**Conventionalism about Persons and Reflexive Reference: A Contextualized Approach**

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***Abstract***

*Many Perdurantists have been drawn to the “Conventionalist” idea that our person-directed attitudes can determine whether or not we survive events such as teletransportation. In this paper, I suggest a novel “Contextualist Conventionalism” according to which Conventionalism is true with respect to some, but not all, contexts in which we ask “will I survive?”—instead in “reflexive” contexts, “I” reflexively refers to a thinker whose persistence conditions are mind-independent. Unlike one form of Conventionalism which implies that the reference of “I” is never constrained to reflexively referring to the thinker (cf. Zimmerman (2012), Miller (2013), Kovacs (2020), Kurtsal (2022), Longenecker (2023)), Contextualist Conventionalism instead implies that there are some important contexts where the “I” is so constrained. And unlike another form of Conventionalism that secures such reflexive reference by holding that the survival of the thinker is a mind-dependent matter (a view which might be attributed to Braddon-Mitchell and West (2001), or Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (2004, 2020)), Contextualist Conventionalism secures reflexive reference while avoiding such a radical metaphysical commitment.*

**1. Introduction**

Perdurantism says that persisting objects are made up of temporal parts. In particular, this implies that persons are made up of person-stages that are momentarily existing slices of a person. Thus, much like a person is made up of *spatial* parts—such as the molecules that make up one’s body—and the person is the *whole* composed of all those spatial parts, so a person is made up of *temporal* parts—person-stages—and the person is the *whole four-dimensional worm* composed of all those temporal parts.

Many Perdurantists are attracted to a “Conventionalist” view of persons (also known as “Proteanism”—see Johnston (2010, 284)—and “Conativism”—see Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (2020))—on which our person-directed attitudes determine whether persons survive events such as teletransportation. In teletransportation, one enters a machine that annihilates their body, but in the next moment a perfect physical and psychological duplicate of the individual made out of different matter materializes in another machine at some distance away. Is this post-teletransporter the same person as the pre-teletransporter? Or in Perdurantist-speak: is the pre-teletransporter a temporal part of the same four-dimensional person-worm that the post-teletransporter is a temporal part of? Perdurantist Conventionalists will say that it depends on the relevant person-directed attitudes (either the individual’s or the community’s). Suppose we have two communities: the Psychologists—in which all the members merely see teletransportation as a high-speed and convenient form of transportation—and the Animalists—a community in which all the members fear teletransportation as death. Conventionalist Perdurantists believe that the Psychologists’ attitudes determine that persons in their community *do* survive teletransportation—that is, the person is the four-dimensional worm that has both the pre-teletransporter and post-teletransporter as temporal parts—while the Animalists’ attitudes determine that persons in their community do *not* survive—that is, the worm (if there is one[[1]](#footnote-1)) that has the pre-teletransporter and post-teletransporter as temporal parts is not a person, rather the pre-teletransporter is just the last temporal part of one person-worm and the post-teletransporter is the beginning of a distinct person-worm. This sort of Conventionalist view is held by Perdurantists such as David Braddon-Mitchell and Caroline West (2001), Denis Robinson (2004),David Braddon-Mitchell and Kristie Miller (2004; 2020), David Kovacs (2020; 2022), and Michael Longenecker (2022a; 2022b; 2023); and Mark Johnston (2010), Dean Zimmerman (2012) and Irem Kurtsal (2022), though not (strictly) Perdurantists themselves, suggest or hold similar views.

In this paper, I want to suggest a new version of Conventionalism that is meant to address the question: what is the relationship between the reference of “I” (such as in “will I survive?”) and the thinker that thinks that “I”? In particular, is that “I” constrained to referring to that thinker or not? Some Conventionalists (such as Miller (2013), Kovacs (2020), Kurtsal (2022), Longenecker (2023); see also Zimmerman (2012)) hold that though person-directed attitudes cannot (or needn’t[[2]](#footnote-2)) determine what events the thinker survives, nonetheless those attitudes can determine what “I” refers to. I will therefore refer to this as “Unconstrained Reference Conventionalism” (or “Unconstrainted Conventionalism” for short) since the “I” is *not* constrained to reflexively refer to the thinker. Other Conventionalists might instead think that person-directed attitudes *can indeed* determine what events the thinker survives (Braddon-Mitchell and West (2001), and Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (2004, 2020) might be interpreted as holding this view[[3]](#footnote-3)). Such a view is perhaps most naturally paired with the view that the thinker’s “I” necessarily reflexively refers to that thinker—thus, I will refer to this pairing as “Constrained Reference Conventionalism” (or “Constrained Conventionalism” for short) since “I” is constrained to referring to the thinker.

Though I find Conventionalism attractive, I think the above two versions both have problems that can be improved upon. Roughly put, the problems are: Unconstrained Reference Conventionalism seems to inadequately capture the importance that the *thinker* plays in our prudential reasoning, and Constrained Reference Conventionalism’s implication that person-directed attitudes can determine the survival of the thinker seems too metaphysically radical.

I will therefore canvas my preferred view, what I’ll call “Contextualist Conventionalism”, which is a hybrid of the two views since it holds that in some contexts the reference of “I” is constrained to referring to the thinker, but in other contexts is not so constrained. More precisely, Contextualist Conventionalism draws a distinction between two kinds of contexts where we ask “will I survive?”: “empirical” contexts where the empirical facts are in question, and “reflexive” contexts where the empirical facts are *not* in question. Contextualist Conventionalism can thus be defined as holding these two theses:

**(Mind-Independence)** What events the thinker survives is mind-independent.

**(Contextualized Reference)** In empirical contexts, the reference of “I” is determined[[4]](#footnote-4) by person-directed attitudes, but in reflexive contexts the reference of “I” refers reflexively to the thinker of one’s thoughts.

These two theses imply that even though person-directed attitudes can determine the answer to “will I survive?” in empirical contexts, those attitudes *do not* play a role in determining the answer to “will I survive?” in reflexive contexts. In comparison, while Unconstrained Conventionalism accepts Mind-Independence, it denies the Contextualized Reference thesis, instead holding that the reference of “I” is determined by person-directed attitudes even in “reflexive” contexts. Constrained Conventionalism, on the other hand, denies Mind-Independence (Constrained Conventionalism also accepts Contextualized Reference, though it implies that the distinction between “‘I’ referring to the thinker” and “‘I’’s reference being determined by person-directed attitudes” doesn’t mark any interesting distinction—both necessarily refer to the same thing.)

The structure of the paper is this. In section 2, I present the background for Contextualist Conventionalism by explaining both the motivation for thinking that the reference of “I” isn’t always constrained to reflexively referring to the thinker and the ‘overpopulation’ motivation for Conventionalism. In section 3, I develop and illustrate Contextualist Conventionalism. Section 4 further compares the view with Unconstrained and Constrained Conventionalism, presenting my reasons for preferring Contextualist Conventionalism. And section 5 considers some practical upshots of Contextualist Conventionalism.

**2. Thinkers and “I”**

In this section, we will begin by looking at why some Perdurantists are attracted to the idea that the reference of “I” is not constrained to referring reflexively to the thinker. Such a motivation also assumes the Mind-Independence thesis—i.e. what events the thinker survives is mind-independent—so in this section I will also assume the truth of that thesis.

Let us begin by looking at David Lewis’ view of the metaphysics of thinkers. Given that he is a Perdurantist, Lewis holds that persons are four-dimensional-worms rather than short-lived stages. But speaking of two continuant person-worms that share a person-stage, Lewis (1983, 74) says: “The shared stage S does the thinking for both of the continuants to which it belongs. Any thought it has must be shared. It cannot desire one thing on behalf of [one of the continuants of which it is a part] and another thing on behalf of [the other continuant of which it is a part].” On Lewis’ view, it isn’t four-dimensional person-worms that think, but rather the *stages* that make up the person that think. In fact, this seems to be what Lewis *should* say. For his well-known argument for Perdurantism from temporary intrinsics is premised on the idea that temporary intrinsic properties—such as ‘being seated’—are had by stages rather than four-dimensional worms or enduring objects (cf. Lewis, 1986, 202-5). Thus, if thinking, or some aspect of thinking, is temporary and intrinsic—as Lewis (1999, 324) thinks is the case at least with respect to narrow content—he should hold that it is stages that think, rather than worms. So let us call this the “Stage-Thinker” view where it is person-stages, rather than four-dimensional persons, that think. (If one worries that person-stages are too temporally thin to form complete thoughts, the holder of Stage-Thinkers could say that the mental activity of a number of person-stages *jointly* form a complete thought.[[5]](#footnote-5)) Mind-Independence is true on the Stage-Thinkers view since what events thinkers (i.e. person-stages) can survive is mind-independent—person-stages exist for only a moment, and so don’t survive anything. Though Lewis isn’t a Conventionalist, his view still illustrates the idea behind unconstrained reference: for Lewis, terms such as “I” and “person” refer to a four-dimensional worm, rather than referring reflexively to the person-stage thinker.

Other Perdurantists, such as Kovacs (2020, 351-2; 2022, 468) and Longenecker (2020, 2572-3; 2023, sec. 2); see also Kurtsal (2022, 2413)), deny Stage-Thinkers, instead holding what I’ll call “Multi-Thinkers”. This view is the conjunction of Unrestricted Composition—any plurality of objects (including any plurality of temporal parts) compose an object—and the claim that person-stages and the worms they are part of *all* are thinkers. This conjunction implies that, for any interval of one’s life, the temporal parts of that interval compose a worm (that exists just for that interval) and is a thinker. So, on this Multi-Thinkers view, though a person is a thinker, there is an abundance of other objects coinciding persons—such as person-stages, or week-long temporal parts of persons, etc.—that aren’t persons but *are* thinkers. On this view, if one undergoes teletransportation, then the pre-teletransporter and post-teletransporter compose a worm that is a thinker that survives the trip, but the pre-teletransporter (which doesn’t survive the trip) is also a thinker. And the fact that the former, but not the latter, survives teletransportation is a mind-independent fact.

On this Multi-Thinkers view, what is it that “I” refers to? As Kovacs (2020, 353) says:

[Perdurantist views that include a plenitude of objects] suffer from a familiar ‘overpopulation problem’: at every moment, you share your place with countless overlapping objects. What makes it the case, then, and how can you know, that—for example—you were once a child, given that you and your ‘child-excluding’ temporal parts all seem to have the same body of evidence?

The basic idea is that, if Multi-Thinkers is true and the child-excluding temporal parts—i.e. the person’s coinciding worms that don’t overlap the person’s childhood temporal parts—use “I” reflexively, then such beings would be wrong to think that they were once a child. But this seems absurd. Many Conventionalists, on the other hand, point to the fact that their view addresses this problem as a motivation for Conventionalism (for instance Kovacs (2016, 1080-2; 2020, 353-4), Kurtsal (2022, 2413), and Longenecker (forthcoming, sec. 3); Zimmerman (2012, sec. 4.1) also gives this argument). For instance, on Kovacs’ (2020, 351) “Diachronic Self-Making” view, since the referent of “I” is determined by one’s beliefs about what “I” refers to, then since child-excluding temporal parts believe their “I” refers to the object that was once a child, then it is true that the “I” so refers. Hence, our ordinary knowledge is preserved. From this, the Conventionalist view follows: since Psychologists believe their “I” refers to something that survives teletransportation, so their “I” refers to the corresponding worm; likewise the Animalist’s “I” refers to a worm that doesn’t survive teletransportation, given the Animalist’s beliefs. (Notice that Kovacs gives a “Private Conventionalist” resolution to this problem—the individual’s attitudes are what determine the reference of “I”. But a “Public Conventionalism” resolution could also work—the community’s attitudes are what determine the reference of “I” (cf. Longenecker (2022b).)

Kovacs’ Diachronic Self-Making view is another example of unconstrained reference. For Multi-Thinkers implies that the child-excluding temporal part *SCE* is a thinker; but assuming that *SCE* believes “I was once a child”, *SCE* doesn’t reflexively refer to itself, but rather some child-including worm that also overlaps *SCE*. We should notice that this view doesn’t imply that thinkers *cannot* refer reflexively to themselves. For instance, a biological-continuer worm *SB—*i.e. a worm that doesn’t survive teletransportation*—*may refer to itself when using “I” if it were to have the right “I”-beliefs. Nonetheless, *SB*’s “I” isn’t *constrained* to referring reflexively—for had *SB* instead believed “I will be the post-teletransporter”, *SB*’s “I” would not reflexively refer.

**3. Contextualist Conventionalism**

I will now turn to developing the Contextualist Conventionalism view that I am proposing. The first of the view’s two claims is the Mind-Independence thesis, which holds that what events thinkers survive is mind-independent. Contextualist Conventionalism can be paired with either the Multi-Thinkers or Stage-Thinkers view, both of which imply Mind-Independence. Contextualist Conventionalism is also motivated by the thought that Conventionalism is an attractive solution to the Overpopulation Problem mentioned above. (Though the motivation as stated in the previous section is put in terms of the Multi-Thinkers view, its force could also be captured in terms of the Stage-Thinkers view.[[6]](#footnote-6)) Apart from Stage- and Multi-Thinkers, there are many other alternative views that are consistent with the Mind-Independence thesis. For instance, consider a “Psychological-Thinkers” view where it is mind-independently true that just psychological-continuer worms, and none of their person-stages or coinciding worms, are thinkers; or a “Biological-Thinkers” view where it is mind-independently true that just biological-continuer worms, and none of their person-stages or coinciding worms, are thinkers. But those who are attracted to the Psychological- or Biological-Thinkers views probably wouldn’t find the overpopulation motivation for Conventionalism compelling and likewise would find Contextualist Conventionalism unmotivated. (Though Perdurantists may not find the Psychological- or Biological-Thinkers views attractive, either because of Lewis’ argument from temporary intrinsics or because the views seem problematically arbitrary.)

Contextualist Conventionalism’s second thesis is the Contextualized Reference thesis, which holds that: in empirical contexts, the reference of “I” is determined by person-directed attitudes, but in reflexive contexts the reference of “I” refers reflexively to the thinker of one’s thoughts. The basic idea behind an “empirical context” is that it’s a context in which one asks “will I survive?” where the empirical facts are in question. To illustrate, consider the following case:

**Empirical Worries**

Priya, a member of the Psychologist community, is set to teletransport in one hour. She asks the teletransportation attendant "will I survive?" worrying that the process won’t work as is intended and that a disastrous malfunction will occur, such as: after the entrance machine disintegrates her, the exit machine will fail to produce anything at all, or will only create a highly disfigured version of her.

In this case, what Priya is interested in knowing is how the empirical facts will turn out. Likewise knowing facts about teletransportation’s track record—such as whether it has a one hundred percent success rate, or whether there have been recent malfunctions—would be relevant to addressing Priya’s concern. That is, if she were confident that no such malfunction would occur, then, in her mind, that would be sufficient reason for the answer to be “yes, I will survive”.

Since the empirical facts are in question, Priya is here in an empirical context. Contextualized Reference therefore implies that person-directed attitudes (whether the individual’s or the community’s—depending on whether we adopt Private or Public Conventionalism respectively) determine the reference of Priya’s “I”. Since in the above example, Priya and her community’s person-directed attitudes are organized around psychological-continuers, Priya’s “I” refers to her coinciding psychological-continuer—i.e. a worm that survives non-glitchy teletransportation.

But apart from the above Empirical Worries case, Priya could have had something very different in mind when she asks “will I survive”:

**Reflexive Worries**

Thirty minutes after Priya first asked the attendant “will I survive?”, Priya again asks “will I survive” with a look of deep concern. The attendant reminds Priya of the practically perfect success rate of the process—a fact which she had informed Priya of just thirty minutes before. But this time, Priya’s response to the attendant is different. Instead of being comforted by this fact, Priya asks “but even if it’s successful, would it really be me?” The attendant continues to try to allay any worries by citing further facts about the teletransportation process, even ensuring her that the community and her family members would all take her to be the same individual. But to every such attempt, Priya only responds “but would *I* be the one coming out of the other end?”

In this case, Priya is no longer asking about the empirical facts; instead, she’s asking whether she would survive *given* that the empirical facts are as the attendant says they are. The Reflexive Worries case therefore counts as a “reflexive” context because the empirical facts are not what are in question. The Contextualist Reference thesis therefore implies that Priya’s “I” reflexively refers to the thinker. In other words, in this context Priya’s “I” is constrained to referring reflexively to the thinker, and person-directed attitudes don’t play a role in determining its reference. (And I think it’s appropriate that holding the empirical facts fixed should force a reflexive-“I” since the empirical facts being the way they are leaves open whether Psychological-Thinkers, Biological-Thinkers or some alternative is the correct view.)

This completes the explanation of Contextualist Conventionalism’s two theses. Let me now explain why I think Contextualist Conventionalism preserves the force of the overpopulation motivation for Conventionalism mentioned in the previous section. Begin by noticing that we are ordinarily in contexts where the empirical facts are in question. For instance, if someone asks “did you travel abroad as a child?”, they are asking about the empirical facts. Thus, Contextualist Conventionalism here agrees that one can correctly respond “yes I was” since one’s “I” here refers to a person-worm with child temporal-parts (assuming that the right person-directed attitudes are in place and the empirical facts cooperate: that the worm’s current person-stages are psychologically continuous with child temporal parts of that worm that travelled abroad). Likewise, if one asks you “were you once a child?” because they suspect that you may have been produced in a laboratory where you entered the world in adult form, then, again, the physical facts are in question and one can correctly respond “yes I was” (again, assuming that the right person-directed attitudes are in place and the empirical facts cooperate). So, Contextualist Conventionalism understands these cases in the typical Conventionalist way. Contextualist Conventionalism would, however, differ from typical Conventionalist views in a case where someone asks: “maybe you’re psychologically continuous with some child phase, but was that really *you*?” For in this case, assuming that the empirical facts are no longer in question, Contextualist Conventionalism implies that the questioner is asking about the thinker of one’s thought—thus, one would answer with a reflexive-“I”. Hence, if the reflexive-“I” refers to a child-excluding worm or stage, then “yes, I was a child” would be false. And I take this to be the right result in this context.

In general, Contextualist Conventionalism’s distinction between contexts is motivated by these two main ideas. First, assuming that Stage- or Multi-Thinkers is true, “I” should *not* be constrained to referring reflexively in empirical contexts as the overpopulation problem indicates. Second, “I” *should* be constrained to referring reflexively in reflexive contexts since, in my estimation, the thinker is what one cares about in such a context and is attempting to refer to.

One might object that, in empirical contexts, the ordinary person also typically intends to use “I” to refer reflexively. So why shouldn’t that intention guide the reference of “I” in empirical contexts? In response, it’s not clear to me that the ordinary person *does* intend specifically to use “I” to refer reflexively in the strict sense of “reflexive”—where *S* uses “I” to strictly reflexively refer if and only if *S* uses “I” to refer to *S* and not to one of *S*’s coinciders. Of course, it’s clear that the ordinary person intends to “refer to *myself*” (said while pointing at one’s body or the region they are located in) “rather than to *others*” (said while pointing at other people or regions). But this loose sort of “reflexive reference” is too crude to distinguish between reflexively referring to the thinker and non-reflexively referring to one of the thinker’s coinciders, all of which have the same body and occupy the same region. But I think the ordinary person can arrive at the stricter concept of “reflexive reference”—one that rules out reference to one’s coinciders—through the sort of thinking Priya goes through in the Reflexive Worries case.

On the other hand, even if one intends to “reflexively refer” in the strict sense in an empirical context, it seems to me that such an intention would be outweighed by one’s intention to refer to something that resembles our common-sense view of a person. This is because the intention to refer to something that resembles our common-sense view of a person is what is most central in empirical contexts. For instance, return to the example of someone asking “did you travel abroad as a child?” Suppose I hold the Multi-Thinkers view, intend to use “I” reflexively (in the strict sense) and that intention determines the use of my “I”, then the appropriate answer would be “I don’t know”. But it seems to me that that’s not the appropriate answer in that context. For the questioner is looking for an empirically informative answer—for instance, they might be asking the question to gauge how comfortable I would be travelling abroad in the future. So given that I know that I’m psychologically and biologically continuous with child-stages that travelled abroad, the appropriate answer would be “yes I did”. Answering “I don’t know” because I can’t rule out the possibility that I might be a child-excluding temporal part is irrelevant to what the questioner wants to know, and definitely wouldn’t help them gauge my comfort levels with travelling abroad. (Though the questioner could force a reflexive context by rephrasing the question so as to hold fixed the empirical facts. Since the commonsense view of a person would thereby be put into question, the intention to reflexively refer—in the strict sense—would be free to determine the reference).

Notice also that Contextualist Conventionalism does not imply that in referring reflexively in the Reflexive Worries case, Priya is aware of the Stage- or Multi-Thinkers views. The claim is only that in that case, Priya is in fact referring reflexively. If Stage-Thinkers happens to be true, then her “I” happens to refer to a person-stage (or, as mentioned in section 2, a collection of person-stages)—*mutatis mutandis* for Multi-Thinkers.

**4. Comparisons**

Here I will explain why I find Contextualist Conventionalism more appealing than Constrained and Unconstrained Conventionalism. My goal here isn’t to argue decisively that Contextualist Conventionalism is the better view—opponents might reasonably disagree. Instead, my goal is simply to give the reader some sense as to why some might find the view attractive.

Unconstrained Conventionalism and Contextualist Conventionalism differ with respect to reflexive contexts. Where Unconstrained Conventionalism implies that in Reflexive Worries the reference of Priya’s “I” is determined by person-directed attitudes (and not necessarily used to reflexively refer to the thinker), Contextualist Conventionalism implies that Priya is reflexively referring to the thinker. I find the latter to be the better result because that seems to me to be what Priya cares about in that case—or at the very least, if I were in Priya’s shoes, that’s what I would care about in the Reflexive Worries case. For where in the Empirical Worries case, Priya is specifically looking for an empirically informative answer—one concerning the probability that the teletransportation machine would malfunction—in the Reflexive Worries case, Priya’s concern seems to me to be directed reflexively (in the strict sense). And Contextualist Conventionalism delivers us the result that it is so directed.

Unconstrained Conventionalism, on the other hand, fails to deliver that. Even though the view can imply that an individual *happens* to refer reflexively in reflexive contexts, it doesn’t imply that it is *constrained* to so referring. For the thinker might be a biological-continuer, but Unconstrained Conventionalism might instead imply that the “I” is referring to a psychological-continuer. (Given that Priya is suspending her beliefs about the persistence of the self in the Reflexive Worries case, one might wonder how her “I” could refer to a psychological continuer. This would be the case if Unconstrained Conventionalism were paired with the view that the community’s attitudes determine the reference, or paired with the view that one’s past attitudes determine the reference when one’s present attitudes are unsettled. Alternatively, if one’s *present* beliefs are what determine the reference (cf. Kovacs 2020, 358), one could just hold that Priya’s “I” doesn’t have a very determinate referent in Reflexive Worries.)

Of course, the Unconstrained Conventionalist could respond in various ways. For instance, they could agree with the intuition that, in reflexive contexts, what we care about and are asking about is the “thinker” and so are “referring reflexively”, but understand “reflexive reference” in the loose sense mentioned previously—i.e. the term “refers reflexively” in this sense so long as it refers to an individual in *this* region (even if it only refers to a coincider that is distinct from oneself). Thus, even if biological-continuer *SB*’s “I” refers to psychological-continuer *SP*, so long as *SP* overlaps *SB* that’s sufficient for *SB*’s “I” to count as “referring reflexively”. But this, to me, doesn’t seem to do as good of a job capturing what Priya cares about in this case (should Priya really be consoled simply by the fact that something coinciding her survives teletransportation, even if that thing isn’t *her* in the strict sense?)[[7]](#footnote-7). In any case, compared to Unconstrained Conventionalism, Contextualist Conventionalism offers a different way of understanding what is going on in reflexive contexts.

*Constrained* Conventionalism, on the other hand, is able to give the *same* verdict as Contextualist Conventionalism in reflexive contexts. For Constrained Conventionalists can hold that the “I” necessarily refers to the thinker no matter the context, and such a view would count as Conventionalist since person-directed attitudes can determine what events thinkers survive (and so deny Contextualist Conventionalism’s Mind-Independence thesis). But, in my view, Constrained Conventionalism’s denial of the Mind-Independence thesis is too metaphysically radical; I find it hard to accept the idea that our attitudes can determine what sorts of events conscious beings can survive.[[8]](#footnote-8) (Worries about vicious circularity also arise.[[9]](#footnote-9)) Contextualist Conventionalism thus gives us a way of securing reference to the thinker in reflexive contexts without having to go to the extreme of denying Mind-Independence.

One might argue that denying Mind-Independence is not as radical as it might appear. For instance, Kristie Miller motivates “Strong Conventionalism” by drawing an analogy with *nations*: persons are “in part constituted by person-directed practices in just the same way that nations are in part constituted by various legal (and other) national practices” (Miller 2013, S94; see especially Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (2004)). The idea is that it’s commonsense to think that the existence of nations is conventional. That is, if the correct national practices weren’t in place, the nation wouldn’t exist; and the persistence conditions of the nation could be changed by changing those national practices. Thus, if we already accept this for nations, it doesn’t seem outlandish to hold something similar with respect to persons.

While I agree that it’s plausible to say that a nation’s existence depends on national practices, it seems *implausible* to me (and to others, such as Searle (1990, 406) and Bratman (1993, 98)[[10]](#footnote-10)) to say that a nation is a *conscious thinking being*. Though we might speak of what a nation wants or believes, strictly speaking, it seems that the nation itself doesn’t have conscious thought, rather it’s only the *people* of the nation that do. This analogy therefore doesn’t seem to support the idea that conscious beings and what events those beings can survive depends on attitudes or practices. (In fact, Braddon-Mitchell and Miller’s (2020, 132) reductionism suggests to me that they would deny that person-directed practices bring beings into existence in any robust sense.[[11]](#footnote-11))

There are other strategies for making the rejection of Mind-Independence not as metaphysically radical. For instance, one could adopt Stage Theory (cf. Sider 2001, ch. 5.8) which says that even though thinkers are stages, their persistence conditions are to be analyzed in terms of the relevant temporal counter-part relation—and we can make the view Conventionalist by holding that person-directed attitudes determine which temporal counter-part relation is relevant. Thus, even if person-stage *S1* only exists at a single moment of time, it nevertheless counts as surviving, say, non-glitchy teletransportation so long as it’s related to some post-teletransportation person-stage *S2* according to the relevant temporal counter-part relation. This view doesn’t seem so metaphysically radical since what person-attitudes do is just select what counter-part relation is relevant. Nonetheless, this doesn’t strike me as a good way of understanding what is at issue in reflexive contexts. If I were to find out in the Reflexive Worries case that the thinkers are momentarily-existing stages, I should think the correct answer is “I will not survive teletranportation”, rather than “‘I will survive’ is true because the current stage is counter-part related to the post-teletransporter stage”. (Unlike Kripke’s (1972, 45) Humphrey objection, I don’t mean to say that counter-part analyses are always implausible. For instance, I think a counter-part analysis is more plausible in the Empirical Worries case since there Priya is interested in whether there’s strong psychological continuity between the pre- and post-teletransporters, and she worries that a malfunction would destroy that continuity. But in the Reflexive Worries case where she isn’t interested in relations of that sort at all, the counter-part analysis seems to me to be not very plausible.)

In this section I have given my reasons to prefer Contextualist Conventionalism over Constrained and Unconstrained Conventionalism. Readers may disagree with me about whether Contextualist Conventionalism is the best way of dealing with the aforementioned issues, but I hope readers will agree that the view offers an alternative solution that is worthy of consideration.

**5. Upshots**

Let us now explore how Contextualist Conventionalism practically differs from the alternatives. Suppose we pair Contextualist Conventionalism with Stage-Thinkers, this would imply that in reflexive contexts “I” refers to momentarily-existing stages. Thus, in the Reflexive Worries case, the answer to Priya would be “no, you won’t survive teletransportation” since person-stages don’t survive anything at all. But notice that this doesn’t mean Priya *shouldn’t* teletransport, for the thinker wouldn’t survive even if Priya *didn’t* teletransport.

Suppose instead that we pair Contextualist Conventionalism with Multi-Thinkers. On this view, we could hold that there are both worms that modally behave like biological-continuers and worms that behave like psychological-continuers. For instance, Longenecker (2023, sec. 2) combines Conventionalism with Hawthorne’s modal plenitude view according to which, “for every [modal occupation profile—i.e. a function from worlds to filled regions of space-time—]there is an object whose modal pattern of spatiotemporal occupation is correctly described by that profile.” This implies that there is both a biological-continuer *SB* and a psychological-continuer *SP* (both of which are thinkers) coinciding Priya. Contextualist Conventionalism therefore implies that when Priya asks “will I survive” in a reflexive context, each refers self-reflexively—*SB* uses “I” to refer to *SB*, while *SP* uses “I” to refer to *SP*. (And, drawing from Longenecker (2020, 2571), we can make sense of this either by holding that each overlapper utters a distinct token of “I” that refers to the utterer, or that all the overlappers utter the same token but the reference of the token is relativized—for each overlapper *S*, the token refers-relative-to-*S* to *S*.) Likewise, there is no unified answer to the question that can be given to all of Priya’s overlappers—for some, such as *SP* the answer is “it’s prudentially ok for you to undergo non-glitchy teletransportation since you would survive”, and for others, such as *SB*, the answer is “it’s against your prudential interest to undergo non-glitchy teletransportation since you *wouldn’t* survive (and, unlike a stage-thinker, would continue to exist if you didn’t teletransport)”.

But as Longenecker (2020, sec. 2) points out, in a plenitudinous ontology such as Multi-Thinkers, it is impossible to know one’s own modal profile. The entities Longenecker is interested in are “personites”—i.e. person-like objects that coincide persons, but exist for only a short portion of the person’s life; and Longenecker argues that we can’t know which of our overlappers we are—whether we are a person, or a personite—for whatever evidence the person has for thinking they are a person, the overlapping personites have the exact same evidence. Assuming that this is true, the point can be extended to the entities at issue in this paper—that is, it’s impossible for me (where “me” and “I” refer reflexively) to know whether I am the overlapping psychological-continuer, biological-continuer, or any of the other overlappers. (Or to put the point specifically from the perspective of *SB*: *SB* doesn’t know specifically which entity its reflexive-“I” refers to, whether it refers to *SB*, or to *SP*, or to some other of *SB*’s overlappers.) So, from this epistemologically disadvantaged position, the best I can do is to take *all* of my overlappers and their modal profiles into consideration and act on the assumption that *any* of them could be me. From this broader perspective, one overlapper that is particularly important to take into account when considering whether or not to teletransport is what I’ll call the “tele-depender”: this is a being whose existence *depends* on teletransporting at some particular time *tn*—if you teletransport at *tn*, it will continue to exist past *tn*, but if you don’t teletransport at *tn*, it will *fail* to exist past *tn*. The modal plenitude view implies that the tele-depender exists. Thus, if you have the option to teletransport at *tn*, while your overlapping biological-continuer’s survival gives you reason *not* to undergo it (for otherwise it won’t exist), and your psychological-continuer’s survival doesn’t push you one way or another (since it would survive either way), nonetheless your tele-depender’s survival gives you reason *to* undergo it (for otherwise it won’t exist). Thus, given that you can’t know which of these you are, the choice is a wash—the survival of the coinciders doesn’t push you in favor of one choice over another. And it seems to me that this conclusion would hold true even after properly taking into consideration *all* of one’s coinciders.

Thus, assuming that Contextualist Conventionalism is true, it seems that the proper response to Priya in the Reflexive Worries case is: it’s prudentially ok for you to teletransport. For, given the above reflections, this seems to be the correct response regardless of whether Stage-Thinkers or Multi-Thinkers is true.

One might think that this pro-teletransportation conclusion is problematic for Contextualist Conventionalism, for it might seem to be in tension with the claim that, in empirical contexts, the reference of “I” is directed by person-directed attitudes. For that claim is based on the idea that different person-directed attitudes—those of the Animalist Community and those of the Psychologist Community—are equally legitimate, yet the pro-teletransportation conclusion implies that the Animalist person-directed attitudes are mistaken.

I agree that the pro-teletransportation conclusion places constraints on what person-directed attitudes are reasonable—e.g. it is wrong to fear non-glitchy teletransportation in the way one fears death. But I don’t believe the constraints are so narrow as to leave only a single set of person-directed attitudes remaining. This is because we don’t have to take “direct conative attitudes” (to use Braddon-Mitchell and Miller’s (2020, 135) categorization)—such as fear, anticipation and regret—to be the relevant person-directed attitudes. For instance, on Kovacs’ paracognitive view, it is “I”-beliefs that are relevant. And though the belief that you don’t survive teletransportation may be thought to naturally go with fear of teletransportation, they aren’t necessarily connected. One could be perfectly ok with non-glitchy teletransportation (realizing it doesn’t make a difference with respect to the thinker’s survival) but still use “I” to refer to a biological-continuer in empirical contexts. Thus, one wouldn’t say “after teletransporting today, I’ll go to dinner with some friends” but instead “after teletransporting today, my post-teletransporter will go to dinner with some friends”. This might seem like a bit of a cumbersome way of talking (though one could make up a shorter term, such as “poster”, as a substitute for “my post-teletransporter” to make it less cumbersome). But there are also ways in which using “I” to refer to biological-continuers might be *less* cumbersome. For instance, such a term could be used to refer to a being that includes one’s early-stage fetus, corpse, and other phases where one doesn’t exhibit any psychological activity; whereas using the psychological-continuer’s “I” would instead disallow such reference.

Similarly, Contextualist Conventionalism could be paired with Public Conventionalism, where it is the community’s attitudes and practices that determine the referent of “I”. To take from Longenecker’s (2022b, sect. 3.2) example of apartment rental contracts, if the renter’s name on the contract refers to a psychological-continuer, then the contract is by default binding for the post-teletransporter as well; but if the name instead refers to a biological-continuer, then the post-teletransporter does not count as being named on the contract, and so may not have the right to the use of the apartment. For this reason, using names to refer to psychological-continuers could be convenient, so as to avoid having to sign a new rental contract every time one teletransports (or adding a clause to the contract which states that the post-teletransporter has the right to the property). On the other hand, using names to refer to biological-continuers could be more convenient in other cases. For instance, suppose both the pre- and post-teletransporter continue to exist after teletransportation due to the fact that, though the teletransportation machine successfully created a post-teletransporter, it failed to destroy the pre-teletransporter. For in that case the name would refer to the pre-teletransporter, and so the pre-teletransporter would retain the right to the property; whereas if names refer to psychological-continuers then, assuming the standard “non-branching” condition for personal identity (cf. Parfit (1984, 207))[[12]](#footnote-12), neither the pre- nor the post-teletransporter would have the right to the property (assuming no additional relevant clauses in the contract). Reference to biological-continuers could also be more convenient to deal with cases where one’s psychological activity changes. For instance, if one temporarily doesn’t have psychological states—perhaps due to an accident or due to being cryogenically frozen—the individual in that state would not be the one named on the contract if names refer to psychological-continuers. Or suppose that due to an accident or disaster, one’s psychology is abruptly and dramatically altered—drastically changing one’s character, plans, memories, etc. Assuming the change is so abrupt and drastic that the resulting individual doesn’t meet the relevant threshold for counting as being psychologically-continuous with the pre-accident individual, then the resulting individual would not be named on the contract. Having names refer to biological-continuers is one way of avoiding these sorts of issues.

So even though Contextualist Conventionalism implies that non-glitchy teletransportation is prudentially ok from the standpoint of what matters in reflexive contexts, different kinds of “I”-beliefs or social practices concerning the persistence of persons can nevertheless be reasonable. The persistence conditions of persons can likewise thereby reasonably differ between individuals or communities as well.

**6. Conclusion**

Contextualist Conventionalism is motivated by the idea that, on ontologies such as Stage-Thinkers and Multi-Thinkers, Conventionalism gives an appealing way of responding to the overpopulation problem—and thus preserving the truth of claims such as “I was once a child”. Contextualist Conventionalism does so in particular by holding that in empirical contexts, the reference of “I” is determined by person-directed attitudes. The view differs from Unconstrained Conventionalism by being able to preserve the idea that in reflexive contexts, one’s concern is directed *reflexively* in a strict way—i.e. thinker *S*’s concern is not only directed to something coinciding *S*, but is directed to *S* in particular. And, unlike Constrained Conventionalism, Contextualist Conventionalism preserves such reflexive reference while maintaining the Mind-Independence thesis. Contextualist Conventionalism thereby offers us a novel way of being a Conventionalist that I think is worthy of consideration.

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1. Braddon-Mitchell and Miller’s (2004) “logical conventionalism” implies that such a worm wouldn’t exist. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Miller’s (2013) view is more ontologically neutral, though it’s meant to be compatible with views where the survival of thinkers is a mind-independent issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See section 4 of this paper for further discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Within limits, cf. Kovacs (2020, 350), Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (2020, 148). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For instance, Miller and West (2023, sect. 1) say that person-stages “are too temporally thin to *deliberate*, or *act*, since each of these takes time.” So they hold that parts of persons that are temporally longer than person-stages (what I’ll call “person-phases”) are what deliberate. I, however, don’t think Miller and West should take this as good reason to reject the Stage-Thinkers view in favor of the view that it is person-*phases* that think. For they also argue that *persons* do not deliberate since “persons typically have massively inconsistent beliefs”, because they both “believe that Q, and not Q” (*ibid.*)—an argument that is very much in the spirit of Lewis’ temporary intrinsics argument. Thus, a parallel argument can be formulated to say that person-phases don’t think: for person-phases will have lines of reasoning such as “I am hungry. There is food in the fridge…”, and this involves incompatible thoughts—it involves not thinking about the fridge (“I am hungry”) and thinking about the fridge (“the fridge has food”). So I think it’s best to understand Miller and West’s claim that it’s person-phases that deliberate as being short-hand for something such as: it is the mental activities of a number of person-stages that jointly combine to deliberate. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. That is, to avoid saying that the person-stages’ claim that “I was once a child” is wrong, we could say that person-directed attitudes determine that the person-stage refers to a worm with child-stages. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Where by “*her* in the strict sense” I just mean “her” refers the same thing that Priya’s “I” reflexively refers to in the strict sense of “reflexively”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. One way of rejecting Mind-Independence is to hold that attitudes can bring conscious worms into existence. Another way is to hold that a plenitude of worms (and their persistence conditions) exist mind-*independently*, but person-directed attitudes decide *which* of the worms is conscious. I find both versions radical and hard to accept. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Merricks (2001) raises this circularity concern: how could it be that persons—whose existence depends on conventions—could exist if persons are the ones that construct conventions? Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (2004, sec. 4) reply by appealing to proto-conventions had by proto-persons—such as squirrels collecting nuts to store for the winter. I think, however, that the circularity objection can be raised more forcefully via the following thought experiment (adopted with modification from Davidson (1987, 443)): suppose lightning strikes a tree in the swamp creating, by total coincidence, Swampman—a being that is, at the molecular and biological levels, just like any other human. It seems that Swampman, despite its origin, could be a conscious thinking being. But this conflicts with the idea that the existence of thinkers depend on person-directed attitudes since the required person-directed attitudes aren’t in place—we can assume that prior to Swampman, there were no persons, squirrels, or any other beings with attitudes or proto-attitudes in existence. One way to avoid this problem is to hold that *person-stages* are thinkers mind-independently, and it is their attitudes that determine what conscious worms exist. Though, on this view, one could only ensure that “I” refers to such a worm, as opposed to person-stages, by denying that “I” is constrained to refer reflexively (in the strict sense). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Though others, such as Pettit (2003) have pushed back on this idea. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (2020, 132) claim to “have a strong preference to construe conativism as a kind of reductionism”, and they (*ibid.*) say: “following Parfit (1984, p. 210) we take reductionism to be the view that the obtaining of the SP[Same Person]-relation between person-phases just consists in the holding of more particular facts, and that these facts can be described without presupposing facts about identity.” As I understand it, this implies that reductionists think that person-directed attitudes don’t construct, or bring into existence, an entity (i.e. a person). That is, person-phases can be related by the SP-relation without there being a four-dimensional worm whose existence depends on that relation (nor on person-directed attitudes). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Doing away with the non-branching clause would raise other issues, such as which of the branches owns the pre-branched individual’s belongings including identity documents and passport, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)