**Prudence and Person-stages**

**Abstract**

Persons care about their future selves. They reason about their future selves’ interests; they plan for their future selves’ happiness and they worry about their future selves’ suffering. This paper is interested in the interplay between diachronic prudential reason and certain accounts of the metaphysics of personal identity that fall under the broad umbrella ‘conventionalist’. Some conventionalists conclude that under certain conditions there are intractable decisions for there is no fact of the matter regarding whether a person-stage ought (prudentially) to ϕ. This paper will suggest otherwise. These decisions are not intractable if we allow that it is sometimes rational for a person-stage to discount the utility of certain future person-stages. The paper then goes on to explore an alternative position that conventionalists might occupy which does not involve any such discounting: *prudential relativism*. According to prudential relativism it is impossible to offer a single, correct, answer to the question: should person-stage, P, ϕ at t? For according to prudential relativism there is no stage-independent stance from which to evaluate whether a person-stage ought to ϕ. Yet it is not, for all that, intractable, from P’s perspective, whether or not to ϕ.

**1. Introduction**

Persons care about their future selves. They reason about their future selves’ interests; they plan for their future selves’ happiness and they worry about their future selves’ suffering. It is widely, though not universally,[[1]](#footnote--1) agreed that the reasoning that persons engage in regarding the interests of their future selves counts as distinctly *prudential* in a way that the reasoning we engage in regarding the interests of other selves is not. It is also widely agreed that some, but not all, of this reasoning, and the actions that ensue, are prudentially rational. That is where agreement stops. That is not surprising given that, on the one hand, there is disagreement about the metaphysics of personal identity, and, on the other, about the nature of rationality.

This paper is interested in the interplay between diachronic prudential reason and certain accounts of the metaphysics of personal identity that fall under the broad umbrella ‘conventionalist’. In particular it is interested in whether it is ever rational for a person–stage to discount the utility of person-stages to which it is (in some appropriate manner) connected. The paper begins by explicating conventionalism and showing why conventionalists frequently think there are circumstances in which a person-stage ought think that there is no fact of the matter regarding whether it has continuer-stages.[[2]](#footnote-0) This has led some conventionalists to conclude that there are intractable decisions: there is no fact of the matter regarding whether, under these circumstances, a person-stage ought (prudentially) to ϕ.

This paper will suggest otherwise. These decisions are not intractable if we allow that it is sometimes rational for a person-stage to discount the utility of certain future person-stages. Thus, it will be argued, standard conventionalists who accept that it is sometimes indeterminate whether a person-stage, P, has continuer-stages after some time, t, ought to conclude that life-time wellbeing is a function of the distribution of utilities of individual person-stages rather than merely being a sum of those utilities. This kind of conventionalism, then, vindicates the unequal weighting view: it allows that the utility of some person-stages is worth less, in terms of overall wellbeing of the persisting person, then the utility of other person-stages. On the face of it, then, conventionalists must either hold that certain decisions are intractable, or, as this paper suggests, that they are tractable so long as we admit that person-stages can, rationally, be treated unequally. This latter, however, is ironic given that conventionalists are motivated by the thought that we ought not prioritise the views of any particular person-stage: in that respect, stages should be treated equally. With this in mind, then, the paper explores an alternative position that conventionalists might occupy.

This involves embracing what I call *prudential relativism*. The final section of the paper explores this view and argues that it has features to recommend it over other views the conventionalist might endorse. According to prudential relativism it is impossible to offer a single, correct, answer to the question: should person-stage, P, ϕ at t? For according to prudential relativism there is no stage-independent stance from which to evaluate whether a person-stage ought to ϕ. Any such evaluation is always relative to the conventions deployed by some stage or other. Since, according to conventionalists, there are multiple equally good conventions for a person-stage to deploy, it follows that, with respect to at least some claims of the form ‘P ought to ϕ’, said claims will be true relative to the conventions of one person-stage, and false relative to another. That is all there is to say on the matter. That does not make the decision of whether to ϕ intractable: if P is making the decision, then, plausibly, P will (rationally) decide to ϕ just in case relative to P’s standards, P ought to ϕ. It does, however, make it impossible to say whether, independent of any particular person-stage’s conventions, P ought to ϕ. But that is a cost someone disposed to relativism might well be prepared to pay, in which case prudential relativism offers the conventionalist an attractive alternative view about diachronic prudence.

**2. Conventionalism**

‘Conventionalism’ is an umbrella term for a group of views about personal identity according to which conventions partially determine the identity and persistence conditions of persons. Conventionalism comes in many guises. I will distinguish just two: *weak* and *strong* conventionalism. Weak conventionalism is the view that there exist multiple eligible candidates to be the referent of our term ‘person’.[[3]](#footnote-1) Which of these entities we pick out depends on our *linguistic* conventions: it depends on how we use terms like ‘person’.[[4]](#footnote-2) Strong conventionalists, by contrast, hold that person-conventions, also known as person-directed practices—which include, among other things, social practices of tracking persons over time, holding persons responsible for their past actions, compensating persons for past events, having rules for the ownership of property over time and so forth, and, most importantly, practices of self-concern such as anticipating and planning for the future, having prudential concern for one’s future, regretting past actions—partially determine the identity and persistence conditions of persons. On this view persons are multiply realisable. ‘Person’ is a term that picks out whatever it is that plays some functional role—roughly, the role of being the object around which our person-directed practices are structured. Since different persisting objects can realise that role, which objects in a world are the persons will depend, in part, on how the person-directed practices are structured in that world.[[5]](#footnote-3) To put it as some conventionalists do, person-directed practices partly constitute the identity conditions of persons over time. Persons supervene on stages of conscious entities and person-directed practices.[[6]](#footnote-4)

The virtue of these kinds of conventionalism is that they can explain our intuitions about certain difficult cases. Here’s how. Suppose Maggie and Todd argue about whether it is rational for either (or both) of them to get into a teletransporter machine. Maggie says using the machine will be death, and hence it is irrational to do so, Todd says it will be easy and fast transportation, and thus it is rational to do so. Let us suppose Maggie and Todd agree about all of the non-identity involving facts. They just disagree about whether the object that steps out of the machine will be, as it were, themself, or someone else.

Many conventionalists think that in *some* sense or other their dispute is not genuine. For there is nothing for the disputants to be disagreeing about given that they agree about all of the non-identity involving facts. Weak conventionalists typically diagnose disputes like this by appealing to features of semantic indecision. They suppose that our linguistic conventions fail determinately to fix a referent for terms like ‘person’. Rather, there is some number of equally eligible candidates to be the referent of ‘person’ such that on some occasions of utterance it is indeterminate to which candidate the term refers.[[7]](#footnote-5) This indeterminacy can then be explicated, a la supervaluationism, by noting that on some precisification of ‘person’ an utterance of the term refers to one candidate, and on another precisification is refers to a different candidate.

Let us return to Maggie and Todd. Weak conventionalists typically think that ‘I’ picks out the *person* who utters it. Now suppose that the relevant Todd-stage (T) utters ‘I will survive transportation’ where the relevant Maggie stage (M) utters ‘I will not survive transportation’. In each of their mouths ‘I’ picks out the person who utters it. But in each case, let us suppose, the referent of ‘person’ is indeterminate: it is indeterminate between referring to a particular human animal and a particular psychologically continuous object. Suppose in M’s case it is indeterminate between referring to human animal, HA, and psychologically continuous object, PC, while in T’s case it is indeterminate between referring to human animal, HA1, and psychologically continuous object, PC1. Suppose PC and PC1 can survive teletransportation but HA and HA1 cannot. Then M’s utterance of ‘I will not survive transportation’ is neither determinately true nor determinately false. For one of the candidates to be the referent of ‘person’ will survive transportation (PC) and one will not (HA). *Mutatis mutandis* for T’s utterance of ‘I will survive transportation’. Thus neither Maggie nor Todd is determinately right and neither is determinately wrong when Todd says that he will survive transportation and Maggie says she will not. In part this explains the peculiar feature of their dispute.

Strong conventionalists agree with much of this: they too suppose that an utterance of ‘I will survive teletransportation’ may fail to be either determinately true or determinately false. But they do not think this is because ‘person’ is semantically imprecise. Typically they think it is because in such cases there exists more than one person, and only one of those persons survives teletransportation. According to strong conventionalism the persons are the objects around which we structure our person-directed practices. Such conventionalists often give special priority to some subset of the person-directed practices: namely the attitude of *caring* about certain future stages, where the attitude of caring includes the attitudes of anticipation, planning, and reasoning about the interests of said stages. It is from this that the conventionalist slogan arises: I do not care about future stages because they are me, they are me because I care about them.

Strong conventionalists typically think that Maggie and Todd might *both* be right. To put it crudely, if Maggie does not care about any post transportation stages but Todd does, then Maggie will not survive transportation while Todd will. To put it less crudely, if Maggie structures her person-directed practices around relation R, where R is the relation that unites the stages of a human animal, and Todd structures his around relation R\*, where that is the relation that unites the stages of a PC object, then Maggie will not survive transportation and Todd will. Thus each is right about his, or her, own persistence conditions.

Although, under the aforementioned circumstances, there is a fact of the matter regarding whether Maggie or Todd survive, there are circumstances in which the strong conventionalist agrees with the weak conventionalist that there is no such fact of the matter. By Maggie’s current lights, that is, the lights of person-stage M, teletransportation would spell death. But teletransportation manufacturers, being good conventionalists, as well as sales people, offer a 2 week course of therapy that is guaranteed to change one of M’s continuers,[[8]](#footnote-6) M+, so that M+ comes to structure her person-directed practices around relation R\* (the relation of psychological continuity). This is what conventionalists Braddon-Mitchell and West call *transfiguration*. As far as M is concerned it (M) is part of a persisting person, P, such that M+ is a stage of P and there are no person-stages that are parts of P that exist after transportation. As far as M+ is concerned, it (M+) is part of persisting person, P+, such that M is part of P+ and P+ has person-stages present *after* transportation. That is, by M+’s lights, it will have continuer stages after transportation.

Suppose Maggie undergoes the therapy. Then there are two sets of stages. Set S has as its members all of the stages that structure their person-directed practices around the R relation—the relation that unites a human animal. Set S\* has as its members all of the stages that structure their person-directed practices around the R\* relation—the relation of psychological continuity. Some of those stages are members of both sets since some stages are related to one another by both the R and the R\* relations. Given that M and M+ disagree about which events Maggie can survive, or if you prefer, they disagree about whether they have person-stage continuers after transportation, there arises the question of whose views to take into account when a decision is being made regarding whether to enter the transporter.

Braddon-Mitchell and West argue that we should treat the perspectives of all of the person-stages equally. That is, we should not prioritise the views of any particular person-stage in S or S\*. Recall that from M’s perspective transportation is death. But we ought not, think Braddon-Mitchell and West, conclude from this that M is right and transportation is death. For suppose transfiguration occurs and M+ comes to differently structure her person-directed practices and later undergoes transportation. M\* is the person-stage that subsequently exits the machine. Given that M\* structures its person-directed practices as M+ does, it follows that in her mouth ‘I survived transportation’ is true. By M\*’s lights, M, M+ and M\* are all stages of one and the same persisting person whose stages are united by the R\* relation. Indeed M\* recalls believing, as she now thinks, falsely, that she would not survive transportation. From M\*’s perspective, M was simply wrong to believe that she would have no continuers post transportation. Yet if we hold that M is right about her own survival, we effectively prioritise her perspective over that of M\* (and M+).

In virtue of the fact that Braddon-Mitchell and West reject the prioritisation of any particular person-stage they call their version of conventionalism temporal phase pluralism. They hold that, for every set of person-stages that structure their prudential concerns around the same relation and which are united by that relation, there exists a person composed of those stages. Thus they hold that there exists a person composed of all and only the stages that are members of S, (stages united by the R relation) and a person composed of all and only the stages that are members of S\* (stages united by the R\* relation). Since they agree with the weak conventionalist that ‘I’ picks out the person who utters it, when M utters ‘I will not survive teletransportation’ it transpires that there is no fact of the matter as to whether this is true. For there exist two persons: the one composed of the members of S, (the object we previously called HA since it is composed of human animal stages) and the one composed of the members of S\* (the object we called PC, since it is composed of psychologically continuous stages). M, however, is part of both HA and PC since M bears both the R and R\* relation to stages in S and in S\*. Thus when M utters ‘I’, it is indeterminate whether it is referring to HA or PC. But HA does not survive transportation and PC does. Thus it is indeterminate whether M’s utterance of ‘I will survive transportation’ is true. So say temporal phase pluralists.

We will revisit this contention in due course. For present purposes, however, let us suppose that there are occasions in which future tensed utterances that deploy the first person pronoun are neither determinately true nor determinately false. Braddon-Mitchell and West suggest that this makes certain decisions about the future prudentially intractable. The suggestion is that once we see that one person, HA, survives and the other, PC, does not, and that M is a stage of both of these, there is nothing further to be said. There is no fact of the matter regarding whether M ought to plan and anticipate a future post-transportation, nor any fact of the matter as to whether she ought to try to prevent transfiguration by avoiding the therapy offered by the transporter company. It is neither prudent nor imprudent for M to arrange to have money put aside for any post-transportation stages; it is neither prudent nor imprudent for the M to sell the future-organs of post-transportation stages for a sum of money to be enjoyed by pre-transportation stages. For there is no fact of the matter as to whether M has continuer stages. In what follows I suggest that even if there is no fact of the matter regarding whether M has continuer stages, this does not make such decisions intractable.

**3. Diachronic Prudence**

Let us say that given a set, S\*, of person-stages, the members of a set, S, of person-stages are *me-related* to one another iff there is some set of conventions, C, (linguistic or person-directed) deployed by one of the person-stages in S\*, such that relative to C each of the person-stages in S is part of the same person. It is often held to be paradigmatically irrational for a person-stage to differently weight the utility of stages to which it is me-related. The discounting of future utility is held to be a prime example of such irrationality. [[9]](#footnote-7) The discounting of future utility is irrational, the thought proceeds, because there are no grounds to prioritise the utility of a current-person stage at the cost of the utility of some later person-stage by effectively making utility-now worth more than utility-later. Call this the *equal weighting view.* This is the view that it is never rational for a person-stage to differently weight the utility of me-related stages. By contrast, one might hold that under at least some conditions it is rational for a person-stage to differently weight the utility of stages to which it is me-related. Future discounting is but one example of unequal weighting, but there are plenty of others. Call this the *unequal weighting view*.

Suppose one wants to determine a person’s total wellbeing. On one view wellbeing is determined by summing the utilities of the person-stages of that person. Call this the *utility summation view.* Contrast this with the *utility distribution view*, according to which total wellbeing is a function of the distribution of utility across person-stages. If a utility curve is the curve we get from plotting the utilities of each of the person-stages and joining up the dots, then the utility distribution view is the view that two different utility curves that represent the same amount of total utility might nevertheless reflect different amounts of wellbeing for the persons whose utility curves they are.[[10]](#footnote-8)

As we have seen, some conventionalists hold that in certain circumstances decisions are intractable because there is no right answer to the question ‘what ought (prudentially) X do?’. In what follows it will be argued that in said circumstances decisions are not intractable. Instead, such circumstances give the conventionalist reason to think that wellbeing is a function of the distribution of utility and not merely its summation across stages. For then it makes sense to think that the very same amount of utility located at some locations in the utility curve is *worth less,* in terms of overall wellbeing, than utility located elsewhere. By allowing that it is sometimes rational for a person-stage to differently weight the utility of person-stages to which it is me-related we render it plausible that there is an answer to the question ‘what ought X do?’ even in the circumstances the conventionalist describes.

To motivate this claim, let us return Maggie and the teletransporter. Suppose that t- is the time (or duration thereof) at which M is reasoning about her future stages. Suppose M+-—the stage that transfigures—exists at t+ and that M\*—the post transportation stage—exists at t\*. Suppose that M can choose between two utility curves: C1 and C2. The former distributes utility only over the temporal stages to which M is R-related: namely, the stages of HA (all of which exist prior to t\*). The latter distributes less total utility to the R-related stages than does the former, but, in addition, distributes utility over the stages that are R\*-related to M but not R-related, namely the person-stages that are parts of PC that exist at (and after) t\*: namely the post-transportation PC stages. Let us stipulate that the summed utility of C2 is greater than that of C1. So according to the utility summation view M ought to prefer C2 to C1.Yet according to the weak conventionalist C2 reflects a distribution of utility over stages—the post t\* PC stages—of which it is indeterminate whether they are parts of the person to which ‘I’ refers when uttered by M. According to the strong conventionalist, C2 reflects a distribution of utility over stages of a person such that it is indeterminate whether that person is picked out by utterances of ‘I’ made by M. Either way it seems, *prima facie,* that for at least for some values of the two curves, M can reasonably prefer C1 to C2. For it seems rational for M to care about the *distribution* of utility across person-stages where it is indeterminate whether some of the person-stages in question are continuer-stages of her. That suggests that M’s reasoning about future person-stages that exist after t\* is not intractable. For she need not think it an all or nothing matter regarding whether the utility that accrues to the post t\* PC stages is utility that thereby adds to her total wellbeing. She can suppose it is permissible to unequally weight the utilities of some stages to which she is me-related.

Some clarifications are in order at this point. As put, the equal weighting view holds that it is never rational for a person-stage to differently weight the utility of stages to which it is me-related. But recall that, as defined, given a set, S\*, of person-stages, the members of a set, S, of person-stages are *me-related* to one another iff there is some set of conventions, C, (linguistic or person-directed) deployed by one of the person-stages in S\*, such that relative to C each of the person-stages in S is part of the same person. We can now see that this definition of me-relatedness is imprecise across a number of dimensions, and that on some readings of me-relatedness the conventionalist denies the equal weighting view and on others she does not.

Here’s why. On the assumption that S is not a fuzzy set the definition makes no room for the possibility that it is indeterminate which stages are members of S. But there are two ways in which S’s membership might be indeterminate. It might be that the conventions at play (namely C) do not uniquely determine which stages are members of S. This is what weak conventionalists suppose: they hold, in effect, that our linguistic conventions underdetermine me-relatedness so there are person-stages of which it is indeterminate whether they are members of S. Another possibility is that the person-directed practices to which strong conventionalists appeal underdetermine me-relatedness. This possibility is not often considered. But since there are different practices within the set of person-directed practices, one can suppose that under certain circumstances some of the practices come to be structured around one entity or set of entities, and other practices come to be structured around a different entity or set of entities, so that there is no fact of the matter regarding around which entities the total set of practices is structured. Indeed, one can even imagine that relative to a *particular* practice in the set, there is no fact of the matter regarding around which entity that practice is structured. For one can imagine that, say, prior to transportation M is not sure whether she anticipates the experiences of post t\* stages, and, more generally, is not sure whether she has an attitude of care towards those stages. In any of these cases it will be indeterminate which person-stages are members of S, and that is what it is for it to be indeterminate whether ‘I will survive transportation’ is true in M’s mouth.

Neither of these possibilities, however, includes the one with which temporal phase pluralists are concerned. The definition of me-relatedness tells us that the members of S are me-related just in case there is some set of conventions, C, deployed by one of the person-stages in S\*, and relative to C all of the stages in S are parts of the same person. But now consider M and M\*. Relative to the conventions deployed by M, the stages that are members of S will include only those that are R-related to M. Relative to the conventions deployed by M\*, however, the stages that are members of S will include only those that are R\* related to M\*. Thus relative to the conventions deployed by M, M\* will not be a member of S. But relative to the conventions deployed by M\*, both M\* and M will be members of S. So although relative to any particular set of conventions it may be determinate which stages are stages of S—in contrast to the cases described above—since there is no fact of the matter regarding which person-stage in S\* is the one whose conventions ought to determine the membership of S, there is no fact of the matter regarding the membership of S.

Indeed, given that conventionalists think that there is no fact of the matter as to which (of a range of) conventions are the right ones, me-relatedness will always be a relation that holds between stages *relative to the conventions deployed by some particular stage.* Thus we might define *narrow me-relatedness relative to P* as follows: a set, S, of person-stages are narrowly me-related relative to person-stage, P, iff every member of S bears R to P, where R is the relation around which P structures its person-directed practices. By contrast, we might define *broad me-relatedness relative to P* as follows: a set, S\*, of person-stages are broadly me-related relative to person-stage, P, iff (i) there exists a set, S, all of whose members bear R to P, where R is the relation around which P structures its person-directed practices and (ii) every member of S is a member of S\* and (iii) every member of S\* that is not a member of S bears some relation to some member of S, such that the relation it bears to that member is the relation around which that member structures its person-directed practices and (iii) whatever that relation is, the member of S\* bears that relation to P.

Thus relative to M, M is narrowly me-related to M+, since M+ bears the R relation to M and the R relation is the one around which M structures its person-directed practices. But M is not narrowly me-related to M\* since M\* does not bear the R relation to M. Relative to M, however, M is broadly me-related to M\*. For broad me-relatedness is effectively the relation one gets by daisy chaining together chains of narrow me-relatedness. Relative to M, M is narrowly me-related to M+, and relative to M+, M+ is narrowly me-related to M\*, and relative to M\*, M\* is narrowly me-related to M: thus relative to M, M\* is broadly me-related to M.

We can then say that relative to P, a set, S, of stages is narrowly *determinately* me-related iff relative to P it is determinately the case that every member of S is narrowly me-related. Relative to P, a set, S, of stages is narrowly *indeterminately* me-related iff, relative to P, it is neither determinately the case that every member of S is narrowly me-related, nor determinately the case that every member of S is not narrowly me-related. *Mutatis mutandis* for definitions of determinate broad me-relatedness and indeterminate broad me-relatedness.

Then whether the conventionalist rejects the equal weighting view depends on what, exactly, that view is taken to be. Conventionalists need not reject the contention that it is never rational for a person-stage, P, to differently weight the utility of stages to which, relative to P, it is determinately narrowly me-related. They ought, however, to reject the view that it is never rational for a person-stage, P, to differently weight the utility of stages to which, relative to P, it is indeterminately narrowly me-related. They ought also to reject the view that it is never rational for a person-stage, P, to differently weight the utility of stages to which, relative to P, it is indeterminately broadly me-related. Finally, they ought to reject the view that it is never rational for a person-stage, P, to differently weight the utility of stages to which, relative to P, it is determinately broadly me-related. In essence, the conventionalist ought to think that wherever it is indeterminate to which stages (relative to P), P is (narrowly or broadly) me-related, it is not irrational for P to discount the utility of those stages. She should also think that even where it is determinate to which stages, relative to P, P is broadly me-related, it will sometimes not be irrational for P to discount the utility of some such stages. Namely, it will sometimes not be irrational for P to discount the utility of stages to which, relative to P, P is broadly, but not narrowly, me-related.

Here is why. It is indeterminate whether M will have post-transportation continuers since relative to M, said stages (such as M\*) are not narrowly me-related to M, but relative to M\*, M is narrowly me-related to such stages (such as M\*). Suppose M has 1000 utiles in the utility bank. The utiles must all be spent at one time, so a single person-stage will be the recipient of said utiles. M can choose to spend the utiles before t\*, or she can spend them after t\*. Either way, some person-stage receives 1000 utiles. What should M do? Plausibly, M should spend her utiles before t\*, since spending them then guarantees that the person-stage who receives them is, relative to M, determinately, narrowly me-related to M. Spending them after t\* guarantees no such thing. Quite the reverse: spending them after t\* guarantees that, relative to M, the person-stage who receives the utiles is not one that is determinately narrowly me-related to M. Instead, the person-stage who receives those utiles will be one that is, relative to M, determinately broadly me-related to M. M can, in principle, be in a position to know all of this. Thus she can reason that since the post t\* stages are, (relative to her) determinately broadly me-related to her, she ought not *completely* discount the utility that could accrue to those stages were she to spend the 1000 utiles on those stages. On the other hand, she should also recognise that, relative to her, those stages are *merely* determinately broadly me-related to her and there are other stages that are (relative to her) determinately narrowly me-related. Thus it is rational for her to distribute the 1000 utiles to the latter stages ahead of the former. For the utility that accrues to the post t\* stages can reasonably be thought to be worth less to M, in terms of overall wellbeing, than the utiles distributed to the pre t\*stages. In essence, then, it is rational for M to discount the utility accruing to the post t\* stages.

Exactly how this discounting should proceed is unclear. This paper argues seeks to suggest that in these circumstances decisions are not intractable if we allow that some amount of discounting is rational. It does not seek to offer a full account of how person-stages ought to discount. In cases such as those just described, however, in which there are two relevant objects (the two candidates to be the referent of ‘person’ according to the weak conventionalist, and the two persons to be candidates to be the referent of ‘I’, according to the strong conventionalist) one of which survives past t\*, and one of which does not, one might suggest that the discounting rate ought to be 50%. That is, one might think that cases of indeterminacy ought to be treated as cases of spreading risk. If M gave .5 credence to surviving after t\*, (i.e. to having post t\* continuers) then, one might argue, she ought to discount the utility of post t\* stages by 50%. If it is indeterminate whether M will survive because there are two candidate sets of continuers, one of which has post t\* stages and one of which does not, then we should treat this case the same way. Then M should hold that the utility that accrues to the post t\* stages is worth half as much wellbeing to her as that which accrues to the pre t\* stages. Whether this is the correct discounting rate is unclear. But on the assumption that there are reasons that can be offered for choosing one rate rather than another, M’s decisions are not intractable.

One might, at this stage, object that temporal phase pluralists are mistaken. If M is asked whether she will survive transportation she is clear that the answer is ‘no’. Why not simply take her word for it? M is, after all, relative to her own views about persistence, quite right that she is determinately not narrowly me-related to post t\* stages. Temporal phase pluralists suppose that it is indeterminate whether M has continuer stages because, as we have noted, post t\* stages such as M\* are such that, relative to their views about persistence, M\* and M are temporal stages of a single persisting person. Allowing that M is right requires prioritising M’s views over M\*’s, and that is, for the conventionalist impermissible. In what follows, however, I suggest an alternative view that may be amenable to conventionalists which allows us to say that both M and M\* are right, without us thereby having to say that it is indeterminate whether M has post t\* continuers. The view, which I call prudential relativism, does not call for any discounting of utility of future person-stages nor for the view that wellbeing is a function of the distribution of utility.

**4. Prudential Relativism**

Whole four-dimensional persons have radically inconsistent desire profiles. They are not the locus of planning or action. It is short-lived objects—person-stages—that reason in the light of their (hopefully) consistent preferences, and other person-stages who carry out the actions that are the fruits of that reasoning. Given this, it makes sense to suppose that it is often person-stages to which we refer with terms such as ‘I’ and ‘mine’. Though it need be no part of the view I am calling prudential relativism to embrace a stage-theoretic semantics of ordinary talk, or indeed, more narrowly, a stage-theoretic semantics of first-person reference, the view is, I think, more naturally explicated in these terms.

Stage-theoretic semantics holds that ordinary singular referring terms pick out temporal stages rather than four-dimensional wholes, and that talk of what was, or will be, true of an object is to be analysed in terms of what is true of the temporal counterparts of that object. Thus it holds that ‘O’ refers to a short-lived object, and that ‘O was F’ is true iff O has a temporal counterpart in the past, which is F (and *mutatis mutandis* for ‘O will be F’)[[11]](#footnote-9). Like modal counterpart relations, features of context determine which temporal counterpart relation is appropriate to evaluate a particular claim.

The strong conventionalist who embraces prudential relativism is someone who holds that ‘I’ (at the very least) is a term whose reference is best captured by stage-theoretic semantics. Moreover, utterances of ‘I’, by different person-stages, sometimes create contexts in which different temporal counterpart relations are appropriate to the evaluation of said utterances. Return to our teletransporting Maggie. The M-stage of Maggie is such that it structures its person-directed practices around the relation R. Hence utterances of ‘I’, by M, single out the R-temporal counterpart relation. M’s utterance of ‘I was a foetus’ is true, since M has a temporal counterpart that is a foetus. M’s utterance of ‘I will not survive transportation’ is also true, since M does not have any post transportation temporal counterparts. Utterances of ‘I’ by M+, however, single out a different temporal counterpart relation: the R\* temporal counterpart relation. M+’s utterance of ‘I will survive a transportation’ is true, since M+ has a temporal counterpart that exists post transportation. M+’s utterance of ‘until recently I believed I would not survive transportation’ is also true, since M+ has temporal counterparts that had just that belief: among them M.

In saying all of this the prudential relativist is denying the temporal phase pluralist’s contention that ‘I’, when uttered by M, is indeterminate between referring to the person whose stages are R-united and the person whose stages are R\*-united. Instead, she can say that ‘I’ determinately refers[[12]](#footnote-10) to the M-stage. As such, when M asserts ‘I will survive’ that is true iff M has a temporal counterpart that survives. Now, someone with a pluralist persuasion could adopt a stage-theoretic semantics and still embrace temporal phase pluralism. For she could maintain that what is indeterminate is *which* temporal counterpart relation is singled out by utterances of ‘I’ made by M. She could suggest that it is indeterminate whether R or R\* is the temporal counterpart relation that is singled out, and thus it is indeterminate whether ‘I will survive’, uttered by M, is true.

The prudential relativist, on the other hand, thinks that there is a fact of the matter regarding which temporal counterpart relation is singled out: that fact is given by the relevant person-stage’s views—in this case M’s—regarding around which relation person-directed practices are structured. If the person-directed practices themselves determine a particular temporal counterpart relation (rather than underdetermining that relation) then M’s first person future tensed utterances will be determinately true or determinately false. In such cases the relativist will hold that it is straightforwardly the case that, uttered by M, ‘I will survive transportation’ is false. In general, the relativist will think such an utterance, by some person-stage, P, is determinately false iff relative to P, P is not narrowly me-related to post transportation stages and is determinately true iff relative to P, P is narrowly me-related to post transportation stages.

Thus the relativist should surely think that M ought not prudentially reason about any post t\* stages: for they are, determinately, not temporal counterparts of M Thus M ought *entirely* to discount any utility that accrues to those stages. Thus there are no intractable decisions facing M. If M knows that is in fact the case that M+ will undergo transfiguration and she knows that it is the case that some continuer stage of herself and M+ will enter the transporter machine, then, insofar as she is able to bring it about that utility is distributed over pre transportation stages rather than post transportation stages, she should do so. If M does not know whether transfiguration of transportation will occur, then she ought to try to bring it about that they do not since the latter spells death, and the former makes it more likely that the latter will occur. Thus regardless of what M knows about the future, relative to what she does know there will be a fact of the matter as to what, rationally, she ought to decide to do.

Now consider M\*. Given that M\* structures her person-directed practices around R\*, it follows that M is a past temporal counterpart of M\*. That is, relative to M\*, M is determinately narrowly me-related to M\*. Thus, the relativist will say that, relative to M\*, it is, determinately, the case that M\* is a stage of a person who survived transportation. Moreover, suppose M\* is reflecting on the choices that M made. Suppose that M entirely discounted the utility of post transportation stages and acted in such a way that the utility of said stages is vastly less than it would otherwise have been. Since M is a temporal counterpart of M\*, it is straightforwardly the case that M\* can legitimately complain that M acted imprudently. Insofar as later person-stages can legitimately expect that earlier person-stages will appropriately plan for the wellbeing of later stages, M\* is justified in complaining that M failed in her duties towards later person-stages. Relative to M\*, then, M’s actions in discounting the utility of the post t\* stages is prudentially irrational and determinately so.

According to the prudential relativist, M and M\* are *both right* even though they disagree about what it is, or was, rational for M to do. Relative to the conventions M deploys, M should not have taken into account the interests of the post transportation stages. Relative to the conventions M\* deploys, M should have taken the interests of those stages into account. Like other strong conventionalists, the prudential relativist thinks there is no further fact of the matter as to which conventions a stage *ought* to deploy. There is no normative force to be found here since the various attitudes that compose the set of person-directed practices bottom out in the desires of the stages whose conventions they are. If one is a Humean about such desires there cannot be any sense in which those of one stage are better than those of another.

What, then, is intractable? What is not intractable is what, relative to M, M should do. Given that one deploys M’s conventions, which of course M does, it is perfectly clear what M ought to do: M ought, rationally, to maximise utility over the stages to which M is, determinately, R-related (the relation that M cares about). There is also nothing intractable in M\*’s being able to evaluate M’s actions. It is straightforwardly true that relative to the conventions M\* deploys, M ought to have maximised utility over all of the R\* related stages (including M\*). What is intractable is providing an answer to the question: ‘what ought M do?’ when that question is not asked relative to the conventions deployed by some person-stage or other. There is no answer to the question ‘what ought M do’. The only answers are answers relative to conventions deployed by particular person-stages.

What sort of relativism is at play here? Various form of relativism are consistent with the picture just outlined and the prudential relativist need not commit herself to a particular account of relativism. She could, for instance, suggest that the dispute between M and M\* regarding what M ought, prudentially, to do, is of a kind with a dispute between P and P\* regarding whether vegemite is tasty. Disputes about taste as often viewed as not being genuine disputes at all: for parties are often interpreted as implicitly including some sort of modifier into their claims. Thus when P utters ‘vegemite is tasty’ and P\* utters ‘vegemite is not tasty’ they are interpreted, instead, as uttering something more like ‘according to my gustatory palate, vegemite is taste’ and ‘according to my gustatory palate, vegemite is not tasty’. Since these two claims are perfectly consistent, so long as the referent of ‘my’ is different in each case, there is no real dispute. Thus we might interpret normative claims of the form ‘M ought to ϕ’ and ‘M ought not to ϕ’ as expressing something more like ‘relative to the conventions deployed by M, M ought to ϕ’ and “Relative to the conventions deployed by M\*, M ought not to ϕ’. Again, these two claims are consistent, thus explaining why both M and M\* can be right when they make those claims. Their apparent disagreement, then, is in some sense merely apparent: at least insofar as it turns out that M\* is not expressing the negation of the proposition that M is expressing. Moreover, this explains why M\* can, and should, concede that relative to the conventions deployed by M, M should not reason prudentially about the post transportation stages, and why M should agree that relative to the conventions deployed by M\*, she should.

Alternatively, the prudential relativist could think that disputes like that between M and M\* ought to be diagnosed analogously to the way in which epistemic relativists diagnose disputes regarding whether M knows that P. That is, the prudential relativist might hold that M and M\* express the selfsame proposition when they utter ‘M ought to ϕ’, and hence that they genuinely disagree when M utters ‘M ought to ϕ’ and M\* utters ‘M ought not to ϕ’. But according to the relativist such expressions ought to be evaluated relative to a further index: the standards of the speaker. In this case the standards are not epistemic standards, but, rather, the views of the person-stage who makes the utterance regarding around which relation she structures her person-directed practices. Relative to the standards of M, ‘M should ϕ’ is, let us suppose, true, while relative to the standards of M\* is it is false. But since there is no fact of the matter as to whose standards are the correct ones, both claims are true relative to the standards of the utterer. And since there is no further external standard relative to which to evaluate the standards of the speakers in question, it follows that there is no answer to the question of whether, independent of the conventions deployed by any particular person-stage, M ought to ϕ

Where does that leave us? The nice feature of prudential relativism, however exactly it is spelled out, is that it allows us to say that M is straightforwardly right when she claims that she will not survive transportation. Given that M avowedly holds that post transportation stages are not continuer stages of her, and given that she does not have an attitudes of care towards them, this seems like a welcome outcome. Concluding that it is indeterminate whether M will survive, as does the temporal phase pluralist, seems counterintuitive. The view also has the consequence that when M is reasoning about whether to transfigure there is a straightforward answer. If transfiguration is likely to lead to future stages engaging in acts that, by M’s lights, mean death, then M should attempt to prevent any future temporal counterparts from transfiguring. That, of course, is consistent with it being true that once a temporal counterpart has undergone transfiguration (as does M+) then, relative to its concerns, it will survive the very events that M is sure will mean death and that it will, therefore, perhaps live a longer and happier life. But that is no concern, as it were, to M. Yet for all that, the prudential relativist does not prioritise M’s views ahead of those of other stages. Given that M+ does transfigure, that stage is quite right to hold that it will have temporal counterparts that survive transportation and, indeed, M+ would be right to try to prevent transfiguration back to the views of M, given that this would represent a loss of fast and effective transport. In effect, the prudential relativist takes even more seriously the temporal phase pluralist’s claim that every stage is right about its own survival.

**Conclusion**

Conventionalists are not committed to thinking that a class of decisions is intractable. Even if it is indeterminate whether a set of person-stages are continuer stages of a particular person-stage, that person-stage can still reason prudentially about the interests of both the stages that are determinately its continuers, and those that are neither determinately its continuer nor determinately not its continuers. We just need to allow that stages in those two categories can be treated differently in terms of the wellbeing their utility is taken to add to the overall wellbeing of the persisting person of which the person-stage in question is a part. Moreover, even conventionalists who agree that we ought not prioritise the views of any particular person-stage can reject the idea that it is sometimes indeterminate whether a set of stages are continuer stages of a particular person-stage if they embrace the view I have called prudential relativism. Instead, such a view allows us to say that what appear to be incompatible claims made by different person-stages are in fact not incompatible at all. Stages can be right in their normative judgements, and determinately so, relative to the conventions they deploy, whiles those same stages are wrong in their normative judgements relative to the conventions deployed by some other person stage. Despite this relativistic outcome, this does not render decisions intractable if we allow that the stage making the decision can, reasonably, make that decision relative to its own standards rather than those of any other stage.

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1. See Rachels and Alter (2005) for a diverging view. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Where a person-stage, P, has a continuer stage, C, iff C is a person-stage that exists later than P, and C and P are parts of the same persisting person. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. These might include human animals, psychologically continuous entities, bodily continuous entities and so forth. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. See for instance Sider (2001) for a defence of this view. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. See Braddon-Mitchell and West (2001) for an explication of this view. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Braddon-Mitchell and West (2004) cash our conventionalism in this manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. See for instance Olson (1997) and Sider (2001). Olson does not endorse the view, he merely considers it. See also Eklund (2004) for discussion of these issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. To be more specific, strong conventionalists will say that C is a continuer-stage of M iff M structures its person-directed practices around relation R, and C is R-related to M. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. See for instance Broome (1994) and Parfit (1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. See Velleman (1991) and Slote (1982) for discussion of these issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. See Sider (2001) and Hawley (2001) for an introduction to stage theoretic semantics. See also Rycher (2012) and Viebahn (forthcoming) for further details. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. Setting aside other issues of determinate reference such as the more general problem of the many. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)