During years a main part of Skovsmose’s research has addressed educational issues. He has developed the notions of landscapes of investigation, mathematics in action, students’ foreground, and ghettoising with particular reference to mathematics education. In this book he addresses more general issues related to mathematics.

Skovsmose tries to show that mathematics, like any other language, includes presumptions, ideas, and priorities. Mathematics does not provide a step out of the metaphysics that accompanies natural language, as suggested by many, who see mathematics as the language of objectivity. By investigating how mathematics forms part of technological endeavours, Skovsmose explores how also mathematics itself embraces a range of metaphysical assumptions.

This observation has implications for how we interpret the most general aspects of human life. Thus, Skovsmose sees our life-worlds as fabricated and mathematics as being crucial to this fabrication. It constitutes part of the human condition, although it can be a highly dubious and frightful constitution.
In Doubt
In Doubt

- about Language, Mathematics, Knowledge and Life-Worlds

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Rio Claro, September 2009

Ole Skovsmose
Introduction

A major part of my research has addressed mathematics education: the various places mathematics is learned whether in school, work places, or organisations, and the ways mathematics operates in a variety of practices.

This work has made me realise that it is important to address more general epistemic issues, and so I decided to write In Doubt. The dream of relating knowledge with certainty has gained much inspiration from mathematics. I will, however, try to point out how considerations about mathematics can bring us to acknowledge the profound uncertainty that is engraved in any epistemic endeavour. I find that such uncertainty constitutes a human condition.

Part 1 addresses some philosophical ideas regarding language. Language as representation is contrasted with language as performance. The idea here is that language means more than describing; it also means doing. The idea of language as performance also includes the idea of linguistic relativism, according to which what one sees depends on one’s position. This applies not only to visual experiences, but also to one’s epistemic outlook as it might be engraved in language. One’s insight, actions, and forms of living are framed and formed through the language within which one is operating. Language provides life-conditions as well as life opportunities. It frames knowledge and provides opportunities for knowing.

Part 2 discusses language as performance with respect to mathematics. Tentatively, I consider mathematics as being a language. The question then becomes: What perspectives might this language impose on the domain being addressed? This brings me to a discussion of mathematics in action. I investigate in what sense mathematics provides new possibilities, for instance, with respect to new strategies for management, production, or decision making. I address in what sense mathematics produces not only new facts, but also new contingencies, for instance by bringing new technological systems into operation – systems that might malfunction. I discuss how mathematics re-configures our life conditions, our life-worlds.
Part 3 provides a generalisation based on the discussion in Part 2. Mathematics exemplifies knowledge, and the discussion of mathematics in action is generalised to a discussion of knowledge in action. I discuss the performative aspect of knowledge in terms of: a subject-object dialectics; the diversity of truths; the complexity of knowledge fabrication; the fabrication of unpredictability; and the market value of knowledge.

Part 4 addresses the notion of life-world. This notion was developed by Edmund Husserl as part of a phenomenological perspective. I will point out in what sense my discussion differs from Husserl’s. I do not operate with a notion of a pre-theoretical state, where a stream of consciousness flows freely untouched by preconception, knowledge, scientific insight, technologies instruments, etc. Instead, I consider life-worlds as located in a highly elaborated techno-environment. Life-worlds are fabricated sites for living. They are fabricated through knowledge in action. And in the midst of such life-worlds, we try to establish knowledge and formulate what knowledge could mean. This observation might bring us deep onto epistemic relativism. Any claim of knowledge is a claim from a particular perspective. In order to try to cope with the problems of absolute relativism, I address the notions of prosoché and responsibility.

In Doubt is composed of notes. I drafted the notes in a mixed order. I wrote a couple of pages about one issue, then moved on to a different issue. I numbered these drafts; those with lower numbers were intended for the first part of the book; those with higher numbers for later parts. Often I reorganised the numbering and reworked the notes. Different notes were brought together; one note was divided into several; and many notes found their way to the spacious waste bin of my computer. I really enjoyed the whole process very much. My main writing time has been in the mornings and I appreciate so much those periods when I could find time for these morning drafting and imagination sessions. The writing process has stretched over a period of about four years, and naturally many other tasks and duties have been mixed up with the process. I enjoy writing with a panoramic view from my window, and I have such a view in front of me right now.
LOOKING AT A FLAT. One can look at things in different ways, as many people certainly do when buying a house or a flat. My wife, Miriam, and I bought a flat in Rio Claro, a city in the interior of the state of São Paulo, Brazil. There were many things to consider.

Previously, we had lived in a rented flat as well as a rented house, so we were familiar with the different possibilities. Furthermore, Miriam knows Rio Claro extremely well, having been born and raised here. Miriam prefers a flat to a house. In Denmark, I live in a house in a small city, Skørping, which I like very much. I can open my door and take a walk in the garden.

However, Skørping is not Rio Claro, and looking at Rio Claro with Skørping-eyes, the first thing you notice is that all houses are hidden behind walls, bars and gates. There are very few houses in the city where one can knock directly on the front door. The walls are often topped by electric wires or broken glass, and there are bars on all windows. It has not always been so in Rio Claro, but now the ‘architecture of fear’ dominates the city, and when we look at the city from the perspective of fear, there is more to observe.

There are guards everywhere – certainly in banks, but also at the post office. Many shops have a guard posted outside, sometimes across the street to better observe who is entering. Rio Claro has many apartment buildings. One can never enter such a building directly. There is a wall, a gate, and a guard. Most often the guard is sitting a safe distance from the gate, which can be opened electronically. If one wants to visit a person in the building, you have to communicate, through a microphone, your name and the name of the person you want to visit. The guard then calls the flat, as only the person from the flat can give permission to enter. When pizza is delivered, the person who delivers the pizza has to wait outside and the pizza will be passed through a small safety opening in the gate.
In Rio Claro there are now many condominios being built and already inhabited. They are gated communities normally consisting of bigger houses built by wealthier people. The whole condominio is surrounded by a high wall, giving it the aspect of a huge and well-protected castle. The castle has a gate, and often a double gate; so when you arrive in a car, you first have to identify yourself. The guard then opens the first gate, which is closed before the second gate will be opened. Then you can drive into the small peaceful village.

There are many stories that accompany the development of the architecture of fear. Naturally, there is more interest in carrying out robberies in a condominio, as there are more things and money to rob. There have been several robberies in condominios. Such robberies are normally carefully planned; the robbers know the family, the number of children, their routines, and so on. Upon arrival at his job in the morning, the husband might be addressed by a well-dressed business-like person who informs him that he should act like they are close friends, that he is happy to be invited back to his home, that he has a gun, and that they (as there are several people involved in the robbery) know where his daughter is at the moment. It is made clear that if he is interested in the safety of his daughter, he is to do as he is told. Then back at the condominio, the husband must assure the guard that he is accompanied by a friend, and together they enter the village.

Simple house robberies also take place, without any particularly sophisticated planning. When one arrives home in the evening in the car, one has to open the gate, and before the gate has closed, the thief, who was waiting somewhere outside, has entered as well. He need not have a gun, as a good knife will serve the purpose. People living in an apartment building feel protected against this kind of robbery. A sensible thief will not take the trouble to enter an apartment building with a guard, as there are so many other more trouble-free opportunities.

Thus, flats are considered to be much safer than houses. Houses in condominios are considered to be even safer, but they are also more expensive. Miriam and I looked for a flat, and we found one we liked. The first thing is naturally what you feel when you enter the flat, and we both had a good feeling. Miriam likes things to be in good condition, and the flat was certainly in very good condition. It was located on the fourth floor and had a rather big bedroom, where I now have my desk.
I have a panoramic view of almost half of the city, and I can see some hills in the distance.

When buying (or renting) a flat, one must contribute to the cost of running the whole apartment building. Previously, we had rented a flat in a building where there were only two flats per floor. Here there are four flats per floor, so the costs we are required to pay for running the building are almost half the costs of our previous flat. This fact we did not ignore.

Could some of the above information about the flat be considered to be objective and some subjective? The prices and the financing seem objective, although in most cases, the price can be negotiated. Could the information provided by the floor plan of the flat be said to be objective? Let us suppose that the floor plan has been properly made, that all its dimensions have been double-checked. It is in a scale of 1:100, and the scaling has also been double-checked. Does the floor plan provide an objective picture of the flat? One could certainly say that a floor plan could be inaccurate, and if it is possible to make an inaccurate floor plan, then it must be possible to make a true floor plan. On the other hand, a floor plan is radically different from, say, a three-dimensional model of the flat. With a three-dimensional model, one can get an idea of the height of the ceiling and the size of the walls. However, this difference is not due to the fact that there is something wrong with the particular floor plan. It is just that a floor plan does not represent everything, only something. A three-dimensional model could demonstrate the colours of the walls. However, in this case, there is a different issue to consider: strong colours of a wall do not appear as powerfully in a small model as they do when the full-scale wall is painted the same colour.

What about the photos showing the flat for sale? In what sense could they be subjective or objective? Certainly photos can be taken in different ways, and there are many ways to be cheated by photos. Any photo includes a choice of what to show and what not to show. If the view out the living room window is the gray wall of the building across the street, the photo of the living room could be taken from a different angel. A photo could be taken at different times of the day. For instance, a living room with a window facing west can appear most charming in a picture, not least if the photo is taken in the late afternoon when the sun streams through the windows and creates a welcoming atmosphere in the room.
Before buying, one has to see the flat. However, there are so many different ways of seeing a flat itself. Different persons may see different things in the flat, but the same person can also look at the flat in different ways. It is also possible to change one’s perspective. At first I did not like the kitchen of the flat, but this was not such an important issue for me, as I had discovered the panoramic view from our bedroom, which is big enough to include a desk. Still, there are many things that do not change through a change in perspective, such as the number of rooms in the flat. The number of rooms was in fact clearly shown in the floor plan of the flat. So could it be said that the floor plan shows something about the flat that does not change when perspectives change? In other words, if one wants to change the number of rooms, some re-modelling will be necessary. Such a change would involve a real change in the flat. Is a floor plan objective in the sense that it represents features of the flat that can only be changed through remodelling? Could one see a floor plan as a form of mathematical description of objective features of the flat?

2

PERSPECTIVISM refers to the idea that everything one sees depends on one’s perspective on things, and not simply on the things in question. One can formulate perspectivism with respect to different issues, reaching far beyond looking at a flat. And perspectivism can be developed in more or less radical forms, one extreme being that there is nothing but perspectives; there is no ‘thing’ on which one can have a perspective.

When dealing with taste, perspectivism is almost common sense. Some prefer pancakes with sugar, some with syrup, many with both. People are different, and so are peoples’ tastes. What about art? Some believe there are no standards by which to judge art, and that any such judgements reflect private statements of taste. Some believe, however, that there are standards according to which art can be judged – maybe not in the sense of standards that are formulated in any straightforward way, but rather standards that can be experienced and acted out, for example: when artists produce their paintings; when
they change and improve them; when they consider the paintings to be finished; when art critics claim that a painting is made by a great artist; and when museums decide which paintings to include in their collections. Through such decisions, some standards of quality may be acted out. Nevertheless, with respect to paintings, I am not familiar with any generally accepted standards of quality. But what about music? Classical music? Most people would agree that there are some standards of quality. However, such generally accepted standards could reflect the taste of a certain dominant group in a certain historical period.

What would perspectivism mean with respect to religious issues? The history of the world is replete with religious conflicts. The belief in the existence of one and only one God brought about Judaism, Catholicism, Islamism, Protestantism, including all kind of conflicts, also of the most brutal form. According to what standards are we to behave? What is good and what is bad? What authority can we turn to in order to settle such matters? What authority should we assign to holy texts like the Pentateuch, the Bible, the Koran? Who can make the proper interpretations of such texts?

One can consider ethical issues. Some find some actions to be right. Very different opinions exist with respect to ethical issues, but is it possible to move beyond opinions with respect to ethical issues? Is it possible to identify some kind of behaviour as right, whatever perspective we consider? And are there forms of behaviour which must be considered wrong, regardless of how one sees them? One could think that perspectivism could apply to a broad scope of ethical issues, claiming that this is a personal matter, but still leaving some as absolutely right and others as absolutely wrong. Could there be some ethical standards – in the form of natural rights, for instance – which operate beyond any personal opinions and take the form of natural laws?

Perspectivism can concern the object we are looking at, and we can talk about an ontological perspectivism. According to realism, there are things ‘out there’ that are independent of our minds. A moderate form of perspectivism might claim that the way we see things depends on the way we look at them. We can see a flat from different perspectives, and we may choose a good perspective when taking a photo. But still we need not say that the things we see change as we change our perspective. However, ontological perspectivism includes a negation of this realism and claims that what we see is dependent upon the perspective. Ontological perspectivism emphasises that there is no
ontological substratum that is fixed and that one can view from different perspectives. An extreme form of ontological perspectivism is condensed in Berkeley’s formulation: *Esse est percipi*. The only thing that exists is what is perceived. Here the very seeing becomes defining for what exists.\(^1\)

One can consider perspectivism with respect to the notion of *truth*. Does one need a perspective to attribute truth to any statement? Could it be that truth presupposes a perspective; that there are no extra-perspectival truths; that truths are inherently a human affair? Are all truths fabricated through particular human perspectives? Or are at least some truths universal, possible to be agreed upon by everyone?\(^2\)

*Knowledge*-perspectivism claims that knowledge always refers to knowledge from a given perspective. There is no God’s eye in epistemological matters. There is no knowledge that can be claimed to be absolute. In Antiquity, knowledge perspectivism was presented by the sophists, and Socrates struggled with this perspectivism. Descartes expressed a defining element of modern philosophy to overcome perspectivism. He wanted to establish a domain of knowledge as being absolute; it should be constituted of absolute truths. He wanted to construct a fortress of certainty that could not be conquered by any violent sceptical attack.

I find that these different forms of perspectivism form part of an overall *language perspectivism*, which stresses that what we see depends on the language by means of which we describe things. Language is a way of seeing and experiencing; it is a way of interpreting what we see. And, as will be stressed later, language is a way of acting. In fact, language relativism can turn into a discussion of how language frames what we see and do.\(^3\)

\(^1\) The *esse est percipi*-principle is presented in the first part of Part 1 of *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, see Berkeley (1962: 65-68).

\(^2\) With respect to truth, a commonsense perspectivism may emphasise that a statement could *appear* true in one perspective and *appear* false from a different perspective. A more radical perspectivism would emphasise, however, not only that a statement *appears* true in one perspective and not in another, but that it in fact *is* true in one perspective and false in another.

\(^3\) We can talk about *weak* and *strong* forms of perspectivism, whatever kind of perspectivism we have in mind. If we consider the notion of truth, a weak form would claim that there are *some* statements, which are true in one per-
A PRIVILEGED PERSPECTIVE? A radical negation of perspectivism is expressed through the claim that there exists an absolute and privileged perspective, a God’s eye perspective. This idea turns into epistemic absolutism according to which it is possible to obtain a true and certain insight, at least with respect to some domains of knowledge.

The idea can be associated with Isaac Newton’s cosmology. Let us take a look at how he, in the first pages of *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (the original title is *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, or *Principia* for short), first published in 1687, specifies certain notions that are fundamental for his whole presentation. He starts by saying:

> Although time, space, place and motion are very familiar to everyone, it must be noted that these quantities are popularly conceived solely with reference to the objects of sense perception. And this is the source of certain preconceptions; to eliminate them it is useful to distinguish these quantities into absolute and relative, true and apparent, mathematical and common. (Newton, 1999: 408).

Everyone has experiences related to time, space, place, and motion. However, Newton points out that, behind the multitude of experiences, one can identify something of a quite different nature, and he makes a distinction characterized by three dualities: absolute versus relative; true versus apparent; and mathematical versus common.

This distinction is basic to Newton’s idea that it is possible to identify a privileged perspective, an absolute perspective. In order to state what this perspective includes, it becomes important to clarify the perspective and false in another perspective. This weaker form allows that there are some statements in some areas that are true or false in all perspectives. A stronger form of perspectivism will claim that whatever statement we are considering, there is at least one perceptive in which it is true and at least one perspective in which it is false. A strong perspectivism leaves no room for truths that run across all perspectives.
meaning of absolute time, space, place and motion. Here I only quote what he writes about absolute and relative space:

Absolute space, of its own nature without reference to anything external, always remains homogeneous and immovable. Relative space is any movable measure or dimension of this absolute space; such a measure or dimension is determined by our senses … (Newton, 1999: 408).

Ideas about the existence of an absolute space provide an argument for the existence of a privileged perspective. There is in fact one perspective that ensures the ultimate way of looking at the universe. Through the notion of absolute space, Newton points out how one can obtain a God’s eye perspective.4

Newton believes that there is a way of describing the physical world in a privileged way. As the title of Principia states, he wants to formulate the mathematical principles of natural philosophy. This philosophy of nature can be presented in absolute terms, as the law of nature can be expressed mathematically. In this sense, there is a direct connection between Newton’s notion of absolute space and absolutism with respect to the knowledge of nature. Through Principia, Newton demonstrated that a God’s eye’s perceptive was accessible to human beings guided by mathematics.

Absolute knowledge is a human possibility, if we handle properly the dualities mentioned by Newton – absolute and relative, true and apparent, mathematical and common. We have to eliminate what is relative and pay no attention to what is apparent and common. Instead we can formulate absolute truths through mathematics.

4 According to Leibniz, the notions of absolute space and empty space are problematic. Leibniz emphasizes that if space is absolutely uniform and without any objects placed in it, then one cannot differentiate between any two positions in space (see Rescher 1967: 93). In other words, if there is something called an empty space, then we must face a grand spatial relativism. In fact, one can interpret Leibniz’s ideas about monads as a suggestion for a rich perspectivism: Each monad establishes its own perspective.
KANT’S CATEGORIES. At Konigsberg University, Immanuel Kant had lectured on many subjects, Newton’s physics among them. David Hume’s radical empiricism had opened, however, room for doubt with respect to the certainty established by Newton through the formulation of natural laws. Kant was shaken. He wanted to re-establish certainty in epistemic matters. But the approach he chose was radically different from Newton’s, who believed that certainty was possible given the possibility of formulating laws of nature.

One could refer to Kant’s position as a kind of *absolute human perspectivism*. According to him, we are locked within our categories: there are no truths and no knowledge to be formulated outside the range of categories. Any form of certainty emerges from these categories and not from any reality.

Let us contemplate in what sense we can consider time and space to be absolute human categories. Let us try to image that we consider a thing, and that this thing is placed outside space. It could be any thing, anything. But it is not easy to visualise such a thing, since visualisation, so to speak, presupposes space. One could try to think of a more fluffy entity, like a mist. But this is also a conceptualisation that presupposes space. What about a ghost or a soul? But in what sense, then, are we talking about things? It seems impossible to consider any thing positioned outside space. In this sense, we could claim that space is a categorical framework, which is presupposed when we talk about things. It is not an entity that we reach through a series of empirical observations. Space is a preconception for our observations. Let us consider an event – it could be any event – taking place outside time. What does it mean to consider such an event? In this case, it appears that time is also a category that we presuppose when we talk about events. Like space, time is not a notion extracted from series of empirical observations; it is a frame for observing. We cannot escape grasping things and events in time and space. In this sense, time and space constitute parts of our human perspective.

According to Kant, we are not dealing with particular individual categories that can change from one individual to another, or with social or cultural categories that might change from context to context. We are dealing with categories that are absolutely human. They represent universal and eternal preconditions for formulating human knowledge.
This brings us to a crucial point in Kant’s human absolutism. How is it possible to formulate absolute truths with respect to different domains? Can we be sure that mathematical statements apply to physical objects? Can we be sure that the sum of the angles in any triangle will be 180 degrees? Yes, we can be sure, and the reason is that space is a human category. Everything we experience in space, and therefore the entirety of our experiences is subject to the properties of space, and these properties are expressed through mathematics. The necessity of mathematical truths with respect to our experiences is due to the fact that they are imposed on experiences. Mathematics forms part of our eternal preconceptions, and this ensures the universal validity and absolute certainty of mathematical truths with respect to all our experiences. So, while Newton believed natural laws to be universal because they reflect absolute structures of nature, Kant believed natural laws to be universal because they reflect universal categories that all forms of experience presuppose. In this sense, absolute truth became a human category.

We could question how one comes to identify categories and their status. How do we judge whether or not a category represents universal and eternal preconditions for human knowledge? This is a statement about any kind of knowledge; it must represent a deep insight. But a fundamental analysis of conditions for obtaining knowledge cannot presuppose knowledge, at least not presuppose such categories which the analysis is going to address. So what is the nature of Kant’s own analyses? What is his own epistemic resource for stating something absolute and general about knowledge and categories? Could he be in need of using some categories in order to say something about categories, or in need of using some knowledge in order to say something about knowledge? How does he avoid getting caught in vicious circles? Kant presents his enterprise as a transcendental philosophy, which tries to identify a priori conditions for obtaining knowledge. The question, then, is in what sense such a transcendental philosophy is possible. Or are we dealing with a philosophical illusion?

Anyway, for the moment, we will assume that there are some categories that are absolute, but also absolutely human, in the sense that we cannot escape these categories. It is through these categories that we establish truth and knowledge. In this sense, Kant presents a one-and-only-one perspectivism that can be turned into absolutism. This was exactly what Kant wanted. He tried to defend the possibility
of obtaining absolute knowledge, and that such knowledge could be exemplified by the work of Newton. Through his transcendental philosophy, Kant tried to show that we need not accept Hume's scepticism. Knowledge was possible, also absolute true and certain knowledge. However, Kant paid a high price for this victory against scepticism; perhaps the most spectacular Pyrrhic victory in philosophy. He accepted the idea that certainty of knowledge does not reflect any properties of what he referred to as the thing-as-such. The certainty emerges from our human categories. It is us, human beings, who project certainty into our space of experiences. Beyond these projections, there is no certainty; there is no knowledge to be established. Kant’s analysis presents an enormous encapsulation of knowledge in categorical structures. There is no knowledge to be found beyond the reach of categories. The limits of our knowledge coincide with the limits of our categories. This claim establishes a sophisticated form of absolute perspectivism.

Taking a closer look at Kant’s approach, one sees how his absolutism can be shaken. Kant tried to provide an a priori analysis of conditions for obtaining knowledge through a transcendental approach, which should come before everything else. The transcendental analysis, however, is an analysis performed by someone in a particular context. It is performed by Kant using all his knowledge, using the German language, using all his capacity acquired over his lifetime. Kant’s transcendental philosophy is situated in his historical contexts and in his private life. So in the middle of Kant’s absolutism, one sees Kant himself. This was what Nietzsche (who we will soon return to) pointed out: In opulent philosophic systems, he saw first of all the minuscule philosopher with his human idiosyncrasies.

Instead of categories, we can talk about conceptual structures, about language, or about discourse. In this way, we can see Kant’s absolute human perspectivism as a first step into language perspectivism. The very idea of relating perspectives to language opens the door for broader considerations. As soon as we talk about language

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5 We will return to Pyrrho in Part 4.
6 This observation about Kant also reminds us that the notions I have used in order to clarify different forms of perspectivism are meaningful only within a certain perspective.
instead of categories, it becomes more obvious that we are dealing with an historical construct, and it becomes consequential to see the development of perspectives as an historical, cultural and socio-political process. Thus, language perspectivism easily takes a radical form and leaves behind any Kantian aspirations of ensuring absolute knowledge.

5

GEIST, VOLK, SPRACHE. The Romantic period grew out of the Enlightenment as a poetic negation. While the Enlightenment cultivated rationality and portrayed human beings as, first of all, rational, Romanticism provided an alternative description by giving emphasis to emotions, imaginations, dreams and creativity. At that time, Germany did not yet exist as a national unit, and the German language was parcelled out in a variety of dialects. The German Romantic literature, however, brought a new dimension to the German language: it came to represent an underlying substratum for the emerging German nationalism. Language came to represent a Weltanschauung, a world view.

Language has to do with categories. Kant saw categories as eternal structures for the formulation of knowledge, but one can give Kant a Romantic turn and see categories as living organisms that reflect a long historical process through which forms of thinking and knowing are created. Categories, then, come to operate as a deep-grammar of not only language, but also of the Weltanschauung of the period.

In 1772, Johann Gottfried Herder published Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache (Essay on the Origin of Language). In this essay, he introduced a new way of looking at language. In fact, language had not previously been addressed as an overall philosophical concern. Thus, to a rationalist, language was simply at hand as a flexible tool for expressing analysis, proposals, critique and opinions. Thus, Kant could write about categories without paying explicit attention to the

fact that he was writing about such categories using a particular language, structured in a particular way. Herder sees language as developing through a historical process, as an organism, which takes on a life of its own. It incorporates wisdom, insight, myths. Language turns into a form of life.

From a Romantic perspective, literature, drama and poetry acquire new significance. They provide insight into the soul of the people and the meaning of life, which is otherwise hidden. The complete aesthetic mastery of language can provide an almost divine insight into life. Not surprisingly, the Romantic movement commemorated the genius. However, Herder also emphasised the collective aspect of language. Through a long historical process, everyone had contributed to the development of language, including all its hidden wisdom. The people were the creators of language, which simultaneously formed the people.

The particular significance of language was also expressed by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who in 1805 found the University of Berlin. He was a philosopher and philologist, who in particular studied the Basque language and the Kawi language of Java. Humboldt was well-settled in the Romantic movement, and to him, studying language also meant coming to know the cultural roots of a people. Language constituted a group of people as a people. Through such an assumption, we draw closer to the idea that language shapes people’s lives and thoughts. I find this differentiated linguistic perspectivism to be an important insight emerging from the Romantic interpretation of language. Language is seen as an expression of a collective creative process that forms knowledge and human understanding. Language shapes both through reality.8

Within Romanticism, three notions become integrated, namely Geist, Volk and Sprache, i.e. spirit, people and language. One can see the outcome of the Romantic period as a celebration of these notions and, not least, of their interconnection. The English notion of spirit does not bring all the connotations associated with the German word Geist. On the one hand, Geist includes the religious notion of soul, but

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8 One can naturally also add that language is formed through thought and reality. In fact, language perspectivism opens the door for seeing language, thought, and reality in a complex amalgamation.
also the spirituality of a people as in becomes expressed through art and culture in general. Geist can take the grandest philosophical meaning, as when G. W. F. Hegel presents the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. The word can take on a more regular scientific meaning, when we talk about Geisteswissenschaften, which is translated as the Humanities, but which literally means sciences of the ‘spirit’. Geist is not any tangible entity. The German word Volk means people, but also here the German word may have acquired some extra connotations which resonated with the growing German nationalism during the Romantic period. The word Volk combines cultural references with almost biological conceptions. Sprache means language, and here the English and the German words mirror each others’ complexities. The outcome of Romanticism, however, was that the notions of Geist, Volk and Sprache became interconnected and eagerly exchanged connotations.

This brought about many other ideas and notions. Thus, Herder used the notion of Volkgeist, simply combining the two notions. And from a construct like Volkgeist, it seems consequential to talk about the existence of a ‘national spirit’ or a ‘soul of the people’. During Romanticism, we experience a creation of mythological entities. The spirit took on an independent life. The idealistic terminology provided the spirit with an existence of Platonic format, which eventually resulted in an absolute existence within Hegel’s system. On a somewhat less general level, one could talk about the spirit of an historical period, the spirit of a nation, or the spirit of a people expressed as patriotism and nationalism. The spirit of a people expressed itself through the most sublime creativity of its artists in the form of music, drama, literature, poetry. Thus, it was assumed that, through poetry, one could get close to the Volkgeist, and in this way, it fell to the poets to give expression to the essence of the people’s spirituality.9

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9 This idealistic creativity took many directions, and we should notice that the concept of race (Rasse) came to operate in many ways. It acquired particular biological interpretations, and it was exactly during the Romantic period that scientific racism developed, in German universities, in particular. An important element was the careful identification of different human races, the endeavour of a biologically-oriented anthropology. At the same time, the notion of race was associated with cultural elements, meaning that the notions of Volk, Geist, Sprache and Rasse became interwoven in a web wherein
The Romantic interpretation brings us deep into language. We are engulfed by language. This idea certainly inspired the Romantic fascination of all the wisdom that might be included in language. However, other things besides wisdom can be included as well. A *Sprachkritik*, a critique of language might be necessary, and we take a look at three different examples of *Sprachkritik*.

6

NIETZSCHE’S *SPRACHKRITIK*. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche could not stand the absolutism presented by the church and which formed part of the theological discourse. There is no certainty to be found here. No truths. Nietzsche also found the philosophers’ presentations of metaphysical systems to be ridiculous when they claimed generality. He could not see any generality here. Instead he saw the philosopher’s private perspective multiplied to a bizarre magnitude as if it were universal and of general interest. In this respect, Nietzsche shared Søren Kierkegaard’s views on philosophical system builders. They mistake the direction of their own nose for the direction of the whole universe, and their philosophical systems reveal nothing but their own private priorities and idiosyncrasies.

Nietzsche developed perspectivism in its most radical formulation; and he established a *Sprachkritik* through which he pointed out idiosyncrasies included in linguistic structures and formulations. I will summarise Nietzsche’s perspectivism and his *Sprachkritik* by addressing three issues: (1) How he describes the notion of *truth*. (2) How he acknowledges knowledge as *power*, or in Nietzsche’s terms, as emerging from a ‘centre of force’ or through a ‘will to power’. (3) And how an anti-realistic position brings him to a critique of language by addressing the *mythology of language*, i.e. the capacity that a language exercises in creating ideas and entities.

each notion appeared to shed light on the others. And when we add the idea that some peoples are better than other peoples, racism has emerged.
Nietzsche’s perspectivism concerns truth. There is no truth to be found anywhere. No truths stand out from the stream of life – from the mesh of opinions. No truths leave doubts behind. All ‘truths’ can be contested. In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche states that “there are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths” (1995: 17, §2).¹⁰ In *The Will to Power*, he emphasises that there is no privileged perspective: “There are many kinds of eyes. Even the sphinx has eyes – and consequently there are many kinds of ‘truths’, and consequently there is no truth.” (Nietzsche, 1968: 291, § 540) Nietzsche has many aphoristic statements that allude to this point. One of the more radical is the following: “Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live.” (1968, 272, §493)¹¹

Truths do not stand out as such; they are located within a perspective. One needs a perspective in order to assign truths, and as there are many perspectives, there are many truths. As a consequence, one could claim that there are no truths at all. Truths are not waiting to be discovered; they are manufactured through ways of looking at things: “We can comprehend only a world that we ourselves have made.” (1968: 272, §495) This observation has been formulated already by Giambattista Vico. We can only come to know about things we can make.¹² Nietzsche takes this idea to a new extreme. We produce our truths within a perspective. What, then, is truth about? Is it about something? What kind of thing? According to Nietzsche, certainly not a thing-in-itself. Not about something permanent with an essence. According to Nietzsche, there is no reality that truth is about. We cannot move beyond appearance. Nietzsche describes the apparent world as a world that is “ordered and selected according to values”, i.e. according to the “viewpoint of utility in regard to the preservation

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¹⁰ Many of Nietzsche’s texts are divided into small paragraphs, and here I add the number of paragraphs after the page reference.

¹¹ One could of course question the consistency of Nietzsche’s formulations: If there are no truths, could there then be any errors?

¹² As one apparently can establish certain mathematical knowledge, Vico’s *verum-factum* principle implies that mathematics must be man-made. And one can consider Vico to be one of the first constructivists within the philosophy of mathematics.
and enhancements of the power of certain species of animal” (1968: 305, §567). In other words: “The perspective … decides the character of the ‘appearance’.” (1968: 305, §567) While Kant would declare that the apparent world is ordered according to absolute categories, then Nietzsche claims that it is ordered according to values that could be of any kind.

Nietzsche’s perspectivism concerns power. Who imposes a perspective on things as they appear? What is the perspective-producing entity? One can attempt some answers, such as: A person can put a perspective on anything. One can have a perspective, and one can change perspective. One can insist on a certain perspective. A group of people can share a perspective. An institution can represent a perspective. A culture can embody a perspective. There are many possible interpretations of what unit may hold a perspective. If we take a look at some of Nietzsche’s formulations, there are rich possibilities for making interpretations. Nietzsche refers to ‘centre of force’ as an acting subject:

Every centre of force adopts a perspective toward the entire remainder, i.e. its own particular valuation, mode of action, and mode of resistance. The ‘apparent world’, therefore, is reduced to a specific mode of action on the world emanating from this centre. (1968: 305, § 567)

The ‘centre of force’ is indicated as a perspective-producing entity. But what is referred to by ‘centre of force’: some atomic units of power, or some historically established social entities? There are rich possibilities for speculating, but I choose to see ‘centre of force’ as a metaphorical way of emphasising that the apparent world is organised according to imposed values, implying that knowledge and power are intimately related.

Nietzsche’s perspectivism knocks down any hope of establishing knowledge, beyond the stream of life, as something permanent and sublime. Knowledge forms part of our way of living, of our struggle for survival. In some formulations, Nietzsche gets close to a form of epistemic Darwinism: “It is improbable that our ‘knowledge’ should extend further than the strictly necessary for the preservation of life. Morphology shows us how the senses and the nerves, as well as the brain, develop in proportion to the difficulties in finding nourishment.” (1968: 272, §494). The brain becomes an organ, among
other organs, necessary for our survival. The secretions produced by
the brain are no more unique that the secretions produced by any other
of our organs. That we call the output from the brain ‘knowledge’
does not make it any more supernatural than any of our other forms
of biological extracts. Tears and sweat are necessary for our survival,
and so is knowledge. Nietzsche states that the ‘sense for truth’ will
have to legitimise itself as a “means for the preservation for man, as
will to power” (1968: 272, §495, italics by Nietzsche). The sense for
truths is a useful sense, a necessary sense like all other senses. The
senses help us to orient ourselves, to ensure our survival.

Nietzsche’s perspectivism concerns the mythology of language. A
richness of religious entities, God included, might be born out of a
Romantic cultivation of language. According to Nietzsche, we can see
these entities as emerging through a collective creative act. One can
see cultural priorities and misconceptions not only expressed in
language, but also as created from language. This brings about a need
for a Sprachkritik, a critique of language. Nietzsche does not assume
the existence of any substratum, any reality. He does not assume the
existence of ‘something’ that is addressed through language. He does
not operate with any distinction between appearance and reality. The
world as such, the real world, is the apparent world. This means that
the mythology of language can operate without restrictions.

Nietzsche believed that a doubtful metaphysics is engraved in
language. In The Twilights of the Idols he wrote: “‘Reason’ or language:
oh what a deceitful old woman! I fear we are not getting rid of God
because we still believe in grammar…” (Nietzsche, 2003: 48). A belief
in God’s existence is based on a belief in grammar. Language includes
nouns, and new nouns can be established through linguistic habits.
We might come to talk about entities like ‘spirit’ or ‘God’ as something
existing, but the existence may be established only through the
linguistic habit of assuming that a noun has a proper reference. In The
Wanderer and His Shadow (§11), Nietzsche states that “a philosophical
mythology lies concealed in language which breaks out again at every
moment, however careful one may be otherwise” (Quoted after Hales
and Welshon, 2000: 46). Language establishes a mythology inhabited
by all these imaginary figures that we assume nouns can refer to. An
important step to get rid of these mythic figures is taking up an anti-
realist position, which is what Nietzsche did.
Nietzsche attacked Platonism, which investigates notions as if they were language-independent entities, and not forms of uses of language. He attacked Kant’s notion of thing-in-itself. Grammatically speaking, ‘thing-in-itself’ is a noun, so according to a grammar-based ontological creativity, a ‘thing-in-itself’ is a thing. But Nietzsche claims that the ‘real world’ has “always been the apparent world once again” (1968: 305, §566, italics by Nietzsche). He finds the distinction between an ‘apparent world’ and a ‘real world’ (as being somehow hiding behind the apparent world) to be meaningless.13 There can be no transcendental things, i.e. things beyond human reach:

The ‘thing-in-itself’ is nonsensical. If I remove all the relationships, all the ‘properties’, all the ‘activities’ of a thing, the thing does not remain over; because thingness has only been invented by us owing to the requirements of logic, thus with the aim of defining, communication (to bind together the multiplicity of relationships, properties, activities.) (1968: 302, §558)

Assuming ‘thingness’ helps to group together a multiplicity of relationships, and this grouping is facilitated by the use of nouns. However, it is one thing to assume thingness as part of a grammatical convention, and quite another to assume that the thing exists.14 This is clearly stated in The Twilight of the Idols: “The ‘apparent’ world is the only one: the ‘real’ world has only been lyingly added…” (Nietzsche, 2003: 46). The so-called ‘real world’ is only a world of ghosts, ‘lyingly added’ – and, we could add, lyingly added by philosophers from Plato to Hegel of idealistic complexion. In other words, the language is a medium for lying. The very grammar of language facilitates the creation of mythologies.

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13 “A ‘thing-in-itself’ is just as perverse as a ‘sense-in-itself’, a ‘meaning-in-itself’. There are no ‘facts-in-themselves’, for a sense must always be projected into them before they can be ‘facts’.” (1968: 301, §556).

14 In several of his formulations, Nietzsche anticipated the formulation of Ernst Mach who addresses a notion like ‘force’ from a positivist position. There is no such thing as ‘force’. This is a noun, and through the use of such a noun, we have the possibility to present a range of observations in a condensed form.