The Basics of Perspectival Reduction

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Abstract

While philosophical results might seem to be relative to the presuppositions of the methods that generate them, this paper proposes a meta-methodology to coordinate those results. The apparent relativity of competing philosophical methodologies can be reduced by the application of any of three general techniques derived from an analysis of relativism in general, one of which, the technique of commensuration, does not seem to have been very well appreciated within philosophical practice. An ideal application of commensuration suggests two theoretical virtues, competitive subsumption and reflexive reiteration, and these virtues are demonstrated in the examination of competing accounts of the nature of explanation.

It seems that great philosophical advances are accompanied by innovations in philosophical methodology. It seems likewise that the general hope among philosophers has been that eventually philosophical methodology will become fully mature and complete, enabling philosophers finally to focus on solving philosophical problems without having to worry about underlying methodological concerns. Yet this hope may be ill founded and destined to be disappointed. It may be that philosophy is a field in which progress is intimately bound to methodological innovation, such that philosophy ceases to progress when no further methodologies are developed. In any case, unless the current methodological state of philosophy, whatever that may be, is to be considered mature and complete, it would seem incumbent upon philosophers to continue to explore and to develop new methodologies, whether one of these new methodologies will be recognized as philosophy's ultimate and proper methodology, or whether methodological innovation in philosophy will never come to an end.

This paper introduces the meta-methodological concept of perspectival reduction and proposes it as a general methodology for philosophy, an overall methodology that tolerates and even demands new methodological innovations. This introduction is a summary of a more extensive investigation into philosophical methodology, so the presentation will unavoidably be very compact, but it should serve to convey the basics of the perspectival reduction.

Philosophy proceeds according to the conception of philosophy held by its practitioners at any given time. Under a narrow conception, philosophy may

indeed provide detailed analyses within a correspondingly narrow scope, an exhaustive investigation of a single concept, for example. However, if more is to be expected from philosophy, it would seem that the conception of philosophy must be broadened, and broadened among a wider range of philosophers. For my part, I favor the broadest possible conception of philosophy.

Yet leaving aside the question of what this broad conception of philosophy might be, even if one takes a position concerning the proper scope of philosophy, it is not clear how to proceed within that scope. The general question is what philosophical methodology should be employed to achieve the goals of philosophy within whatever scope is appropriate to it. As an answer to this question, I propose a technique that I call perspectival reduction, one that should accommodate a very broad conception of philosophy.

As a framework for understanding the general sort of method embodied by perspectival reduction, consider the following rough taxonomy of philosophical methodologies. Note that I do not necessarily expect every methodology to align perfectly to this taxonomy. It is rather merely an expository device to introduce the methodological direction in which I am heading.

The notion of first philosophy is familiar from the work of Descartes (1985a, 1985b). According to first philosophy, there are certain fundamental pieces of knowledge that can be established as clear and distinct, or perhaps as necessary, and the rest of the field of knowledge can be established on the basis of these fundamental intuitions by means of deduction. Therefore, given these fundamental intuitions and a suitable conception of deduction, a complete end state of philosophy could be projected, given sufficient time and energy.

By contrast, some philosophers have attempted to reverse this methodological direction by starting with a projected end state and arguing backward to what the rest of the system must be like in order to achieve that end. By analogy with the notion of first philosophy, I will call this approach 'last philosophy'. Hegel would seem to be an exemplar of this approach, by projecting the Absolute as the ultimate completion of philosophy, then arguing back to what must therefore support that Absolute state (Hegel, 1969, pp. 67–78). Perhaps also philosophers working strictly within a framework of revealed religion, such as medieval scholastic philosophers, could be understood to practice last philosophy, since that revealed religion would represent an ultimate state that philosophy must support without in any way challenging, unless that philosopher would risk charges of heresy and its potentially nasty consequences.

It seems that both first and last philosophy have been largely discredited in contemporary philosophical practice. On the one hand, it is not perfectly clear and distinct whether any particular piece of knowledge can be foundational in the way that Descartes thought in his first philosophy. On the other hand, it is not clear how any projected end state for philosophy could be justified in advance of reaching such an end. If this end state is merely assumed, it would seem to be completely unjustified. If there is an argument for this end state, then it would seem that this argument should rely on some secure foundations, in which case it would seem that what seemed to be an instance of last philosophy was really first philosophy.

If neither of these approaches is viable, then it would seem that philosophy must proceed from the middle, as what one might call 'median philosophy', equally unsure of its foundations and of its end state. Yet adopting the model of median philosophy hardly solves the methodological problem of philosophy, but indeed puts that problem into greater focus. How can one possibly proceed with philosophy if one is neither sure of one's foundations nor of where one is going? It seems that the very notion of philosophy from the middle is nothing more than an attempt to pull oneself up by one's own bootstraps.

Yet the general notion of bootstrapping is not entirely as absurd as its associated image of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps suggests. Rather, it indicates that median philosophy must inevitably begin from some arbitrary starting point, or better still, start from what is already available, without necessarily holding that starting point to be foundational. The practice of philosophy from the middle would therefore need to proceed from some starting point and continue according to an iterative process that progressively refines its results, in the hope that relatively stable philosophical results would eventually emerge, even if those results may not represent a final end state of philosophy as a whole.

It seems that the most influential methodological approaches in contemporary philosophical practice represent just this sort of median philosophy. The three I have in mind are methodological naturalism, inference to the best explanation, and reflective equilibrium.

The most notable exemplar of methodological naturalism is Quine's doctrine of naturalized epistemology (Quine, 1969). The rough argument for this approach is that since the natural sciences have proved themselves much more successful than philosophy, philosophers should themselves adopt the methods of the sciences, or at least base their philosophy closely upon the results of the sciences. I would likewise simply note a recent variant of methodological naturalism called experimental philosophy, according to which philosophical intuitions are studied by experimental means, such as conducting questionnaire surveys. Since the natural sciences likewise have progressed without starting with firm foundations and without a known end state, the sciences themselves would seem to exemplify the same kind of middle approach as median philosophy. Of course there seems to be a presupposition in methodological naturalism that philosophical topics can properly be studied by scientific methods, or that whatever cannot be studied by those methods is not worth studying at all.

Yet even if philosophers do not use the same specific experimental methods as the natural sciences, it would seem that the general epistemic methods of the sciences should be relevant to philosophical practice. For many philosophers, these general epistemic methods are best understood according to the model of inference to the best explanation, whereby given several competing explanations of a given phenomenon, the best one is selected as being true or at least approximately true, whatever that may mean. Of course there may be some concern over whether this method is intended to apply to the absolute best explanation, in which case it is not clear that the absolute best explanation is always available, or whether it applies only to the best available explanation, in which

case the inference is clearly only as good as the available theoretical material allows. In the latter case, it would seem that the inference would largely serve an instrumental purpose within an iterative process to approach increasingly better explanations, which seems to be the reason that the notion of approximate truth is invoked. In any case, there seems to be a presupposition in this method that there is some determinate conception of what constitutes a best explanation such that the method could identify some one explanation to crown as the best one.

A different variety of a median philosophy has become influential in recent social and political philosophy thanks to the work of John Rawls (1974, 1999), who built upon a suggestion from Nelson Goodman (1983, p. 64) and christened it *reflective equilibrium*. The basic idea of this method is that we start with a certain set of particular intuitions about some phenomenon and progressively refine them by balancing them against formulations of general principles about that phenomenon, and refine those principles by balancing them against the intuitions, until those intuitions and principles reach a state of equilibrium, at which point the resulting theory would be considered to be justified. Here too one might identify certain presuppositions concerning this method, such as that balancing against intuitions is a proper means of refining general theoretical principles, or contrariwise that general theoretical principles should properly constrain intuitions.

I have pointed out a few presuppositions of these three methods, and I think many more can be identified. Not only with these examples of contemporary median philosophy, but I think in any philosophical methodology, however classified, presuppositions of those methods can always be identified. Yet some may object that merely identifying presuppositions is insufficient. The critical question is whether these presuppositions are justified. If so, then the associated method would seem to be valid, and if not, then the method is faulty. So the next task in this investigation, it would seem, would be to conduct a critique and evaluation of these various presuppositions to identify which of the various methods are valid.

Yet here the methodological problem that started this investigation reasserts itself, since there is a question concerning what method I should employ to determine whether these presuppositions are valid. If there is a clear method for this evaluation, then it would seem that the investigation may already be over, since that method would thereby ground all philosophical practice and could thereby constitute a general philosophical methodology. Otherwise, if there is no clear method for evaluation, then it is not clear how to proceed. Should each method's presuppositions be judged according to its own method? If so, then it would seem that such a technique would ultimately merely reiterate those presuppositions, with the result that every self-consistent method would be justified. Should each method's presuppositions be judged according to some other method? If so, then what is that method, and what justifies that method as the proper one for judging presuppositions? It would seem, then, that this investigation has stumbled back onto the ancient skeptical problem of the criterion: Either something is accepted with no independent supporting criterion,

in which case it may be wondered why it should be accepted at all, or something is accepted with some further supporting criterion, in which case it may be wondered by what criterion that further criterion should be accepted (Sextus Empiricus, 2000, pp. 43–44).

The problem may seem to be completely paralyzing, and indeed I have heard some philosophers claim in response that the best that one can do in philosophizing is simply to pick the most likely solution to any given problem and defend it as best as one can, without much worry about such skeptical problems. This is not my response. Indeed, I am particularly sympathetic to a wide variety of skeptical concerns, and take them very seriously. Rather than focusing on criteria, though, my response centers on the idea of presuppositions, and this response can best be understood by a contrast in the attitudes toward presuppositions taken by R. G. Collingwood on the one hand, and Edmund Husserl on the other.

Collingwood argues that the function of metaphysics is to identify the presuppositions of natural science (Collingwood, 1998). Presuppositions in general may either be relative or absolute. In accordance with Collingwood's logic of question and answer, a relative presupposition is a presupposition of some question, but an answer to some other question, whereas an absolute presupposition is never an answer to any question. So natural science ultimately relies on certain absolute presuppositions. However, since natural science experiences radical changes from era to era, what Thomas Kuhn would later call shifts in paradigms (Kuhn, 1996), the absolute presuppositions of science must likewise change from era to era. Since these presuppositions are absolute, all that metaphysics can do is to identify these presuppositions and note their changes, but never to critique them. So what emerges from Collingwood's attitude toward presuppositions is a kind of historicist relativism.

Yet before Collingwood had articulated his relativist account of presuppositions, Edmund Husserl had already rejected it, along with most other kinds of relativism (Husserl, 2001, pp. 75–82). Husserl's response to the perceived threat of relativity according to presuppositions is to turn away from the kind of argument exemplifying Collingwood's logic of question and answer and to turn toward the things themselves, namely toward the phenomenology of what appears to the investigator (Husserl, 1982). To effect this phenomenological turn, Husserl develops a technique he calls the phenomenological epoché, borrowing a term the ancient Greek skeptics used to express the suspension of belief. However, what is suspended in Husserl's phenomenological epoché is not all belief, only beliefs concerning existence, since the epoché for Husserl serves to parenthesize or bracket the question of whether what appears to the investigator actually exists or not, leaving the structure of phenomenological appearances open to the investigator. Husserl thus considers the resulting phenomenology to be a presupposition-less science.

Yet it is not clear that Husserl has completely evaded the kinds of presuppositions that have become problematic to this study. In fact, at one point, he seems explicitly to acknowledge a presupposition that phenomenological appearances involve an intuition of essences (Husserl, 1982, p. 13). How to evaluate

such a presupposition with regard to a putatively presupposition-less science is unclear. It seems that Collingwood could calmly accept the attribution of presuppositions to his account and simply acknowledge that they are part of the current set of absolute presuppositions dominant in his era. Yet his account bluntly accepted a form of relativity according to presuppositions, whereas I have presented such relativity as a problem for the question of philosophical methodology.

By contrast to both of these positions, I propose to accept the relativization of philosophical theories to their presuppositions, rather than seeking to transcend it as Husserl attempted. Yet rather than accepting this relativism fully as in Collingwood's historicism, I propose to accept it merely as a methodological expedient. To the question which philosophical methodology to employ, I propose that any and all methodologies be applied in any given instance. Let each methodology develop theories on a given topic, and let their methodological presuppositions be identified, such that an overall relativistic system seems to develop. Then I would consider whether this apparent instance of relativism could be reduced to some simpler, non-relativistic form. The basic idea in this case is the principle that the structure of the problem should contain the clue to its solution. If the problem is that philosophical theories seem relative to the presuppositions of the methodologies that produced them, then the structure of that relativity should provide the way to resolve the apparent relativity, if indeed the relativity is merely apparent.

This approach is what I call *perspectival reduction*, since each methodology is treated as a perspective on a given problem. It is a pluralistic methodology, since a variety of different methodologies are employed, but it represents a meta-methodology, since the results from that plurality of methodological approaches are not merely acknowledged in their bare plurality, but an attempt is made to coordinate them. Thus this meta-methodology represents the ideal of triangulation, as is sometimes promoted within the social sciences. As the metaphor of triangulation suggests, multiple perspectives are employed on a problem in order to deduce something independent of any particular perspective, while in a way inclusive of all perspectives.

Yet if the structure of apparent relativity is to provide a clue to the solution of the broader methodological problem in philosophy, then the nature of relativism needs to be understood very well, and I do not think it has always been well understood. What is relevant for the purposes of this methodological inquiry is that any instance of relativism requires three substantive theses (Ressler, 2009). Therefore, perspectival reduction may be accomplished by denying any of these three theses where philosophical theories seem to be relative to the presuppositions of the methodologies that generated them.

The first thesis is the assertion of the formal requirements for relativity, namely whatever is structurally required in order properly to claim that x is relative to y, for some topic x and some set of relativizing factors y. There are a number of formal requirements, which I will not fully detail here, but one of the important requirements is that there must be diversity in the theories held by various perspectives. If each perspective held the same theory concerning

a topic, then there would seem to be no reason to claim that this topic was relative. With regard to perspectival reduction, identifying invariances across all perspectives concerning some topic would therefore constitute a reduction of the apparent relativity from which the method starts. The technique of searching for invariances in philosophy is already fairly well understood, though it seems that if such invariances could have been identified with regard to the application of the various philosophical methodologies, then the problem of relativity would never have arisen in this case. So I will largely disregard this aspect of perspectival reduction in what follows, though it must be acknowledged as one way in which a perspectival reduction in general might be accomplished.

The second thesis of relativism is what I call the thesis of objective equity, which expresses the common notion that in relativism one perspective is just as good as any other. However, the invocation of the notion of goodness can be problematic, particularly in discussing forms of relativism in ethics where the nature of goodness is precisely at issue. So I prefer to characterize this thesis more blandly in terms of equity, and I claim that this equity must hold with regard to the question of shared standards among the various perspectives in order to count as relativism. If there are no shared standards, then equity is achieved in terms of the absence of any objectivity. Yet there is a more controversial possibility whereby all perspectives may share the same standards, and their theories may evaluate equally well according to those standards, while those theories still differ between perspectives. With regard to perspectival reduction, then, demonstrating that a theory according to one perspective is objectively better than all other perspectives would therefore constitute a reduction of the apparent relativity from which the method starts. Not only is this technique already well understood in philosophy, but it seems to be the main technique in philosophy, namely the attempt to demonstrate that one's own pet theory is better than anyone else's pet theory. Yet the problem here lies with the question of shared standards. It is easy to demonstrate that one's own theory best meets a certain set of standards, if those standards are set precisely by that theory. When competing theories hold different sets of standards, the question of an objective evaluation of theories becomes much more difficult, which is why the notion of relativism often gets invoked in such cases. Since these difficulties are already well appreciated, I will also largely disregard this aspect of perspectival reduction in what follows.

The third thesis of relativism is perhaps the most contentious, but I think it is the most promising methodological aspect with regard to perspectival reduction. It is the thesis of incommensurability. The question of inter-theoretic commensurability has been raised most notably by Thomas Kuhn (1996) and Paul Feyerabend (1981). Laboring under the obsession with language that governed much of the twentieth century, most if not all philosophers tend to understand commensurability in terms of the semantics that govern various languages and the question of the meaning of terms between the languages of different theories. In some instances, this understanding is perfectly appropriate, as in the case of Feyerabend's early work on reduction. Yet with regard to the nature of relativism in general, I think this semantic interpretation is too narrow. I propose

that the issue of commensurability in relativism is not best understood in terms of a translation between languages that preserves meanings, but rather more generally in terms of a structural transformation between two theories, regardless of whether the languages in which the theories are expressed can be intertranslated. I claim that the paradigm case of commensurability with regard to relativism is the Lorentz transformations in the special theory of relativity, which coordinate spatial and temporal measurements between different inertial frameworks. Such commensurability rules would need to transform each competing perspective completely into any other, without any theoretic residue, in order to qualify as commensurability, in accordance with the general conception of commensurability dating back to ancient Greek mathematics. Incommensurability would hold in a case in which no such transformation can be provided to coordinate theories between different perspectives. Commensurability would demonstrate that the differences in theories simply represent different perspectives on the same world, so to speak, whereas incommensurability would show that those differences are deep and radical, that holding different perspectives is akin to living in different worlds, as some philosophers have claimed.

With regard to the method of perspectival reduction, then, formulating commensurability rules to transform one competing theory into another would constitute a reduction of the apparent relativity from which the method starts. This aspect of perspectival reduction does not establish one of the perspectives as the best one or truest one, as with the other two aspects. Rather it seems to generate a new perspective, a new theory, since the resulting commensurability rules would effectively constitute a new analysis of the topic, just as the Lorentz transformations that provide commensurability rules between the various inertial frameworks in the special theory of relativity become part of a new analysis of space and time in the overall theory. Unlike the two previous ways to achieve perspectival reduction, it seems to me that the search for commensurability rules has not been fully appreciated within philosophical practice. So I will focus primarily upon this aspect of perspectival reduction in what follows.

In order to identify fully adequate commensurability rules, it may be necessary to examine not only the perspectives that might already be available, but also to generate new perspectives on a given topic. The basic notion behind perspectival reduction is to use these various perspectives to triangulate onto some objective, non-perspectival account of the topic. Yet examining only a meager subset of possible perspectives may improperly skew the investigation, so it would seem that the broadest range of perspectives is required to get the best results from perspectival reduction. Insofar as available perspectives may rely upon strongly held intuitions, it would seem that the task of generating new perspectives may require the exploration and development of counter-intuitive notions and theories. So unlike some contemporary philosophical methodologies, perspectival reduction gives no pride of place to philosophical intuitions, whatever they may be.

Perspectival reduction operates against a system of apparent relativity of competing philosophical theories to their methodological presuppositions. The result of a successful application of perspectival reduction is putatively some

non-perspectival theory. Yet if every other philosophical methodology has its presuppositions, apparently even Husserl's allegedly presupposition-less phenomenology, surely it would seem that perspectival reduction should likewise have its own presuppositions. So there may appear to be a lurking problem with the very idea of perspectival reduction, a problem bordering on incoherence. It may seem that perspectival reduction aims to identify some theory that somehow transcends any perspective, whereas it seems ultimately only to generate yet another perspective. This kind of problem is often attributed to relativism in general, so part of my prior research into relativism was to argue against precisely this sort of incoherence claim.

Yet without pausing here to address the question of the incoherence of relativism, I think the apparent problem with perspectival reduction is not a problem at all. If the method of perspective reduction has its presuppositions just as any other method, then let the results perspectival reduction be subject to perspectival reduction as well. Let there be another instance of perspectival reduction that takes all of the initial competing perspectives with their presuppositions and adds to them the perspective resulting from the first instance of perspectival reduction with its presuppositions. Consequently, perspectival reduction should not necessarily be conceived as a single operation, but rather as an iterative process that uses existing perspectives as a way to bootstrap the process, in accordance with the prior characterization of median philosophy. Ideally, this process should ultimately converge asymptotically on a single result, namely that repeated iterations of perspectival reduction eventually keep yielding the same results. Yet it may happen that no stable pattern or result will emerge from iterations of perspectival reduction. In that case, it may be that the initial set of perspectives was insufficient to provide an adequate base for perspectival reduction. At this point, however, given the scant experience with perspectival reduction in philosophical practice, it is not perfectly clear how to interpret an instance in which perspectival reduction fails to achieve stable results upon iteration.

Of course, there is no guarantee that the apparent relativity of philosophical theories to the presuppositions of methodologies will always reduce to some non-relativistic form by any of the three ways to achieve a perspectival reduction even in a single instance. In such a case, if no perspectival reduction is possible, it seems that the apparent relativity would turn out to be a genuine case of relativism, so there remains the possibility of relativism behind any attempt at perspectival reduction. However, I think it would be a mistake to assert that any apparent failure of perspectival reduction thereby demonstrates an instance of relativism. The reason is that commensurability rules transforming the various perspectives may be very difficult to devise. Just because I may be unable to work out any commensurability rules in a given instance does not thereby mean that no commensurability rules are possible. Rather, it would seem that a proof of incommensurability would need to take the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, by demonstrating that some absurdity would follow on assuming that there were commensurability rules. Yet it is not clear how such a proof could proceed or succeed, since a *reductio* proof always operates on the basis of

certain background premises, and these premises may precisely represent points of disagreement between the various perspectives, either with regard to the topic at hand, or to some other topic that may be subject to perspectival reduction. So while relativism remains a possibility within perspectival reduction, I do not think such relativism should ever be asserted, at least until such time as philosophy itself should come to its natural end, whatever that may be.

However, there seems to be an important additional problem in the notion of perspectival reduction, namely that the method seems to represent an ideal situation that is practically impossible to achieve. It seems to be a presupposition of perspectival reduction that the various perspectives upon which the method operates are both adequate and complete. If the perspectives were faulty in these respects, then there would be no reason to think that the results of the method would be valid. Yet it is not clear that any competing theory on any topic of philosophy is either adequate or complete. So even if perspective reduction may sound like a good idea, it seems to provide no practical way forward with regard to the current situation of philosophy that must proceed from the middle.

Even if perspectival reduction does represent only an impossible ideal, I nevertheless think that this ideal still has methodological consequences that may provide a way forward. Consider an ideal instance of perspectival reduction that operates on a set of fully adequate and complete perspectives and yields a stable result upon further iterations, and suppose that this perspectival reduction is accomplished by means of commensurability rules. I suggest that the theoretical virtues that this stable result exemplifies in the ideal case are virtues that should guide philosophical research even if the ideal case cannot be met. I think there are two such virtues.

First, the result of perspectival reduction seems to include every other competing account, since by virtue of the commensurability rules, every perspective can be recovered from any one perspective, just as the Lorentz transformations enable one to compute measurements in every inertial framework from any one given framework. Call this virtue *competitive subsumption*, since every competing perspective is subsumed in some way under the result of perspectival reduction.

Second, the result of perspectival reduction includes not only its initial competing accounts, but also its own account, since by hypothesis this ideal result was a stable result of repeated iterations of the method. So it should be possible to recover not only its initial competitors from the result of perspectival reduction, but also its own theory as one of the perspectives. Call this virtue *reflexive reiteration*.

As stated, these virtues seem merely structural, given the vague notion of inclusion and subsumption on which they rely, and therefore it is not initially clear how these alleged virtues might be applied. I think these notions of inclusion and subsumption can best be understood in terms of explanation. Any philosophical theory should be able to explain certain phenomena, namely the base phenomena that fall within a given topic. Yet the variance in the competing perspectives on those base phenomena itself seems to constitute a kind

of phenomenon that likewise would need to be explained. A theory that could explain not only its base phenomena but also its competing theories would indeed seem to exhibit special virtues. So competitive subsumption is essentially competitive explanation. I suggest that this virtue should be understood as a species of the virtue of empirical adequacy, already well appreciated, in which that adequacy is extended not only to base phenomena but also to competing theories of that phenomena.

Likewise, a good theory should be able to explain how its own theory is possible if the world is as the theory says it is. A theory that fails to meet this virtue would seem to be an incoherent theory that effectively refutes itself. In this way, I suggest that reflexive reiteration should be understood as a species of the virtue of consistency, already well appreciated, in which that consistency is understood in terms of the ability of the theory to explain its own place within the world.

Yet invoking the notion of explanation may seem only to unleash further problems, since there are several competing accounts of the nature of explanation. It may be wondered which of these accounts is appropriate in attempting to apply the proposed virtues of competitive subsumption and reflexive reiteration. Consider three alternatives: the causal account, the deductive-nomological account, and the pragmatic account of explanation.

According to the causal account, something is explained when the causal factors responsible for its appearance can be identified, roughly speaking.

According to the deductive-nomological account, something is explained when it can be deduced from general laws in conjunction with certain initial conditions, again roughly speaking (Hempel, 1965).

According to the pragmatic account, most closely associated with the work of Bas van Fraassen (1977, 1980). An explanation has three components. First, there is a topic that specifies what the explanation is about. Second, there is a contrast class that specifies that the explanation in question is to address why one thing rather than another happened. Third, there is a request specification that indicates the form in which the explanation is to take. Van Fraassen suggests that this request specification can be understood in terms of Aristotle's four-fold account of causes: formal, material, efficient, and final causes. So the request specification may be to explain something either formally, materially, efficiently, or teleologically.

Yet note that the efficient causes that van Fraassen includes among his request specifications correspond to the kind of causes sought in the causal theory of explanation. Furthermore, it seems to me that the request specification need not be limited to the four kinds that van Fraassen borrows from Aristotle. In particular, it seems to me that one might request an explanation specifically in terms of the deductive-nomological account, namely to explain something deductive-nomologically. So it seems to me that these two competing accounts of explanation, causal and deductive-nomological, are subsumed under the pragmatic account of explanation. Further, I would suggest that any competing account of explanation could count as a request specification within the pragmatic account. Thus with Mary Hesse one might request an explanation metaphori-

cally, as a metaphorical re-description of the phenomenon in terms of a model that is already understood (Hesse, 1966). Consequently, it seems to me that the pragmatic account of explanation exemplifies the proposed theoretical virtue of competitive subsumption.

Likewise, it seems to me that one might request an explanation pragmatically, which would have the effect of reasserting the pragmatic theory of explanation and would oblige one to identify the pragmatic features sought in terms of the topic, the contrast class, and the request specification. This seems to exemplify the proposed theoretical virtue of reflexive reiteration.

Since the pragmatic account of explanation seems to exemplify the two theoretical virtues identified from an ideal application of perspectival reduction, it seems to me that this account could constitute an example of an application of the method of perspectival reduction. It is true that the pragmatic account did not result from an explicit application of the method, but rather from a direct analysis of the nature of explanations in general and why-questions in particular. Yet by exemplifying the theoretical virtues that fall out of an ideal case of perspectival reduction, it seems to me that the pragmatic account could have been formulated from the kind of thinking demanded by perspectival reduction. Since that kind of thinking seems to support the same account as van Fraassen offers on the basis of direct analysis, I am encouraged to think that the reverse might apply, namely that an explicit application of perspectival reduction could produce results that would represent a direct analysis of a topic of philosophical research.

While the pragmatic account of explanation exemplifies the proposed theoretical virtues of competitive subsumption and reflexive reiteration, it remains to investigate whether it could likewise support the kind of commensurability rules that seemed only to be recognized as an unachievable ideal. Here I do think that some efforts in this direction may be taken. Suppose that for a given topic, the various explanations that satisfy each contrast class and request specification are progressively aggregated together. So holding the topic of explanation constant, let each possible contrast class and each possible request specification be explored and let all the explanations that satisfy these be gathered together. What is thus aggregated together is a progressively more complete set of knowledge about the topic. These elements of knowledge would not be completely independent, however, since some of them would be deducible from others. Ideally, all of them would eventually be connected together into a coherent body of knowledge, and this knowledge would extend somewhat beyond the topic itself toward the inquirers about the topic, since the explanations include request specifications concerning teleology, and would therefore need to extend to the aims and interests of the inquirers. So if complete knowledge of the topic and the inquirers were given, and the connections between these items of knowledge were made explicit, it seems that any item of knowledge on the topic could be transformed into any other item by means of entailment. Note that these items of knowledge represent elements of possible explanations in accordance with some contrast class and request specification. What needs to be understood further in order to provide full commensurability rules between

various explanations is the nature of pragmatic interest in general, namely why certain pieces of knowledge satisfy certain pragmatic interests rather than others. Perhaps this investigation is better conducted within the field of cognitive psychology than within philosophy, but in any case, the question far exceeds my current expertise to answer. Still, my suggestion is that if complete knowledge on a given topic were available, and if the nature of pragmatic satisfaction were completely understood, then it seems likely that commensurability rules could be identified to transform an explanation from one perspective to an explanation from another. This transformation would proceed by coordinating the grounds of pragmatic satisfaction with the particular items of knowledge that would satisfy a particular explanatory interest, such that when those interests shift, the explanatory items of knowledge likewise shift according to some rule. The identification of commensurability rules in this way would thereby satisfy the full ideal of perspectival reduction. However, in the absence of complete knowledge and understanding that would provide these commensurability rules, it seems that the proposed theoretical virtues of competitive subsumption and reflexive iteration could still point the way forward toward that ideal, and they seem to point to the pragmatic theory of explanation.

So the question concerning what kind of explanation is appropriate in understanding the proposed virtues of competitive subsumption and reflexive reiteration might thereby be answered as follows: If indeed any explanation can be transformed into any other explanation in accordance with my presentation of the pragmatic account of explanation, then it would not matter which conception of explanation is employed, since they are all linked pragmatically.

In summary, perspectival reduction can be accomplished by one of three general techniques with regard to the presuppositions of competing methods: either (1) to demonstrate invariances across all methods, (2) to demonstrate that one method is objectively preferable to all other methods according to standards shared among all methods, or (3) to devise commensurability rules that transform the results of each method into the results of all the others. The latter technique of commensuration exemplifies two theoretical virtues, competitive subsumption and reflexive reiteration, that can best be understood in terms of the explanatory capabilities of a theory. With regard to the competing accounts of explanation itself, these virtues seem to support the pragmatic theory of explanation, in a way that seems to permit the construction of commensurability rules, at least in an ideal case.

There is much more to be said about perspectival reduction, but these are the basics of the method. Ultimately a method will be judged according to the results it achieves, so a full evaluation of perspectival reduction may need to wait until it can be applied to a wider range of issues beyond the one example of the nature of explanation I presented here. Note that I am not claiming that this method is destined to be recognized as the final methodology for philosophy, leading to some glorious projected end state of philosophy. Rather I have merely articulated reasons for thinking that this method deserves to be investigated and applied at this current stage of philosophy. After all, perspectival reduction as

a general methodology should be able to be applied to any philosophical topic, including the question of philosophical methodology. Consequently, it may happen that an application of perspectival reduction to the question of methodology will yield results that ultimately justify some other general methodology for philosophy. In that case, perspectival reduction will have served its purposes by pointing forward toward the next direction for philosophy, and will then have played merely an instrumental role.

In any case, it seems that in a field like philosophy, new life is often the result of new methodological thinking, and methodological stagnation is essentially death. I have offered here my suggestion for the next step forward. Others will surely disagree. That would be excellent. A debate over these methodological issues can only strengthen philosophy. What would weaken philosophy, it seems to me, would be simply to persist using the same old bag of philosophical tricks without continually questioning philosophical methodology.[1]

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[1] This essay will be expanded and incorporated into a forthcoming book, tentatively entitled *The Method of Perspectival Reduction.*

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