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# The personite problem remains: reply to Montmini and Russo

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## ABSTRACT



Personites are shorter-lived person-like things temporarily coincident with persons. According to the four-dimensional view, they exist. Mark Johnston argues that acknowledging their existence renders activities which we ought to regard as wholly unproblematic morally questionable. So we face a dilemma: either we must reject the capacious personite-including ontology or reject central intuitions of our ordinary moral thinking. Many people disagree. But how to respond to Johnston's dilemma has proven challenging. Montmini and Russo are among those who disagree. Their radical and important contention is that, with *just* a proper understanding of what the ascription of temporary and temporal properties amounts to on the four-dimensional view, the appearance of a problem vanishes. I disagree. Adopting the conception of temporary and temporal property ascription which is correct according to the four-dimensional account is no help. What M&R actually do is to deviate from the standard Lewisian account of how ordinary discourse about temporal and temporary properties should be translated into the four-dimensional framework, and it just this deviation which enables them to say that personites are not morally problematic. But the deviation is unwarranted and ad hoc. Johnston's problem is not so easily dismissed.

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## 1. Introduction

Personites are shorter-lived, person-like, things that coincide with persons through parts of their existence. According to the widely accepted four-dimensional view, and according to any view with a capacious ontology (which may not involve commitment to the four-dimensional claim that

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personites are temporal parts of persons), personites exist. Mark Johnston (2016) argues that to acknowledge the existence of personites renders activities which we regard as wholly unproblematic, morally questionable. So, something has to be done: either we must reject the capacious, personite-including, ontology or reject central intuitions of our ordinary moral thinking.

Many people disagree. But how to respond to Johnston's dilemma has proven challenging. Montminy and Russo(M&R) are among those who disagree. The existence of personites is not morally problematic, they think. Their radical and important contention is that with *just* a proper understanding of what the ascription of temporary and temporal properties amounts to on the four-dimensional view, the apparent moral problems caused by acknowledging the existence of personites disappear.

I argue that this is incorrect. Adopting the conception of temporary and temporal property ascription which is correct according to the four-dimensional account, that is, the Lewisian (1971, 1983) conception, is no help. The problem of personites still remains. What M&R actually do is to deviate from the Lewisian account of how ordinary discourse about temporal and temporary properties should be translated into the four-dimensional framework. It is just this departure which enables them to say that personites are not morally problematic. But the departure is unwarranted and ad hoc. Johnston's problem is not so easily dismissed.

## 2. The moral problems identified by M&R

M&R identify two types of *prima facie* moral problems caused by the acknowledgement of personites: forward-looking and backward looking.

Their forward-looking example is Johnston's Hungarian holiday scenario. Hungarian is a very difficult language but I have committed to a holiday in Hungary. I know life will be much easier for me when I am there if I have gone through the drudgery of learning before I go. So I do. And, as I expect, this greatly helps me when I am there. So, I greatly benefit from the self-inflicted drudgery. I am fully compensated. This situation seems wholly unproblematic morally. But if there are personites, one of them goes through the drudgery of learning Hungarian but ceases to exist before the trip. So it appears that I am, by choosing to learn Hungarian, choosing to inflict suffering on a person-like thing, a creature with moral status, for which it receives no compensating benefit. This seems problematic. The personite on the 4D view is part of the person. But so what? Surely it is part of our ordinary moral code

that no relation any person-like being, or any entity capable of suffering, can have to another, can deprive it of moral status, the right to be taken into account in the moral calculus. So how can the uncompensated suffering of this personite be ignored?

Backward-looking problems arise in cases of punishment. When I am justly punished (if there is ever such punishment) for a past crime, some personite, according to the 4D conception, is burdened with consequent suffering (if punishment did not cause suffering it would be pointless), even though it did not commit the crime and did not even exist at the time it was committed. Again, this seems problematic.

M&R note that four-dimensionalists can be perdurantists, like Lewis, or stage theorists like Sider (2001). Some (Kaiserman 2019) think that a solution to the personite problem is available to stage-theorists but not perdurantists. M&R disagree. They think that their solution works on either conception, given the understanding of temporal and temporary property ascription which comes with the four-dimension ontology. They think that their solution works even if 'personites exist, have a moral status comparable to that of persons and just like persons satisfy non-sortal predicates [like 'suffers a cost at t' and 'is compensated at t']' (2024, 681).

Their paper is a defence of perdurantism, but, as they write, they 'take a page from the stage theorist' (2024, 682).

What M&R do is add a clause to the standard Lewisian perdurantist translation of ordinary temporal discourse taken from stage theory, the Siderean, Lewisian-inspired, temporal counterpart theory. According to the perdurantist, we do not, in ordinary discourse, talk of time-bound individuals(stages), nor ascribe temporal properties to them. According to the stage theorist, that is all we do. M&R propose that we add to the perdurantist translations of ordinary discourse the translation of 'the present stage of me will be bent' as 'there is a person-stage in the future which is bent and is a personal counterpart of the present stage of me'. The perdurantist does not need to do this, and M&R acknowledge that they also think that they do not need to make this addition to mount their defence of perdurantism against Johnston's attack ('Our solution to the problem raised by personites does not require a commitment to [stage] theory' (2024, 683)). The perdurantist can give his standard account of the ascriptions of temporal properties to things: Lucia is now such that she was standing earlier iff Lucia now has a stage that bears the personal unity relation to an earlier stage that is standing (2024, 693). But they say,

'we will rely on Sider's theory, but worm theorists should feel free to substitute the alternative where appropriate' (2024, 683).

Because of this wrinkle in M&R's exposition I will focus on the stage-theoretic version of four-dimensionalism, with occasional reference to perdurantism when I judge that it adds clarity. I shall also, for brevity, mostly consider the forward-looking problem.

### 3. Perdurantism vs stage theory

I have been taking for granted our familiarity with the difference between perdurantism and the stage theory. It will be useful now to be explicit.

The stage-theorist and the perdurantist have the same ontology. The difference between them is purely semantic.

According to the perdurantist, persons are maximal stages of person-stages related by the personal unity relation. Animals are maximal summations of animal-stages related by the animal unity relation, chairs are maximal summations of chair-stages related by the unity relations for chairs, etc. So presently there is a person sitting in this chair because there is a person-stage sitting in the chair (no need to add 'at present' since it does not exist at any other time). The person (me) is now sitting in the chair – bears the *x is sitting at t* relation to the present time – because it *contains* the present stage which has the simple property of *sitting*. There is also an animal sitting in this chair. The animal now sitting in the chair is now sitting in the chair because it contains a presently existing animal-stage which is sitting. There is only one stage here, which is both a person-stage and an animal stage and is contained both in the person and the animal. But the person and the animal are non-identical (let us assume for purposes of the exposition) because the unity relation for persons is psychological continuity and the unity relation for animals is purely biological and although the animal and person came into existence at the same time (like a Davidsonian swamp-man) I will have a brain transplant in the future and the rest of me will be destroyed, so the animal now coincident with me now qualifies as a personite, a shorter-lived person-like thing, a *non-maximal* sum of person-stages related by the personal unity relation, though it is a maximal sum of stages pairwise related by the animal unity relation.<sup>1</sup>

According to the stage theorist, the person here now and the animal here now are the same thing, the stage. All names of material things are names of stages, all our singular terms referring to material things have stages as their referents, and all our quantification over material

things is exclusively over stages. So, I am the animal here. But I will survive the brain transplant and the animal will not. Why? Because 'I will survive the brain transplant' gets translated by the stage theorist as 'there is a future stage, existing after the brain transplant, related by the *personal* temporal counterpart relation to the present stage' and 'the animal will survive the brain transplant' gets translated as 'there is a future stage related by the *animal* temporal counterpart relation to the present stage which exists after the brain transplant'.

#### 4. The Hungarian holiday scenario

So let us consider the learning Hungarian scenario and let us suppose that before my holiday in Hungary, but after my crash course in Hungarian, I have the brain transplant just referred to (or rather, the body transplant) in the previous section, to freshen up before my trip.

Then, according to the stage theorist, it is correct to say (assuming the times of the language learning, the transplant and the trip are future times T1, T2 and T3):

- (1) I will suffer intense boredom at T1
- (2) I will exist after T2
- (3) I will have a great time in Hungary, conversing fluently with the locals at T3.

And it is also correct to say:

- (1\*) The animal here now (i.e. the personite here now) will suffer intense boredom at T1
- (2\*) The animal here now will not exist after T2
- (3\*) The animal here now will not have a great time at T3 in Hungary chatting fluently with the locals.

If we take on board the correct understanding of temporary and temporal predication for the four-dimensionist if he goes the stage-theoretic route, i.e. the understanding corresponding to Lewis's counterpart-theoretic account of *de re* modal predication, which is the basis of Sider's account of temporal predication, the above is what we get.

On that account in *de re* temporal ascriptions, e.g. 'I/the animal here will exist/not exist after T2', a temporal counterpart relation is evoked by the subject term: 'I' evokes the personal counterpart relation, 'the

animal here now' evokes the animal temporal counterpart relation. These are different. Hence (2) and (2\*) are both true. *Mutatis mutandis*, if we take the perdurantist route, i.e. Lewis's own. In (2) 'I' denotes a maximal summation of person stages related pairwise by the *personal* unity relation. In (2\*) 'the animal here now' denotes a maximal summation of person/animal stages related pairwise by the *animal* unity relation. So both (2) and (2\*) are true. What 'I' denotes in 2) does contain a stage existing after T2; what 'the animal here now' in (2\*) denotes does not. So, the personite problem is not solved since the problem is that all three of the starred propositions are true.

What M&R say is that since the temporal counterpart relation which matters morally is the personal counterpart relation, we should give different translations of temporary and temporal predication into four-dimensional discourse when matters of moral significance are under discussion.

According to the Siderean, Lewisian inspired, stage-theoretic account, the subject term of a subject-predicate sentence, like 'the person/animal (personite) here will have a great time at T3', evokes the relevant counterpart relation to be employed to understand the temporal ascription. Hence (2\*) and (3\*) are the correct things to say about the scenario under discussion. According to M&R, employing the stage-theoretic addition to the perdurantist account, (2\*) and (3\*) are not correct things to say. This is because, when matters of moral significance are under discussion, the counterpart relation evoked by the subject term of the subject-predicate sentence employed is rendered less salient in the context, so the counterpart relation to be employed is the personal counterpart relation. So, when I say, 'The animal here will have a great time in Hungary', what I say is true, since there will be a stage related to the animal stage by the *personal* counterpart relation which will have a great time.

So, by departing from the standard stage-theoretic translation scheme, according to which the starred propositions are to be interpreted employing a different counterpart relation since the subject terms of the unstarred and starred propositions evoke different counterpart relations, M&R can describe the learning Hungarian scenario by (1\*), the denial of (2\*) and the denial of (3\*) and so in a way which makes it seem seems wholly unproblematic: the personite, that is, the animal, suffers at T1, but it still exists at T3 and then benefits greatly.<sup>2</sup>

The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, they say, if we think in wholly perdurantist terms and insist that, in a context where matters of moral

significance are under discussion, the relevant unity relation for interpretation must be the personal unity relation, irrespective of the singular terms ('I'/'the animal here now') which is the subject terms of the temporal predications.

But is this not a cheat? It has to be true to say in some context 'the animal will not exist at T3'. In general, to qualify as a personite a thing has to be shorter-lived than a person. So is it not just that we are not being allowed to say that by M&R when the question arises of whether anything morally problematic is going on? What justification can M&R give for their revisionary assignment of truth-conditions to the starred sentences, which are not sentences in the language of four-dimensionism or stage theory, but sentences of ordinary English?

I do not think M&R are cheating. They have a reason for thinking the problem-eliminating translation scheme (the one that renders (3\*) false) should be used by the four-dimensionalist. This comes out in the following passage. Read 'Mark-minus' in the quotation following as abbreviating 'the animal here' and take the scenario envisaged to be the brain transplant case described above:

... there are many stages existing after T2 that have the memories, beliefs, characteristics and so on of Mark-minus's last stage. Moreover, many of these future stages can be said to satisfy the desires of Mark-minus's last stages. For example, by joyfully chatting with the locals, Mark-later realizes Mark-now's desire to have the experience. That is why Mark-minus's ceasing to exist does not affect what matters; it does not frustrate its interests in futurally existing. By contrast, there are no future stages which have the memories, beliefs, character traits and so on of Mark\*'s last stages [Mark\* is a being in another world that is intrinsically like Mark-minus, but is a *maximal* R-related sum of stages, and so a person]. Moreover, no future stage can be said to fulfil the plans of Mark\*'s last stages. For this reason, Mark\*'s desires and interests are frustrated. Hence, unlike Mark-minus's death, Mark\*'s death is something worth grieving. Only the latter is deprived of a future of value. There is nothing about the end of Mark-minus's existence that warrants grieving.' (2024, 693)

So the crucial thought presupposed here is: I and the animal want the same things (of course, since we are one and the same thing, i.e. stage, if the stage-theoretic translation scheme is assumed, or if the perdurantist translation is assumed, we are summations of stages differing only in the future, so our present desires are the same). I want to learn Hungarian in order to have a great time in Hungary. So then does the animal (in virtue of Leibniz's Law, or in virtue of the fact that a thing's psychological states at a time cannot be affected by its future). That is, the animal wants that I



have a great time in Hungary. So, the animal's desires are satisfied by what happens later. So it receives the benefit of its earlier drudgery. Hence the translation scheme from four-dimensionalist discourse to everyday talk which makes the personite problem disappear, by making the conjunction of (1\*), (2\*) and (3\*) false, is justified, and by performing actions for future gain we are not acting in a way that is inconsistent with the moral status of personites.

## 5. Concerns with M&R's argument

I am not convinced by this line of thought. There are several concerns.

First, let us stay with the forward-looking problem. Even if the animal gets what it wants because someone else (someone numerically distinct from it) benefits and *that* is what it wants, is that necessarily unproblematic? The animal cannot consider what it wants for *itself* since it must think what the person thinks. Is it an autonomous agent in this situation (Hershenov and Taylor 2017)? And if not, is that not in itself problematic? Secondly, we can consider related scenarios where it is not obvious that the personite does have the relevant desires which are satisfied by subsequent events, albeit not by itself undergoing any future experience. Suppose I force my daughter to do her homework. That is wholly morally unproblematic. But, of course, there is, according to the four-dimensionalist, a personite that will suffer and obviously not receive the benefits in terms of the better salary, interesting job, greater leisure time, my daughter will receive in the future. But my daughter is only seven. Does she really have such desires for the future (which will therefore be shared by the personite who will go out of existence on her eighth birthday)? Can we really say that that carefree, live-for-the moment, never-more-than-7-year-old personite will get what it wants when my daughter lands a great job at the age of 21? And if not, how does it benefit? (Of course, my daughter benefits, irrespective of her present desires, because she will *live* the future life, but the personite will not.) Note also that it is not only persons and personites that have moral status (as patients). So do all sentient beings, all things that can suffer. So suppose, thinking of the future, I put my obese dog on a strict diet, which she hates.<sup>3</sup> But she needs it and she benefits from it. However, the corresponding shorter – lived, dog-like being coincident with her, which does not continue to exist when the diet comes to an end, does not benefit, not anyway by *itself* reaping the reward of a more enjoyable future existence. And does my dog really have the relevant future-focused

desires which the coincident short-lived dog-like thing can share? It is not clear, I submit, how convincingly we can say that the shorter-lived thing present in this case does benefit in the future.

If we think about the past-directed form of the personite problem the same sort of concern arises. Suppose Bill commits a serious crime for which he is given the entirely appropriate punishment. The case is one in which from any ordinary point of view the punishment is wholly unproblematic. At the time of the punishment there will be a personite present, Ben, say, who vividly remembers all the details of the crime etc., but did not exist at the time (unless we insist on interpreting talk of temporal existence only in terms of the personal unity relation, or personal counterpart relation – which is what we are seeking a justification for doing). Since the case is past directed we cannot speak in terms of Ben's desire for the future. Is there anything to render the suffering inflicted on Ben unproblematic? Do the memories he has of the past crime and all the psychological continuities he has with the past person (who is also, of course, still present) do so? Do we really think that it is right and proper (to use Locke's words) that on the Great Day, when all hearts are opened, each should receive his doom, his consciousness (Locke says 'conscience') alone accusing or excusing him?<sup>4</sup> And if not, can we think that this is so in the present life?

I therefore remain unconvinced that the problem-eliminating translation scheme from four-dimensional discourse to everyday discourse recommended by M&R – which translates the apparently true conjunction of (1\*), (2\*) and (3\*) by a falsehood – can be justified.

But even if it can, more will have been done in doing so than *just* to point to the correct understanding, from the four-dimensionalist viewpoint, of temporary and temporal intrinsic properties as primarily borne by stages and only derivatively borne by (temporally extended) persons and personites.<sup>5</sup> What has to be done is to explain why the personal unity relation and/or the personal counterpart relation (and the analogous relations in the case of non-personal sentient beings like dogs) *alone*, unlike the animal unity relation/counterpart relation and the unity relations/counterpart relations for those personites who are shorter-lived because the psychological continuity conditions for them are stricter, are of moral significance, so that being a sentient being which is a proper temporal part of a person divests one of the right to be considered individually in the moral calculus. I have suggested that &R have not convincingly explained that.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. Note that there will be many other personites which I will outlive, which unlike the animal do not have purely biological persistence conditions. There will be many with purely psychological persistence conditions which are personites, not persons, just because their psychological persistence conditions requires a higher degree of psychological continuity/connectedness than the personal unity relation. I say this to forestall the thought that only the personal unity relation is relevant when considering what is morally relevant because it is constituted by some sort of psychological relation. I focus in what follows on a scenario involving a brain-transplant, in which the personite under discussion is an animal, for convenience of reference to the relevant (perdurantist) unity relation and (stage-theoretic) temporal counterpart relation.
2. M&R's justification for thinking that 3\*) comes out false on their translation scheme is most easily explained by reference to their explanation of the truth-conditions of past-tense statements (2024: 683). They indicate that future-tense statements can be dealt with 'likewise'. They consider a situation in which there is a person, Lucia, a personite, Lucia-minus (say, Lucia in her middle age) and Lucia-now, the present stage of (now middle-aged) Lucia. Lucia-now is sitting simpliciter. Lucia-minus is sitting derivatively now because it contains a stage, Lucia-now, which exists now and is sitting simpliciter. Lucia-now was standing because there is a stage of teenage Lucia (not a stage of Lucia-minus) which is standing simpliciter to which Lucia-now is related by the personal counterpart relation. The middle-aged personite, Lucia-minus, was standing because it contains a stage existing now, Lucia-now, which was standing. Hence (2024: 683) 'Lucia-minus was previously standing but only derivatively' (derivatively just as Lucia-minus is now sitting derivatively). Mutatis mutandis, 'the animal here now will be standing around chatting with the locals in Hungary' is true on M&R's proposal in the scenario described and 3\*) is false and so is 2\*).
3. The same argument can be given by considering taking a toddler to the dentist.
4. Locke 1975 *Essay II.xvii.22*. Locke anticipates the past-directed form of the personite problem: 'But, why one intellectual substance may not have represented to it, as done by itself what it never did, and was perhaps done by some other agent will be difficult to conclude from the nature of things. And that it never is so will by us, till we have clearer views of the nature of thinking substances, be best resolved into the goodness of God, who as far as the happiness or misery of any of his sensible creatures is concerned in it will not, by a fatal error of theirs, transfer from one to another that consciousness which draws reward or punishment with it.' (*Essay II.xvii.13*)
5. Strictly, the Lewisian distinction is between intrinsic properties borne by stages (*being bent*) and other properties of persons and personites, relational properties indexed to times (*being bent at midnight*).
6. I have not considered separately whether the stage theorist has a reply to the perdurantist, since M&R emphasize that their response to the personite problem can be used by either perdurantist or stage theorist. But I note that

there is a special difficulty for the stage theorist (see Noonan 2022). According to the stage theorist, I am the animal, i.e. we are one stage. The ascription of a moral status is not tensed. So, since I am the animal, the animal has a moral status just as I do (Leibniz's Law). This will be correct to assert in any context if the stage-theoretic translation scheme applies only to tensed predicates. So it will be true, and correct to say of the animal, however referred to and in every context, that it has moral status. But it must be true in *some* context to say that the person will outlast the animal. So, it seems that there will be some context in which it will be correct to assert both 'the animal has moral status' and the conjunction of the three starred propositions, i.e., that the animal will endure the agony of learning Hungarian, will cease to exist before the Hungarian trip and therefore will have no pleasant experiences during it. So, the stage theorist cannot render the personite problem unstatable, however he translates tensed discourse into his theory. The personite problem will inevitably be statable in some context of discussion.

## Disclosure statement

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