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How Things Persist, by Katherine Hawley. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, Pp. ix + 221.

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Virtually every philosopher of persistence can be accurately described in one of two ways. Some are endurantists; they believe persisting objects are three-dimensional, wholly present at each time at which they exist, and lacking temporal parts.

Perdurantists, on the other hand, hold that persisting objects are four-dimensional, spread out in time, and composed of temporal parts.

Katherine Hawley defends a metaphysics of persistence. But she rejects both endurance and perdurance. This rejection signals that How Things Persist is an ambitious book, daring to defend a thesis few have considered, much less accepted. Indeed, other than anti-metaphysicians who look askance at the whole debate, only Theodore Sider joins Hawley in insisting that ordinary persisting objects (e.g., tennis balls, bananas, human beings) neither endure nor perdure.

According to Hawley, each ordinary physical object is identical with an instantaneous stage (p. 41 ff.) (Sider defends basically the same view; see his “All the World’s a Stage,” Australasian Journal of Philosophy (1996) 74: 433-453 and Four-Dimensionalism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 188-208.) Each such stage is three-dimensional and so does not perdure. But, since it exists at only one time, neither does it endure. And so, Hawley holds, ordinary physical objects persist without enduring or perduring.

I think many readers will object to Hawley's contention that, according to her theory, ordinary physical objects persist. After all, it seems obvious that instantaneous stages do not persist. And if each ordinary object is a stage, it follows that ordinary objects fail to persist. Hence stage theory seems not to be, as Hawley presents it, a theory of how things persist. Rather, it amounts to the claim that ordinary objects do not persist at all.

Surprisingly, Hawley fails to consider explicitly the objection that, since her view affirms that each ordinary object is instantaneous, it implies that no such object persists. But her book contains the ingredients of a response. Hawley says that, according to stage theory, persistence is not 'analyzed in terms of identity' (p. 131). She thinks that an object existing at one time can persist even if it is not identical with any object existing at any other time. An instantaneous stage persists, according to Hawley, if it stands in the right relations to other stages existing at other times. (Similarly, her theory allows 'this banana is now yellow but was green' to come out true. It comes out true if the instantaneous banana is yellow and related in the right ways to an earlier green banana.) So Hawley would reply that the above objection presupposes a false—perhaps even question-begging—account of persistence.

She might also reply in a second way. She plausibly assumes that perduring is a way of persisting. And she thinks that, as far as what there is and how it persists are concerned, stage theory has no dispute with perdurance. Rather, she believes, their disagreement is merely over language. Thus she says:

Stage theory and perdurance theory share a general metaphysical picture, an agreement about what kinds of things there are in the world. But the theories differ about how our ordinary, non-metaphysical ways of talking latch on to things in the world. (p. 202)

And consider this comment, implying that what determines whether stage theory or, instead, perdurance is right turns on contingent facts about ‘our everyday talk’:

I take it that the debate between stage and perdurance theories does not concern necessary truths—the theories agree on a basic metaphysical picture, and disagree about how our everyday talk fits with that picture. And presumably our everyday talk could have been different. Even if stage theory is true, it need not have been, and the same goes for perdurance theory. (p. 208)

So Hawley might respond to the above objection as follows. A world of perdurance is a world in which things persist. Stage theory has no metaphysical disagreement with perdurance. So a world in which stage theory is true is a world in which things persist.

For the sake of argument, suppose that either perdurance or stage theory is correct. Then either I am a four-dimensional object, spread out in time, or I am, instead, an instantaneous stage. These are two possibilities, not one. They are inconsistent in what they imply about my nature and about what parts I have. They do not diverge only over how ‘our ordinary, non-metaphysical ways of talking latch on to things in the

world.’ They do not diverge only regarding how we use the words ‘Trenton Merricks’. They diverge on what they say about me.

It is false that stage theory and perdurance differ merely verbally while agreeing on ontology. But stage theory does differ merely verbally with ‘another’ view: the view that ordinary objects do not persist. The only difference between Hawley’s theory and the thesis that ordinary objects are instantaneous and do not persist lies in Hawley’s definition of ‘persist’ (and corresponding definitions of past- and future-rooted predicates like ‘was green’). It is this definition that generates Hawley’s first reply to the objection that stage theory implies that ordinary objects do not persist. Stripped of this linguistic innovation, hers is simply the theory that no ordinary object lasts over time.

This is, of course, the objection I began with, the one that Hawley would reply is undermined by her account of persistence. But I think that, once we compare her view to the claim that ordinary objects do not persist, we can see that those views differ only over language. And so I conclude that the original objection is a good one. The book should have been called Things Don’t Persist.

And however we describe it, Hawley’s view is very difficult to believe. I think the principal difficulty is what it implies about each of us. Hawley thinks that each of us—each human person—is an instantaneous stage (p. 42). You exist but a moment. That is, you exist at one time and nothing that exists either in whole or in part at any other time is identical with you. This is not believable. Note that this objection is independent of any wrangling over the meaning of ‘persist’. For the claim that each of us is instantaneous is not made more believable merely by adopting—as Hawley does—a

definition of ‘persist’ that makes a sentence like ‘instantaneous people persist’ come out true.

My objections above notwithstanding, How Things Persist is a careful and clever defense of stage theory. The book is in large part an extended comparison of the stage theorist’s solutions to standard puzzles with the solutions of the endurantist and the perdurantist. Hawley argues—sometimes in quite insightful and interesting ways—that stage theory’s solutions are preferable to those of its rivals.

In the course of presenting her argument, Hawley discusses a wide range of metaphysical issues and their bearing on the nature of persistence. There are chapters on persistence and change, criteria of identity, vagueness, coincidence (or co-location), and modality. So the book is not only a worthy defense of a novel ontology, it is also an instructive survey of the metaphysics of material objects in general and the philosophy of persistence in particular.

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