Nietzsche and Self-Constitution
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According to the self-constitution view, a person is a kind of creation: we constitute our selves throughout our lives. The self-constitution view can be contrasted with views of the self that are based on psychological or physical continuity (e.g. continuity of memories, the body, or the brain) or non-naturalistic views that focus on the underlying substance or soul. In opposition to these other views, on the self-constitution view, we play an active role in self-creation. The self-constitution view may take more than one form: for example, on the narrative version, the self is like a story, while on the Kantian version, the self is a set of principles or commitments. I will argue that there are good reasons for interpreting Nietzsche's view along the lines of a self-constitution view. Such interpretation, I will argue, allows us to make sense of many of Nietzsche's remarks about the self that otherwise may seem contradictory. In what follows, I start in Section I by outlining the self-constitution view. In Section II, I argue that despite seeming evidence to the contrary, the self-constitution view fits quite well with Nietzsche's view. And finally, in Sections III and IV, I consider and respond to some possible objections.

I. Self-Constitution

Self-constitution views share the idea that the self is constructed throughout a person's life. The two self-constitution views that I will focus on here, Schechtman's and

Korsgaard's, share a starting point in the practical as opposed to theoretical domain.[1]

They each argue that a notion of a self that endures over time is required to make sense of

practical reason as we know it. Thus, though we may have reasons to do away with the

notion of unified self in theoretical reason, the practical domain presents its own

demands for such a self. [2]

Korsgaard and Schechtman independently contrast their own accounts of the

constitution of the self with Derek Parfit's view of personal identity. Parfit's view

represents for Korsgaard and Schechtman the conclusions of a purely theoretical

perspective. Their disagreement with Parfit starts from their rejection of the theoretical

as the only point of view for thinking about the self. Parfit presents a broadly empiricist

argument for a reductionist psychological continuity theory. On Parfit's account, personal

identity over time is given by psychological continuity.[3] Furthermore, Parfit argues that

there is nothing too special about personal identity or the self.[4] What matters are the

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[1] See for example, Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* and Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit" and *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*.

[2] As we'll see below, Schechtman's and Korsgaard's arguments are different from each other but share the notion that only the self-constitution view can make self of various aspects of practical reasoning.

[3] Though the details don't matter for my argument here, more specifically, for Parfit personal identity is psychological continuity when it takes a non-branching form. The version of psychological continuity he prefers is referred to as relation R and the non-branching requirement is a requirement that the relation be one-to-one or uniqueness. With that in mind for Parfit, personal identity is R together with uniqueness. See for example, *Reasons and Persons*, 262-263.

[4] See for example, "Because we ascribe thoughts to thinkers, it is true that thinkers exist. But thinkers are not separately existing entities... We could ... redescribe any person's life in impersonal terms. In explaining the unity of this life, we need not claim that it is the life of a particular person. We could describe what, at different times, was thought and felt and observed and done, and how these various events interrelated. Persons would be mentioned here only in the descriptions of the content of many thoughts, desires,

various relations that hold among psychological events and in particular psychological continuity is what really matters to us.[5]

The emphasis on practical reason plays a large role in Korsgaard's and Schechtman's responses to Parfit and in their arguments for the self-constitution account. In the rest of this section, I outline each of their responses to Parfit and then outline the general characteristics of a self-constitution account that will be used in the remaining of the paper to argue for interpreting Nietzsche as providing a self-constitution account of the self.

Korsgaard follows Kant in distinguishing between the theoretical and practical standpoints. The theoretical standpoint is the one we take when we "regard ourselves as objects of theoretical understanding, natural phenomena whose behavior may be causally explained and predicted like any other."[6] The practical standpoint, on the other hand, is the one we take on when we "regard ourselves as agents, as the thinkers of our thoughts, and the originators of our actions."[7] Korsgaard believes that these two standpoints cannot be "fully assimilated," they are different perspectives or points of view we may take when thinking about our own choices. She believes that "[w]hen we look at our actions from the theoretical standpoint our concern is with their explanation and prediction. When we view them from the practical standpoint our concern is with their

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memories, and so on. Persons need not be claimed to be thinkers of any of these thoughts." (Parft, *Reasons and Persons*, 251.)

[5] Part of Parfit's reasoning is that personal identity requires uniqueness and that what matters is not uniqueness but psychological continuity. See for example, Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 261-265.

[6] Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency", 119.

[7] Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency", 120.

justification and choice."[8] The two standpoints operate differently, with each providing different goals and governed by different rules.

Korsgaard argues that the distinction between theoretical and practical reason allows Kant to accept a lot of Hume's empiricist and ultimately skeptical conclusions about the self while finding a notion of a unified self in practical reason.[9] Similarly, Korsgaard is able to grant a lot of Parfit's reductionist conclusions by attributing them to theoretical reason while arguing that practical reason requires and is able to provide for a notion of a unified self.[10]

Korsgaard argues that an empiricist view, focused on sense impressions and desires, will fail to find a unified self. Nonetheless, she believes that a certain unity of the self can be found in practical reason: While we may exhibit various psychological dispositions and inclinations, we can perform only one action at a given moment.[11] This is partly the result of having only one body; whatever disunity we may have within us, Korsgaard argues, we must come together to act.[12] Self-constitution for her is the process of deliberating and deciding what to do by adopting or committing to principles that in

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[8] Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency", 120.

[9] See, for example, *Sources of Normativity*, 229.

[10] See, for example: "Supposed Parfit has established that there is no deep sense in which I am identical to the subject of experiences who will occupy my body in the future…. I will argue that I nevertheless have reasons for regarding myself as the same rational agent as the one who will occupy my body in the future. These reasons are not metaphysical, but practical." (Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency", p. 369)

[11] See, for example: "You are a unified person at any given time because you must act, and you have only one body with which to act." (Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency", 111.)

[12] Note that for Korsgaard, "action" is intentional action. See for example, Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 97.

turn select competing desires or inclinations for endorsement.[13] Thus on her view the

self does not exist prior to choices or actions but is *constituted* by them.[14]

Korsgaard believes that there is a difference between impulses motivating an

action, which she categorizes as things happening to a person, and the person acting.[15]

Crucially for Korsgaard, acting involves enough psychic unity so that the action can be

attributed to an agent even "in the face of psychic complexity."[16] She believes that "it is

essential to the concept of agency that it be unified," because "to regard some movement

of my mind or my body as *my action*, I must see it as an expression of my self as a whole

rather than as a product of some force that is at work *on* me or *in* me."[17] Korsgaard

believes that the principles that one endorses in making choices allow for the distinction

between motives acting in me and *me* acting and thereby unify the will.   For Korsgaard,

these principles include the principles that constitute one's various practical identities,

for example, "the dos and don'ts of being a teacher or a citizen."[18] In addition, there are

structural principles of practical reason, like the categorical and the hypothetical

imperatives, which are at the center of practical deliberation and thus crucial for the

possibility of having a self. Korsgaard believes that when we make a choice to act in a

certain way, we commit ourselves to a principle that endorses acting in such a way.[19] For

example, when I decide to grade some papers over taking a nice stroll in the sun, I am

endorsing the practical identity of a teacher and a principle that prioritizes grading

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[13] Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 7.
[14] Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 19.
[15] See for example, Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 18.
[16] Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 7.
[17] Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 18.
[18] Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 21.
[19] Korsgaard, *Self Constitution*, 77: "Deciding is *committing* yourself to doing the thing. That is another way of saying acting is determining yourself to be a cause."

obligations over strolling in the sun, perhaps under certain conditions. In endorsing such

a principle, and taking it seriously in various different circumstances, I constitute myself

as an agent, beyond impulses acting on me.[20] Thus, for Korsgaard, the self is constituted

through the operation of practical reason.

Schechtman does not make the explicit distinction between theoretical and

practical reasoning that Korsgaard does. However, Schechtman's account similarly

privileges the practical point of view. Schechtman criticizes Parfit's view for failing to

"capture the real world implications of personal identity."[21] She adds that the notion of

psychological continuity "does not seem to bear any relation to the practical implications

of identity or to provide a plausible basis for survival, responsibility, self-interested

concern, or compensation."[22] Schechtman's argument for the narrative view and her

critique of Parfit's view are centered around four features that, according to her, any

account of personal identity should be able to account for.[23] On her view, a successful

account of personal identity would be able to account for the following four features:

moral responsibility, self-interested concern, compensation, and survival.[24] The idea is

that an account of personal identity needs to provide answers to questions about survival,

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[20] Notice that the commitment to being a teacher need not require me to always grade over taking a stroll but it will do so in certain circumstances. Furthermore, breaking such a principle would not always be indicative of a lack of agency, only in those cases where I disregard it without any reason.

[21] Schecthman, 1.

[22] Schechtman, 25.

[23] She discusses several psychological continuity views, centrally Parfit's, Lewis', and Shoemaker's. See Part I of *The Constitution of Selves*.

[24] Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 14. One may wonder whether one account of personal identity needs to account for all four features or whether there may be different accounts that fit each of the features. Though she doesn't argue for it, Schechtman seems to assume that it is one concept that plays these various roles. It is unclear that this assumption is unwarranted, however, as the four features seem to be connected and overlap in various ways.

for example: "under what circumstances will I continue to exist?" The notion of survival and how we answer the question, says Schechtman, plays a central role in practical reasoning.[25]

Schechtman's view of personal identity, like her account of each of the four practical features, is centered on a narrative self-conception that is developed throughout a person's life and that provides significance to experiences, memories, and choices. Schechtman says that "[t]he formation of an identity-constituting narrative creates a single, temporally extended subject of experience, and any two actions or experiences attributed to the same person by this view are necessarily attributable to the same subject of experience."[26] So Schechtman attempts to provide an account of an extended self over time that allows for making sense of central notions used in practical reasoning. The motivation and the argument for her own view, over the psychological continuity view, hinges on her view being better able to make sense of practical reasoning and our understanding of ourselves from the first person perspective.

The contrast between Schechtman's view and Parfit's makes the different approaches quite clear: Parfit starts from purely theoretical reasoning and gets to a conclusion that has revolutionary practical consequences;[27] Schechtman starts from practical concerns by accounting for the role that an account of personal identity plays in practical reason and develops her account of the self so as to make sense of it. Though

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[25] Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 14.

[26] Schechtman, The Constitution of Selves, 149.

[27] Parfit himself believes that these consequences are significant, though he thinks they may be positive (see, for example, *Reasons and Persons*, 280-281.) Schechtman points out that Parfit, for example, often uses practical considerations in motivating aspects of his view but he ends up with a view that does not properly respond to those considerations. (See for example her argument against the extreme claim, *The Constitution of Selves*, 60-66.)

Schechtman and Korsgaard have different views of how the self is constituted, they share their opposition to Parfit in that he takes the theoretical domain to be privileged and the starting point for an account of the self. For Schechtman and Korsgaard, the notion of the self is required in order to make sense of practical reasoning.

In addition to privileging the practical perspective, when it comes to self-constitution, Korsgaard and Schechtman emphasize the first person point of view. For Korsgaard, this can be easily seen in her focus on deliberation and making choices. For Schechtman it can be seen in her emphasis on a first person narrative. In addition, on their views, the self is active in self-creation. The self is not given but constructed and one plays an active role in this construction.

So, to summarize, taking Schechtman's and Korsgaard's accounts as paradigmatic, I take a self-constitution account to have the following features:

1. Practical considerations, rather than purely theoretical considerations, are central. Indeed, the view allows that theoretical considerations alone are not enough to account for the self. In addition, pure empiricism (allowing only for experiences as the basis for knowledge) is not enough to account for the self. **(Practical)**

2. The account emphasizes the first person point of view, the way in which one conceives of one's life, e.g. the narrative or practical identities one adopts, or the principles one is committed to. **(First Person)**

3. The self is constructed throughout a person's life as opposed to just given. The constitution of the self requires that one be active, i.e. engage in narrative creation or in deliberating and making choices. This activity ends up linking together what otherwise may be discrete and isolated psychological phenomena either through a

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narrative or through commitment to certain principles. **(Active)**

II. Nietzsche and Self-Creation

As I turn to explaining why I believe that a self-constitution view provides for a promising way of understanding Nietzsche's view, I want to acknowledge that at first glance, it would seem that the self-constitution view is at odds with many of Nietzsche's remarks. First, Nietzsche offered notorious critiques of the notion of a subject or a self.[28] Second, his account of human psychology with its emphasis on drives and unconscious mental phenomena would seem to be at odds with the self-constitution view. Third, his critique of the notion of causa sui which he takes to be "the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far" would seem to rule out an account of self-constitution where we are active in self creation.[29]

Despite these seeming problems, I find that the self-constitution account fits well with a lot of what Nietzsche says and I will argue in this section that some of these remarks mentioned above are not really in contradiction with the self-constitution account; rather, they fit well with it. Indeed self-constitution theorists like Schechtman and Korsgaard have made remarks similar to those made by Nietzsche. Furthermore, the self-constitution account allows us to make sense of Nietzsche's seemingly contradictory remarks and fits especially well with his remarks about self-creation, creating values, and giving oneself laws. And, finally, as I will argue in Section III, the emphasis that the self-constitution account places on the first person and the practical point of views fit quite well with Nietzsche's views.

[28] See, for example, GM I:13.
[29] BGE 21.

Before developing my argument, I want to briefly mention one more way that the self-constitution view may seem at odds with Nietzsche's views. Schechtman and Korsgaard attempt to vindicate morality in different ways. Schechtman takes it to be a feature of her account that it may be able to make sense of moral responsibility.[30] Similarly, Korsgaard focuses on justifying moral requirements, and ultimately the categorical imperative. Nietzsche is a critic of any traditional notion of moral responsibility, of moral requirements, and of the categorical imperative. While I suspect there may be more agreement between Schechtman and Nietzsche in terms of responsibility than it may appear, for example, my discussion of the self-constitution view is not meant to endorse any direct connection to morality. Despite Korsgaard's arguments to the contrary, I don't believe that the connection to morality is central to the self-constitution view as it is clear from my characterization of it at the end of the previous section, none of the three features identified there – **(Practical)**, **(First Person)**, or **(Active)** – make any mention of morality or moral responsibility.[31]

Turning now to the positive case for interpreting Nietzsche along the lines of the self-constitution view, as I mentioned above, Nietzsche's remarks about self-creation provide strong reasons for interpreting Nietzsche as providing a self-constitution account. In particular, the discussion in this section is meant to support interpreting Nietzsche as endorsing **(Active.)** As defined as the end of Section I above, **(Active)** stands for the idea

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[30] Moral responsibility is one of the Four Features mentioned above that Schechtman believes any account of personal identity needs to be able to make sense of.

[31] While I will not be able to go into it in this paper, I don't believe that Korsgaard's view, for example, succeeds in justifying the categorical imperative. Nonetheless, I find that her account of how the self is constituted has appealing features besides the role it may play in the justification of moral requirements. For more on this, see my "Korsgaard's Constitutive Arguments and the Principles of Practical Reason."

that the self is not just given but it is constructed throughout a person's life. Nietzsche

refers to self-creation in various works. In *The Gay Science*, for example, he says that "we

want to be the poets of our life" and that we "want to become those we are—human

beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create

themselves."[32] In the following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*, he suggest that

humans are creatures of their own creation: "In man *creature* and *creator* are united: in

man there is material, fragment, excess, clay, dirt, nonsense, chaos; but in man there is

also creator, formgiver, hammer hardness, spectator divinity, and seventh day: do you

understand this contrast?" (*BGE* 225) Summarizing the view of many Nietzsche scholars,

John Richardson points out that "[f]amiliarly, Nietzsche thinks that a self is something that

needs to be acquired, or rather created – this is one main reason for calling him an

existentialist."[33] The emphasis on a created self as opposed to a given one provides

evidence for interpreting Nietzsche as endorsing **(Active)**.

Whatever self-creation is for Nietzsche, it cannot be based on the notion of being

causa sui, which he famously criticizes. Being *causa sui*, to be a cause of oneself, is often

ascribed to God as first cause but sometimes also ascribed to the Cartesian soul. In

Beyond Good and Evil, for example, Nietzsche calls the possibility of being *causa sui* "an

absurdity" and he critiques the notion of *causa sui* as involving "the best self-contradiction

conceived so far."[34] So when Nietzsche speaks of self-creation in positive terms, as we

saw above, he could not mean something that requires that we be *causa sui*.[35]

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[32] GS 299 and *GS* 335.
[33] Richardson, "Nietzsche's Freedoms," 129. For an influential account of Nietzsche's view
as focused on self-creation, see Nehamas' *Nietzsche, Life as Literature*.
[34] BGE 15 and BGE 21.
[35] I expand on this point in my "Nietzsche's Existentialist Freedom."

Furthermore, whatever Nietzsche means by self-creation, it cannot involve the notion of a Cartesian soul or a metaphysical subject. Nietzsche is critical of such a notion in *Genealogy*, for example, when he says that "the subject (or, to speak more popularly, the *soul*) has until now been the best article of faith on earth."[36]

Notice, however, that what I take to be the paradigmatic self-constitution accounts also reject such metaphysical notions. Schechtman accepts from Locke, and other psychological continuity theorists like Parfit, that the notion of an immaterial soul does not meaningfully contribute to the question of personal identity. In even stronger terms, she takes the notion "to be discredited" and does not engage in detailed discussion of it.[37] Korsgaard makes clear that she is not even considering the view of the self as a soul that is outside of nature; instead, she is focused on providing a viable alternative to Parfit's empiricist and reductionist view.[38] Korsgaard and Schechtman's rejection of the notion of a Cartesian soul while providing for a notion of unified self fits well with the following account by Mark Migotti of one of Nietzsche's central concerns: "Precisely because we are

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[36] GM I 13.

[37] See for example: "Locke uses a number of cases to show that sameness of body and/or immaterial soul (the soul being constructed as featureless immaterial substance) is irrelevant to the continued existence of the same person…" (Schechtman, 16) See also: "Historically there is a third option – the view that personal identity over time consists in the continuation of the same immaterial soul. I do not discuss this possibility in much detail because it is widely believed to have been discredited and is not a major part of the current discussion." (Schechtman, 13fn14)

[38] See for example, the following passages where the subject of experience and the Cartesian Ego stand for the kind of soul that Nietzsche is critical of: "Suppose Parfit has established that there is no deep sense in which I am identical to the subject of experiences who will occupy my body in the future. In this section I will argue that I nevertheless have reasons for regarding myself as the same rational agent as the one who will occupy my body in the future." (Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency," 109) And also, "This problem should seem especially pressing if Parfit has convinced you that you are not unified by a Cartesian Ego which provides a common subject for all your experiences." (Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency," 109)

not, any of us, metaphysically simple, divinely sustained substantial souls, the task of

becoming a self-unifying, truly individual subject becomes urgent for some of us – indeed

precisely those for whom Nietzsche writes his books."[39] The idea that without the

metaphysical unity given by an immaterial soul, we have disparate phenomena is a key

component of **(Active)** and, as explained in the previous section, it is central to

Korsgaard's view that ultimately sees the unification of the self as provided by practical

reason.[40]

   As we can see from the discussion above, there is good evidence for interpreting

Nietzsche as endorsing **(Active.)** Furthermore, though Nietzsche makes some remarks

that could be taken to be at odds with the self-constitution view, these remarks ultimately

support the self-constitution view and are reminiscent of similar remarks by self-

constitution theorists. The self-constitution view seems especially well positioned to

make sense of Nietzsche's emphasis on self-creation while criticizing the notion of a

metaphysical soul.

III. The First Person, Practical Point of View

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[39] Migotti, 522.

[40] Migotti's account of Nietzsche's view as focused on commitments is reminiscent of Korsgaard's view and provides further support for attributing **(Active)** to Nietzsche. See for example the following passage: "The reason Nietzsche can and does admire the ability to stand securely for oneself as future is that its emergence signals the presence of people who become something other than the 'merely passive conduits for various disparate forces already existing and operating around them.'" (Migotti 522, Migotti is quoting Gemes 2006:322) The notion that the self is more than "merely passive conduits of various disparate forces" is very close to Korsgaard's claim that the role of the principles of practical reason "is to impose unity on what would otherwise be disparate phenomena." (Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 229.)

The discussion in the previous section was focused on **(Active)**. As we saw earlier, the self-constitution view also includes an emphasis on the practical and first person points of views. In what follows, I argue that understanding Nietzsche as endorsing **(Practical)** and **(First Person)** would allow us to make better sense of his overall view.

First, I'll start with a clarification regarding these two points of view. The practical and the first person points of view may come together, as they do in the self-constitution view, but they need not. The first person point of view may be practical or theoretical. From the first person perspective, I may have experiences that other perspectives cannot adequately capture—I may become aware of features of reality, unconnected to how I should act, that other perspectives miss.[41]

The practical point of view, to the extent that it is focused on what I should do, often goes along with the first person point of view. Indeed one may think that the practical point of view is always first personal as it involves deliberating about what to do. However, one may think about what others should do or how to reconcile various, perhaps opposing, first-person practical perspectives. Insofar as those questions make sense and they are practical, we would have examples of non-first personal practical points of view. Nagel, for example, sees the possibility of ethics as depending on a non-first personal practical point of view: "The subject matter of ethics is how to engage in practical reasoning and the justification of action once we expand our consciousness by

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[41] See, Nagel, "What is like to be a bat?", Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," and Searle, "Minds, Brains and Programs" for examples of non-practical features of the mind (consciousness, intentionality) that are available only from the first person perspective and would be missed from a purely third person perspective.

occupying the objective standpoint"[42] In the self-constitution view, **(Practical)** and **(First Person)** come together but it is important to note that these are two independent claims which could come apart.[43]

Having clarified what the practical and first person points of view entail, in what remains of this section, I will focus on a possible objection to the argument I am presenting in this paper. The objection that I will be considering is that Nietzsche, contrary to Kant and Korsgaard, takes the third person scientific point of view to be central. If this is correct and Nietzsche did emphasize the third person scientific point of view over the practical, then that would be a reason against interpreting Nietzsche as providing a self-constitution view. My argument here is that interpreting Nietzsche as focused on emphasizing the third person, scientific point of view, leaves out a central aspects of Nietzsche's thought and ultimately is unsupported by the texts.

In order to make my position clearer, it is worth going through an argument against the interpretation that I am providing here in some detail and explaining why I think it does not work. My discussion in the remaining of this section will be focused on responding to the argument presented by Matthias Risse in "Nietzschean 'Animal Psychology' versus Kantian Ethics." Contrary to my argument here, Risse contrasts Nietzsche's view with Kantian views like Korsgaard's and Nagel's and ultimately argues

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[42] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 139. See also: "The most basic idea of practical objectivity is arrived at by a practical analogue of the rejection of solipsism in the theoretical domain. Realism about the facts leads us to seek a detached point of view from which reality can be discerned and appearance corrected, and realism about values leads us to seek a detached point of view from which it will be possible to correct inclination and to discern what we really should do. Practical objectivity means that practical reason can be understood and even engaged in by the objective self." (Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 140)

[43] Thanks to the editor of this volume, Paul Katsafanas, for pressing me to be clearer on this issue.

that Nietzsche emphasizes the third person point of view, by which he means the point of

view of science.[44] On Risse's view, Nietzsche is urging us to focus on the sciences, and see

ourselves *only* from the external, third person, point of view that is characteristic of the

sciences. Furthermore, Risse takes Nietzsche to be pointing out that the third-person

point of view shows that first personal deliberation is based on illusory considerations

thus flawed in crucial respects.[45] Risse believes that we can develop from Nietzsche's

works a critique of Kantian views, like Nagel's and Korsgaard's, that fail to take the third-

person point of view as primary. As I explain below, unlike Risse, I believe that on this

point Nietzsche's view is more similar to the Kantian views not critical of them.

In some ways, it seems surprising that Nietzsche would be arguing that we need to

be less personal and focus more on the impersonal point of view. Nietzsche, after all says

that every great philosophy has been "the personal confession of its author."[46] Risse

assumes that in emphasizing the point of view of science, Nietzsche is thereby rejecting

the first person *practical* perspective that is emphasized by Kantian ethics. Notice

however, that while one may agree with Risse's point that Nietzsche rejects Kantian

ethics, I don't believe that Nietzsche does so by rejecting the first person practical point of

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[44] See for example: "Steven Pinker, discussing the soul, writes that 'science is showing that what we call the soul – the locus of sentience, reason, and will – consists of the information processing activity of the brain, an organ governed by the laws of biology' (2002:224). It is that thought that Nietzsche tried to grasp, working with what biology he had access to." (Risse, 66.)

[45] See for example: "Nagel believes we are unable to see ourselves merely as portions of the world. But accepting this external point of view to the *exclusion* of the internal one is precisely Nietzsche's doctrine: in its light Nagel emerges as another theorist insisting on an untenable 'juxtaposition of "man and world"'." (Risse, 73, emphasis added) Notice, however, that on Nagel's view, the juxtaposition is between two perspectives that humans can take, so it is not a juxtaposition between humans and world, rather between two aspects of humanity.

[46] BGE 6.

view. Indeed I take the first person point of view to be central to Nietzsche's practical project and to his views about the self. On Risse's view, Nietzsche would seem to be a scientist, attempting to find out how the mind works. I don't disagree that Nietzsche is engaged in such a project. But as I argue below, I don't think that this captures all of Nietzsche's interests related to the self, there is good reason to think that Nietzsche is interested in the self from the first person practical point of view.

Risse supports his interpretation partially by invoking Nietzsche's interest in psychology, which he constructs as an interest in third person explanations. But Nietzsche's interest in psychology need not be constructed as entirely or primarily an interest in third person explanations. John Richardson, for example, explains Nietzsche's interest in psychology in a way that fits well with an interest in the first personal perspective. According to Richardson, psychology looks for reasons not just descriptions.[47] On Richardson's interpretation, Nietzsche believes that "to do psychology… one requires first-personal acquaintance with those wills oneself."[48] Furthermore, he claims that "the new psychology", not as it was practiced in Nietzsche's time but as he would like it to be, "involves a kind of 'subjectivity' at odds with the 'objectivity' called for by science so far."[49] So, Nietzsche's interest in psychology need not be evidence that he is interested in the third person point of view and perhaps even supports the view defended here that Nietzsche emphasizes the first person perspective.

Furthermore, Risse takes Nietzsche to be presenting a third person standpoint critique that would apply to a view like Korsgaard's because it shows that the Kantian

[47] Richardson, "Nietzsche's Psychology," 315.
[48] Richardson, "Nietzsche's Psychology," 318.
[49] Richardson, "Nietzsche's Psychology," 318.

understanding of the self is mistaken and consequently, any reasoning from the first person point of view will yield illusory conclusions.[50] However, notice that, like Nagel or Korsgaard, one could believe that a conflict between the third person theoretical standpoint and the first person practical standpoint should not to be resolved by privileging the third person theoretical standpoint and eliminating the first person practical standpoint.[51] On a view like Korsgaard's, dropping the first person practical perspective would be to give up on any practical reasoning. Thus, Risse's claim that from a third person theoretical standpoint (the standpoint of science, for example), references to reasons may seem illusory, as all that can be seen from that perspective may be causes, is not a threat to the view but a central feature of it. Korsgaard's point is that insofar as we are thinking about what to do, we adopt the first person practical standpoint not the third person theoretical standpoint. It is from that perspective that self-constitution takes place and the notion of the self makes any sense. From the third person theoretical standpoint, we may find with reductionists like Parfit, that there isn't much of a self. If Nietzsche held the view that Risse attributes to him, he would have to believe that the third person theoretical point of view is the only point of view worth taking seriously and

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[50] "… according to Nietzsche's attack on the Kantian notion of the will, we are deceived precisely about what that process is, and thus this attack does affect how we should characterize the decision making process. That is, agents would systematically give wrong answers to questions about why they acted the way they did, and would do so because they are deceived about their own decision-making process. Exploring that decision process is the subject of third-person inquiries, which is why, by way of contrast with the truth of determinism, they matter to the practical standpoint." (Risse, 66)

[51] Risse's focus is to provide a Nietzschean critique of the Kantian view. What I say here is not meant to undermine all of that critique or to suggest that Nietzsche is not presenting it. Indeed I believe that Nietzsche is providing a direct response to Kant in various places. The only point I am concerned with here is that part of Risse's account of Nietzsche's critique which would seem to be in tension with the self-constitution view I am presenting here.

that given a conflict between it and the other points of view, the third person point of view would prevail. I don't believe this fits with Nietzsche's view. Nietzsche places great emphasis on the practical point of view, which warrants attributing **(Practical)** to him and ultimately, interpreting him as a self-constitution theorist.

In attributing **(Practical)** to Nietzsche, I am aligning myself with Gardner's interpretation of Nietzsche's view as indicating a tension between the theoretical and the practical points of view: "...Nietzsche regards the claims of naturalism as too strong to allow theoretical reason to be bent into the shape that practical reason needs it to assume."[52] Unlike Risse, Gardner does not believe that Nietzsche resolves the tension by privileging the theoretical point of view.[53] Gardner attributes to Nietzsche the separation between the two points of view while leaving Nietzsche with the impossibility of reconciling the two points of view – reminiscent perhaps of Nagel's view in *The View from Nowhere*. Furthermore, Gardner notices that for Nietzsche, the practical perspective requires the presupposition of a self thus providing further support for interpreting Nietzsche as holding **(Practical)**.

Perhaps the clearest evidence for Nietzsche's priority of the practical perspective comes from the last section of the *Genealogy*. There, Nietzsche refers to the human need for meaning or purpose and relates this need to religious answers that end up satisfying the need only minimally. The *Genealogy* would end on a very different note if it were urging us to focus on science. Instead, it seems to take on a practical perspective by mentioning how an "interpretation [of suffering]... brought new suffering with it" while

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[52] Gardner, 20.
[53] See for example, "... the naturalistic model, though it coheres with Nietzsche's denial of the reality of the I, conflicts with his practical presupposition of the self, and more generally frustrates the ambitions of Nietzsche's practical thought..." (Gardner, 21)

insinuating that an alternative interpretation could satisfy the demand for meaning.[54] This problem of meaning that Nietzsche is concerned with is not a problem at all from the third person theoretical point of view. Indeed Nietzsche seems to be finishing a book that often emphasizes the theoretical perspective by pointing out that it is unsatisfying from the practical point of view.[55] Unlike Risse who does not focus much on Nietzsche's practical claims, Gardner argues that a reductionist view like Hume's or Parfit's, without a conception of a unified self, is not open to someone with Nietzsche's practical commitments. Though Nietzsche makes many remarks that point toward a reductionist view, the fact that Nietzsche takes the need for meaning seriously in the last section of the Genealogy (and doesn't just explain it away) is hard to make sense within a reductionist view.[56]

As we have seen above, some of Nietzsche's remarks that may seem to contradict the self-constitution view are not really in contradiction if they are coming from the perspective of third person theoretical philosophy. But in addition, we have seen that Nietzsche sometimes emphasizes the first person practical perspective over the third

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[54] GM III:28.

[55] On this point, see: "Nietzsche concludes the *Genealogy* with the affirmation that we have a need which points beyond nature and which renders a non-naturalistic self conception inescapable for us; there is therefore within the *Genealogy*, on the face of it, a transition of its terms of explanation from the naturalist of the First and Second essays to the concluding recognition of a trans-natural perspective on the Third." (Gardner, 26)

[56] Gardner emphasizes how the explanation for the need for meaning is not enough to make sense of Nietzsche's view: "If Nietzsche were to be a consistent naturalist, then he would have to agree that the need for *Sinn* can be explained as some kind of evolutionary or whatever *Nebenwirkung*, to be resolved back into a naturalized, mechanistic, hedonistic psychology. But - if naturalization of the need for *Sinn* were to have the meaning for Nietzsche that it has for the consistent naturalist – Nietzsche would then have to take Freud's line that the need for *Sinn* cannot be taken with philosophical seriousness, and his practical philosophy would crumble." (Gardner, 28)

person theoretical perspective. It thus makes sense to interpret Nietzsche as holding

(First Person) and **(Practical)**.

IV. Activity in Nietzsche

In this section, I will focus on a series of related questions that may lead us to reject interpreting Nietzsche along the self-constitution view. Is the notion of self-creation or self-constitution contradictory? Does it emphasize conscious reasoning, which Nietzsche often de-emphasizes? Does it require a free self of the kind that Nietzsche rejects? In what follows, I will discuss some ways of answering these questions such that they do not present a problem for interpreting Nietzsche as providing a self-constitution view.

One feature of the self-constitution view is **(Active)**, that one be active in constituting the self. One may wonder how it is possible to be active if one is not already there, that there is something contradictory about a self that is active in creating itself. Korsgaard and Schechtman both embrace this notion that the self is actively created. Korsgaard says, "what it is to be a person, or a rational agent, is just to be engaged in the *activity* of constantly making yourself into a person…"[57] Korsgaard directly addresses the possibility that there be something contradictory or circular in the self-constitution view but she argues that "being a person, like being a living thing, is being engaged in an activity of self-constitution."[58] She argues "that in the relevant sense there is no you prior to your choices and actions, because your identity is in a quite literal way constituted by

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[57] Korsgaard, 42, emphasis added.
[58] Korsgaard, 42.

your choices and actions."[59] For Korsgaard, the self is constituted through action so that as we act, we are at the same time constituting the self. It is key to her view that the self be active for there to be action at all. Though there is an interdependency between the notions of action and having an agent, the view need not be circular. Activity is what makes us into agents and agents are those engaged in certain type of activity.

Schechtman also believes that the self needs to be active in self-constitution. She says that a self-constituting narrative "is not simply a static set of facts about him, but rather a dynamic set of organizing principles, a basic orientation through which, with or without conscious awareness, an individual understands himself and his world." [60] Schechtman emphasizes that the self be active in creating a narrative, even though not all aspects of this narrative need to be fully conscious. The self-constitution view is compatible with a view of the mind, like Nietzsche's, that emphasizes mental states that are not conscious. Some of the organizing principles and narrative may be unconscious.

While Korsgaard and Schechtman may have differing views of what it means to be active in self-constitution, I believe this notion could be filled out in a way that fits well with Nietzsche's views. Just to point to an example, in *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics*, Katsafanas provides a Nietzschean account of activity. For my purposes here, I want to note that Katsafanas' account provides an example of what an account of activity could look like such that it: (i) fits with Nietzsche's views, (ii) fits with the self-constitution account, (iii) is not circular or contradictory.

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[59] Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 19.
[60] Schechtman, 116.

Katsafanas' account of activity is broadly compatibilist and "does not rely on the discredited claims about agency."[61] On Katsafanas' account, whether the agent is active depends on whether the agent approves of her action and whether this approval would be undermined with more knowledge of the motivation behind the action. He says, "an agent is active iff two conditions are met: (i) the agent approves of her action, and (ii) further knowledge of the motives figuring in the etiology of this action would not undermine her approval of the action."[62]

This account coheres well with Nietzsche's claims that the true motives behind our actions are often unknown, as it does not require that the agent know the motives behind her actions for her to be active. Katsafanas points out that "we are examining a counterfactual – in which the agent has more information about the etiology of his action – and asking whether the agent's approval of the action then dissipates."[63]

Though one may think that the self-constitution view requires transparency, that one knows everything about the self, this account can allow for activity without such transparency. Schechtman directly addresses the issue of transparency in connection to her self-constitution account and denies that transparency is needed. On Schechtman's view, the self-constituting narrative need not be articulated or explicit (one need not walk around telling oneself the story of one's life) nor need it be fully conscious.[64] Similarly,

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[61] Katsafanas, 143

[62] Katsafanas, 111.

[63] Katsafanas, 142.

[64] On this point, see for example: "I call a person's underlying psychological organization a self-narrative because it is not simply a static set of facts about him, but rather a dynamic set of organizing principles, a basic orientation through which, with or without conscious awareness, an individual understands himself and his world. These implicit organizing principles are not simply a collection of features, but a continually developing interpretation of the course of one's trajectory through the world. In this way it is

attributing to Nietzsche a self-constitution account would not require that we attribute to him a view of the mind as fully transparent. Indeed, the self-constitution view is compatible with Nietzsche's views that we are often ignorant of our own minds.[65]

As we have seen in this section, we can respond to various objections to interpreting Nietzsche along the self-constitution view. The view need not be contradictory and it need not require a picture of the mind as transparent or a view of freedom that is incompatible with Nietzsche's rejection of metaphysical free will. Some of these questions may seem to present a problem for attributing to Nietzsche a version of the self-constitution view. But as we have seen, we may be able to answer these questions in ways that are compatible with Nietzsche's claims.

Conclusion

There are many advantages to interpreting Nietzsche's as holding a type of self-constitution account. It allows us to make sense of many claims by Nietzsche that would otherwise seem contradictory. This kind of interpretation coheres with many of his remarks about self-creation and can make sense of his practical philosophy. In addition, the many naturalistic and anti-metaphysical remarks made by Nietzsche fit well with this kind of view and are not really in opposition with it, as long as they are understood as theoretical claims that do not undermine the importance of the practical point of view.

legitimate to think of what I am calling the implicit self-narrative as a self-conception, even though it contains elements that the person explicitly denies." (Schechtman, 116)
[65] For an example of Nietzsche's emphasis on the unconscious, see: "We could think, feel, will, remember, and also 'act' in every sense of the term, and yet none of this would have to 'enter our consciousness' (as one says figuratively). All of life would be possible without, as it were, seeing itself in a mirror; and still today, the predominant part of our lives actually unfolds without this mirroring—of course including our thinking, willing, and feeling lives..." (GS 354)

My discussion above has not settled on whether the practical point of view and thus the self under discussion is understood as real or a fiction. Thus interpreting Nietzsche along the self-constitution view does now commit us to a particular answer to that question. What it does suggest is that the first person practical point of view is important and the self is required from such point of view.

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