

Persons are not made of temporal parts

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Four-dimensionalism (the view that ordinary things persist by having temporal parts) is largely a response to the Problem of Temporary Intrinsic (see David Lewis 1986: ch 4, sec 2). I sit at one time; I stand at another. As nothing can be both standing and sitting, one temporal part of me stands, another sits. I, this persisting human person, am identical to a four dimensional space-time worm made of temporal parts. Just as a road can be both straight and curvy because it has a straight part and a curvy part, I can be both sitting and standing because I have a sitting part and a standing part. Like the road, I have these properties in a derivative way. To say I'm sitting is to say that one of my temporal parts is sitting; to say I'm thinking I'm hungry (I won't think it after lunch) is to say a temporal part of me thinks it.

I will argue that this account of persons is incoherent. Let's accept four-dimensionalism for the sake of reductio.

1. The reductio.

Suppose I'm a three-dimensionalist; I believe I persist by being wholly present at every moment of my life (three-dimensionalists believe this about persisting things in general). On my death bed I suddenly realize the truth: There exists an x such that x is a four dimensional space-time worm lasting for decades and $I = x$ (call this proposition 'p'). Immediately I

expire. As nothing can both believe and not believe p , I have a temporal part, S (let's allow that S is virtually instantaneous) that believes p . Given four-dimensionalism, I believe p because S does; I think what it thinks.

Consider S again. It thinks this thought: There exists an x such that x is a four dimensional space-time worm lasting for decades and $I = x$. This is false; by hypothesis S is an instantaneous object, entirely present at the moment it exists. Consequently four-dimensionalism is self refuting if it applies to me. For if four-dimensionalism is correct, what I think is true. But if four-dimensionalism is true, I think the false thought S does. In short, four-dimensionalism entails that I am and am not made of temporal parts.

Here is the nub of the difficulty. Given four-dimensionalism, I think p truly. I am a person if I exist at all, as persons can consider themselves as themselves, they can use the personal pronoun to denote themselves in thinking such thoughts, and persons are indeed identical to space-time worms. According to four-dimensionalism, to say I have the property of thinking p is to say S has that property. Indeed, S is all there is to me at the time I think p . As nothing else is available to do any thinking, if S doesn't think p , I don't either. But S can't think p truly. Given four-dimensionalism, therefore, what I think is true, what S thinks is false, but what I think = what S thinks.

If the reductio is to be avoided, S and I must both think p, which must be true. Two conditions must be satisfied. First, if S and I are to think the same thought, the personal pronoun 'I' must denote the same thing for S and for me. Second, if that thought is to be true, it must denote the space-time worm.

2. Can these conditions be satisfied?

Suppose 'I' means 'the thinker of this very thought.' I've argued elsewhere that this is a plausible and illuminating explication of the personal pronoun (Stone, 2005); the indexicality of 'I' is captured by the indexical 'this.' The Cogito reads 'As the thinker of this thought thinks, it exists.'¹ Given four-dimensionalism, however, 'I' fails to refer, because S's thought has two thinkers--S and me, the latter thinks it indirectly by having a part (S) that directly thinks it. As 'I' means the same for me, our thought is either false or neither true nor false.

Suppose 'I' means, for both of us, 'the direct thinker of this thought.' Then the thought has a referent, S, but the thought is false.

Suppose, though, that 'I' means 'the indirect thinker of this thought.' As numerous space-times worms that include S are proper parts of me, however, if 'I' is to refer, it must mean

¹ As the negation of 'I think' Russells nicely into 'It is not the case that there is just one thinker of this thought,' which is not indubitably false, Descartes is entitled only to 'There is a thought now.'

'the maximal indirect thinker of this thought.' Then the thought, fully explicated, becomes 'There exists an x such that x is a four dimensional space-time worm lasting for decades, and the maximal thing that thinks this thought by having a temporal part that thinks it = x .' So S , in thinking this, doesn't denote itself by 'I.' S thinks directly that the thought's maximal indirect thinker is a space-time worm. Just as S 's thought about Shakespeare would be about something other than S , this thought is about something other than S . I think the thought because S thinks it, but we are both referring only to me. Given four-dimensionalism, our thought is true.²

This does violence to the personal pronoun, arguably. On the face of things, 'I' denotes what directly thinks p , not something that thinks its thoughts in virtue of something else's thinking them. This is what Roderick Chisholm meant when he argued that a 'stand in' couldn't have his mental states for him: 'If I happen to be feeling sad, then, surely there is no *other* thing that does my feeling sad for me' (Chisholm, 1979). Similarly, if I think a thought, no other thing does my thinking for me.

3. The objection refined.

The last objection is too strong. Suppose (let's take a three-dimensional example) I'm identical to a persisting human

²Dean Zimmerman considers the idea that 'when a temporal part uses the first person in thought or speech, it automatically refers to the whole *person* in which the temporal part falls...' (Zimmerman 2003: 502). He observes that this convention would provide his parts no reason to prefer his welfare to their own.

animal, one that's all here now. Might not my brain, the organ of thought, think my thoughts for me, while I think them because it does? If so, 'I' denotes, not the organ of thought, but the animal that includes the organ. 'I' isn't constrained as precisely as the objection pretends. It's implausible that we can decide the metaphysical question 'Am I the animal or the brain?' simply by appealing to the semantics of the personal pronoun.

Analogously, might not 'I' denote, not S, but the maximal space-time worm that contains S?

Indeed, we might allow that realizing or producing a thought isn't necessarily thinking it. The thinker of an 'I'-thought is just the thing the personal pronoun denotes. An 'indirect' thinker, we might say, is one that thinks a thought because another thing *realizes* it, but the indirect thinker is the *only* thinker. So, in our three-dimensional example, my brain merely realizes or produces my thoughts; I, the animal, think them. Just as my salivary glands secrete saliva, but I salivate, my brain produces thoughts, but I think them. In fact, this suggests another way to avoid the reductio. I, the maximal space-time worm, think p because a proper part of me, S, realizes the thought, *not* because S thinks it. As S thinks nothing, S thinks nothing false.³

³ This is to abandon the four-dimensionalist response to the Problem of Temporary Intrinsic, however. If I think p but S thinks nothing, to say I think p is not to say a temporal part of me does.

However the objection can be refined. We are supposing that 'I' means something in the neighborhood of 'the thinker of this very thought.' The thought's thinker is conceived as what actually produces (or realizes) the thought. Only what is available to produce the thought at the time it happens actually does the realizing. Hence 'the thinker of this thought' denotes only what is available to produce the thought at the time it happens. However the definite description isn't theoretically loaded--it doesn't select between animals, hearts, brains or souls. This is why we can't decide the question 'Am I the animal or the brain?' simply by appealing to the semantics of the personal pronoun. I submit that the following principle governs the personal pronoun: 'I' denotes no more of me than is available to realize thought t at the time t occurs. So if y is all there is of me that is available to realize thought t, 'I' does not denote something that is neither a proper nor an improper part of y. To return to our three-dimensional example, as the human animal is all of me that is available to realize t at the time t occurs, 'I' denotes the animal or some proper part of it, nothing more. Reverting to four-dimensionalism, as S is all of me that is available to realize t (the thinking of p) at the time t occurs, 'I' denotes S or some proper part of S.⁴ There are indeed larger temporal parts of me that include S as a proper part, including the maximal

⁴As S has no proper temporal parts, a proper part of S would be a spatial part; for instance, the part of S that is a temporal part of my brain.

space-time worm itself, but the preceding parts of these bigger parts of me are not available to realize *t* at the time *t* occurs--first, because they precede *t* and second, because they realize not-*t*.

In short: if, as I submit is plausible and illuminating, 'I' denotes no more of me than is available to realize thought *t* at the time *t* occurs, no account of the meaning of 'I' according to which it denotes something that is neither a proper nor an improper part of *S* preserves the term's use as a personal pronoun. As *S*, or a proper part of *S*, is denoted by 'I,' *S*, or a proper part of *S*, (a) *thinks p*, and (b) *thinks p about itself*.

The principle also helps illumine what is right, and what is less right, in Chisholm's argument. My stand-in would be something distinct from me that is nonetheless all of me that is available to realize my thought *t* at the time it occurs. Therefore 'I' in *t* denotes the stand-in, not me. As what 'I' refers to *thinks t*, the stand-in, not I, *thinks t*. The possibility remains, however, that I think *t* in a derivative way; to say I think *t* is just to say a temporal part of me (the stand-in) *thinks t*. Chisholm rejects this on the ground that I must think my thought directly, but arguably this begs the question against the four-dimensionalist. My argument completes Chisholm's by showing the four-dimensionalist's idea that I think thoughts in a derivative way reduces to absurdity.

4. Conclusion.

I realize in the last instant of my life that I am identical to a space-time worm. Given four-dimensionalism, I think the truth. Four-dimensionalism entails that I think it because S does. As S and I both think the same proposition, the personal pronoun denotes the same thing for both S and me. However our thought is true only if the personal pronoun denotes the space-time worm. As this condition cannot be satisfied, what I think is both true and false. If four-dimensionalism is to avoid contradiction, therefore, it cannot apply to me. I'm no different ontologically from other persisting human persons, however; if they are made of temporal parts, so am I. Persons are not made of temporal parts.⁵

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References

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