



## Comments on *Nietzsche's Constructivism* by Justin Remhof

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### Abstract

Justin Remhof defends a constructivist interpretation of Nietzsche's view regarding the metaphysics of material objects. First, I describe an attractive feature of Remhof's interpretation. Since Nietzsche seems to be a constructivist about whatever sort of value he accepts, a constructivist account of objects would fit into a nicely unified overall metaphysical theory. Second, I explore various options for developing the constructivist view of objects. Depending on how Nietzsche understood concepts, and whose concepts he saw as giving rise to objects, he could've had a variety of different constructivist accounts.

**Keywords** Nietzsche · Constructivism · Objects · Concepts · Value · Metaphysics

It's an exciting time to work on Nietzsche. Over the last three decades, scholars have developed clear and textually well-supported accounts of Nietzsche's views on a number of important philosophical issues. As Nietzsche was primarily concerned with questions about value, much of this research has focused on clarifying Nietzschean positions in fields like metaethics and aesthetics. But metaphysics has gotten its fair share of attention too. Scholars strive to understand Nietzsche's conception of truth, and explore whether his views about the structure of reality are closer to Schopenhauer's post-Kantian metaphysics of the will or to the more naturalist-friendly program of German materialism.

*Nietzsche's Constructivism*, by Justin Remhof (2018), breaks new ground in our understanding of Nietzsche's metaphysical views. Its central questions concern whether Nietzsche thinks that the ordinary objects of the macroscopic world exist—things like bottles, buildings, and bagels. And if so, does Nietzsche think that the mereological fusion of the first bottle opened in Singapore today and the first bagel eaten in New York today has the same ontological status as the bottle itself and the bagel itself? These

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questions have been heavily debated in contemporary analytic metaphysics. But prior to reading the book, I hadn't thought about what Nietzsche's views on these issues might be.

According to Remhof's constructivist interpretation, Nietzsche thinks there are bottles, buildings, and bagels—at least, for those of us whose intellectual activity involves the concepts of bottles, buildings, and bagels. But as these objects are dependent on our intellectual activity, they might not exist for others who have different concepts. For reasons I'll go into soon, I don't know what the view says, or should say, about the bottle-bagel fusion.

Remhof's book combines historical exegesis with a contribution to contemporary metaphysical debates. My response to the book will likewise come in two parts. I'll begin with a historical and interpretive discussion, and then consider the metaphysical picture on its own terms.

First, I'll provide a reason to endorse Remhof's constructivist approach to the metaphysics of material objects as an interpretation of Nietzsche. I join many recent interpreters in seeing Nietzsche as a constructivist about the positive values that he cares about. Combining these positions provides an attractively unified interpretation of Nietzsche on both fact and value.

Second, I'll explore possible ways of developing constructivism about material objects as a metaphysical position on its own terms, apart from historical issues. Here I think some key details of constructivism are left unclear by Remhof's presentation of the theory, particularly regarding the psychological states from which material objects are constructed. I'll try to ask questions that reveal good ways of developing the position.

## 1 A Unified Constructivist Theory of Values and Material Objects

Remhof's constructivist interpretation concerning material objects combines into a nicely unified picture with constructivist readings of Nietzsche's evaluative views. Remhof's contribution to this picture has objects existing with their distinctive spatial, temporal, and modal boundaries because our concepts slice the world along these boundaries. On the constructivist metaethical position, value exists because our passions constitute the objects of passion as valuable. Both material objects and value therefore thus are dependent on our psychological states, with material objects depending on our concepts and values depending on our passions. I'll begin by describing what the evaluative side of this unified constructivist picture looks like.

Harold Langsam (1997), SJ Robertson (2012), Alan Thomas (2012), and Sinhababu (2015) offer broadly constructivist interpretations of Nietzsche's evaluative views. Many of us see Nietzsche as an error theorist about moral values, but as a constructivist about the nonmoral values posited in his own evaluations. One might reject moral values because they require objectivity, but still ascribe the value of beauty to music and the value of deliciousness to food, because aesthetic and culinary values tolerate subjectivity. This is the position we attribute to Nietzsche. My desire-based subjectivist interpretation is a very simple form of constructivism about value. If  $x$  is an object of passion and  $Y$  is the person who has the passion, "x is good for Y to the extent that Y desires x, and x is bad for Y to the extent that Y is averse to x" (281).

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which Nietzsche (1954) regarded as his greatest work, is rich in textual support for this sort of subjectivism. Some passages have Zarathustra, who can generally be taken to represent Nietzsche, rejecting objective value in favor of a more subjective picture. Consider this passage from “On the Spirit of Gravity”: “He, however has discovered himself who says, ‘this is my good and evil’; with that he has reduced to silence the mole and dwarf who say, ‘Good for all, evil for all’.” The section ends, “This is my way; where is yours?”—thus I answered those who asked me ‘the way.’ For the way—that does not exist.” Zarathustra expounds similarly on his conception of value in “The Last Supper” after one of his guests chooses a vegetarian meal instead of sharing meat with the others: “I am a law only for my kind, I am no law for all.” Further evidence comes from the section aptly named “On the Thousand and One Goals.” Zarathustra says, “Verily, men gave themselves all their good and evil. Verily, they did not take it, they did not find it, nor did it come to them as a voice from heaven.” He continues: “Through esteeming alone there is value: and without esteeming, the nut of existence would be hollow.” Passages like these make clear that Nietzsche has a subjectivist view of value.

There is further textual evidence that the subjective values Nietzsche is concerned with spring specifically from passion. Consider this beautiful passage from “On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions”, which connect value with one’s passions—with what one loves:

“This is my good; this I love; it pleases me wholly; thus alone do I want the good. I do not want it as divine law; I do not want it as human statute and need: it shall not be a signpost for me to overearths and paradises. It is an earthly virtue that I love: there is little prudence in it, and least of all the reason of all men. But this bird built its nest within me, therefore I love and caress it; now it dwells with me, sitting on its golden eggs.” Thus you shall stammer and praise your virtue.

Once you suffered passions and called them evil. But now you have only your virtues left: they grew out of your passions. You commended your highest goal to the heart of these passions: then they become your virtues and passions you enjoyed.

And whether you came from the tribe of the choleric or of the voluptuous or of the fanatic or of the vengeful, in the end all your passions became virtues and all your devils, angels.

Zarathustra begins by rejecting number of potential ways of understanding value as objective, following the constructivist interpretation I suggest. Throughout the passage he makes clear the mental state essential to constructing these values: passion, which in its most intensely positive form is love.

Combining constructivism about value and material objects results in an elegant and unified metaphysical picture. Mind-independent reality doesn't instantiate value or boundaries between material objects. Where the value is, and where the material object boundaries are, depends on the mind. There are different values and different material object boundaries for creatures with different mental states. Passion is the mental state that metaphysically grounds value, and concepts are the mental states that metaphysically ground the boundaries of material objects.

The combined constructivist picture is elegant in its unity across domains and its ontological simplicity. Of course, there also are a variety of reasons why one might want to reject this unified constructivist position. I myself think there are objective moral facts. But this doesn't pull me away from a unified constructivist interpretation of Nietzsche. Interpreting one's favorite philosophers as always agreeing with one's own views is usually a sign of hero-worship or misguided and excessive interpretive charity. Whatever we might think of this global constructivist position today, it's a natural one to attribute to Nietzsche.

I see Nietzsche as primarily concerned with values, and only secondarily concerned with metaphysical questions. Remhof seems inclined to agree. This suggests a way for us to understand how Nietzsche might have developed his constructivism about material objects. Nietzsche (1997) seems to have been attracted to constructivism about value as early as *Daybreak*. He (1974) expresses the view in *The Gay Science* (299, 301) and with lavish poetry in the above passages from *Zarathustra*. Having accepted constructivism about value, Nietzsche considered what sort of view of material objects would fit naturally with it. The metaphysical constructivism Remhof defends was the obvious choice.

## 2 Clarifying the Psychology that Constructs the Objects

If you're a constructivist about something, you treat it as mind-dependent. Things, on Remhof's constructivist view of things, are constructed by the activity of our minds. (From hereon, I'll simply treat the constructivist position Remhof attributes to Nietzsche as Remhof's own.) When precisely formulated, a constructivist view will tell us which particular psychological states give rise to which facts in that domain. My subjectivist interpretation takes passions to give rise to value. If you know which passions people have, you'll know which things my subjectivist interpretation treats as valuable for them.

I'm not yet clear about which psychological states Remhof thinks give rise to material objects. I've been assuming that concepts are these psychological states. Remhof sometimes puts things this way: "New concepts bring into existence new structures that better fit contemporary interests. Constructing objects is just one example" (51). But sometimes Remhof seems like he has a less committal position. For example, in explaining why islands exist and incars don't, he writes, "The concept of an island works to organize experience, while the concept of an incar does not. Islands are retained, incars are rejected" (151). It remains obscure to me what it means for a concept to work to organize experience, and which further psychological states are involved in explaining why the island concept succeeds and the incar concept fails. The

explanation must be in terms of further psychological states, rather than intrinsic features of islands and incars themselves. Otherwise Remhof's position won't be properly constructivist.

Clarifying this issue is necessary for us to see which material objects Remhof's position will countenance. Where exactly he'll draw the spatial, temporal, and modal boundaries around objects depends on which particular mental states he treats as constructing those boundaries. Even if some form of constructivism about material objects is true, a constructivist who identifies the wrong mental states as giving rise to objects can easily be wrong about which objects there are.

Assuming that concepts are the mental entities that explain material-object boundaries, we might be able to discover interesting features of the nature of material objects by examining the nature of concepts. So I'm curious about how Remhof understands concepts themselves. (This isn't a question he has to answer in this book, but I think it's worth exploring, as it leads to interesting metaphysical consequences.) According to the classical theory, some more or less complicated set of necessary and sufficient conditions govern how concepts apply to objects, with concepts applying to those things that fit the conditions. According to the prototype theory, concepts fundamentally pick out a particular exemplar or prototype, and apply to objects that resemble the prototype. There are other possibilities, but to explore the issue, I'll just focus on these two theories of concepts.

These theories seem to suggest different theories of the fundamental metaphysics of material objects. I see the prototype theory as offering something like Aristotelian formal causes for ordinary objects. The exemplar or prototype is the formal cause, and an object has a form in virtue of resembling it. Aristotle probably didn't intend his idea of formal causation to be understood in this constructivist way. But if one likes understanding material object types as formal causes, and wants to find an ontologically parsimonious way of getting the formal causes into one's ontology, combining constructivism with a prototype theory seems like a good way to go.

As I see it, the classical theory corresponds more closely with conceptions of material objects standard in analytic metaphysics. The spatial, temporal, and modal boundaries of material objects are more or less clear, as our concepts are more or less clear. Vagueness in the concepts suggests vagueness in the objects. While Remhof's main response to the vagueness argument is to join epistemicists in accepting sharp cutoffs in material sorites series, he also considers accepting borderline cases of composition. If the boundaries of concepts are vague, and the boundaries of concepts determine where there are cases of composition, we have a good explanation of why there would be vagueness of composition.

To explore a further question, is there one material object type per simple concept, or do the logical operations we can perform upon simple concepts give rise to material object types of their own? If there's one material object per simple concept, we seem to arrive at a constructivist view close to Dan Korman's (2016) conservative position. Since we have the concept of a bagel and the concept of a bottle but not the concept of an bagel-bottle fusion, there are bagels and there are bottles but there are no bagel-bottle fusions. (Of course, once I form the concept of bagel-bottle fusions, I can believe that they exist.)

But if logical operations upon simple concepts to generate complex concepts also give rise to material objects, we seem to arrive at a position where there are bagel-bottle

fusions. After all, we can form the complex concept of a thing consisting of a bagel in one place and a bottle in another. Our conceptual apparatus slices the world into parts which can be recombined into many of the strange new objects of permissivist metaphysics. We don't get all the permissivist's objects, as there might be several places where our concepts don't slice reality at all. But I do think we get bagel-bottle fusions and the incars that conservative metaphysicians want to reject.

A final question that I'd like to clarify is whose concepts generate the objects, and for whom that particular set of objects exists. I have the concept of an electron, while Glaucon didn't have the concept of an electron. Should I then say that electrons exist for me, but not for Glaucon? This would be agent-constructivism, where the concepts of a particular agent fix which objects exist for that agent. Or should I say simply that electrons exist (because I have the concept of an electron), and that Glaucon didn't realize that electrons existed? This would be appraiser-constructivism, where the appraiser's concepts slice the world into objects.

As I hope this discussion shows, there are many different ways to set up a constructivist position, with many different possible consequences. Depending on how constructivists understand the mind and its role in giving rise to objects, they can accept many different accounts of what objects there are, and of what objecthood fundamentally consists in.

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