

## The Personite Problem and the Stage-Theoretic Reply

Harold Noonan\*

Received: 1 July 2021 / Revised: 28 August 2021 / Accepted: 15 October 2021

*Abstract:* Personites are shorter-lived, person-like things that extend across part of a person's life. Their existence follows from the standard perdurance view of persons. Johnston argues that it has bizarre moral consequences. For example, it renders morally problematic spending time learning a difficult language in anticipation of going abroad. The crucial thought is that if persons have moral status so do personites. Johnston argues for this claim. Kaiserman responds, on behalf of stage theory, that this only works on a perdurantist account. This is a conservative response to the problem. It seeks to show that retaining the ontology of perdurantism one can resolve the difficulty by a semantic change. I show that the personite problem can be reworked as an argument against stage theorists. The stage theorist can respond by rejecting an assumption of the reasoning. But if it is acceptable for him to do so the perdurantist can reject this assumption too, which is enough by itself to block Johnston's argument. Thus, for all it helps with the personite problem, stage theorists might as well be perdurantists.

*Keywords:* Personites; perdurance; stage-theory; moral status; Johnston.

---

\* University of Nottingham

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5538-5444>

 University of Nottingham, Department of Philosophy, Room C41 Humanities, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK

 [Harold.Noonan@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Harold.Noonan@nottingham.ac.uk)

## 1. Introduction

Personites are shorter-lived, very person-like things that extend across part, but not the whole, of a person's life. The term is introduced by Johnston (2016; 2017). That there are personites is a consequence of the standard perdurance view of persons championed by David Lewis (1986). Johnston argues that the existence of personites has bizarre moral consequences. For example, if there is a personite now coinciding with me which will not exist tomorrow this renders morally problematic my planned visit to the dentist today, since the personite, unlike me, will suffer pain today but not live long enough to experience any gain. The same reasoning renders morally problematic spending time learning a difficult language in anticipation of going abroad. Again, in accordance with this reasoning, taking a child to the dentist or making her do her homework become morally problematic actions.

The crucial thought in the background of these reflections is that *no relation (e.g., being a child of, being the wife of, being the creation of, being part of) a sentient being has to another can deprive it of the right to be counted (as a patient) in the moral calculus.*<sup>1</sup> Hence the relation a personite has to a person cannot do so. Personites, if they exist, have moral status.

Johnston gives a more precise argument that personites have moral status. Kaiserman (2019) argues, on behalf of the stage theory (Sider 2001; Hawley 2001), that this only works on a perdurantist account. On a stage-theoretic account, he argues, it fails. This is a conservative response to the problem. It seeks to show that one can retain the ontology of the perdurantist and resolve the difficulty by a semantic change. I show that the personite problem for perdurantism can be reworked as an argument against stage theorists. The stage theorist can respond by rejecting an assumption of the

---

<sup>1</sup> This entails that other things being equal, the suffering of two sentient beings (which considered individually have moral status) is worse than the suffering of one, however they are related. (Hence it rules out a hedonic moral calculus which treats suffering as like mass, and so not additive in the case of coinciding things. Perhaps this most primitive form of hedonism, to which 'the most telling objection has been regarded as being that it treats persons as mere receptacles of good-making features', is the only refuge for the believer in personites [Johnston 2017, 642, fn. 5]).

reasoning. But if it is acceptable for the stage theorist to do so the perdurantist can reject this assumption too, and this enough by itself for him to block Johnston's argument. Thus, stage theorists are no better placed than perdurantists to deal with the personite problem. For all it helps with the personite problem, stage theorists might as well be perdurantists.

## 2. The personite problem

First, I state Johnston's challenge to perdurantists more carefully in the form Kaiserman discusses (in the following 'x in w is a duplicate of y in v' means 'x in w instantiates all the same intrinsic properties as y in v'):

- (1) For all possible worlds w and possible objects x, if x is a person in w then x has moral status in w.
- (2) For all possible worlds w and v and possible objects x and y, if x in w is a duplicate of y in v, then x has moral status in w if y has moral status in v.
- (3) For all personites x, there are a possible object y and possible world w such that y is a person in w and y in w is a duplicate of x in the actual world.
- (4) Therefore, all personites have moral status.

## 3. The stage-theoretic response

Kaiserman objects to premiss (3) on behalf of stage theory. The objection is obvious. Stage theory has the same ontology as, but a different semantics from, perdurantist theory. It gives an account of temporal predication in terms of temporal counterpart relations. Hence, according to the stage theorist persons are instantaneous person-stages; that is just a matter of what 'person' means. So, in fact, no *non-instantaneous* proper part of a maximal sum of person-stages linked pairwise by personal unity is a duplicate of any (even merely possible) person since no non-instantaneous thing can be a duplicate of any instantaneous thing. So no personite can be a duplicate of a person. Premiss (3) is false.

Unfortunately, this reply to Johnston does not prevent a reworking of the argument for the possession of moral status by personites which

threatens the stage theorist as much as the original threatens the perdurance theorist.

To see this, we need only recall that stage theory is the temporal analogue of Lewisian modal counterpart theory and what follows from that. As Kaiserman explains, according to stage theory where I am now, i.e., where the instantaneous stage denoted by the token of ‘I’ I am now uttering is, there is not “a multiplicity of entities with different counterpart relations” (Kaiserman 2019, 220). There is just one object coincident with me—*me*.<sup>2</sup> But there are a variety of different counterpart relation in which that one object stands to others. ‘I will be in Hungary next year’ is true (if it is) if there is a personal temporal counterpart of me which is in Hungary next year. This may be true even if there is here no human animal/body which is in Hungary next year. For example, this will be so if I have a brain transplant before I depart and the psychological continuity account is the correct account of personal identity, i.e., of the personal temporal counterpart relation. Thus, even though every human animal is a person-stage, and ‘the human animal here’, as uttered by me now, denotes the person stage ‘I’ denotes, ‘the human animal here will be in Hungary next year’, uttered by me now may not be true, since the term ‘the human animal’ may evoke the human animal counterpart relation. This is, of course, exactly analogous to what Lewis says about *de re* modal claims.

So consider the following scenario (elaborated from Johnston). I am going to Hungary next year (at time  $t_2$ ). Before, at time  $t_1$ , I will have a brain-transplant (so when I say ‘I am going to Hungary next year’ I mean ‘the composite of my brain and new body is going’). My old body will be disposed of. So the animal here now will be no more after  $t_1$ . Before  $t_1$  you, who have my best interests at heart, will have to choose whether to make me learn Hungarian before the brain transplant, knowing that it will be unpleasant for me to do so, but aware that I will benefit greatly once I am in Hungary.

Now the reworked argument against stage theory can be given. According to the stage theorist: I am a person, so I have moral status. The only

---

<sup>2</sup> In fact, this proposition is the main focus of Kaiserman’s (2019, 219-20) replies to objections. That he is exactly right about this is also precisely the crucial premiss in my objection to him.

thing I am coincident with is me. I am coincident with the human animal here. So it is me. Leibniz's Law holds. So the human animal here has moral status. You have the ability to cause me, before my departure to Hungary and also before the brain transplant, pain (by making me learn Hungarian), i.e., you have the ability to ensure that there is a future personal counterpart of me existing before the brain transplant which suffers pain.<sup>3</sup> That will also be an animal counterpart of me, since no brain-transplant will have taken place when it exists. So it will be an animal counterpart of the animal here. So the animal here will exist at that time, just as I will, and will be in pain. Now suppose the painful future existence of that counterpart of me will ensure that the person-stages in Hungary related to me-now by the personal counterpart relation will be pain-free (I will be able to follow the lessons in school and mix freely with the Hungarian children). Then if I say now, 'I will suffer pain before my brain transplant but will benefit by being pain-free when I am in Hungary' I will speak truly. But although I will speak truly if I say, 'Before my brain transplant the human animal here will suffer', it will not be true for me to say, 'the human animal here will benefit subsequently'. But I am the human animal here and I have moral status. So the human animal here has moral status. So choosing to inflict the future pain on me before my brain transplant in order to prevent subsequent suffering in Hungary is morally problematic, since it will ensure the infliction of pain on the animal here from which it will never benefit. If you make that choice you are choosing to make it true that something existing now which is endowed with moral status will suffer pain in the future from which it will never benefit.

So goes the argument that the stage theorist as well as the perdurantist faces the personite problem. Of course, corresponding to every personite the perdurantist recognises and must regard as a duplicate of a possible person, the stage theorist must recognise a temporal counterpart relation. For, as noted, the perdurantist and stage-theorist have the same ontology. So in this argument 'the animal here' can be replaced by any singular term which

---

<sup>3</sup> Why do you have this ability? Perhaps because I am a young child, and you are my parent and for family reasons I am being sent to Hungary next year to live with my grandparents. Understand the scenario in this way.

according to the perdurantist refers to an appropriately short-lived personite.

The response the stage-theorist must make is obvious. He must channel his inner Lewis and deny that I can infer from the joint truth of ‘I have moral status’ and ‘I am the animal here’ that ‘the animal here has moral status’ is true. He must say that ‘has moral status’ is inconstant in denotation (in Lewis’s sense [Lewis 1971; Lewis 1986, 248ff]).<sup>4</sup> When a token of ‘has moral status’ is attached to a token of a subject term (e.g., ‘I’), and/or uttered in a context, which evokes (to use Lewis’s language) the personal counterpart relation, it denotes the class of person-stages, i.e., the class of persons, so the token sentence utterance is true. When a token of ‘has moral status’ is attached to a co-designating token which evokes some other, morally insignificant, temporal counterpart relation (like the animal or body temporal counterpart relation) it denotes the empty class, so that token sentence utterance is false, despite the co-designation. So, although ‘I have moral status’ is true, ‘this animal here has moral status’ is false, even though ‘I am the animal here’ is true.

What if the stage-theorist does not respond in this way? Then he is committed to saying that all three of the following propositions are true (expressed by sentences uttered in a single context where the only temporal counterpart relation evoked is the one for animal persistence): (a) this animal here has moral status, (b) if tutoring in Hungarian goes ahead this

---

<sup>4</sup> Kaiserman does not speak in Lewisean terms of ‘inconstancy’. But he does say that the stage theorist should relativized the predication of temporal properties to a choice of counterpart relation. Nor does he enquire whether the (crucial) predicate ‘has moral status’ is inconstant in denotation. He does, however, say that the stage theorist should insist that there is a particular counterpart relation which is such that what I ought to do depends on what is true of me relative to that counterpart relation—this is the one that matters. Thinking all this through in Lewisean terms and responding to the reworking of the personite argument I gave leads, I argue, to the conclusion that the stage theorist should say that ‘has moral status’ is inconstant in denotation. But if he can say this so can the perdurantist. Note that in the modal case Lewis does not think that modal predication is inconstant because counterpart theory is correct; rather, he thinks the inconstancy is a fact that any account of modal predication must accommodate; acceptance of inconstancy does not require acceptance of counterpart theory.

animal will be caused to suffer before the brain-transplant, (c) this animal will never benefit. So, to conform to the common-sense view that in insisting on the tutoring in Hungarian before the departure to Hungary you (my parent) are acting wholly unproblematically morally,<sup>5</sup> the stage-theorist must deny that it *follows* from these three propositions that this animal's suffering is in any way morally problematic. He must say that if we are told that something that possesses of moral status has had suffering inflicted on it from which it has not benefited and will not benefit, we cannot *infer* that that action has thereby any moral cost.<sup>6</sup> Whereas if we deny the constancy of 'has moral status' we can endorse this inference.

But, of course, if the stage theorist can deny that 'has moral status' is constant in denotation so can the perdurance theorist. And if one cannot infer from the truth of 'X has moral status' and 'X=Y' that 'Y has moral status' is true, a fortiori one cannot infer from the truth of 'X has moral status' and the truth of 'X is a (mere) duplicate of Y' that 'Y has moral status' is true. So the perdurance theorist can acknowledge the existence of personites and deny their moral status, i.e., deny premiss (2) of Johnston's argument.

If this is deemed unsatisfactory a more drastic response to the personite problem is needed, as Johnston argues: perhaps the perdurantist/stage-theoretic ontology must be rejected, perhaps even the ontology of liberal endurantists (Kaiserman 2019, 219) along with it, and perhaps any ontology consistent with naturalism. That discussion is for another place.

---

<sup>5</sup> Which must be so in this case unless all education is somehow morally problematic! (So, of course, to give the argument against the stage theorist there is no need to consider Johnston's Hungarian language learning scenario. Just consider taking a child to the dentist or making her do her homework.)

<sup>6</sup> Note that to say such suffering is a moral cost is not, of course, to say that it must be immoral to inflict it. It is no part of ordinary moral thought that this follows. It is no part of ordinary moral thought that it cannot in any circumstance be morally justified, on balance, to inflict suffering from which it will not benefit on a possessor of moral status. Rather, it is part of common-sense morality that such circumstances are common (for example, "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one" [Mr Spock, Star Trek]).

---

### References

- Hawley, Katherine. 2001. *How Things Persist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnston, Mark. 2016. "Personites, Maximality and Ontological Trash." *Philosophical Perspectives* 30(1): 198–228. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpe.12085>
- Johnston, Mark. 2017. "The Personite Problem: Should Practical Reason Be Tabled?" *Noûs* 51(3): 617–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12159>
- Kaiserman, Alex. 2019. "Stage Theory and the Personite Problem." *Analysis* 79(2): 215–222. <https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/any074>
- Lewis, David. 1971. "Counterparts of Persons and Their Bodies." *Journal of Philosophy* 68(7) 203–11. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2024902>
- Lewis, David. 1986. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sider, Theodore. 2001. *Four Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.