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Knowledge from a Human Point of View

Springer Open

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In memory of Barry Stroud (1935–2019)

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This edited collection of nine original essays was commissioned as part of the ERC Consolidator Grant project *Perspectival realism. Science, Knowledge, and Truth from a Human Vantage Point.* The guiding idea behind it is to explore the view known as "perspectivism" in philosophy of science by looking at its broader historical and epistemological context. Perspectivism in philosophy of science is often presented as a view about our scientific knowledge being historically and culturally situated. The scientific knowledge we can afford is inevitably the outcome of modelling practices, scientific theories, experimental techniques, conceptual resources inherent in specific 'scientific perspectives' that we—as historically situated epistemic agents—happen to occupy. Therefore, it is common currency to refer to the 'Newtonian perspective', or the 'Maxwellian perspective' (among innumerable others across the sciences) as a way of marking and specifying the particular *vantage point from which* knowledge claims are typically made. But what is philosophically at stake in this seemingly platitudinous move remains to be clarified. For one, if our scientific knowledge is indeed historically and culturally situated, can it ever be knowledge of the world *as is* (as opposed to knowledge of the world *as seen through our perspectival lenses*)? Relatedly, how does perspectivism affect the very notion of knowledge (qua justified true belief, under the traditional view) if justification and truth are themselves couched as perspectival notions?

This edited collection locates perspectivism within the wider landscape of history of Western philosophy and current epistemology. Two overarching questions guide the inquiry in the following chapters. When did the idea of knowledge from a human point of view emerge in the history of philosophy? And what role does the idea play in contemporary debates in epistemology? Each question invites more than one answer and the selection of chapters that follow is intended to give a brief—almost pointillistic, but nevertheless illuminating—introduction, rather than a comprehensive and exhaustive treatment of the topic. In what follows, we briefly introduce each chapter and the underlying narrative and leitmotiv that connects the first part of the book (with more historical analyses) to the second part (dedicated to ramifications in contemporary epistemology).

Situating perspectivism in the history of Western philosophy means locating a

distinctive notion of 'knowledge from a human point of view' as an emerging influential trend with far-reaching ramifications in contemporary epistemology.[1] When did the epistemic agent's point of view become relevant in philosophical discussions about knowledge? The question might sound *prima facie* trivial (of course, knowledge is necessarily from a human point of view—whose else's point of view could it be?). But, in fact, it conceals a more profound issue. It has become a platitude (almost a cliché) to identify Kant in the history of Western philosophy as a turning point in placing the epistemic agent's point of view centre stage. After all, was not Kant the philosopher who with his self-styled 'Copernican revolution' realigned philosophy around the human agents (as Copernicus re-aligned planetary motion around the Sun)? Was not Kant the philosopher who clearly warned against the sceptical threat facing anyone who asks how our representation of things conform to these things as they are in themselves? (see Kant 1781/1787, Bxx).

But while Kant certainly placed the human agent centre stage, he did not give precise instructions as to how to 'exit' one's own perspective. How is it possible to identify one's mode of knowledge as a particular perspective if one cannot exit it and encounter others who occupy different perspectives? How could one recognise one's own standpoint as such without a plurality of other possible standpoints? This is the central question that Rachel Zuckert addresses in Chap. 1. Zuckert argues that there is an inevitable tension inherent in the very idea of knowledge from a human point of view. Kant maintains that one can only gain knowledge of the world from within the human perspective. Yet the recognition of this fact requires one to be able to step outside the human perspective and to acknowledge the existence of other perspectives, which Kant seems to deny. Zuckert defends Kant's view from potential incoherency charges by examining Kant's Transcendental Dialectic in the *Critique of Pure Reason.* Zuckert argues that reason with its ideas delivers a conception of a thing that cannot be presented in experience. Attempts to exit the human perspective, and failures to do so (as Kant explored them in the Transcendental Dialectic), can lead one to recognise the specificity and the limitations of the human perspective, without ever being able to step outside it.

But maybe more than Kant himself, the Western philosopher who has more clearly advocated a view known as perspectivism is Friedrich Nietzsche. In Chap. 2, Steven D. Hales explores Nietzsche's two-tier perspectivism as encompassing a first-order epistemic theory that takes truth as perspectival and a second-order methodological perspectivism aimed at enhancing 'understanding'. Hales defends Nietzsche' 'positive epistemology' by responding to both critics who perceive Nietzsche as a sceptic and those who have interpreted him as a pragmatist. He surveys contemporary epistemological accounts concerned with the notion of 'under-

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[1] The qualification of Western philosophy is important here because our already very selective introduction to the topic will be confined to the three main figures of Kant, Nietzsche, and American Pragmatism (with no implication or suggestion that similar themes cannot be found in other Western authors, of course). A more comprehensive analysis would also need to include Arabic, Indian, and Chinese philosophy (among others) where the notion of knowledge from a human point of view might be cast in an interestingly new light. This would be an extensive scholarly project to undertake on some another occasion, we hope.

standing' to motivate Nietzsche's methodological perspectivism and points out that the adoption of different perspectives, including erroneous ones, can further 'understanding'.

The perspectivalist line of inquiry that begins with Kant and continues with Nietzsche finds its mature expression in the multifaceted reflections of the movement known as American Pragmatism. Matthew Brown in Chap. 3 highlights how the notion of knowledge from a human point of view acquires wider resonance in the work of the American Pragmatists. Starting with the Pragmatist notions of inquiry and truth and potential lessons for perspectivists, Brown carves a path through a voluminous literature and analyses pluralistic metaphysics in the pragmatist tradition. His inquiry reveals certain shortcomings for perspectivism, such as a potential collapse into relativism, or a narrow Eurocentric focus in science. Brown suggests that these shortcomings can be overcome if perspectivists are willing to integrate certain lessons on truth, reality, and plurality from the American pragmatists. For example, the perspectivist can avail herself of Pierce's dynamic idea of *community of inquiry* to forgo the static and passive *vision metaphor*. Or learn from Addams' and Du Bois's standpoint theory to integrate a wider range of perspectives in science.

Unsurprisingly, American Pragmatism played a key role in informing one of the most influential contemporary advocates of a view closely related to perspectivism: Hilary Putnam's internal realism (or, as he later rebranded it 'realism with a human face'). In Chap. 4, Mario De Caro discusses Putnam's philosophical thoughts on reality and knowledge, and in particular his evolving views on what form of realism might be tenable. De Caro starts his survey with Putnam's views on physicalism and his criticism of metaphysical realism. He then turns to Putnam's internal realism, which, according to De Caro, was in part inspired by Kant, Peirce, and Dummett, and motivated by a renewed effort to respond to metaphysical realism. Putnam eventually abandoned internal realism in favour of 'liberal naturalism', a view that De Caro sees as congenial to Massimi's own version of perspectival realism.

These first four chapters set the historical stage for the second part of the book where the discussion switches to the ramifications of perspectivism in contemporary epistemology. What is it at stake in the seemingly anodyne claim that knowledge is 'from a human point of view'? In Chap. 5, Natalie Ashton looks at the topic through the lenses of contemporary feminist standpoint theory. She argues that both perspectivism and feminist standpoint theory have a lot to learn from relativism, as well as from one another. Ashton identifies elements of relativism at play in Ron Giere's perspectivism and in standpoint theory, respectively, and argues that there is an innocuous version of relativism that can benefit both views. One mistake that both Giere's perspectivism and feminist standpoint theories make, in Ashton's view, is to interpret relativism as asserting equal validity. The latter maintains that all rankings of different perspectives are equally correct, when in fact both views share with relativism the idea of non-neutrality, i.e. system-independent rankings are not possible. Ashton believes that once perspectivism and feminist standpoint theory embrace some version of non-silly relativism, both views will be better equipped to occupy the feasible middle-ground they are striving for.

In Chap. 6, Kareem Khalifa and Jared Millson put forward a view which they call 'inquisitive-truth monism', according to which it is not only true beliefs that are of epistemic value, but true answers to relevant questions. According to Khalifa and Millson, it is an inquirer's perspective that determines what questions are relevant, where the inquirer's perspective encompasses their interests, social role, and background assumptions. Khalifa and Millson's main motivation in pursuing inquisitive-truth monism is—in their own words—to account for 'the complexity of epistemically valuable undertakings characterizing the scientific endeavor'. They argue that traditional accounts, which focus on the acquisition of true beliefs, are inadequate to capture such complexity. They nod to perspectivism as a way of cashing out an alternative notion of epistemic normativity centred on the epistemic agent's perspectival interests. Along similar lines, Nick Treanor, in Chap. 7, undertakes an examination of epistemic normativity that takes perspectivism seriously. Treanor starts with a discussion of a widespread view about epistemic normativity that takes truth as a key norm for beliefs. On this view, shared by Alvin Goldman and Ernest Sosa among others, to know is to believe the truth—as much truth as is possible—and avoid error. Treanor highlights problems with this conception of epistemic normativity, focused as it is on more true and less false beliefs, and suggests a different way of thinking about epistemic normativity and a perspectival challenge looming in the horizon.

Sosa's epistemological view is also the starting point for Adam Carter's analysis in Chap. 8. Carter focuses on Sosa's 'virtue perspectivism' as a two-tier epistemological stance, whereby the reliability of first-order animal knowledge requires an ascent to second-order reflective or perspectival knowledge. Despite its success at averting scepticism and regress, critics have however lamented that virtue perspectivism falls prey of circular strategies. Carter's aim in this chapter is to tease out the criticisms and defend Sosa's virtue perspectivism from circularity-based objections levelled at the view by Barry Stroud, Baron Reed, and Richard Fumerton.

Aptly, this edited collection concludes with Chap. 9 by Barry Stroud himself, who undertakes a conceptual analysis of the very notion of 'knowledge from a human point of view'. By investigating the ways in which human beings come to know and what it means for one to come to know something, Stroud addresses the sceptical challenges to the possibility of knowledge and general concerns about knowledge and truth that a perspectival realist might have. He argues that to occupy a "human point of view" is to be fully engaged in the community of human knowers and to be committed to the world's being the way it is widely known to be. However, he also warns that this way of thinking about the original question does not have anything distinctively perspectival. And that maybe a better way of understanding the notion of 'knowledge from a human point of view' is to reflect not directly on human knowledge as such, but on human beings, 'their regarding themselves as enquirers or knowers'. Like Treanor, Stroud too invites 'aspiring perspectivists' to ask themselves questions about

> what we primarily want to understand about the acquisition and development of what we call human knowledge. Is it human acceptance—and rejection—of more and more theories or hypotheses that we think needs accounting for? Or is it the fact of theory change, or the

competition among theories: how can we tell which is best? Or is what we want to account for the progressive accumulation of more and more of what we call human knowledge. (Stroud, Chap 9)

These pressing questions remain ongoing concerns for aspiring perspectivists. Barry Stroud sadly and untimely passed away since writing this Chapter. We dedicate this volume to his memory, and hope this edited collection will prompt more and broader reflections on a fast-growing topic with a long-standing philosophical history.

Edinburgh, UK   Ana-Maria Crețu
October 2019   Michela Massimi

Contents

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Adam Carter is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. He is the author of *Metaepistemology and Relativism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and is working on a forthcoming book with Clayton Littlejohn entitled *This Is Epistemology* (Wiley-Blackwell).

Mario De Caro is Professor of Moral Philosophy at Rome Tre, and a regular Visiting Professor at Tufts University. He is the editor, with David Macarthur, of the volumes *Naturalism in Question* (Harvard University Press, 2004) and *Naturalism and Normativity* (Columbia University Press, 2010) and of two volumes of essays by Hilary Putnam: *Philosophy in the Age of Science* (with D. Macarthur, Harvard University Press, 2012) and *Naturalism, Realism, and Normativity* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

Steven D. Hales is Professor and Chair in the Department of Philosophy at Bloomsburg University. He specialises in epistemology and metaphysics and has co-edited books on both Nietzsche's philosophy and on relativism. He is the author of *Nietzsche's Perspectivism*, with Rex Welshon (University of Illinois Press, 2000), and of *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy* (MIT, 2006).

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Barry Stroud was Willis S. and Marion Slusser Professor Emeritus of Philosophy in the Philosophy Department at the University of California, Berkeley. He was the winner of the Matchette Prize (1979) for his book *Hume* (Routledge, 1977) and the author of *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (OUP, 1984), *The Quest for Reality* (OUP, 2002), *Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction* (OUP, 2011), as well as four volumes of collected essays also published by Oxford University Press.

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