

Perdurance and Psychological Continuity*

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In my (1999), I conclude that the thesis that persons endure is inconsistent with any and all psychological continuity analyses (PC-analyses) of personal identity over time. Michael C. Rea and David Silver (2000) object that my argument for that conclusion would, if sound, show that PC-analyses are also inconsistent with the thesis that persons perdure.¹ This would, as Rea and Silver note, raise problems for other claims I make.

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¹Rea and Silver also charge that that argument—or, better, their reconstruction of that argument—is unsound. Let me make two points in response.

(1) Their reconstruction is inaccurate, in part because it conflates two distinct arguments. Their Premises 1 and 2 are taken from my argument against the thesis that personal identity is to be identified with psychological continuity. Their Premise 4 is taken from a second argument, an argument against the thesis that personal identity is not identified with psychological continuity but is, nevertheless, reduced to psychological continuity. Moreover, their Premise 3 is not a premise in either of my arguments; it is, instead, a response to an objection.

(2) Rea and Silver charge that my argument(s) would be undermined by the claim that numerical identity is a “genus”, that there are “different kinds of numerical identity”. But this claim would not undermine my argument if it means only that, e.g., tree (numerical) identity over time is distinct from, e.g., personal (numerical) identity over time (Cf. Merricks, 1999, fn. 10). If, instead, the claim that identity is a genus means that numerical identity simpliciter is analyzed as a disjunction of more primitive kinds of numerical identity, then that claim does threaten my arguments; but, as Rea and Silver note, I reject such an analysis of numerical identity (Merricks, 1999, fn. 11). If Rea and Silver’s claim that identity is a genus amounts to something other than the two interpretations I have suggested, it is not clear what that claim amounts to; as a result, it is not clear whether what that claim amounts to is both plausible and also such that, if true, would render my arguments unsound.

As those familiar with Rea and Silver's objection know—and I'll assume such familiarity in this reply—it is built upon the following claim:

(1) If perdurantism is true, the relation of personal identity [over time] is to be analyzed as the co-part relation holding among person stages [which stages exist at distinct times].

But consider Napoleon's (alleged) 1803 person stage and my (alleged) current person stage. Many perdurantists will say that those stages are related by the co-part relation. For many perdurantists—like, e.g., W.v.O. Quine and David Lewis—endorse unrestricted composition, holding that any two stages are related by the co-part relation. But no perdurantist should say that I am the same person as Napoleon, that Napoleon lives on through me. So (1) is not—pace Rea and Silver—a plausible schema of how the perdurantist as such should analyze personal identity over time.²

There are, I think, two likely ways that one might improve (1) so as to immunize it against the sort of worry just noted. The first is to add explicitly to the analysis that the stages compose a person. So consider:

(2) If perdurantism is true, the relation of personal identity over time is to be analyzed as the co-part relation holding among person stages, which stages exist at distinct times and (along with others) compose a person.

Note that, according to the perdurantist, no object composed of my current part and Napoleon's 1803 part is itself a person. (To better see this, note that the perdurantist who believes in unrestricted composition will hold that some of those objects have the

²I'm guilty of promoting something similar to (1) in my (1998, 110 and 122n10). Oops. I take it back. The point I was trying to make there was that perdurance as such does not preclude there being an informative analysis of personal—or any other kind of—identity over time. What I say below, in this paper, will make just that point.

Eiffel Tower's 1945 part and the entire American Civil War as parts, too.) So (2) does not suffer from the problem afflicting (1). But (2) is needlessly redundant. For if stages compose a person, it follows that the stages are related by the co-part relation.³ So let's drop the claim about the co-part relation. Thus—changing the wording a bit for clarity—we have:

(3) If perdurantism is true, the relation of personal identity over time is to be analyzed as a person stage at one time and a person stage at another composing (along with others) a person.

What makes person stages compose a person? That's a substantive, controversial question. One substantive, controversial answer is that person stages compose one and the same person if and only if they are co-parts that are interrelated by unbranching psychological continuity; this answer, of course, implies that some PC-analysis or other is true for perduring persons. Whether or not this answer is ultimately acceptable, it cannot be undermined simply by noting the perdurantist's schema for an analysis of personal identity.

I said there were two likely ways to adapt (1) to avoid the worry generated by unrestricted composition. The first was to add to the analysis the claim that the person stages compose a person. The second, suggested to me by Michael Rea, is to replace the co-part relation in the analysis with a more restricted relation, one that—unlike the co-part relation—holds only among the parts of a single person. Let the co-person-part relation be that more restricted relation. Now consider:

(4) If perdurantism is true, the relation of personal identity over time is to be analyzed as the co-person-part relation holding among person stages, which stages exist at different times.

³Note Rea and Silver's definition: x and y are co-parts_{df} there are ps such that (i) the ps compose something and (ii) \underline{x} and \underline{y} are among the ps .

(4) is consistent with PC-analyses of personal identity over time. For the PC-analyst could claim that the co-person-part relation just is, is analyzed as, the relation that holds among all and only (i) person stages that are co-parts interrelated by unbranching psychological continuity and (ii) the proper parts of person stages that are co-parts interrelated by unbranching psychological continuity. If this is the correct analysis of the co-person-part relation, then (4) implies a PC-analysis of identity over time for perduring persons.

Of course, the perdurantist foe of PC-analyses of personal identity over time can object to this suggested analysis of the co-person-part relation. Indeed, she can object to every attempt to flesh out (3) or (4) in ways that invoke psychological continuity, and can do so without violating her commitment to perduring persons. For the claim that persons endure does not, all by itself, imply a PC-analysis of personal identity over time. But neither does the claim that persons endure, all by itself, preclude PC-analyses of personal identity over time. And in this way it differs fundamentally from the claim that persons endure. For, as I argue in the paper to which Rea and Silver respond, the claim that persons endure does preclude such analyses.

References

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