democracy” was a worthwhile model, he would be at odds with his own practice of anticolonial resistance, which often implied going against British law. If he distanced himself from “Western democracy,” he would be trapped in the caricature of the backward native refusing Modernity. With his performative gesture, Gandhi thus escaped this bad alternative and unmasked the journalist’s query as only seemingly an open question. Instead of assuming that “Western democracy” referred to a given reality on which he would then be called on to express his view, Gandhi undid the very distinction between fact and opinion. “I think it would be a good idea” is a marvelous response because it not only leaves room for interpretation about what democracy might mean for India, it also recalls that with respect to the West, talk about true democracy reflects much more an ideal than an actual state.

As Nietzsche rightly puts it: “There is no ‘fact-in-itself’; instead, for there to be a fact, a meaning must always first be projected in.”⁶ All this ought to warn us off any premature invocation, in philosophy, of so-called common sense: affirmations like “Rembrandt was born in 1606,” “Paris is the capital of France,” or “It’s nice out today” are clear only at first sight. In fact, they make sense only if they are inscribed in a tight mesh of social

conventions—this is why Barbara Cassin is right to say that facts result from what she calls “fixion.”⁷ Once again, the external point of view the realist movement aspires to becomes more complicated. The gesture of returning to a pre-Kantian position where ontology would precede epistemology is thus far from innocent. In other terms, the recourse to common sense can be just as populist as the politics neofactualism—understandably—seeks to thwart.

Moreover, far from operating exclusively on the political terrain of post-truth, of the introduction of creationism in schools, or of negationist discourse parading under the banner of “alternative narratives,” neofactualism always comes with a settling of accounts with traditions of thought said to have paved the way for this all-out relativism, variously identified as postmodernism, the philosophy of language games, deconstruction, or social constructivism, to have jointly prepared the ground on which the contemporary anything goes can flourish. Thus we read in *Scientific American*: “By undermining science’s claim of objectivity, these postmodernists have unwittingly laid the philosophical foundation for the new rise of authoritarianism.”⁸ Likewise, the media intellectual Kenan Malik explains “that sections of academia and of the left have in recent decades helped create a culture in which relativised views of facts and knowledge seem untroubling, and hence made it easier for the reactionary right not just to re-appropriate but also to promote reactionary ideas.”⁹ In the same register, philosopher Daniel Dennett asserts: “I think what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts. You’d have people going around saying: ‘Well, you’re part of that crowd who still believe in facts.’”¹⁰ And in an editorial titled “Why We’re Post-Fact,” Soviet-born British intellectual Peter Pomerantsev fully agrees: “This equaling out of truth and falsehood is both informed by and takes advantage of an all-permeating late post-modernism and relativism.”¹¹ The same argument is being deployed in systematic fashion by Maurizio Ferraris. In his *Manifesto of New Realism*, he affirms that media populism and its society of the spectacle are the most efficient—and most dangerous—implementation of postmodern irony.

Beyond their differences, Malik, Pomerantsev, and Ferraris all incriminate the same guilty party: Friedrich Nietzsche. To quote Maurizio Ferraris,

the postmodern distrust in progress entailed the adoption of the idea—which finds its paradigmatic expression in Nietzsche—that truth can be evil and illusion good, and that this is the destiny of the modern world. The core of the matter is not to be found so much in the assertion “God is dead” (as Hegel claimed before Nietzsche) but rather in the sentence “there are no facts, only interpretations,” because the real world ended up being a tale.¹²

A position Pomerantsev shares:

This school of thought has taken Nietzsche's maxim, there are no facts, only interpretations, to mean that every version of events is just another narrative, where lies can be excused as "an alternative point of view" or "an opinion," because "it's all relative" and "everyone has their own truth."¹³

Let's take a closer look.

Knowledge and power

When Nietzsche affirms "facts are just what there aren't, there are only interpretations,"¹⁴ he not only commits a logical error, Ferraris asserts, but inaugurates a tradition of thought with deleterious political consequences: the tradition that associates knowledge and power. The logical error is evident and it applies of course to all relativist positions: if there are only interpretations, then there is no longer anything interpretable. Interpretation, in other words, is interpretation of nothing at all—just as the affirmation "there is no truth" annuls itself, because if relativism is only one option among others, there is no reason to keep it rather than its negation. The logical argument is familiar and not really new. The political argument is more surprising because it seeks to deprive a certain tradition of thought that acknowledges its debt to Nietzsche of its emancipatory power. When Michel Foucault refers to Nietzsche to establish his famous equation of power and knowledge—"It is our needs which interpret the world"¹⁵—he is said to have initiated a movement that, far from developing analytical tools to denounce oppression, on the contrary deprived critique of any rigorous criterion to prevent the powerful from imposing their law. If knowledge depends exclusively on the interests of power, the word *truth* is emptied of all meaning.

Is perspectivism regressive, then? Does it end up locking subjects into their stereotypes? That, at least, is one of the readings of historical epistemology, that is, of the history of scientific knowledge. Thomas S. Kuhn, who popularized the notion of scientific "paradigms,"¹⁶ is thus reproached with—despite himself—favoring relativism when he stresses that each epoch is governed by specific regimes of knowledge delimiting what can be thought and known. Where Galilei sees a pendulum, a Scholastic physicist sees an object under the effect of constrained fall; where Lavoisier sees the effect of oxygen, Priestly sees the effect of dephlogisticated air. Kuhn was above all concerned with discarding a linear notion of progress: Newton's physics is not content with replacing Descartes's physics, it shifts the very object of physics. In fact, Cartesian physicists rejected Newtonian physics

because it provided no mechanical explanation of the propagation of gravity. This conceptual gap would not hinder the ultimate triumph of Newton's physics. The generalization of his model, beginning in the eighteenth century, quite simply meant that physics stopped being interested in that problem, and the success of the new paradigm, Kuhn explains, is gauged (like all paradigms) by its capacity for shifting the terms of its evaluation. From one paradigm to the next, it is the very definition of a science—physics, in this case—that undergoes a profound mutation, and between one paradigm and another, the theoretical bases are incommensurable. That is why, when Einstein establishes the laws of relativity in physics, these laws are not (contrary to what the Logical Positivists thought) a simple extension of Newtonian physics but represent a caesura from it: they would be unthinkable within its framework. In summary, no more than social progress, scientific progress does not take place through the establishment of a single and definitive truth.

Kuhn's approach explains rather well why certain scientific discoveries took so long to be accepted and what prevented scientists from appreciating the empirical results that their calculations nonetheless uncontestedly furnished them with. The famous Alexandrian mathematician Diophantus, for example, preferred convincing himself that second-degree equations either have a positive solution or they do not. It does not, however, explain very well how the combination of sometimes diverging approaches can lead to the emergence of new knowledge. This is better accounted for by another theory, developed by the Polish physician, biologist, and philosopher of science, Ludwik Fleck. While Kuhn acknowledges this theory as an inspiration for his thinking of paradigms, there are notable differences. Instead of attempting to think a succession of paradigms, Fleck tries to think the coexistence in a given epoch of different "thought styles."¹⁷ Once discovered, syphilis can be viewed in quite different optics relating to a clinical, dermatological, bacteriological, or sociopolitical mode of thinking. Moreover, contrary to what one might think, Fleck asserts, the larger share of great scientific discoveries pertain less to a systematic investigation of a law of nature than to a sliding in the thought style. And each researcher belongs not just to a single community marked by a certain thought style but to several at once, and these superpositions are what guarantees progress in science: if there were only one unchanging and self-identical style, no transformation of ways of seeing could be conceived. According to Fleck, any advance of knowledge thus presupposes a grasping and a letting go and implies going back to what in a method is being left unthought.

The current that, in a way, has inherited Fleck's preoccupations today is known as "standpoint theory." It is concerned not so much with asserting a relativity of knowledge than with affirming a more solid notion of knowledge that would account for various biases. Its basic idea

consists in an inversion that amounts to saying that individuals targeted by mechanisms of oppression or marginalization in reality possess certain privileges concerning knowledge. For standpoint theory, such individuals often have different or even better knowledge than those who are socially or politically privileged. The question *quis interpretatur?* “who interprets?” which Thomas Hobbes asked in connection with the legitimacy of the state, must be applied to the question of the legitimacy of our regimes of knowledge. We might trace the genealogy of standpoint theory to Marx with his idea that a knowledge based on the lived experience of people being exploited makes it possible to account both differently and better for the ways in which the world is structured than a knowledge based on the experience of the dominant does. The dominant harvest the fruits of labor but do not participate in the processes that generate value. Nobody has grasped Marx’s meaning better than Theodor W. Adorno in his formula, “the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying-glass.”¹⁸ In other words, suffering enjoins us to go back to the source, and once it is recognized, it will be discerned more easily in others suffering from the same affliction.

Sarah Harding is among those who have provided standpoint theory with important impulses. She has never stopped reminding us that taking into account voices that usually are rejected is not a gesture of inclusion aimed at incorporating previously sidelined positions or at granting them a status apart. On the contrary, for Harding, the issue is to claim for them the possibility of a “strong objectivity,” stronger because it makes space for the inevitable biases of all knowledge.¹⁹ No one can deny that science emerged from considerations of a highly practical order (for the purposes of prediction or planning, for example). The problem lies less in these origins, which are indissociable from particular interests, than in their being denied, in a deleterious conception of objectivity. But far from rejecting the ambition of objectivity, the issue for proponents of strong objectivity is instead to multiply the means of access. In the place of a classic objectivism that legitimizes the dominant institutions and practices and comforts their foundations, strong objectivity privileges giving voice to usually marginalized or “subjugated” experiences. This privilege is justified with two arguments: on the one hand, seeing one’s lived experience subjugated augments sensitivity for analogous marginalizations and, on the other, such subjects are less inclined to forget the partiality of their own point of view.

This is particularly true for colonial societies in which the colonized, to overcome colonialism, must learn the language of the colonizer—English for the Maori in New Zealand, Afrikaans in South Africa, or French in Algeria—while the colonizer is not obliged to do the inverse. In certain circumstances, this unevenness can benefit the colonized because they then possess the keys to both worlds and are able to play in two registers. What has been analyzed thoroughly for colonial societies to a certain extent

still applies to contemporary ones. The task, to invoke W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness," is to think this capacity members of minorities often have, the ability to analyze the norms in force in a society, at the same time from the minority point of view (of their own lived experience) and from the majority point of view (borne by an ambient discourse).

Given these contributions to a better understanding of the history of objectivity, we cannot but note that perspectivism, rather than a hindrance to progress in knowledge, was on the contrary one of its factors. Insisting on the connection between knowledge and power does not—and not by far—mean that the knowledge is being subjected to power. On the contrary, the defense of the robustness of facts against interpretative fecklessness—*it is a fact that the world was not created in seven days; it is a fact that the earth is not flat; it is a fact that climate change is happening*—not only reduces intellectual labor to a purely reactive struggle, it also falls into a supremely simplistic schema of the very kind the adversary is charged with. We must acknowledge that to assert the immutable reality of facts—against Nietzsche and his spiritual children allegedly in power in so many new regimes tempted to take the path of authoritarian populism—amounts to a call for the death of all critical thought. It is to prevent its confiscation by the promoters of the law of the strongest that perspective must today be defended.

The three perspectivisms: reclusive, additive, and diagonal

How does perspective operate? If it was possible for perspectivism to appear as an agent of relativism and of singlemindedness, it was first of all because most continue to conceive of it in its *reclusive* dimension: each knowing subject, locked in by its respective blinders, only ever has a partial view of a thing. Not seeing what it does not see, the subject is incapable of measuring the gap. A perspective never presents itself in its partiality but as a faithful fendering of the things as they are. This reclusive dimension is not confined to the individual but can bring entire groups together. At the level of an advanced telematic society, the increasing personalization of contents and the fact that, in the social networks, what resembles assembles, contribute to consecrating, each time a little more, the opinion bubbles from which any diverging point of view is progressively eliminated. Nietzsche, to denounce it, described this perspectivism in which one only ever goes from six of one to half a dozen of the other. The "I" is the victim of its own enclosure, subject to "a perspectival illusion ... the illusory unity in which, as in a horizon, everything converges."²⁰ This type of point of view results from the "narrowing of perspective" even as it universalizes perspective:²¹

My eyes, however strong or weak they may be, can see only a certain distance, and it is within the space encompassed by this distance that I

live and move, the line of this horizon constitutes my immediate fate, in great things and small, from which I cannot escape. Around every being there is described a similar concentric circle, which has a mid-point and is peculiar to him. Our ears enclose us within a comparable circle, and so does our sense of touch. Now, it is by these horizons, within which each of us encloses his senses as if behind prison walls, that we *measure* the world, we say that this is near and that far, this is big and that small, this is hard and that soft: this measuring we call sensation—and it is all of it an error!²²

Joining this *reclusive* version of perspective is a second one we might qualify as *additive*. In this version, perspectives, still partial, can be placed end to end to form a complete and viable picture. We might consider Leibniz's perspectivism to pertain to such an additive conception. In his *Monadology*, Leibniz describes a town one can look at from various angles and positions that nonetheless does not stop being the same town. The contradiction between singular points of view—which Leibniz calls “monads”—is only an apparent contradiction because it dissipates with regard to an underlying harmony established by a divine principle. Leibniz's perspectivism is like the elephant in a famous Indo-Persian fable: in a dark room, visitors try to identify the elephant by feeling the parts of its body, but each of them only touches a limited part of the large animal. For the one who touches the trunk, the elephant is a drainage pipe, for the one feeling the ear, a fan, for the one lifting up the tail, a liana, for the one patting the animal's foot, a pillar, no doubt. Only the wise, the moral of the fable concludes, will understand that the contradictions are false. To return to Leibniz, a perspectivism of this kind catches a glimpse of the principle of sufficient reason that arranges these perspectives. In connection with his theory of preestablished harmony, history has held on to the image of Leibnizian God as a great organizer who makes all points of view converge. This image—which Voltaire did much to fashion by plopping Leibniz into *Candide*—prompts a conception of perspective as an ultimate fusion of horizons. In other words, we might not yet see the profound unity that links all points of view, but in the end, there is an ultimate point of view—God's—that will allow for seeing things as they are. The ultimate unity can be furnished by an organizing God or, more modestly, by the nature of a thing. It is this latter meaning that the tradition of hermeneutics maintains in the interpretation of texts. Following Leibniz, Chladenius in his *General Hermeneutics* of 1742 invokes an art of “viewpoints [*Sehe-Punckte*]” that consists in completely going around a thing, a theory or a text, once and in capturing “all” its aspects.²³ There is nothing fortuitous about Chladenius inventing, with this notion of “viewpoint,” a modern equivalent to the Latin word *scopus*, the right aim. This idea of progressive but constant approximation

still informs the hermeneutic theories that succeed one another all the way to Hans-Georg Gadamer: although he always denied defending a pacifying conception of perspectivism, the image Gadamer chooses to describe successful interpretation—the “fusion of horizons” between a reader and a work—is more than eloquent on this point.²⁴

In its different acceptations, additive perspectivism is thus only ever a perspectivism of half-measures: the pluralism it features is only ever a transition stage on the path toward unanimity. As for Gadamer, a fusion of horizons between a historically distant point of view and that of a reader in the present implies a supratemporal point of view that allows for harmonizing them. But the same argument also holds for other paradigms of contemporary thinking, such as Habermas’s deliberative ethics, in which the moment of dissension is only ever provisional before the better argument ends up garnering the adhesion of everyone. Ultimately, we may wonder where this certainty comes from that there can be a focal unity all gazes concentrate on, this “town” that in Leibniz unites all parts. Blaise Pascal already voices reservations: “From afar, a town ... is a town ... but as you approach, there are houses, trees, tiles,”²⁵ such that someone who ventured to ask where the town itself is to be found could be shown only these houses, trees, and tiles. Nietzsche equally highlighted the epistemological dead ends of an additive perspectivism: to posit an ultimate point of view is to adhere to the fiction of a single “eye where the active and interpretative powers are to be suppressed, absent, but through which seeing still becomes a seeing-something.”²⁶

Each in its own way, reclusive and additive perspectivism concede too little to the operative power of perspective since they end up reducing it to extrinsic principles. Too autistic in the case of the first, too optimistic in the second, perspectivism can only escape being reproached with relativism if it is articulated more radically. There again, Nietzsche’s thinking allows for clearing the path: every perspective is a movement, a force (a *dynamis*), and Nietzsche calls for a dynamic interpretation of the world. What he doubts is a cautious perspectivism: “You shall learn to grasp ... life itself as *conditioned* by the sense of perspective and its injustice.”²⁷ Yet it is precisely because the points of view are not equivalent that they enter into conflict and that they permit, in the end, the establishment of a better truth. Both reclusive and additive perspectivism lead to a leveling: in the case of the former, a general flattening because every point of view counts the same; in the case of the latter, a uniformity imposed on the gazes from the outset by organizing principle. The confrontation of points of view is necessary. Only a conflictual and contrastive perspectivism can yield the relief all knowledge requires. The disparate enters into resonance and produces its internal differentiation even as it lets the objects emerge in a consistence of their own. Following Nietzsche and his call for dynamizing

perspective, we must take the conflictual dimension seriously. Its dispute, its *agōn*, is neither a limitation nor a choking of its machinery but on the contrary names its condition: its agonality operates a distribution. Once more, that which separates and splits up also supposes shared stages where that which is to be distinguished is summoned to appear. The more contrary opinions there are, the more crossed-over gazes, the clearer the result imposing itself will be. One eye is not enough, nor two, Nietzsche writes in the passage from the *Genealogy of Morality* cited earlier: “the *more* affects we are able to put into words about a thing, the *more* eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our ‘concept’ of the thing, our ‘objectivity.’”²⁸

The operative dimension of all perspective (the “through-which” of its prospectiveness) always takes place through a first division, a first cut or clearing. This is what this book’s title was trying to hint at: the value we attribute to something—the share we reserve for it—is the result of a previous activity of division, of cutting up. The Old English etymology helps us to acknowledge that the cuts at stake are not merely mental operations, they involve corporeal activity, putting one’s hands into action. While the Old English *scearu* primarily referred to shearing wool with a bladed tool or scissors, it could also refer to working the land with a ploughshare, to ploughing furrows for agriculture, but also to digging ditches to demarcate a territory. It thus appears that attributed parts and reserved shares are never a given; they are the outcome of specific actions of “sharing,” of cutting and distributing. They attribute properties and establish priorities, create a “here” and a “there” and sometimes also a “we” and a “they.” Moreover, once drawn, lines of division can be expunged by subsequent gestures of delineation. This makes for an instable and often conflictual field.

Precisely because the lines perspective draws are not parallel, do not run side by side all the way to infinity, but instead are a-parallel and tend to concur, overlap, and intersect, they create a site of tension.

Acknowledging the share of perspective, that is, its role in the constitution of sense, begins with acknowledging these operations that allow convergences as well as discrepancies to become visible. Rather than seeing in perspective a more or less clear, transparent representation of a state of affairs, we would do well to see in it a dynamic matrix that organizes and delimits, a vector of forces that separates and connects, one that contrasts. Rather than to an additive synthesis in the Kantian sense, it pertains above all to an *agōn* that plays itself out between several competing sites. The perspectival relief that emerges thus always results from a shared agonality; it is obtained through its dispute, *dia ton agōn*. Put differently: dynamic perspective is *dia-agonal*, characterized by competing agonalities, and it is *diagonal* because its competing perspectives cut across sites once it is deployed in the plural. Dynamic perspective corresponds

to a perspective that is always invariably diagonal—it is characterized by competing agonalities, *dia-agonal*, and it is diagonal because it *dia-gonally* cuts across sites. Against the idea that there is a single complete and true representation of the world and that the world thus consists of a set of objects independent of any way we might have of relating to them, diagonal perspective demands a permanent rearticulation of meaning. Each new perspective completes and at the same time relativizes the ones that came before.

If truth processes are emergent processes, contingent on such corrections, this entails not only that not all takes on reality are compatible with each other but that their dispute *shapes* the collectives that are involved. It is not only knowledge that is determined by the practical attempts to gain a better view: so are the epistemic agents themselves, individually and collectively. Comparing, contrasting, and blending perspectives brings about insight, but it also shapes an epistemic individuation and brings about certain agents of knowledge. In many cases, the very existence of a conflict of perspectives impedes a return to unilateral standpoints. This has to do with the processuality and thus with the historicity of these emergent processes themselves: not only are there conflicting descriptions of what is, there also are memories of such conflicts that trace thresholds and points of no return. Epistemic insights are often irreversible, on a collective and already on an individual level: once a child understands that Santa Claus does not exist, that babies are not brought by the stork, or that the beautiful hill in the city park consists of war debris, there is no going back to previous beliefs. Frieder Vogelmann has aptly called this the “ratchet effect”: factual knowledge may be forgotten, but the self affected by knowledge does not regain its former naivety.²⁹

Perspectiva communis: political stakes

In itself, a perspective will never be false—this, precisely, is the lesson of reclusive perspectivism—such that the confrontation of perspectives allows for letting truthful conditions emerge. Borrowing a term from Wolfgang Blankenburg, we might speak of a “perspectival contrast”:³⁰ variation, which makes perspectives play with and against each other, confers a certain depth on a given field, which then endows things with meaning and consistence (it being understood that meaning exists only insofar as it takes a certain spin). Yet this contrastive truth must be traced back to its intersubjective anchoring. If all reality requires being taken up again and rearticulated, its “persons” always take the plural.

Shared practices of meaning are what endows viewpoints with their strength—their realism—but inversely, it is also in the divergence of points of view that something like a horizon of common sense emerges. To look at

a painting together is to experience this irreducible multiplicity that takes shape despite the convergence of gazes—*what do you see? do I see something different than you? why did I not see that detail you've made me aware of that was right before my eyes? what do we see together? do we see what the painter or his age saw? what will be seen a hundred years from now?* In explicating and taking up again what we see, and what we have never seen well enough, we bring out what previously entered the count and what, on the contrary, remained excluded. In taking part in this game, we let previously invisible partitions emerge. Such a making-common of points of view is always simultaneously a demarcation and an indifferntiation, sharing and diverging, constituting an object or a scene of which no one can reasonably claim to be the sovereign. My *here* is their *there*, and my *now* never fully coincides with theirs because the instant we share is situated at the intersection of two diverging trajectories. Meanwhile, via the deictics that refer to a shared situation (*look at this, look down there*), an entire topography of meaning takes shape. Via deictics, the *we* moves from being a constative to being a performative: joint attention institutes its wholes, and its operation flows from a cooperation.

The psychology of joint attention thus intermittently displays a possible extension toward political theory that Hannah Arendt can help us spell out. There is, Arendt stresses, a “simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised.”³¹ From Merleau-Ponty, Arendt takes the notion of “perceptual faith” to insist on its intersubjective implications. This credit we grant the existence of the world, “our certainty that what we perceive has an existence independent of the act of perceiving, depends entirely on the object’s also appearing as such to others and being acknowledged by them.”³² Every act of joint attention thus already features an implicit validation that acknowledges the sharing of a given situation. For Arendt, controversy about the identity and value of things is what guarantees a common world, whose existence is never ensured in advance, as experiences of totalitarianism show:

Under the conditions of a common world, reality is not guaranteed primarily by the “common nature” of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object. If the sameness of the object can no longer be discerned, no common nature of men, least of all the unnatural conformism of a mass society, can prevent the destruction of the common world, which is usually preceded by the destruction of the many aspects in which it presents itself to human plurality. This can happen under conditions of radical isolation, where nobody can any longer agree with anybody

else, as is usually the case in tyrannies. But it may also happen under conditions of mass society or mass hysteria, where we see all people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor. In both instances, men have become entirely private, that is, they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times.³³

Growing intolerance toward the divergence of opinions and aversion to disagreement end up sanctuarizing closed spaces from which all difference has been eliminated. The privatization of viewpoints deprives them of all possibility of revision, of seeing again and differently what cannot be reduced to a single site. There is no common sense without exposition to what differs from oneself, no intersubjectivity without intersensoriality. That is the price of imagining a common world, Hannah Arendt reminds us: “The end of the *common world* has come when it is seen only under one *aspect* and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective.”³⁴

Hypo- and hyperperspectivism: pathologies of the viewpoint

When we speak of perspective, we are not only talking about the structures that condition our experience in general but also about certain trends in subjective life that can intensify in one direction or another and end up developing into sometimes considerable mental suffering. A subject’s greater or lesser capacity for putting itself in another’s place but also of taking other, divergent points of view into consideration results from a process of socialization that has nothing natural about it but that can also, most importantly, atrophy or on the contrary get out of hand. Psychopathology thus commonly associates a lack of empathy with a subject’s inability to abstract from what it feels and make place for what others experience, while identification with the suffering of other persons or groups of persons sometimes entails the dissolution of the limits of the self. In both cases, major mental dissonances are observed that some psychopathologists explain via the categories of *hypo-* and of *hyperperspectivism*.

In such an optic, suggested notably by Wolfgang Blankenburg,³⁵ hypoperspectivism refers to a heightened experiential rigidity that prevents patients from integrating changing and plural realities whereas hyperperspectivism on the contrary refers to cases in which patients are caught in a kind of advanced histrionics, a constant changing of masks and identities. With its rigid ways of seeing, the hypoperspectivist subject’s horizon is marked by monothematic fixations that restrain its reactivity and petrify its responses.

In its intolerance to the fundamental ambiguity of the perceived world, the subject develops a form of totalization delirium, believing to have found, beyond the partial points of view, a truth that would encompass them all. The rigidification of experience manifests in variable modes: it may be the delirium of jealousy, explored by writers like Proust (in *Swann in Love*) or Strindberg (in *The Defense of a Fool* or *The Father*), where the individual progressively becomes ensconced in an inner world papered with morbid apprehensions. The totality of lived experience is henceforth transported via a single prism, that of a delirium of jealousy or persecution or, in the example of one of Blankenburg's own patients, in a delirium of justice. In this latter case, a patient one day finds a watch someone has lost in the street. The patient picks it up and takes it home in order to bring it to the lost and found office. But he remembers only several days later, when the legal period for returning lost property has already passed. Little by little, voices begin to assail him, and he interprets all the messages coming from the world around him as accusing him of a moral failure. His sharp sense of justice and uprightness, which according to his therapist goes back to childhood, is only exacerbated and now takes a pathological turn: given that the entire world is aware of his failure, the slightest remark by his wife or his friends contains an innuendo, and the patient sinks into a feeling of infinite guilt. What was a simple "theme," Blankenburg summarizes, ends up saturating the entirety of lived experience.³⁶

Yet there also is hypoperspectivism's correlate, hyperperspectivism. In this second version, the rigidity of the psyche is replaced by an extreme flexibility where the subject is never "in its skin" but always puts itself in the place of others, anticipating their expectations or desires. Blankenburg speaks of a "hypermobility of the point of view" that can rise to delirious degrees when the subject becomes convinced of its ability fully to take on another's personality or to find its way into anyone's thoughts. Yet what at first resembles a histrionic personality, able to adapt its exterior to each situation, often flips over into an incapacity to act. Blankenburg cites patients whom this never-ending dance of masks throws into a profound catatonic state and who describe a sense of having the limits of their self dissolve. These hyperperspectivist patients are unable to form a personal point of view or to express themselves in their own name, not to mention their inability to take sides. The ensuing mental suffering results from a destabilization of what allows subjects to hold up: "a complete exchange of perspectives would be as abnormal as an incapacity for the relative adoption of another's perspective."³⁷

According to Blankenburg, this type of pathologies is ultimately explained by an overinvestment on the *facilitating* side of perspective and a denial of its *limiting* side. Yet perspectives not only clear a path toward a world, they also delimit—both must be conjugated. An operating

perspectivity and a reflective perspectivity must be held together, a perspectivity that opens up to a world and a perspectivity that allows for becoming aware of the gap between the world and our way of grasping it each time.³⁸ On this point, the “dark side” of perspective is not restricted to individual mental structures but also concerns much wider anthropological stakes.

From the enemy’s point of view

Thanks to anthropologists who have once more seized on the question of perspective, perspectival pluralism has once and for all left behind the clichéd image some sought to apply to it. In fact, empathy does not necessarily lead to mutual respect and harmony. Learning to hunt, for example, can take the form of expanding one’s capacity for empathy, and for putting oneself in the place of the prey, its ways of perceiving, of moving, and so on. This hunter’s empathy—a literally “cynegetic” empathy—has been described in detail by anthropologists studying the nomadic Yukaghir people in Siberia.³⁹ Viveiros de Castro takes up the notion in his own way to address the Amazon world, where it concerns the prey as well as potential predators: learning to escape danger, from a jaguar, for instance, is learning how to see like the jaguar. This perspectivism is thus nothing like a guarantee for pacifying relationships: among the Araweté people, for example, empathy is the result of war, and after having killed, it is the killer who undergoes a symbolically “death” such that henceforth, the souls of the killer and the victim will be indissociably linked. The killer cannot complete this stage of transfiguration other than by speaking from the victim’s point of view, having learned “to see oneself as the enemy.”⁴⁰

History is replete with malevolent attempts to put oneself in the enemy’s shoes. Uncounted are the ideological or religious groups who go so far as to write pamphlets allegedly authored by the group seen as the enemy, from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to the fake conspiracy texts circulating in Indonesia today.⁴¹ We have been warned. There is no reason to think that adopting another’s point of view proceeds from good intentions. The same goes for empathy with animals: putting oneself in the place of the animal often allows for freeing oneself from one’s own place but it is not for all that a gauge of benevolence. A magnificent story by Samuel Beckett, “Dante and the Lobster,” shows that one can try to get into the skin (or rather, the carapace) of a lobster and to feel the world from its point of view. This delightful little exercise of the imagination, though, changes nothing about the fatal, and fatefully banal, ending of the story: the lobster ends up in a big pot of boiling water.⁴²

We might add that such a perspectivism of survival is not a prerogative of certain indigenous societies in Amazonia or Siberia but in a sense even has a place in Linnaeus’s zoological classification. Despite the

rigid taxonomy that has so often been decried, we find in the order of Neuroptera a group called antlions (Myrmeleontidae). The name comes from the effect these insects have on other species: antlion larvae behave like a dangerous feline toward insects of smaller size, dragging them into tunnel traps in the sand before devouring them with large mandibles. This case of animal perspectivism within a “naturalist” order can be interpreted as signaling a decentering of the human point of view, of the standpoint that informs all of Linnaeus’s taxonomy; but we may also, on the contrary, detect in it an ultimate confirmation of this anthropomorphization of the living, since in the end, the predators are modeled on the fears of the human.

Perspective, a matter of adoption

We would thus be wrong to think that the variation of points of view automatically entails a widening of minds, never mind their pacification—far from it. Nonetheless, any concerted action and any construction of a common project presupposes such plasticity.

We may think of the Australian Aborigines’ “songlines” that sketch a map, a map that is of course geographical but equally mythical. Each bend in the land, each rift, each valley has its narrative fragment to which only a certain clan and sometimes even only a single individual has the key. These vast cartographies must be regularly retraced by appealing to those who possess its secret, associating song and place and thereby lining up, like pearls on a string, bits of melody, lines of a poem. The map does not reveal itself once and for all, and it is only in sharing fragmentary knowledge that the whole of the mythic narratives constituting the background of a culture shows through, always by way of successive elucidations. The example of songlines can help in rethinking the very idea of a reality indissociable from such a crossfading, from a successive articulation of aspects, from “the interlocking of our perspectives.”⁴³ It also opens up a diachronic reflection because beside a distribution in space (*I here—they down there*), allowance must also be made for a multiplicity of agents in time.

Becoming aware of our own point of view already constitutes the beginning of a possible movement. In this regard, then, we would have to distinguish between an operative perspectivism, always at work, and a thematic perspectivism to which the subject returns by a reflective act or by relativizing its own point of view, temporarily adopting the point of view of the other. Identification with another lived experience, in fact, amounts to disidentification with our own. Nonetheless, knowing how to put oneself in another’s place still requires a non-negligible effort. Fiction plays a crucial role in this learning, in this art of “adoption.” Be they figurative or language arts, they are able, through their narrative, to orchestrate

the change of perspective. Nietzsche recommends taking inspiration from artists, past masters of the art of perspective, and to learn their lesson:

To distance oneself from things until there is much in them that one no longer sees and much that the eye must add *in order to see them at all*, or to see things around a corner and as if they were cut out and extracted from their context, or to place them such that each partially distorts the view one has of the others and allows only perspectival glimpses or to look at them through coloured glass or in the light of the sunset, or to give them a surface and skin that is not fully transparent: all this we should learn from artists.⁴⁴

Put differently, there are not only “optics” but “poetics” of perspective as well. It is Nietzsche’s wise man, the “poet ... of life,” who creates worlds and enriches the one that exists, adding “valuations, colours, weights, perspectives, scales.”⁴⁵ Modernity has displayed a more acute sense for this multiplicity—although often, it also has developed a lesser tolerance toward it. Deleuze basically says nothing else when he stresses that literature reaches modernity not so much when it turns to language itself than when it liberates possible worlds (the virtual) from the constraint of having to actualize. For lack of accommodating all possibles, literature allows for pushing back the boundaries of the real by considering the coexistence of such virtualities. Nothing, no doubt, better illustrates this idea than the short story by Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths”:

In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others ... Fang, let us say, has a secret; a stranger calls at his door; Fang resolves to kill him. Naturally, there are several possible outcomes: Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they both can escape, they both can die, and so forth. In the work of Ts’ui Pên, all possible outcomes occur; each one is the point of departure for other forkings. ... You arrive at this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another, my friend.⁴⁶

Morphology of perspective

Let’s try to summarize in a morphology some traits our analysis has brought out. Discerning the characteristics of perspective is not an easy task because the perspectival milieu is the subjective space in which we are immersed and that for this very reason escapes our grip. On the one hand, perspective is made up of “arounds” that move with us and nonetheless go beyond us at every moment. On the other hand, we must acknowledge

that a perspective is not a phenomenon; it does not give itself to see but is instead that which gives to see. And yet it would be wrong to see in perspective a simple grid projected by a consciousness or a gaze, as Abraham Bosse's engraving seems to suggest (Figure 1.1). The perspectives we adopt are often induced by our surroundings, they are the result of a solicitation emanating, more often than not, from the things themselves and forcing us to pay attention. Reality thus has a "proleptic"⁴⁷ structure: we implicitly anticipate it in each of our gazes, but it also recalls itself to us by its character of interjection, as that which places itself across our path and constantly frustrates our expectations. Reality always presents itself under this double aspect of actualization and annulment, of fulfillment and refusal.

This double aspect of perspective must be accommodated. It has a *transitive* side, which defines it as a process, and an *intransitive* side, that is, it corresponds to a mode of presenting a thing (object, event, etc.) that invariably exceeds this perspective. It is this second aspect that allows us to affirm that perspectivism is not a relativism, that instead it can claim to be a realist position. In a perspective, something is maintained *through* all movements but also *in spite of* and *against* them. It is by means of contrasts that we realize the properties of a thing as that which distinguishes it and sets it apart. Perspective is not only the name of an irreducible multiplicity; it is also that which prevents us from seeing and saying anything whatever.

In the first chapter, I highlighted some characteristics of perspective: its *address*, its *antirepresentational*, *medial*, *objective*, and *plural* character. Let's take them up again and describe them in a new sequence: *to see for*, *to see as*, *to see through*, *to see that*, and *to see with*.

a) *to see for*

What is given in perspective refers us to an oriented and addressed appearance: what gives itself to see gives itself thus for us (and not necessarily for someone else). From a different angle, the thing may well no longer present itself the same way. Perspective thus constitutively depends on a subject that for lack of being at the origin of an appearing nonetheless constitutes its pole of address. At a minimum, the subject is nothing but this capacity for forming a point of view. It is in this sense that perspective leans on a subject and that it is determined from this side of the relationship it institutes.

b) *to see as*

Seeing an aspect is not seeing a copy or a simulacrum of the thing, it is seeing it from a certain point of view, seeing it "in a certain sense." There is never any vision in general, all vision is only ever vision "to the extent that," and I never see but to the extent that a thing gives itself "as" aspect, as *this* seeing of the thing, as *this* profile of a person.

Meanwhile, and against certain trends in the philosophy of language, this *seeing-as* does not come down to a propositional structure (S is considered as p) but pertains to a structure of the phenomenal field itself that organizes according to a logic of contrasts.

c) *to see through*

If perspective is thus not a secondary representation or copy, that does not mean that it is immediate. It refers, even in its etymology, to an operation generally passed over in silence, the *per-* of its operation, that *through which* something is configured and accedes to visibility. In short: no perspicacity without perspectivity. Perspective is thus, more than it is a limitation, a rendering of meaning—its medium and its vector. Like most media, perspective does its job all the better the more it makes itself forgotten (it is in the dead angle, so to speak), but nonetheless, far from being a simple intermediary, it constitutes an apparatus of appearances which it places and distributes.

d) *to see that*

As long as we suppose that each aspect of the perceived object demands that we relate to it individually, the subjacent perspectivism at best pertains to the order of superposition. Only if we suppose that the object can be reduced neither to a particular access nor to the sum of all possible accesses does the object present itself as a regulative ideal, demanding that we constantly renew our access to it. If the ambition of perspective is thus to be more than a simple internal projection, if it is to be a perspective *of* something that goes beyond perspectival immanence, its objectivity cannot come down to objecthood or, put differently, to the fact that something presents itself head-on. If perspective names an actualizing operation, it does so because it rearticulates a real that it does not constitute, a real that exceeds it. In this sense, perspectivism, as Nietzsche puts it, is indeed but a “complex form of specificity.”⁴⁸ To see from a certain angle is already *to see that*, and in consequence, perspectivity is also what prevents us from perceiving and saying anything whatever.

e) *to see with*

If vision is always plural from the outset, it is so because to see something as just this something is to make space for the always present possibility that it could also be otherwise. This determination designates not only a possibility *de jure*; in the confrontation of points of view, we experience it every day. A personal point of view is constituted only against the backdrop of a multiple and changing horizon, and it is constructed in innumerable situations of sharing, in a sharing that is held together not by the identical but by what, precisely, never stops escaping us. To see together (a show, a movie, a work of art, to look at a question together) is thus to take the measure, by means of tallying, of

the partitions and exclusions that our perception and thinking depend on. To see in perspective, then, invariably is to *see with*: perception only emerges against the backdrop of co-perception.

Conclusion

Everything depends on the point of view—this phrase, trotted out over and over again, was the starting point of this investigation. Confoundingly banal, it stopped drawing philosophers' attention a long time ago, as Deleuze once noted: "You'll say: what could be more banal than the expression 'a point of view'?"⁴⁹ Similarly, in the registers of art history and the history of science, entire libraries filled with literature on the subject seemed to suggest that all there was to say about (linear, parallel, oblique, isometric, and so on) perspective had been said. The constellation outside the library, however, has endowed perspective and its epistemological and politics stakes with sudden urgency. Against all precipitate identification of perspectivism with an enscenment in singlemindedness, another tradition had to be unearthed, the tradition that since the end of the thirteenth century has been known as *perspectiva communis* and makes no less of a claim to say the real than any other realism.

Let's put things back in perspective: this expression has never been more opportune, and certainly not in the sense of a never-ending contextualization. Perspectival vision gives us something to see that does not exhaust the image perspective gives us of it. All perspectival vision thus always exceeds itself toward a real that evades its grip. All perspective steps aside as perspective, it slips away in its partiality, to give all the space to the things of which it offers a view. We thus have to resign ourselves that no perspective is ever a perspective on itself, that there is no perspective on perspective without perspective invariably stopping to be a perspective. If perspective offers a view on phenomena, it does so because it always escapes itself, it refers to things that are other than itself. This is also why we so much as experience a real world at all. Applied to the question of belief in a reality, this is the great difference between perspectivists and factualists, which in the wake of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Roy Wagner we may put as follows: facts oblige you to believe in them, perspectives oblige you to believe out of them.⁵⁰

Our investigation of some salient aspects of the problem of perspective has recalled the surprising correlations between geometrical problems and anthropological questions, between painters' considerations and metaphysicians' reflections. Once again, we saw how philosophy only took the measure of the perspectivist revolution belatedly, more than a century and a half after the practical "perspectivers," when, from Leibniz to Nietzsche, it seizes on their problem. Such examples tend to prove that we are better

off when, as far as possible, we do not dissociate an analysis of perspectival structures from its concrete applications. The method I followed thus proceeded from a conviction reinforced as time went on: one cannot produce a discourse about perspective in general without taking its specific instantiations into account, the forms and guises it takes. If it is true that there is no perspective in a pure state, and that perspective exists only in the plural, in specific inflections, then any inquiry into perspective is justified in always playing in these two registers and in not dissociating the phenomenological side from an archeological side and vice versa. Friedrich Nietzsche already warned against the dead ends of that sort of exercise because in fact, we are constantly sent back and forth between the two: “When we try to look at the mirror in itself we discover in the end nothing but things upon it. When we want to grasp the things we finally end up with nothing but the mirror.”⁵¹

Nietzsche, moreover, also insisted on the profoundly unjust character of all perspective. Each perspective offers more visibility to some things and deprives other things of it. Leonardo da Vinci already put his finger the pictorial implications of this dimension of perspective when he stressed the fact that objects lose clarity as they recede into the distance; he called this *prospettiva de' perdimenti*, the perspective of losses or perditions.⁵² It would thus be quite in vain to look for an all-inclusive perspective: however transversal it may be, any shared perspective generates its own exclusions, its blind spots and dead angles.

There is no metaperspective, no vantage from where the confusion of viewpoints could be ordered in the sense of Leibniz's prestabilized harmony, of Toynbee's combination of the fly's-eye and the bird's-eye view, or of Gadamer's fusion of horizons. There is no view from nowhere—a criticism Thomas Nagel shares with phenomenology: “to see,” as Merleau-Ponty never tires of emphasizing, “is always to see from somewhere.”⁵³

There is thus, simultaneously, an enabling and an inhibiting aspect to the situated and entangled nature of seeing. At most we can discern, in transitioning from one perspective to another, its injunctive character. Perspectives are so many horizons for that which appears or remains invisible, and they are thus so many invisible reticulations of what is seen or said. In following these already traced trajectories with our gaze, we affirm or weaken all the perspectival norms that govern our way of being and of doing, reiterating or on the contrary subverting them.

Naturally or by convention, perspective is thus normalizing and unfinished at the same time. If perspectival vision excludes uniqueness, seeing according to *a* point of view must account for the fact that there necessarily are *other* points of view—as a consequence, perspectival vision implies that other alternative visions are always possible. For, to borrow Stendhal's formula, no matter how good our eyes, we will never see both sides of an

orange at the same time.⁵⁴ There are so many possible ways of showing that perspective is only ever declined in the plural and that it is this pluralness that endows it with consistence. There are many possible ways of relating to reality, but above all, this relationship itself exists only in the plural. Of all the meanings we can attribute to pluralism, this, indisputably, is the most demanding.

Notes

- 1 Paul A. Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006).
- 2 Paul A. Boghossian, "The Concept of Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 12, no. 1–2 (June 2010): 69–80.
- 3 Bruno Latour, "On the Partial Existence of Existing and Nonexisting Objects," in *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, ed. Lorraine Daston, 247–69 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), esp. the "Prologue," 247–51.
- 4 John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).
- 5 Hilary Lawson, "Searle vs Lawson: After the End of Truth - Part 2," *Changing How the World Thinks*, no. 39 (August 5, 2015), <https://iai.tv/articles/after-the-end-of-truth-part-2-auid-552>.
- 6 Nietzsche, fragment 2[149], in *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner, trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 90.
- 7 Barbara Cassin, "Sophistics, Rhetorics, and Performance; or, How to Really Do Things with Words," trans. Andrew Goffey, *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 42, no. 4 (2009): 349–72, here 370n70.
- 8 Shawn Otto, "A Plan to Defend against the War on Science," *Scientific American* [online] (9 October 2016).
- 9 Kenan Malik, "Not Post-Truth as Too Many 'Truths,'" (February 5, 2017), <https://kenanmalik.com/2017/02/05/not-post-truth-as-too-many-truths/>.
- 10 Daniel Dennett, "'I Begrudge Every Hour I Have to Spend Worrying about Politics,'" *The Guardian* (12 February 2017).
- 11 Peter Pomerantsev, "Why We're Post-Fact," *Granta* (July 20, 2016), <https://granta.com/why-were-post-fact>.
- 12 Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifesto of New Realism*, trans. Sarah De Sanctis (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), 2.
- 13 Pomerantsev, "Why We're Post-Fact."
- 14 Nietzsche, fragment 7[60], in *Late Notebooks*, 139.
- 15 Nietzsche, fragment 7[60], in *Late Notebooks*, 139.
- 16 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
- 17 Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, eds. Thaddeus J. Trenn and Robert K. Merton, trans. Fred Bradley and Thaddeus J. Trenn (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979), esp. 125–45.
- 18 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 50.
- 19 Sarah Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is Strong Objectivity?" in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, 49–82 (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 20 Nietzsche, fragment 2[91], in *Late Notebooks*, 77.

- 21 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), §188: 79.
- 22 Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, eds. Maude-marie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), §117: 73, Nietzsche's emphasis. Such error, incidentally, applies not only to individuals but to the human species in general; Nietzsche evokes the "enormous *perspectivist falsification* thanks to which the species Homo imposes itself [*ungeheure perspektivische Fälschung, vermöge deren die Species Mensch sich selber durchsetzt*]" (fragment 43[1], *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 2nd rev. ed. [Munich: dtv, 1999], vol. 11: 700, Nietzsche's emphasis).
- 23 Johann Martin Chladenius, *Einleitung zur richtigen Auslegung vernünftiger Reden und Schriften*, 1742, reprint (Düsseldorf: Stern-Verlag Jansen, 1969), ch. 4, §155: 86.
- 24 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, rev. 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 315–18 and 386.
- 25 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004), S99/L65: 21.
- 26 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), III, §12: 87.
- 27 Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Preface, §6: 9, Nietzsche's emphasis.
- 28 Nietzsche, *Genealogy III*, §12: 87, Nietzsche's emphases.
- 29 Frieder Vogelmann, *Die Wirksamkeit des Wissens: Eine politische Epistemologie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2022), chapter 7, 386–462.
- 30 Wolfgang Blankenburg, "Perspektivität und Wahn," in *Wahn und Perspektivität: Störungen im Realitätsbezug des Menschen und ihre Therapie*, eds., Wolfgang Blankenburg and Walter von Baeyer, 4–28 (Stuttgart: Enke, 1991).
- 31 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 57.
- 32 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1981), 46.
- 33 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 57–58.
- 34 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 58, my emphases.
- 35 Blankenburg, "Perspektivität und Wahn."
- 36 Wolfgang Blankenburg, "Die Verselbständigung eines Themas zum Wahn," in *Psychopathologie des Unscheinbaren: Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, ed. Martin Heinze, 25–68 (Berlin: Parodos, 2007).
- 37 Wolfgang Blankenburg, "Perspektivität und Wahn," 16.
- 38 In the footsteps of Blankenburg, see also Thimeo Breyer, "Too Much or Not Enough: Psychopathological Limits of Distributed Perspectivity," in *The Power of Distributed Perspectives*, eds. Günter Abel and Martina Plümacher, 103–15 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016).
- 39 Rane Willerslev, "Not Animal, Not Not-Animal: Hunting, Imitation and Empathetic Knowledge among the Siberian Yukaghirs," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 10, no. 3 (September 2004): 629–52.
- 40 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *From the Enemy's Point of View: Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society*, trans. Catherine V. Howard (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 249.
- 41 Nils Bubandt, "From the Enemy's Point of View: Violence, Empathy, and the Ethnography of Fakes," *Cultural Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (August 2009): 553–88.

- 42 Samuel Beckett, "Dante and the Lobster," in *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition*, ed. Paul Auster, vol. 4, 77–88 (New York: Grove Press, 2006).
- 43 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 349.
- 44 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), IV, §299: 169–70, Nietzsche's emphasis.
- 45 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* IV, §301: 171.
- 46 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," trans. Donald A. Yates, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, eds. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, augm. ed., 9–29 (New York: New Directions, 1964), 26.
- 47 I borrow the term from Viktor von Weizsäcker.
- 48 Nietzsche, fragment 14[186], *Kritische Studienausgabe* 13, 373.
- 49 Gilles Deleuze, lecture on Leibniz, Vincennes, 15 April 1980, <https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/48>.
- 50 Roy Wagner, "Afterword: Facts Force You to Believe in Them; Perspectives Encourage You to Believe Out of Them," in *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds*, ed. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 295–324 (Chicago, IL: HAU, 2016).
- 51 Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §243: 141 (modified).
- 52 Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks*, trans. Jean Paul Richter, sel. Irma A. Richter, ed. Thereza Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 113 (there rendered as "perspective of disappearance").
- 53 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 69.
- 54 Stendhal, *Racine and Shakespeare*, trans. Guy Daniels (New York: Crowell-Collier, 1962), 94.