Philosophy and
Phenomenological Research

Philosophy and Phenomenological Research
doi: 10.1111/phpr.12553

Are My Temporal Parts Agents?

ALEXANDER DIETZ
University of Southern California

When we think about ethics, we normally focus on a particular sort of agent: the individual person. Some philosophers have argued that we should rethink the limits of what counts as an ethically relevant unit of agency by expanding outward, and claiming that groups of people can have normative reasons for action. In this paper, I explore whether we can go in the other direction. Are there sub-personal beings who count as agents with their own reasons for action? In particular, might the temporal parts of persons, beings like "me-in-my-twenties," be thought of as normative agents? This idea, I argue, has deep attractions, and deep, but surmountable, challenges. And if we do accept this idea, I argue, this can indirectly help to support the case for thinking that groups can have reasons for action.

1. Introduction

When we think about what ought to be done, we often have the actions of a particular sort of agent in mind. Consider some typical ethical questions. Should I pursue a career that will get me fame and influence, or should I just try to be happy? Should I save money for my children to attend prestigious colleges, or should I give it all away to benefit much poorer children halfway around the world? Would it be OK for me to contribute to climate change by flying back home for vacation, if my own contribution probably wouldn't make a difference? In all these cases, we are thinking about the actions of *individual persons*, like you and me.[1]

We might, however, question whether the individual person is really the only sort of agent that it is appropriate to focus on. In particular, one way of departing from the focus on individual persons would be to embrace the idea that *groups* of people might themselves have normative reasons for action, which are not reducible to individual reasons.[2] For example, it might be that while our individual contributions to climate change do not make a difference, we together have reasons to reduce our combined emissions.

This paper, however, is not primarily about collective reasons for action, but about another possible departure from the ordinary focus of our ethical thinking. We can think of the question of whether we should recognize groups as having reasons for action as the question of whether we should expand the limits of the ethically relevant unit of agency. The question I am interested in here is: if these limits can expand, can they also

[1] Or rather, individual persons as we normally understand them, as I will discuss in Section 2.

[2] See Jackson 1987, Parfit 1988, Isaacs 2014, Wringe 2016, and Dietz 2016.

contract? If in the group we find a "bigger" unit of agency, might there also be a "smaller" unit of agency? That is, might it be the case that, just as the actions of groups consist in the actions of their individual members, the actions of individual persons themselves consist in the even more metaphysically basic actions of some further unit of agency, which is itself an appropriate subject of ethical assessment?

What might this unit of agency be? There are several possible candidates, but I will here focus on one.[3] According to a widely accepted view in metaphysics, persons, like physical objects generally, are extended not only in space, but also in time. As a result, they have not only spatial parts, but temporal parts, or what Eric Olson calls *subpersons*.[4] For example, one subperson is *twenty-year-old-me*, a temporal part of mine that comes into existence when I turn twenty, and that ceases to exist when I turn twenty-one. I will explore the idea of seeing the subperson as a further unit of agency.

The notion of treating beings like this as agents is not new. As Butler wrote, on Locke's psychological theory of personal identity, "our present self is not, in reality, the same with the self of yesterday, but another like self or person coming in its room, and mistaken for it; to which another self will succeed tomorrow."[5] Now, Butler saw this as a reductio of Locke's theory. Yet the idea that our present, past, and future "selves" might be thought of as distinct agents is one that has struck a number of philosophers as compelling.[6] And the notion that persons have temporal parts, or subpersons, offers us one way of making sense of this idea.

I have two aims in this paper. My first aim is to clarify the motivations and drawbacks of recognizing subpersons as a locus of ethical evaluation even more basic than the individual person. I will argue that we have good reasons for finding the view that subpersons are genuine agents with reasons for action attractive. As we will see, this view also faces serious challenges, but I will argue that they are not insurmountable.

My second aim is to argue for a conditional claim: if we do recognize the subperson as an ethically relevant unit of agency, then this can strengthen the case for recognizing the group as an ethically relevant unit of agency.

I proceed as follows. In Section 2, I discuss the idea of subpersons, and how they might relate to persons. In Section 3, I discuss what reasons we have for thinking of subpersons as agents. In Section 4, I discuss whether the reasons of persons and their subpersons could come apart. In Section 5, I discuss how the view that subpersons are agents bears on the question of whether groups have reasons for action. Section 6 concludes.

---

[3] Other candidates include putative sub-personal agents that the person might be said to be constituted by at any given time, rather than only across time. For example, Brian Hedden notes that in cognitive science, it is common to think of the mind as composed of semi-autonomous subsystems or "modules," which we might think of as distinct agents (Hedden 2015: 198–199).

[4] Olson 2010. See also Johnston 2017. Whereas I am focusing primarily on the idea of seeing subpersons as normative agents, Olson and Johnston focus on the idea of seeing subpersons as normative patients, beings whose interests we persons ought to take into account. For a more general introduction to temporal parts, see Sider 2001.

[5] Butler 1975: 102.

[6] For example, see Jackson 1987: 103–106; Parfit 1984: 92–93; Hurley 1989: 136–148; Sebo 2015a and 2015b; and Hedden 2015: 6–7.

2. Subpersons as agents

Again, the view that persons have temporal parts, or subpersons, is implied by the more general view that physical objects are extended not only in space, but also in time. This view is called *perdurantism*. Perdurantists claim that, if I spend the morning in my apartment and the afternoon in the library, I am never strictly speaking entirely in either my apartment or the library. Rather, there is a part of me, my morning-part, that is in my apartment, and another part, my afternoon-part, that is in the library.

Perdurantism stands in contrast to the *endurantist* view that persons, and objects generally, are not extended in time, but are instead wholly present whenever they exist. While the debate between these views remains unresolved, perdurantism is widely accepted, because it is thought to help solve a variety of metaphysical puzzles.[7]

Perdurantists typically claim that we have temporal parts corresponding to every period of time that we exist, from momentary "time-slices" to longer "segments," like my morning-part, or my October-part, or my 1990s-part.[8] This means that there are a number of possible versions of the view that subpersons can be agents, depending on which of these subpersons we have in mind. I will initially leave this matter open.

Next, I noted earlier that, when we are thinking about ethics, we naturally focus on individual persons like you and me as the relevant agents. But, I suggested, we might also consider the possibility that subpersons are agents with their own reasons for action. These claims now require some clarification.

In making these claims, I was taking for granted certain assumptions about what individual persons like you and me are like. What we should say is that the agents we ordinarily focus on in our ethical thinking are individual persons like you and me, *as we normally understand them*. For example, I was assuming that individual persons like you and me can, these days, normally expect to live for around 70 or 80 years.

The reason why we need to make such seemingly obvious assumptions explicit is that the view we are interested in here may call them into question. That is, this view may call into question two things: what sorts of beings count as persons, and what sorts of beings you and I really are. First, there is a case to be made that if subpersons were agents of the sort capable of having normative reasons for action, they would have to qualify as persons. According to Locke, a person is "a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places."[9] But plausibly, a being could count as an agent, and one subject to ethical assessment, only if it had the sorts of capacities of thought and reflection that Locke mentions, and so would meet this definition of a person.[10] Second, if we end up accepting that the subpersons of the long-lived beings we normally take ourselves to be are thinking, reflective agents, we might wonder whether *we* are actually these subpersons. In fact, Ted Sider has argued that we are; and Olson has argued that if subpersons existed, then since a person and her present subpersons would all be in indistinguishable epistemic circumstances, it seems unclear how you could ever tell which one you were.[11]

---

7 Sider 2001: Chaps. 4–5.

8 Olson 2007: 101.

9 Locke 1975: 335.

10 A natural question this raises is whether groups would also have to qualify as persons in order for the group to be an ethically relevant unit of agency. I will not pursue this question here.

11 Sider 2001: 188–208; Olson 2002: 192.

For ease of exposition, I will simply stipulate that by "person," I mean to refer to beings that can normally expect to live for around 70 or 80 years, and when I talk about "subpersons," I mean to refer to the temporal parts of beings with that average lifespan. I will also continue to assume that we are persons, or the beings that can normally expect to live for around 70 or 80 years, and will, for the purposes of this paper, set aside Sider and Olson's important challenges to this assumption.[12]

In a moment, I will discuss what reasons we might have for thinking that subpersons are agents. However, recall that our interest in this question is motivated by the more general question of whether there is a unit of agency relevant to ethics whose actions are even more metaphysically basic than those of the person. Even if we do end up accepting that subpersons are agents, why should we think their actions are more metaphysically basic than those of persons?

If we are endurantists, then we might still be happy to talk about temporally distinguished "selves" as existing and acting. We might think that, when I talk about me-as-a-child or me-as-an-adolescent, this is just a convenient shorthand for talking about the kind of person that I was at those times, rather than genuinely distinct beings.[13] Or we might be happy to accept that such beings exist in a more substantial sense, but claim that a given such being will, as long as it exists, be identical with the person. However, if endurantism is true, it seems there is little motivation for thinking that the actions of these beings would be metaphysically prior to the actions of persons. After all, endurantists claim that when I raise my arm, I myself am wholly present. So, at least initially, there doesn't seem to be any reason to doubt that I myself directly perform this action.[14]

In contrast, if we are perdurantists, we will likely be happy to claim that the actions of subpersons are prior to the actions of persons. After all, perdurantists claim that when I raise my arm, only a tiny part of me is wholly present. So how can I take credit for raising my arm? I count as raising my arm, perdurantists can claim, only *in virtue* of the fact that I have a temporal part who raises his arm. In other words, the action of the subperson is metaphysically prior to the action of the person. Of course, I might have many temporal parts that are simultaneously raising their arms. The most metaphysically basic actions, presumably, would be those of whichever are the shortest-lived parts that count either as raising their arms, or as performing even finer-grained actions in which the raising of my arm consists.

3. Why think that subpersons are agents?

Suppose we accept the perdurantist view that persons have temporal parts, or subpersons. How can we decide whether these entities should qualify as agents?

---

[12] For critical discussion of Sider's view, see Olson 2007: 125–128. As Olson notes, the epistemic problem raised by the idea of subpersons parallels epistemic problems for certain influential views about personal identity, and there are several proposed solutions to these parallel problems. See Olson 2002. Some of these solutions, including the externalist solution defended in Brueckner and Buford 2009, and the linguistic solution defended in Kovacs 2016, may also be helpful in the present context. In addition, we may find the problem less worrisome if we think that persons and subpersons would have corresponding reasons for action, an issue that I will discuss in Section 4.

[13] Compare Brink 1997: 111.

[14] However, matters may turn out to be more complex on closer inspection. In particular, certain versions of endurantism, including the accounts described in Hawthorne 2006: Chap. 5 and in Miller 2006, may be friendlier to priority claims of the sort in question.

Now, we might think that we could decide whether subpersons are agents by applying a more general theory of agency. For example, suppose that we think that some being is an agent just in case it is capable of performing actions, and that some being counts as performing an action just in case its behavior is caused in the right way by its beliefs and desires. And suppose we think that a being can be an agent of the sort that can be subject to ethical assessment only if it meets certain further conditions, such as the capacity to reflect or deliberate. Then, we might think, to tell whether a subperson is an agent of the right sort, we just need to tell whether it meets these conditions.

Such theories might help us to rule out some subpersons as candidates for agency. For example, reflection and deliberation, it seems, will always take at least some amount of time. So if an agent needs to exist throughout at least one such process, then time-slices will just be too short-lived to count as agents. But to assess whether longer-lived parts count as agents, we would still need some way to tell whether it makes sense to attribute things such as beliefs, desires, and behavior to a subperson, rather than only to the person.

In the rest of this section, I will describe several more promising arguments that we can use to motivate the idea that we should treat subpersons as agents. While I will not try to show that any of these arguments are conclusive, I will try to show that there are compelling reasons at least to take the idea of subpersons as agents seriously.

One strategy for arguing for the agency of subpersons starts from the observation that many subpersons are intrinsically just like beings whom we would count as agents. For example, consider a subperson of yours, *S*, that we define as existing for some five-year segment of your adult life. We can imagine a "mirror person," *M*, who comes into existence with qualitatively identical intrinsic bodily and psychological characteristics as S, continues to have parallel such characteristics over the next five years, and at the end of five years, is annihilated. M, I take it, would clearly count as an agent. So we might try to use this observation to support the idea that S is also an agent.[15]

One way of developing this strategy would be to claim that *agency* is an intrinsic property. In that case, if M is an agent, then since S is intrinsically just like M, S must also be an agent. Alternatively, we might try to use this strategy not to support the conclusion that subpersons are agents strictly speaking, but to support the conclusion that it would be appropriate to focus on them, and to treat them like agents, in our ethical thinking. In particular, we might think that this strategy does not show that subpersons are agents, because we might deny that *agency* is an intrinsic property. We might think, following Sider, that properties relevant to agency, such as *being conscious*, are *maximal*. When a property is maximal, in Sider's sense, this entails that something can fail to be F in virtue of the fact that it is a large part of an F.[16] As a result, if being conscious is maximal, then being conscious is not intrinsic, because whether something is conscious can depend on what it is part of. However, although Sider argues that *being conscious* is an extrinsic property, he also claims that there is an associated intrinsic property, which we can call *being conscious**, which differs from it only in being non-maximal. In other

---

[15] Johnston 2017: 618–623; see also van Inwagen 1981. It is important to note that a similar strategy could be used to argue that many of our *spatial* parts are agents. For example, it seems that there could be a person who was intrinsically just like my "nose-complement": the part of me that includes all of me except for my nose.

[16] Sider 2003: 139; see also Burke 1994.

words, to be conscious just is to have the intrinsic property of *being conscious** while failing to be a proper part of a larger conscious* object.[17] So if M is conscious, then S, being intrinsically just like M, must at least be conscious*. And following Trenton Merricks, we might wonder why we should care about consciousness rather than consciousness*.[18] Similarly, even if we deny that subpersons are agents, we might wonder why we should care about agency rather than agency*.[19] If we have no reason to care about agency rather than agency*, then even if subpersons are not agents, they may still be beings which it is appropriate to focus on, and to treat relevantly like agents, in our ethical thinking.

In addition to these rather abstract and theoretical considerations, we can also see how thinking of subpersons as agents can represent an attractive perspective by consulting our intuitions about three more specific kinds of cases.

First, it is intuitive to treat subpersons as distinct agents when we think about time travel examples. In particular, suppose that you travel back in time to meet your past self.[20] Again, the notion of subpersons offers us one way to make sense of this intuitive notion of past or future "selves." And in this situation, it seems, it would be natural for third parties to treat and think of your two selves, and for your two selves to treat and think of each other, as different agents. For example, if your selves were in the mood for cards, it seems they could choose a two-player game—they would not be confined to solitaire. And I suspect that it would be natural for your two selves to treat each other as different agents even if they knew that they were the past and future selves of the same person, and even if your later self could remember what it was like to be your earlier self. Examples like this can make it more natural to think of our lives as a succession of multiple agents, a fact that we ignore only because our past, present, and future selves are often not salient to each other.

Second, as Derek Parfit has argued, it can be natural to view present and past selves of some person as distinct agents when this person has undergone significant psychological changes.[21] This can be true both when we are thinking about our own present and past selves, and when we are thinking about the present and past selves of other people. For example, Parfit imagines a nineteenth-century Russian nobleman who, in his idealistic youth, signs a document which will automatically give away the vast estates he is due to inherit, and which can only be revoked with his wife's consent. The nobleman then asks his wife to promise not to give her consent. Over time, his ideals fade, and he asks his wife to revoke the document. But, Parfit suggests, his wife could plausibly regard herself as not released from her promise, on the ground that there is an important sense in which the man who she is now married to is not the man to whom she made the promise.[22] And this remains plausible even though the psychological changes are not sufficient for us to say that there has been a break in personal identity, say, because there has been no break in the nobleman's psychological continuity. This would seem to support at

---

17 Ibid.: 147–148.

18 Merricks 2003: 155.

19 Compare Johnston 2017, esp. 627.

20 To get a better sense of what this situation might feel like, I recommend watching the film *Looper* (2012).

21 Parfit 1984: 302–306.

22 Ibid.: 326–329.

least treating some subpersons—those which are separated by significant psychological differences—as distinct agents.[23]

Third, it is natural to see our past, present, and future selves as distinct agents when we want to carry out a project that we would need to work on over an extended period of time. For example, in these cases, you might find yourself thinking of your future self as a different person whom you'll need to communicate with and motivate to do his part, and you might motivate your present self to do your part out of fairness to all the work that your past self put in. As David Brink writes, subpersons do and must "interact and co-operate, much as distinct individuals interact and co-operate in groups, in order to plan and execute long-term projects and goals."[24]

In fact, the idea that subpersons are agents in their own right should not be as surprising as it may have initially sounded. Many of us are already intuitively drawn to treat our past or future selves as distinct agents. The idea that we can treat our past or future selves as distinct things from our present selves seems to be one that we often find natural even when we are not engaged in philosophical reflection. Indeed, Galen Strawson claims that a number of people, including himself, systematically fail to identify with their past or future selves. For example, Strawson writes, "it seems clear to me, when I am experiencing or apprehending myself as a self, that the remoter past or future is not my past or future, although it is certainly the past or future of GS the person. . . . I have no significant sense that *I*—the I now considering this question—was there in the further past."[25] But even those of us who do normally identify with our past and future selves have often had the experience of seeing these as distinct agents.

4. Would subpersons and persons have conflicting reasons for action?

Suppose we are convinced that subpersons are agents in their own right. In that case, why should we think that the subperson is an ethically relevant unit of agency—that subpersons have their own reasons for action?

If we accept that subpersons are agents, it seems that this fact alone gives us prima facie reason to think that they are capable of having reasons for action. After all, it seems that the actions of a subperson could easily have morally salient features, in virtue of which we can evaluate them as reasonable or unreasonable. For example, if something a subperson could do would cause someone unnecessary pain, this would seem to provide this agent with an excellent reason against doing so. And if we accept subpersons as agents, then it seems we should accept that they would have all the same capacities as short-lived persons, including the relevant abilities to reflect and evaluate. So it seems that they will indeed have the necessary capacities to have reasons for action.

Even if you are willing to grant that subpersons have their own reasons for action, however, you might be skeptical that it really matters whether we make this claim. We already know that you shouldn't cause unnecessary pain, for example. Does it really matter if we also claim that your today-part shouldn't cause unnecessary pain?

---

[23] Shoemaker 1999 defends a version of this view.

[24] Brink 1997: 114.

[25] Strawson 2004: 433. Similar experiences have been reported by patients suffering from brain damage, and from patients suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. See Nichols 2014: 140–143.

Whether it would make a difference in practice to recognize subpersons as having reasons for action depends on what we think these reasons would be. For example, we might think that subpersons simply inherit their reasons from persons: that is, that some fact gives some subperson a reason to perform some action only if, and because, this fact gives the whole person a reason to do the corresponding (metaphysically less basic) action.[26] On this conservative view, it indeed wouldn't seem to matter whether we thought about the reasons of subpersons, or only the reasons of persons. I will now argue, however, that we have reason to accept a more radical view, on which the reasons of subpersons can in fact come apart from the reasons of the corresponding persons.

To start, it is widely accepted that many of our reasons for action are *agent-relative*. That is, many of our reasons are reasons to bring about outcomes that other agents do not have the same reasons to bring about, because these outcomes are specially related to us in some way. For example, I may have special reasons to do what promotes my own welfare, satisfies my own desires, keeps my own promises, and so on, as opposed to the welfare, desires, or promises of others. But if the subperson and the broader person are two different agents, then we should expect these agents to have different agent-relative reasons for action: we would expect the subperson to have special reasons to care about *her* welfare, desires, or promises, and the person, by contrast, to have special reasons to care about *her* welfare, desires, or promises.

To make things more concrete, let's focus on our reasons to promote our own welfare. Suppose that you—the whole person—have to choose whether to make some sacrifice now for the sake of some greater future reward. Other things equal, it seems, you ought to make the sacrifice, since doing so would be in your overall self-interest. However, think about things from the perspective of one of your present subpersons, who will not live long enough to enjoy the reward. Does she have the same reasons to make the sacrifice?

If we think that agents have special reasons to care about their own welfare, then it seems that the answer should be no. The present subperson's sacrifice may be in the interest of the whole person, but it is not in the subperson's *own* interest, and this fact seems to have at least prima facie normative significance. We can also put the point in terms of compensation. The person has a special kind of justification for making the sacrifice, because she herself will be compensated for the sacrifice: she will be not only the benefactor but also the beneficiary. But the present subperson will not be compensated.[27] So there is a justification for the sacrifice which is available to the person but not to the present subperson. So it seems plausible that the person's reasons for making the sacrifice should be stronger than the present subperson's reasons. As Thomas Nagel has written, prudential intuitions "reflect an individual's conception of himself as a temporally persistent being."[28]

Now, there is an obvious reply to this argument. Even if we grant that a person and her temporal parts are distinct agents, it may be argued, they are nevertheless very closely connected. Each subperson is connected to the other parts of the person through whatever relations we think are involved in personal identity over time, such as certain

[26] Or we might think that persons inherit their reasons from subpersons. After all, we might think, if my actions are to be explained in terms of the actions of my subpersons, then it seems natural to think that my reasons for action should likewise be explained in terms of the reasons of my subpersons. However, I will not pursue this suggestion here.

[27] See Brink 1997: 110–111, Olson 2010: 263, and Johnston 2017: 623–624.

[28] Nagel 1970: 58.

relations of physical and/or psychological continuity and/or connectedness. And even when some fact of special significance to the person as a whole does not apply directly to a given subperson, but rather to the person's past or future subpersons, the subperson in question will still have a special connection to this fact through her relations to these other subpersons, and so should have special reasons to care about it. For example, it may be argued, even though the sacrifice will not benefit the present subperson herself, it will benefit a future subperson with which she is related, so she has reasons to give this benefit special weight after all.

However, even if this is right, we still have grounds for thinking that the reasons of the subperson can come apart from the reasons of the person. This is because, even if the physical and psychological relations that a given subperson bears to past or future subpersons gives her special reasons to care about the things happening with these subpersons, it remains the case that these things are not happening to *her*, and this fact plausibly still makes a difference to her reasons.

The notion that the reasons of persons and subpersons can come apart in these ways — that my present subpersons might often have reason not to make sacrifices for my future interests, or keep promises that I made in the past—seems to represent a radical departure from our ordinary ethical commitments. It also seems to come with further troubling implications. Again, Olson has argued that since a person and her present subpersons seem to be in indistinguishable epistemic circumstances, it seems unclear how you could ever tell which one you were. As a result, if what persons and their subpersons ought to do can often come apart, this seems to imply that it is even harder than we thought to know what we ought to do. These challenges might strike us as compelling reasons to reject subpersons as agents.[29]

On the other hand, there is one way in which the unorthodox normative implications of the view that subpersons are agents can actually give us a reason to accept this view. It is a familiar fact that many of us are often tempted not to make sacrifices for our long-term self-interest, keep promises made long ago, and so on, and we often in fact succumb to these temptations. Why is this? Maybe we just aren't being reflective enough to recognize what we ought to do, or maybe our normative convictions are just not strong enough to overcome the attractions of immediate pleasure or convenience. But if subpersons are agents, then there is a more interesting alternative explanation. Perhaps we simply do not identify with our future or past selves, and so correctly recognize that the subperson that we identify with really shouldn't make the sacrifice or keep the promise. While the person would still be failing to do what she ought to do, this would be at least a partially

[29] There are also at least two other important kinds of challenge which I will not discuss here. First, while I am focused here on the idea of treating subpersons as normative agents, we might think that the motivations for this idea would also support treating subpersons as normative patients, beings whose rights and interests we persons, at least, need to take into account. But treating subpersons as normative patients seems to have a variety of highly counterintuitive implications. For discussion, see Olson 2010: 264–265, and Johnston 2017: 623–624 and ff. Second, Hud Hudson has argued that if we accept a view on which that there are many overlapping agents in my vicinity, such as my temporal or spatial parts, face a challenge which he calls "many-brothers determinism." This is roughly the idea that, whenever one of the other agents in my vicinity performs an action, this seems to entail that I must perform the corresponding action, and so it might seem that we must conclude that I have not acted freely. See Hudson 2001: 39–44.

rationalizing explanation, since it suggests that there is at least one agent in the vicinity who is acting appropriately.[30] (Of course, it would be also less charitable to many actions than the standard view. For example, when prudent sacrifices are made, it would frequently imply that there are at least some agents in the vicinity who are acting inappropriately.)

Similarly, we might argue that the further in the future some benefit will be, the fewer present subpersons will still be around to enjoy it: however many subpersons there are who will be around tomorrow, only some subset of these will be around a year from now.[31] Thus, more of the agents currently sharing my body will have reason to make sacrifices for benefits in the nearer future than would have reason to make sacrifices for benefits in the further future. Another way to look at this is that the agents currently sharing my body will, taken together, have stronger reasons to care about what happens in the more immediate future. This can provide another interesting explanation of a sense in which time bias could be rational.[32]

A final option is to deny the commonsense assumption that whether something happens to me can make a difference to my reasons. This would allow us to maintain that subpersons and persons always have matching agent-relative reasons. For example, we could agree with Parfit that personal identity is "not what matters."[33] That is, when I am considering whether to benefit some future person, for example, Parfit suggests that what matters is not whether this person will be me, but only the degree to which there is continuity and connectedness between the psychological states that I have now, and the states that this person will have at that future time. On this view, it would make no difference to my agent-relative reasons whether I was a person or a subperson. It is also worth noting that, although this view would deny that subpersons have reasons for action which come apart from those of the corresponding persons, it would not commit us to the conservative view that subpersons simply inherit their reasons from persons.[34] There is no sense in which this view makes the individual person the privileged unit of agency.

---

30 Is the identification with the subperson appropriate? Again, it seems that at least one agent in the vicinity —the subperson in question—will be correctly identifying herself, though other many agents in the vicinity will be incorrectly identifying themselves. However, we should also keep in mind that Olson's epistemic challenge calls into question whether even this subperson could be justified in identifying with herself.

31 I am assuming here that subpersons must be temporally continuous. For discussion of this issue, see McKinnon 2008.

32 A challenge for this proposal would arise on certain views of the nature of space and time. In particular, we might think that space and/or time are *gunky*, or infinitely divisible (see Russell 2008). If time is gunky, and if any of my temporal parts which has the right intrinsic properties is an agent, then it seems that there will be both infinitely many agents who will survive long enough to enjoy the benefit, and infinitely many who will not. As a result, we may not be able to say that there are more agents who will not survive. Similarly if space is gunky, and if any of my less-than-full-sized temporal parts (such as my Monday-nose-complement) with the right intrinsic properties is an agent. However, the view that time is gunky is more controversial than the view that space is gunky. So we may be able to avoid this challenge if we accept only full-sized temporal parts, and not spatial parts, as agents.

33 Parfit 1984: Chaps. 12–15. For replies, see Lewis 1983 and Brink 1997.

34 Nor would it commit us to the view, mentioned in an earlier footnote, that persons inherit their reasons from subpersons. On Parfit's view, the reasons of persons and of subpersons would be guaranteed to line up not because there is a dependence relation between them, but rather because these reasons derive from facts about their current psychological states, states which I will always share with any of my present subpersons.

Now, it might seem that, if this strategy is successful, this success would come at the cost of forfeiting our reasons for worrying about subpersons in the first place. Again, if the reasons of persons and subpersons always align, then it seems that we have no reason to pay attention to what subpersons ought to do rather than what persons ought to do. However, again, Parfit's view would still allow us to deny that there is any privileged role for the individual person as a unit of agency. And as I will argue next, there is another reason why recognizing subpersons as agents matters: doing so can help us to indirectly support the case for thinking that there can be collective reasons for action, or reasons possessed by groups of people.

5. How subpersons can support collective reasons

In the beginning of this paper, I noted two ways in which we might rethink the limits of what we recognize as the ethically relevant unit of agency. Rather than focusing only on the individual person, we could expand outward, by claiming that groups have reasons for action; for example, we might claim that we collectively ought to reduce our carbon emissions in order to avoid the harmful effects of climate change. Alternatively, we could focus inward, by claiming that subpersons have reasons for action. I will now discuss another way in which subpersons can make a difference to our ethical thinking. If we focus inward, by claiming that subpersons have reasons for action, this can strengthen the case for expanding outward as well, by claiming that groups have reasons for action.

Subpersons, I will argue, can help us strengthen the case for collective or group reasons in two ways. First, they give us the resources to respond to a compelling objection to collective reasons. Second, I will argue that subpersons give us the resources to offer a new positive argument for collective reasons.

On its face, using subpersons to support collective reasons might seem like an odd strategy. After all, while collective reasons may be controversial, the notion that subpersons are agents in their own right is quite radical, and may strike many people, at least initially, as much more implausible. So it might seem odd to use an implausible claim to support a more plausible one.

However, there are two reasons for thinking that this strategy may hold some promise. First, even if the idea of subpersons as agents strikes us as initially implausible, I have argued that it can be supported by some compelling motivations. And, importantly, these motivations had nothing to do with the idea of collective reasons. So the idea of subpersons as agents is in fact something that we can appropriately appeal to in order to support collective reasons.

Second, while I am focused here on how subpersons might bear on collective reasons, the idea of collective reasons might also be used to support subpersons. In particular, insofar as we find collective reasons plausible, this might make us more comfortable with the idea that there may be other units of agency. It might make it more natural to expect that if in the group we can find a unit of agency "bigger" than the individual person, then we might also find a unit of agency "smaller" than the individual person. And if collective reasons can help to make the idea of subpersons more plausible, then it could become more reasonable to think that we might be able to rely on subpersons to assuage some of our remaining worries about collective reasons. In this way, the ideas of collective reasons and of subpersons could in fact be mutually supporting.

So in what ways can the idea of treating subpersons as agents support the idea of collective reasons? First, treating subpersons as agents can help us to answer an important kind of objection against collective reasons. In particular, it might be argued that collective actions cannot really be assessed as reasonable or unreasonable, because collective actions are simply the sum of the various actions performed by the group's individual members. As Parfit writes in his critique of collective reasons,

> Just as it is individuals, and not groups, who deserve blame, it is individuals, and not groups, who make decisions. (This is so even when these individuals act together as members of a group. When a group decides what to do, this is not a separate decision, over and above the decisions made by the members. We impute a decision to the group, according to certain rules or procedures, given the only actual decisions, which are those taken by the members.)[35]

If a collective action is nothing over and above the various actions performed by the members of the group, it might be claimed, these seemingly metaphysically prior actions must really be the appropriate objects of ethical assessment.

However, if we accept the idea of subpersons as agents, then as I argued earlier, we have good reasons for claiming that the actions of subpersons would be metaphysically prior to the actions of individual persons. In that case, if we want to retain the core commonsense notion that individual persons have reasons for action, we will have to accept that actions which are not metaphysically fundamental can nevertheless be appropriate objects of ethical assessment.

In addition to using the idea of treating subpersons as agents to respond to this objection against collective reasons, I will now show that we can also use this idea to go even further, and construct a new positive argument for collective reasons.

The basic outlines of this argument are as follows. Individual persons can have not only reasons to perform a given action at any given time, but also reasons to perform sets of actions over time. But a set of actions performed by an individual person over time can be relevantly similar to a set of actions performed by a group of people. So if an individual person can have reasons to perform a set of actions over time, then a group can likewise have reasons to perform a set of actions.[36]

First, why should we think that persons have reasons to perform sets of actions over time, and not merely particular actions at particular times?

Common sense and intuitions about cases suggest that we do indeed have reasons to perform sets of actions. When we are deciding what we should do, we are frequently deciding between sets of actions, rather than between individual actions. We often think not only about what we should do at any given time, but also about what we should do with our day, our week, or even our lives.

In addition to these common-sense judgments, it can also seem to us that we have reasons to perform sets of actions when we think about imaginary cases. For example, suppose that I will face two choices, one now, one later, with outcomes as follows:

---

[35] Parfit 1988: 10.

[36] The general strategy of this argument parallels a strategy used by Carol Rovane to defend a view about collective agency. Rovane 1998: 142–150.

		I later	
		do A2	do B2
I now	do A1	Second-best	Bad
	do B1	Bad	Best

In this case, it seems plausible that I should perform a certain set of actions, namely B1 and B2, since this will lead to the best outcome. And I should not do A1 and then A2, since this will lead only to the second-best outcome.

Can we make sense of these judgments purely in terms of reasons for particular actions, rather than sets of actions? We might think, for example, that we can understand the claim that I should do B1 and then B2 simply as the conjunctive claim that I should do B1, and also should do B2. But plausibly, I should do B1 only *if* I will then do B2, since otherwise I will produce the bad outcome. And if all we can claim is that I should do B1 if I then do B2, but should do A1 if I then do A2, this would not explain in what sense I should do the B set and *not* the A set.[37] So in order to accommodate our intuitions, it seems that we should claim that we have reasons to perform sets as such, and not merely the individual actions in a given set.[38]

Next, how are sets of actions by an individual person like the actions of a group of people? It may be claimed that every set of actions performed by an individual person is constituted by the actions of various subpersons, which can be seen as agents in their own right. If we see our lives as divided into the lives of subpersons, then when a person intentionally carries out some set of actions over time, we can see that set as the product of coordination between the subpersons. Again, as Brink writes, subpersons do and must "interact and co-operate, much as distinct individuals interact and co-operate in groups, in order to plan and execute long-term projects and goals."[39] Thus, the intertemporal action of an individual person, like the action of a group, consist in the coordinated actions of multiple distinct agents.[40]

But if we accept that the action of a person over time is a product of the actions performed by distinct agents, then there may be less distance between individual and collective action than we may have thought. As Susan Hurley writes, "The notions of personal action and a personal unit of agency already allow for the possibility and indeed the normality of the corresponding sense of intrapersonal 'collective' agency."[41]

Now, there may also be important disanalogies between the intrapersonal case and the interpersonal case. First, there is an intimate causal connection between the reasons possessed by my subpersons: my present subpersons may often have reasons to do things which will causally influence the reasons that my future subpersons will possess. Second, there are plausibly important constitutive connections between my reasons and those of

---

37 This argument parallels an argument for collective reasons discussed in Parfit 1988: 4–9 and Dietz 2016: 960–961.

38 For criticism of the similar idea that sequences are subject to rational evaluation, see Hedden 2015: Chaps. 6–7.

39 Brink 1997: 114.

40 For more comparisons, see Rovane 1998: 142–150.

41 Hurley 1989: 142.

my subpersons. For example, plausibly, whenever one of my subpersons has a reason to do something that will avoid pain, I must also have a reason to perform the corresponding action. In contrast, we might think, the reasons present in the interpersonal case are more independent. There is not the same kind of intimate causal connection, we might think, between the reasons possessed by each of the individuals in a group. And we might doubt that there could be the same kind of constitutive connection between the reasons of individual members of the group and the reasons of the group itself. For example, we might think that, even if I have a reason to do something that will avoid pain, this may not mean that the group has any reason to act in a way that will allow me to avoid pain.

However, these differences do not seem to me to jeopardize the analogy. First, there do often seem to be causal connections between the reasons of individuals in a group: I may have reason to do something that will affect what you have reason to do. Second, in the sort of constitutive connection between my reasons and those of my subpersons we saw above—that I must have a reason to avoid pain whenever one of my subpersons does—the relevant reasons are reasons of a special kind: agent-relative reasons. While it is plausible that there is a close connection between the agent-relative reasons of persons and subpersons that has no analogy in the interpersonal case, this does not indicate that there will be any disanalogy in cases where only agent-neutral reasons are at play.

Here is a more intuitive and direct way of arguing that a set of actions performed by an individual person over time can be relevantly similar to a group action. First, we can imagine a case where you seem to have strong agent-neutral reasons to perform a certain set of actions. In particular, suppose you are in a two-stage case of the sort described in the table above. More specifically, consider

> *Case One*: You have been entrusted with a machine that can release a chemical into the atmosphere that would reverse the potentially catastrophic effects of climate change. Unfortunately, activating the machine requires a rather inconvenient two-step process: you will need to press a button now, on your twentieth birthday, and press another button in ten years, on your thirtieth birthday. And if by the end of your thirtieth birthday only one button has been pressed, the machine will release a different chemical that would even further devastate the environment. Luckily, you have an excellent memory and a strong will, so if you now intend not only to press the first button now but also to press the second button in ten years, you can be confident that you will follow through.[42]

In this case, it seems that you ought to perform the set of actions in which you press both buttons.

Consider next

> *Case Two*: All is as in Case One, except that you do not have a good memory or a strong will. You know that you cannot ensure that you will press the second button in ten years just by intending now to do so. However, you can ensure that you will press the second button by leaving yourself a reminder.

Again, it seems that you ought to perform the set of actions in which you press both buttons. It might be suggested, plausibly, that what you ought to do is closely connected

[42] This is based on an example offered in Dietz 2016: 960, n. 8.

with what you can form an effective intention to do.[43] But individual action over time often involves "external" mechanisms, like notes to oneself and commitment devices.[44] And apart from the costs involved, it seems plausible that I have no less reason to perform sets of action that require such mechanisms.

Consider next

> *Case Three*: The machine has a different activation method: now, the two buttons simply need to be pressed simultaneously. Unfortunately, the buttons are on opposite sides of the room. Fortunately, on your thirtieth birthday, you will time-travel back to today. At least two of your temporal parts will then meet: twenty-year-old-you, and thirty-year-old-you (that is, the temporal parts that exist just as long as you are twenty and thirty years old, respectively). Twenty-year-old-you will see a time-traveler, thirty-year-old-you, appear at the other end of the room. These two subpersons will then be able to press both buttons simultaneously. Again, twenty-year-old-you will not be able to ensure that thirty-year-old-you presses the second button just by intending now to do so. But twenty-year-old-you will be able to persuade him by talking to him once he appears.

This case, it seems, is relevantly like Case Two. Again, you ought to perform the sequence in which you press both buttons. But you just are the collection of your subpersons, including twenty- and thirty-year-old-you. So it seems that the two subpersons could truly say: "We together ought to press both buttons."

It might be objected that even if we accept that individuals have reasons to perform sets of actions in general, this does not mean we have to accept that you ought to perform the button pressing sequence in Case Three. That is, it might be claimed that while we have reasons to perform sequences in normal cases, the time travel case is not a normal case of individual action over time, and so our reasons to perform sequences do not apply to it.

It is true that the introduction of time travel makes this case quite different from all cases of individual action over time that anyone has ever actually performed. Still, this does not seem to me that it could in itself affect whether a person has a reason to perform a set of actions. For example, suppose that I need to move a couch out from the wall. One way to move the couch would be to move the right side of the couch, then move the left side. Another way to do it would be to move the right side of the couch, then travel thirty seconds into the past, then help my past self out by moving the left side of the couch. This course of action seems just as reasonable as the more standard way of moving the couch.[45] So we should accept that you ought to perform the button pressing sequence in Case Three, and so that your subpersons together ought to press both buttons.

Finally, consider

> *Case Four*: Twenty-year-old-you and an older-looking time-traveler from the future meet in the machine room. Since they share an uncanny resemblance, and since the time-traveler's memories are hazy, both initially think that they are temporal parts of the same person. They discuss the situation, and agree that they together ought to press both buttons. They then learn, however, that they are actually two different people.

---

43 I owe this suggestion to Abelard Podgorski.

44 Compare Sebo 2015a, esp. 137–138.

45 I owe this example to Mark Schroeder.

Here's the question: Should our judgment change? Should the two parties abandon the claim that they together ought to press both buttons? Intuitively, it seems not. In that case, it seems we should accept that groups of people can indeed possess reasons for action.

To resist this conclusion, we might try to find some relevant difference between Cases Three and Four. But again, we cannot point to the difference that might seem particularly forceful: we cannot claim, that is, that the relevant difference is that the set of actions in Case Four is merely the product of the actions of various distinct agents, because if we recognize subpersons as agents, we will have to say the same about the set of actions in Case Three.

What we seem to be left with, then, is to simply appeal to the bare fact that Case Three involves only a single person, whereas Case Four involves a group of distinct persons. But in the absence of some further rationale for why this should make a difference, it is not clear how forceful this is. It would be one thing if your reason for performing the set of actions in Case Three had been a special agent-relative reason. For example, it is at least initially plausible that your two temporal parts together have a reason to do what benefits *you*, whereas two unrelated agents might not have any such reason.[46] But when the reason that your temporal parts collectively have is merely an agent-neutral reason to produce a better outcome, impartially considered, it is not clear why the fact that they are both parts of the same person should be relevant.

Why have I chosen to use examples involving time travel? These examples help to make vivid the way in which our temporal parts have to cooperate in order to carry out long-term projects, analogous to the ways in which different people cooperate. This cooperation is often hidden, but time-travel examples bring it out, by forcing our temporal parts to see each other face to face.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the idea of treating the temporal parts of persons, or subpersons, as agents with their own reasons for action. This idea, I have argued, has both deep attractions, and deep, but surmountable, challenges. I also argued that if we do accept this idea, this can help us to support the notion that we have collective reasons for action. We should not rest content with the assumption that the individual person is the ethically relevant unit of agency: we should both broaden and narrow our horizons.[47]

References

Brink, David O. 1997. "Rational Egoism and the Separateness of Persons." *Reading Parfit*, ed. Jonathan Dancy. Oxford: Blackwell: 96–134.

Brueckner, Anthony and Christopher T. Buford. 2009. "Thinking Animals and Epistemology." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 90: 310–314.

[46] For an argument that two unrelated agents can in fact constitute a group that possesses agent-relative reasons, see Dietz 2016: 963–968.

[47] For helpful feedback and discussion, I would like to thank Maegan Fairchild, Jeremy Goodman, Joe Horton, Nathan Robert Howard, Matt Leonard, Daniel Pallies, Abelard Podgorski, Mark Schroeder, Jonathan Quong, Jeff Sebo, and Ralph Wedgwood.

Butler, Joseph. 1975. "Of Personal Identity." In *The Analogy of Religion, reprinted in Personal Identity*, edited by John Perry. Berkeley: University of California Press. 99–105.

Burke, Michael B. 1994. "Dion and Theon: An Essentialist Solution to an Ancient Puzzle." *The Journal of Philosophy*, 91: 129–139.

Dietz, Alexander. 2016. "What We Together Ought to Do." *Ethics*, 126: 955–982.

Hawthorne, John. 2006. *Metaphysical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hedden, Brian. 2015. *Reasons without Persons: Rationality, Identity, and Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hudson, Hud. 2001. *A Materialist Metaphysics of the Human Person*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Hurley, Susan. 1989. *Natural Reasons*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Isaacs, Tracy. 2014. "Collective Responsibility and Collective Obligation." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 38: 40–57.

Jackson, Frank. 1987. "Group Morality." In *Metaphysics and Morality*, edited by Philip Pettit, Richard Sylvan, and Jean Norman. Oxford: Blackwell. 91–110.

Johnston, Mark. 2017. "The Personite Problem: Should Practical Reason Be Tabled?." *Noûs*, 51: 617–644.

Kovacs, David Mark. 2016. "Self-made People." *Mind*, 125: 1071–1099.

Lewis, David. 1983. "Survival and Identity," in *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1. New York: Oxford University Press.

Locke, John. 1975. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McKinnon, Neil. 2008. "A New Problem of the Many." *Philosophical Quarterly*, 58: 80–97.

Merricks, Trenton. 2003. "Maximality and Consciousness." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 66: 150–158.

Miller, Kristie. 2006. *Issues in Theoretical Diversity: Persistence, Composition, and Time*. Dordrecht: Springer, Netherlands.

Nagel, Thomas. 1970. *The Possibility of Altruism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Nichols, Shaun. 2014. "The Episodic Sense of Self." In *Moral Psychology and Human Agency*, edited by Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 137–155.

Olson, Eric T. 2002. "Thinking Animals and the Reference of 'I'." *Philosophical Topics*, 30: 189–207.

—— 2007. *What Are We? A Study in Personal Ontology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—— 2010. "Ethics and the generous ontology." *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, 31: 259–270.

Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——. 1988. "What We Together Do" (ms.).

Rovane, Carol. 1998. *The Bounds of Agency: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Russell, Jeffrey Sanford. 2008. "The Structure of Gunk: Adventures in the Ontology of Space." *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, 4: 248–274.

Sebo, Jeff. 2015a. "The Just Soul." *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 49: 131–143.

——. 2015b. “Multiplicity, self-narrative, and akrasia.” *Philosophical Psychology*, 28: 589–605.

Shoemaker, David. 1999. “Selves and Moral Units.” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 80: 391–419.

Sider, Theodore. 2001. *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

——. 2003. “Maximality and Microphysical Supervenience.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 66: 139–149.

Strawson, Galen. 2004. “Against Narrativity.” *Ratio*, 17: 428–452.

van Inwagen, Peter. 1981. “The Doctrine of Arbitrary Undetached Parts.” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 62: 123–137.

Wringe, Bill. 2016. “Collective Obligations: Their Existence, Their Explanatory Power, and Their Supervenience on the Obligations of Individuals.” *European Journal of Philosophy*, 24. 472–497.