**Conativism about Personal Identity**

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide an overview of the conceptual terrain of what we call *conative* accounts of personal identity. These are views according to which the same-person relation in some sense depends on a range of broadly conative phenomena, especially desires, behaviours and conventions. We distinguish views along three dimensions: what *role* the conations play, what *kinds* of conations play that role, and whether the conations that play that role are *public* or *private*. We then offer a more detailed consideration of direct private conativism—the version of conativism that we favour—before considering how conativists ought respond to a general worry, according to which any conativist view will lead us to be radically pluralist about persons.

1. Introduction

Conativism is an umbrella term for a large range of views about the nature of persons. Broadly, it’s the view that in some sense or other, *it’s up to us* which things are the persons, either synchronically, or diachronically. Conativist views include views according to which the same-person relation (henceforth SP-relation) in some sense depends on desires, behaviours, choices, and other conative states, as well as organised systems of such behaviours and choices in the form of conventions: so *conventionalism* about persons is a species of conativism according to our taxonomy. It’s the view that which things stand in what we will call the SP-relation (same-person relation) to each other is settled, in part, by which conations obtain.[[1]](#footnote-2) So the contrast with conativism is *non-conativism*. Non-conativism is the view that which things stand in the SP-relation to each other is settled entirely by matters of non-conative fact, and not in any part by the existence of conations.

Conativism, then, is a thesis in first-order metaphysics. As we will sometimes put our preferred version of the view, it’s the view that conations settle which relations in the world *are* or *realise*, the SP-relations. The thought is that there are various relations that obtain between person-phases; relations (such as similarity, or causal connectedness) that obtain independent of any conations. On our preferred version of conativism it is the obtaining of certain conations, which determines *which* of these relations, is, relative to a pair of person-phases, the SP-relation. That’s because the correct semantics for ‘SP-relation’ is that the SP-relation is the relation that obtains between two person-phases when some relation (more on this shortly) holds between those person-phases, and that relation’s holding is desired, or otherwise conatively relevant. Then different relations can *realise* the SP-relation relative to some pair of person-phases, on the assumption that different relations can be desired by (or otherwise be conatively relevant to), different person-phases. For what makes a relation the SP-relation relative to some pair of person-phases, is that the relation is conatively relevant to a least one of those phases. The sense, then, in which conations settle which person-phases the SP-relation obtains between, is not the sense in which conations settle which person-phases various relations (like similarity or causal connectedness) obtain between: those relations obtain independently of the conations. Rather, the conations settle whether any of those relations is the SP-relation, if so which ones, and hence in that way settle between which person-phases the SP-relation obtains. Finally, it is a matter of conceptual analysis that a relation’s being conatively relevant to some person-phase, settles that the relation is, relative to that person-phase, the SP-relation: it’s the fact that as a matter of conceptual analysis, the SP-relation is the relation that obtains between two person-phases when some relation holds between those person-phases, and that relation’s holding is desired, or otherwise conatively relevant. For those hostile to talk of conceptual analyses, there are other ways to understand our view, and we turn to these in §2[[2]](#footnote-3). For now, however, one can think of us as making a claim about the right conceptual analysis of ‘SP-relation’.[[3]](#footnote-4)

This paper focuses on *diachronic* versions of conativism: that is, conativism about the persistence conditions of persons.[[4]](#footnote-5) It is most natural to think of this as conativism about *personal identity.* We, however, will talk about the *same-person* relation in order to avoid prejudging the question of whether the relation that obtains between person-phases (more on this shortly) of the same person is an identity relation or not. So we intend the SP-relation to be a very metaphysically neutral notion. It’s what corresponds to same-person judgements that people form. Consider this question: “That women you had coffee with this afternoon (t2). Is she the same person as Annie, whom I met last week (t1)?”  If the answer is yes, then the SP-relation holds between Annie at t1 and Annie at t2. You might think that it follows from this that the SP-relation is a numerical identity relation. We make no assumption either that it is, or that it is not. It’s *whatever* kind of relation it is which (sometimes, when things go well) makes judgements of this kind true. And that, of course, depends on the right metaphysics of personal-identity. Indeed, if you think that talk of the personal-identity relation is metaphysically neutral in this way—that is, if you think what we have just characterised *is* the relation of personal-identity, then for you, talk of the SP-relation just is talk of the personal-identity relation.[[5]](#footnote-6)

If the SP-relation is a numerical identity relation, then the SP-relation holds between a person at one time, and a person at another time, when the former is numerically identical with the latter. By contrast, if worm theoretic perdurantism is true, then the SP-relation is the relation that holds between person-stages that are *parts* of the same person. If the stage theory (i.e. exdurantism) is correct, then the SP-relation holds when one person-phase is a temporal person-counterpart of the other, and so on. Although ultimately we are drawn towards a view on which the SP-relation is *not* an identity relation—a view we will outline later in the paper—we think that conativism can be understood even within the framework of supposing the SP-relation to be an identity relation. Hence, in what follows we will often talk of the SP-relation obtaining between *person-phases* p1 and p2*.* As we use the term, ‘person-phase’ is neutral between picking out a person at a time, and picking out a person-stage—where person stage is understood as a short-lived entity that is qualitatively much like a person at a time (leaving open whether persons are composed of person-stages or a person has such stages as temporal counterparts). Hence if we say that the SP-relation obtains between person-phases p1 and p2, this is metaphysically neutral between its being the case that p1 and p2 are numerically identical—they are ‘phases’ of an enduring person—or p1 and p2 being numerically distinct person-stagesthat are either parts of the same perduring person (in the case of four-dimensionalism) or bear same-person temporal counterpart relations to one another (in the case of exdurantism)[[6]](#footnote-7).

Conativists, then, agree that in some good sense desires, behaviours or conventions[[7]](#footnote-8)— henceforth *conations,* determine between which phases the SP-relation obtains. Views in this neighbourhood have been variously called desire-first accounts, practice dependent accounts and conventionalist accounts. For instance, suppose Martha cares very much about her physical continuity. She has no self-interested desires about a future in which she has a psychological continuer, but no physical continuer. Let us suppose she would die in a teletransporter in which her physical, but not psychological, continuity ends. The usual story about why Martha has the patterns of desires she does, is that there is a metaphysical fact that the SP-relation depends on physical continuity, and Martha sees that this is so, and she dreads lack of continuity because it will result in death. Such a view is a version of non-conativism: there is a metaphysical fact of the matter regarding which relation is the SP-relation, a fact that obtains independently of any person-phase’s conative states. Indeed, on such a view the appropriateness of person-phases’ certain conative states depends on the presence of these metaphysical facts. Person-phases ought reason prudentially about the interests of just those person-phases to which they are SP-related. Non-conative views disagree about which facts determine the SP-relation (psychological, physical, organismic, soul, brute, etc.) but they agree that there are such facts independently of most conations.

Conativists, by contrast, find it plausible that once we specify the various non-identity involving relations that obtain between person-phases (similarity relations, causal connections, social relations, social conventions, and so on) and specify the various psychological properties (particularly the cognitive and conative states of person-phases) then we have specified all that there is which can be relevant to settling which person-phases bear the SP-relation to which other phases. There are no other metaphysical facts that outstrip these properties and relations. So conativists hold that Martha would die in the transporter not because of a fact about the SP-relation that holds independent of her (and others’) conative attitudes, but because, for instance, her attitudes, or the attitudes of others, towards a future in which she has no physical continuer, are what make it the case that physical continuity is the SP-relation for her, and thus that she would die in the teletransporter. Her desires do not depend on the facts about the SP-relation, but rather, the facts about which relation is the SP-relation depend (in part, or entirely) on her desires.

The most natural way to understand conativism, then, is as a kind of *reductionism* about the SP-relation,[[8]](#footnote-9) with the added claim that (at least according to our version of the view) different relations (even within a world) can realise the SP-relation. So while we talk about *the* SP-relation, *which* relation that is, relative to any pair of person-phases, can vary.

Here, following Parfit (1984 p 210) we take reductionism to be the view that the obtaining of the SP-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. Further, we assume that reductionism only really makes sense if one holds that the SP-relation is *not* the relation of numerical identity, since the relation of numerical identity is surely irreducible (of course there are views which pitch themselves as reductionism about numerical identity, but a way to make those views coherent is as reductionism about whatever identity talk is about: not, it turns out, identity). Assuming that is right, then reductionism can be paired with a view of the SP-relation according to which it is a non-identity relation that obtains between person-phases, and where the reductive base for that relation is the combination of certain non-identity involving relations that obtain between person-phases, and the conative states of those person-phases.

By contrast, we suppose that those who hold that the SP-relation is a relation of numerical identity will typically be non-reductionists. Non-reductionists will not think that the obtaining of the SP-relation *reduces* to the obtaining of certain relations between person-phases, and the obtaining of certain conative states by those person-phases, but they can still think that there is some connection—perhaps a necessary bi-conditional—between the obtaining of the SP-relation, with the obtaining of these other relations and conative states. On that view, the obtaining of the latter is effectively apodeictic evidence (if the biconditional is necessary) that the former obtains.

In what follows we will talk of the presence of these conative states either *settling* which relation is the SP-relation, or settling between which person-phases the SP-relation obtains. Reductionists, such as we are, can straightforwardly read this as a claim about the reductive base of the SP-relation. Non-reductionists will need to read it, instead, as a claim about some connection, possibly necessary, between the SP-relation and the conations (in which case the term ‘settling’ is perhaps inapt). Given this, we have a strong preference to construe conativism as a kind of reductionism, and this is the view we will have in mind henceforth. Nevertheless, we think that non-reductionist versions of the view are available, which is why we continue to use the metaphysically neutral language of person-phases.

Conativism is often motivated by the thought that there is some sense in which what we believe, or what practices we engage in, or what conative states we have, play some important role in settling which things the kinds of things we care about—persons—*are* across time. Conativism is naturally paired with person essentialism—the view that we are essentially persons. Technically, conativism only tells us which person-phases the SP-relation obtains between, leaving it open that you and I are not essentially persons, and hence might survive some event that nevertheless causes the person that we are, to cease to exist. But since conativists think that what we care about settles which things the SP-relation obtains between, this would be the view that although the person each of us is, might cease to exist, *we* might continue to exist *even though we do not care at all about our future continuer phases.*

We, however, are of the view that to talk about survival is to talk about something about which we care deeply. In fact, we think that *whatever* the SP-relation consists in, it had better be what *matters* to us. It ought not be that when we spell out what it is for one person-phase to bear the SP-relation to some other person-phase, some question remains regarding whether the former ought care about the latter, or, indeed, some question remains about whether, if the latter exists, then the former survives. More generally, we, at least, are motivated by the thought that there ought be a particularly close connection between our practical concerns and facts about the SP-relation: it should not be that the latter come apart from the former.[[9]](#footnote-10) Let’s call this the *practical concern desideratum.[[10]](#footnote-11)* Indeed, as we will see, our analysis of the SP-relation yields a version of conativism that meets the practical desideratum constraint: I cannot fail to care about the SP-relation, because the SP-relation just is whatever (appropriate – more on this later) relation it is that connects my current person-phase with other person-phases, such that I care about that relation (or care only about person-phases connected to me by that relation) in a certain manner.

We suppose, then, that the best version of conativism will meet the practical concern desideratum. Given this, in what follows, we will assume that you and I are essentially persons, and hence that you and I survive only so long as there is some future person-phase that is SP-related to our current person-phase.

We thus can be seen as disagreeing with Parfit’s (1984), view, according to which the things that we care about in survival can come apart from numerical identity.

We think there are three ways things might be metaphysically organised, and exactly what the conativist should say about this will depend on how each of them goes.

The view we find most attractive does not have trans-temporal numerical identity relations. So the SP-relation is not an identity relation, but rather, a relation that holds between the temporal stages of a self-identical person, or, perhaps is a temporal counterpart relation. On this way things might turn out, the conativist disagrees with Parfit, insofar as Parfit seems to assume that there are relations of numerical identity that obtain across time. For in this version the conativist denies that there is any relation of numerical identity that obtains across time: objects, or at least, complex ones, do not persist by enduring. So there is no trans-temporal identity relation that can come apart from what we care about, and hence cannot come apart from the SP-relation.

The second view a conativist might have is that there is numerical identity of persons across time, but that it can’t come apart from the SP-relation. This would either require the SP-relation to reduce to the identity relation, or the identity relation to reduce to the SP-relation, or that the SP-relation is somehow apodictic evidence for the holding of fundamental identity facts. None of these options appeals to us; but the obvious problems, such as fission and so forth, designed to show that identity *must* come apart from what we care about, have been well enough dealt with in the literature for us to think this is a live option for the conativist who is a friend of numerical identity across time[[11]](#footnote-12) On this way things might turn out, the conativist also disagrees with Parfit because although there are relations of trans-temporal numerical identity, these cannot come apart from what we care about (or from the SP-relation).

Finally, of course, Parfit’s metaphysics might be right: there is numerical identity across time, and the facts about this *do* come apart from the conative facts (of which Parfit’s R relation is but one instance). We don’t think that Parfit’s positive arguments stand, and thus that there is any reason to suppose this is so. But there is room in logical space for the view there are such things as persons that endure across time, and that their persistence conditions come apart from anything that we care about. How one would make that discovery is a mystery to us, but suppose it to be made. Most endurantist conativists will resist, and say that conativism tells us what persons are and what their persistence conditions are, and thus that we should retreat to the second view. But perhaps a conativist might give in and buy this view, in which case they would indeed become close to Parfit. They would view Parfit’s R relation as the prototype of the SP-relation, and say that whatever these dull metaphysical facts about the numerical identity of persons over time are, our actual practices around identity, survival and decision, should go with the SP-relation, not the identity relation.

Now let’s move on to a second, related, motivation for conativism. This is the intuition that there are at least some faultless disputes over survival, between parties. Consider a case in which Martha takes herself to be able to survive teletransportation, and Phyllida, a somatophile[[12]](#footnote-13) takes herself to be unable to survive teletransportation. We can imagine cases like this in which Martha and Phyllida *agree* about all the empirical facts: they agree about what teletransportation consists in, and they agree about the fundamental relations that would obtain between each of their person-phases, and the person-phases that exist post-teletransportation; they agree that there are no mysterious further facts (such as the existence of souls) that could make it the case that Martha survives and Phyllida does not; they agree about what ‘survival’ means in English, and so on. Yet their dispute remains persistent and intractable.

Conativists are motivated by the thought that in such cases it’s hard to see what Martha and Phyllida could be disagreeing about. A natural thought is that what differs between Martha and Phyllida are not the metaphysical facts, but the conative facts. It is the difference between their most basic desires, about their attitudes to various different kinds of future person-phases, which explains why there is a persistent and intractable dispute. Moreover, it seems natural to think that as long as different conative states are permissible, we can, and ought, accommodate its being the case that both Martha and Phyllida are right about their own survival, or lack thereof, after tele-transportation.[[13]](#footnote-14) This is to accommodate there being (at least some) faultless disagreements about the SP-relation. Since we think it plausible that there are such disagreements, on our view the best version of conativism will accommodate them. We call this the *faultless disagreement* desideratum. We will have more to say about how conativism in general, and our preferred version in particular, accommodates this desideratum in the remainder of the paper.

Versions of conativism differ in the kind of conations they suppose settle which things the SP-relation obtains between, and the manner in which they do the settling. The range of conations is very broad, and can include attitudes about who one is[[14]](#footnote-15) and what one will survive; first-person I thoughts; various other conative states such as anticipation; practices of prudentially caring about other person-phases; social practices of imputing responsibility and ownership; and so on. As a consequence, different conativisms vary as to whether they are public or private: whether SP-relations depend on the conations of individual persons, or person-phases, or, as in conventionalism, emerge at the level of communities of person-phases.

In what follows we will first provide a general sense of what we mean when we say that conations settle which person-phases the SP-relation obtains between, (§2), before we briefly outline a few different views about the nature of those conations (§3). What is notable about these different conations is the extent to which they can be expected to come apart from one another. We then outline our preferred version of conativism—direct private conativism (§4)—along the way explaining how the view does justice to various of our intuitions about personal identity: in particular, how it accommodates the two desiderata just outlined. We then consider a number of objections that are specific to this version of conativism (§5) before turning to a more general objection to conativism in any form (§6). According to this more general worry, conativism raises

The spectre either of there being lots of different notions of ‘person’, each associated with some different conation or set of conations—person pluralism—or of having to tell some story about which set of conations is the right one to determine the SP-relation. In §6 we introduce two rather different kinds of practical concerns: self-regarding and other-regarding and argue that in some sense our view is a kind of pluralism about persons. There, we not only respond to this general worry for conativism, but argue that our version of conativism is better placed to respond to the worry. Finally, in §7 we return to consider a number of further issues about personal-identity discourse that are raised by conativism.

2. How do Conations Settle the SP-relation?

So far we have said that conativists hold that conations settle which person-phases the SP-relation obtains between and that, on our view, they do this by settling which relation, or relations, that obtain between person-phases, realise the SP-relation.

In particular, we think that something like the following is the right conceptual analysis of the SP-relation.

**Conceptual Analysis: SP relation**=df the relation that holds between two person-phases when some CPC holds between those person-phases, and that CPC’s holding is desired, or otherwise conatively relevant.

Here, following Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (forthcoming) we distinguish *candidate properties of conation* (CPCs) from the conative attitudes towards those properties. The candidate properties of conation will often be straightforward non-conative naturalistic properties and relations like physical continuity, psychological continuity, similarity, and so on. Roughly speaking, one can think of CPCs as the various candidates that philosophers have introduced for being the SP-relation. The conative attitudes (more on these shortly) then *apply* to these candidate properties. So on our view, the SP-relations are those candidate properties that are cared about in the right way. We will have more to say about these candidate properties in §5.1, where we will argue that not just any old relation can be a CPC. Instead, we will suggest that something can be a CPC only if its being desired (in the relevant ways) is compatible with (but not entailed by) ideal rationality and relevant knowledge. So, for instance, some sort of weak similarity relation won’t count as a CPC if, after reflection, and in light of relevant facts, a person-phase could not have the right kind of conations towards that CPC. For now, though, it suffices to just think of the CPCs as the kinds of candidates that philosophers have proposed, for being the SP-relation.

Before we talk more about this analysis, there are a few things to say here. First, our contention is clearly at odds with those, like Sider (2001a) who think that meaning is determined by eligibility plus use, and that in the case of the SP-relation, meaning and use do not determine which relation is the SP-relation. In particular, Sider argues that there is no fact of the matter regarding whether the relation of physical continuity or psychological continuity is the SP-relation, because they are both equally eligible candidates, and use does not determine which relation is the SP-relation. So, on the one hand we disagree with Sider that there is no conceptual analysis of the SP-relation that settles whether two person-phases are SP-related to one another. On the other hand, we agree that eligibility and use do not fix that one particular relation—psychological continuity, physical continuity, or something else—is *the* *unique* SP-relation. We think, that is, that on a case-by-case basis there is a fact of the matter as to which relation (which CPC) is the SP-relation, we just that that this fact varies between person-phases, and it varies because different person-phases bear different conations towards different CPCs.

Second, we cannot, in this paper, defend a full account of what conceptual analysis consists in, let alone defend the value of such analyses. We can say that we have in mind something very much like what is often known as “The Canberra Plan” (see Braddon-Mitchell and Nola 2008). Moreover, we cannot fully defend that the above is the right conceptual analysis of the SP-relation. What we can do is show that the view that we end up with is plausible; in particular, we can show that it meets the two desiderata with which we began this paper, and so, in a roundabout way, we can defend its plausibility. To do that, we first introduce a couple of competitor conativist accounts: accounts that differ in their view about what the conations are which do the settling. In §6, when we consider some general objections to conativism, we will argue that our preferred version—direct conativism—is superior to those views. Along the way we will argue that direct conativism is an attractive view when measured against the desiderata that we set out earlier.

Third, we noted at the beginning of this paper that for those who are hostile to conceptual analysis, there is another way of thinking about our account of the SP-relation. One need not think that the definition of the SP-relation that we gave above is an analysis of a concept. Instead, one might hold that we are simply giving a sort of subject naturalistic (in the manner of Price 2008) account of the phenomenon in question: an account that explains why, in the domain of discourse and practices pertaining to personal identity, we talk the way we do and have the practices we have, and so on. Viewed in that light, there is no need to try to articulate some internal concept or representation of the same-person relation, and then to map that thing onto something in the world. Instead, once we have told the full story of why we have the practices (linguistic and otherwise) we do, one has done all that there is to be done. Hence, thought of in these terms, our view is that in order to tell the full story about why we have the practices we do, one need only appeal to the CPCs that obtain between person-phases, and the conative states of those person-phases: nothing more need be said. Then the account we offer of the SP-relation is perhaps best thought of not as a definition, but rather, as a short hand description of the explanation we provide.

We prefer the former way of conceiving of our project in terms of an analysis of a concept, but we are happy for others to think of it in terms of this latter methodology.

3. Kinds of Conations

In what follows we distinguish *direct* from *indirect* conations. Direct conations are first-person conative states such as anticipation and regret, attitudes of prudential care, and so on. These are to be contrasted with *indirect* conative states that are structures like conventions or practices built up out of direct conations. Conativists disagree both about whether the conations that settle the SP-relation are direct or indirect and, further, about what sort of direct, or indirect, conations these are.

Those we will call *paracognitive* *theorists* think that the conations are first-person I-thoughts and related states that appear to be cognitive, not conative, states: for instance, beliefs about what one will and will not survive.[[15]](#footnote-16) Those we call *direct conative theorists* think that the conations are first-person conative states such as anticipation and regret. The contrast is with *indirect* *conative theorists*, who rely on structures like conventions or practices built up out of conations. Among the indirect theorists are various *social theorists* who think that the conations are social conventions of, for instance, imputing diachronic ownership and responsibility.[[16]](#footnote-17)Also among them are what we will call *practice-based* *theorists* who think that the conations are some mixture of conative states, first-person I-thoughts and apparent beliefs, and social practices.[[17]](#footnote-18)

Some of these views about the nature of the conations entail that conations are public, and some entail that they are private. We will say that conations are *private* just in case the manner in which they obtain *constitutively* *depends* only on the individual person-phase. It is this sense in which private conations are ‘up to’ individual person-phases. Of course, it does not follow from this that individual person-phases can choose, at will, which conations they instantiate. Conation in general, like desire in particular, is not voluntaristic. This is important to bear in mind, particularly in a context in which views of this kind have been labelled (including by us) as conventionalist. Many, including, for instance, Schechtman (2014), go to some lengths to distance their views from conventionalism, on the grounds that which things are persisting person is not, on their view, just some matter of choice.[[18]](#footnote-19) As we will see shortly, however, we characterise Schechtman’s view as a version of practice-based conativism. As we have been at pains to stress elsewhere[[19]](#footnote-20) while conativists think that in some sense which relation is the SP-relation is ‘up to us’, since it is settled by our conations, or by conventions that depend on those conations, this is not to say that these conative states are voluntaristic, or easily changed, much less changed on a mere whim. *Conventions*, in our sense, include a whole range of social and inter-personal practices which, given our psychologies and evolutionary history, may be such that they could not easily have been different; or at least, could not easily have been significantly different. This is in contrast to more paradigmatic cases of conventions—such as which side of the road to drive on—which could easily have been decided differently.

Notice that public things like conventions might play a critical role in determining private conations: it might be, for example, that social attitudes or conventions *casually* determine what an individual person-phase’s conative states are like. This is consistent with the conations constitutively depending only on how the person-phase is. So on our view this would still be a private conativism, since the public properties do not directly determine SP-relations, they merely cause the private conations to do.

Continuing on, a conative theory is*public* just in case it invokes conations that do not constitutively depend on any individual person-phases’ conative states, though they may depend on the *totality* of conative states of such person-phases.[[20]](#footnote-21) Conations in this sense are public insofar as the alteration of the mental-states or behaviour of a single person-phase makes no difference (or no detectable difference) to the conations in question. Public conations of this kind are often best thought of as public *conventions*, and henceforth, this is what we will have in mind when we speak of public conventions. As we just noted, these conventions can run from the more paradigmatically ‘conventional’ end of the spectrum, including legal conventions of holding persons responsible, and ownership of property and so on, through to social conventions that seem much less paradigmatically ‘conventional’ such as naming individuals, caring for them in certain ways, treating them in certain ways, within certain structures, and so on. Finally one might have a *mixed conative theory* that involves both public conventions and private conations, and some trade-offs between these.

Practice-based conativism is plausibly a kind of mixed conativism. On that view, what makes it the case that some set of person-phases is united by the SP-relation is determined by which candidate property of conation is most eligible, and eligibility, in turn, is determined by best fit with person-directed practices. These person-directed practices include both public and private conations: social practices of tracking persons over time, holding person-phases responsible for the actions of other person-phases, compensating person-phases for past events, having rules for the ownership of property over time and so forth. It also includes practices of self-concern such as anticipating the future, having prudential concern for future person-phases regretting past actions, and owning and imputing the actions of some past person-phase as one’s own.[[21]](#footnote-22)

In what follows we will talk of a person-phase *organising* her (relevant) conative states around some CPC, Very roughly, a person-phase organises its conations around a particular CPC just in case that person-phase has the relevant conative states only towards person-phases that are connected to it via that CPC.

Since person-directed practices can be organised around different candidate properties of conation in different societies, there can be faultless disagreements between person-phases regarding what each can survive. Two person-phases, p and p\*, can disagree about what events they will survive, and each can be right, so long as each organises its person-directed practices about a different CPC. If one organises its practices around, for instance, the psychological continuity relation, and the other around the physical continuity relation, then the former will survive events such as teletransportation, which the latter will not. Moreover, practice-based conativism appears to be able to accommodate the practical concern desideratum. After all, the various person-directed practices include the very sorts of things that person-phases care about. If these determine which CPC is the SP-relation, then for any person-phase, p, that person-phase will care about phases that are SP-related to it. We will return to consider this issue more fully in §6.

Both *paracognitive conativism* and *direct conativism* are versions of private conativism. Despite having ‘cognitive’ in its name, we take the former to be a form of conativism, as we will now explain. According to this view it is something close to the content of I-thoughts that determines, for each person-phase, which stages are its continuers: namely, those stages are continuers, which make most sense of the I-thoughts of that stage.[[22]](#footnote-23) The idea is that there are various candidate properties of conation, and which is the most eligible is determined by best fit with the I-thoughts and beliefs of the relevant person-phases. We take this to be a version of conativism because ‘fit with I-thought’ means something like: the thing that goes along with the person-phase’s imaginings and conative dispositions. It cannot be that the content of the I-thoughts literally determines the content of the I-thoughts; that would be circular. Rather it seems that the conative dispositions determine the content of the I-thoughts, which, in turn settle which person-phases bear the SP-relation to one another. Understood in this way, however, this view looks a lot like what we call direct conativism: the view that direct conative states of the relevant person-phases settles to which other person-phases those stages bear the SP-relation.[[23]](#footnote-24) On that view, it is in virtue of some person-phase, p, organising its conative states around the particular candidate property of conation that it does, that when p uses ‘I’, that term refers only to person-phases that are connected to p in respect of that candidate property of conation. Henceforth, then, we won’t distinguish this kind of paracognitive version of conativism from direct conativism.

4. Direct Private Conativism

We endorse a version of direct conativism. Direct conativism is the view that it is direct, private, conations of some person-phase, p, that settle which CPC is the SP-relation relative to p. There is room for disagreement, here, about which private conations matter. But the direct conative attitudes that we take to be relevant to determining the SP-relation are of two kinds: desires for *extension* of oneself where these extensions bear certain sorts of similarities to the current person-phase—these are forward looking conative attitudes—and desires to have been *extended from* (i.e. to have as an *origin*) person-phases that bear certain sorts of similarities to the current person-phase—these are backwards looking conative attitudes. It is these attitudes that, according to our preferred version of direct conativism, settle, relative to some person-phase, which CPC is the SP-relation.

Further, we think there are constraints on which relations can count as a CPC. We will have more to say about this later (§5.1) but for now, we’ll just say that something can be a CPC only if its being desired (in the relevant ways) is compatible with (but not entailed by) ideal rationality and relevant knowledge. So, for instance, some sort of weak similarity relation won’t count as a CPC if, after reflection, and in light of relevant facts, a person-phase could not have the right kind of conations towards that CPC.

Since a person-phase might desire to be extended by the relation of psychological continuity, and desire to have come from person-phases connected by psychological continuity, the relation of psychological continuity is a CPC (so long as its being thus desired is compatible with ideal rationality and relevant knowledge). If a person-phase does desire to be extended by the relation of psychological continuity, and desires to have come from person-phases connected by psychological continuity, we will say that that person-phase desires psychological continuity, and *mutatis mutandis* for other CPCs. Why do person-phases desire certain CPCs? Here is one part of the story we find plausible: there are primitive conative attitudes of *anticipation* and of *origin*: primitive attitudes of, on the one hand, anticipating the experiences of certain future person-phases and, on the other, of taking some past person-phases to be one’s origin. Here, again, there is something of an inversion of the order of explanation. Rather than its being the case that person-phases ought have attitudes of anticipation and origin towards other person-phases because those person-phases bear some particular relation (such as psychological continuity) to the person-phase in question, instead, it is the attitudes that are primitive. Some CPC, such as psychological continuity, is one that a person-phase cares about because, for that phase, believing that psychological continuity holds between itself and, say, a future person-phase, triggers the primitive conation we call, for example, ‘anticipation’. Anticipation in this example is primitive: it’s just a way of thinking, feeling and imagining. So it’s not analysable in any way, most especially not in terms of identity or the SP-relation. Rather, as should now be clear, the SP-relation is defined in terms of it, and other conations, and how they track CPCs.

Further, it is our view—but not one we argue for here[[24]](#footnote-25)—that the SP-relation is best thought of as coming in continuous degrees. After all, if the SP-relation is the relation that holds between two person-phases when at least one CPC holds between those person-phases, and its holding is desired (by at least one of those phases), then the SP-relation can be a matter of degree because it can be a matter of degree *whether* some CPC is desired and by its being a matter of degree whether some CPC *holds* between said person-phases. In either case we might expect the SP-relation itself to come in degrees.[[25]](#footnote-26)

To be clear, one could impose some kind of threshold in both cases. This is the approach of most reductionists about the SP-relation. For instance, Parfit (1984 p 206-207) holds that the SP-relation only obtains where person-phases are psychologically continuous with one another, where psychological continuity consists in there being overlapping chains of strong connectedness. In turn, strong connectedness obtains between two person-phases just in case at least half the number psychological connections obtain between those phases, which are present in the life of nearly all adult humans, nearly every day. Regardless of the explicit details of such a proposal, one could hold that only when a CPC holds above a certain degree, and only when it is desired above a certain degree, does the SP-relation obtain. But we see no good reason to impose such a threshold. Indeed, if one thinks, as direct conativists do, that the CPC in question matters for the obtaining of the SP-relation *because* of the conative relations person-phases bear to it, then there could be such thresholds only if person-phases have fine-grained desires about such thresholds. That is, there could be such thresholds only if, for instance, a person-phase cares about some person-phase with which it bears psychological connections, only if 50% of the usual psychological connections obtain, and otherwise, does not care at all about that person-phase. Such patterns of care are possible but not, we think, actual, or at least, not common.

So on the assumption that person-phases don’t care about particular thresholds in a strong way, it follows that the direct conativist account *entails* that the SP-relation comes in degrees. Importantly, if the SP-relation is that CPC which is desired, then it is not simply that the patterns of practical concern determine which CPC is the SP-relation: it is also that the patterns of practical concern cannot come apart from the facts about the SP-relation. So if actual patterns of practical concern come in degree—which clearly they do—then so does the SP-relation. So meeting the practical concern desideratum entails embracing the claim that the SP-relation comes in degrees, at least given plausible views about person-phase’s actual conative states. Indeed, we think it an attractive feature of the resultant view that it accommodates the SP-relation obtaining to different degrees between person-phases. It seems to us that this accommodates the sort of phenomena that we see in the real world, with person-phases treating other phases (either of themselves, or someone else) as being the ‘same person’, and yet, at the same time, not entirely the same person (think about person-phases that are very distant in the future and very different from your current phase, with entirely different values; think of some future person-phase suffering dementia, or the person-phase of a family member who has undergo serious brain injury). We think that the fact that the SP-relation comes in degrees allows us to make sense of a range of behaviours—both moral and prudential—regarding the treatment of future person-phases to which one is SP-related (to some degree or other) as well as the treatment of person-phases of other persons. Hence we think that this aspect of our view is pleasing, and is some reason to think that the analysis of the SP-relation we offer, is correct.

Another reason we think that our analysis of the SP-relation is plausible, is that the resulting version of our view (direct private conativism) is one that can nicely accommodate the faultless disagreement desideratum. So long as person-phases can bear the relevant conative states towards different CPCs, it follows that said person-phases can faultlessly disagree about which kinds of continuers they have, or could have, and can disagree about to what degree those person-phases are SP-related. Let’s start with Martha and Phyllida.

We can explain why Martha is right to say that she will survive teletransportation, and Phyllida is right to say that she, Phyllida, will not, by noting that for Martha (or the current person-phase thereof) the psychological continuity relation is the SP-relation—because that is the relation around which she organises her conations—while for Phyllida, the physical continuity relation is the SP-relation—because that is the relation around which she organises her conations. In fact, on our view this is not really faultless disagreement at all, since there isn’t really any *disagreement* between Martha and Phyllida. But suppose that not only does Martha think that she will survive teletransportation, but she thinks that Phyllida will too, while Phyllida thinks not only that she will not survive teletransportation, but that neither will Martha. Now we do seem to have a case of disagreement. When Martha evaluates what Phyllida says about her, Martha’s, survival—i.e. that Martha will not survive teletransportation—from Martha’s own context of assessment—that is, given Martha’s own conations—she will say that what Phyllida says is false. *Mutatis mutandis* for Phyllida’s evaluation of what Martha says about her, Phyllida’s, survival. Here, our view can capture a sense in which Martha might feel inclined to argue with Phyllida, and to strongly suggest to her that she get into the teletransporter machine. Equally though, if Martha has a firm grip on the concept of the SP-relation, then she will recognise that given Phyllida’s own conations, what Phyllida says is, by Phyllida’s own lights, true. Moreover, since there is nothing more to settle the debate between them, than facts about the relations between certain person-phases, and the conations of those person-phases, Martha will see that there is no fact of the matter as to whose conations, hers or Phyllida’s, are *right*. So she will recognise that in some good sense their disagreement is faultless: because, working with the very same concept of the SP-relation, Phyllida makes claims which, given her own conations, are true.

Indeed, on our view there can be faultless disagreement between person-phases that are parts of the *same* person. In the starkest case it can be that from the perspective of one person-phase, P, some other person-phase, P\*, bears the SP-relation to P to degree 1, while from the perspective of P\*, P does not bear the SP-relation to P\* (i.e. bears it to degree 0).[[26]](#footnote-27) For suppose P\* is psychologically but not physically continuous with P. Suppose, further, that P desires psychological continuity in virtue of having certain primitive attitudes of anticipation and origin towards stages connected to P via psychological continuity. Suppose, also, that P\* desires physical continuity in virtue of having certain primitive attitudes of anticipation and origin towards stages connected to P\* via physical continuity. Since P\* is connected to P by psychological continuity, from the perspective of P the SP-relation holds between the two stages. But since P\* is not physically continuous with P, from P\*’s perspective it’s not the case that the SP-relation holds between the two stages. In virtue of P and P\* having the relevant conative attitudes towards different CPCs, it turns out that from the perspective of P, P\* is not SP-related to P, and from the perspective of P\*, P is SP-related to P\*. In order to accommodate this being the case, the SP-relation must be non-symmetrical.

A question then arises as to how to think of persons, and their connection to the SP-relation. Before we turn to this issue, unfortunately, there are some complications.

The first is whether it is solely the conations of an individual person-phase that determines the SP-relations between that phase and other phases, or whether the conations of other person-phases play a role. Consider the following version of the view: the conations of some phase, P, determine what the nearest successor phase, P\*, is. But that ends their role. It’s then the conative states of P\* which determine her successor phase, P\*\*, and so on. So whether P is SP-related to some other distant phase, P’, is a matter of whether there is a chain of phases between P and P’ in which the conative states of each phase determine that the ‘next’ phase is SP-related. This, of course, allows P to be SP-related to some P’ even when, by P’s lights, P’ is not her to any degree at all. Consider the case where the relevant conative states of the intervening phases (between P and P’) has changed enough so that, for example, both P\*, the phase just before P’, and P’ accept that teletransportation is SP-preserving, whereas P does not. So P would take herself to have died before P’ appears, despite the existence of the chain of phases each of which takes themself to have survived to the next stage.

The view we favour is that the conative states of each person-phase fix what the person *is by their lights* (meaning of course that there could be different persons, depending on from which phase we are evaluating —cf Braddon-Mitchell and West 2001). So we simply look to P’s conative states, and we see that P organises her direct conations around the psychological continuity relation, and that settles that P is SP-related only to phases with which P is psychologically continuous. That is true even if some of those phases, in turn, organise their conations differently—around, say the physical continuity relation. Relative to those phases, the SP-relation will be the physical continuity relation. Hence there will be overlapping, but distinct, persons: the person united by psychological continuity, and the person united by physical continuity.

Note that this does not *prohibit* the view that the SP-relation is determined by a chain of phases each with different views about the local SP-relation, and thus different views about which phase is the successor phase. But on the view we favour this would only be true where, from the perspective of a person-phase, it followed from the conative states *of that person-phase*. That would be true if, for instance, some-person phase defers to the conative states of a successor person-phase, allowing that successor’s conative states to determine still later successors, and so on.[[27]](#footnote-28)

Of course being committed to this way of thinking of things commits us to there being no fact of the matter as to what the person is, except indexed to a person-phase and their conations. The exact metaphysics of this might be spelled out in some of the different ways we will shortly consider (many overlapping worms, centred worms etc.) but the crucial thing is that there is a set of SP-relations fixed by each person-phase. This does not, of course, imply that there are always, or even often, a bewildering variety of persons made from the same (or largely overlapping) set of person-phases. If the conative attitudes do not change hugely, then (in the case of the worm view) all the worms may completely overlap, or all the centred worms may differ only in their centre.

Let’s consider how to think about *persons* given what we have said so far. Elsewhere (Braddon-Mitchell and Miller ms) we have considered a number of proposals, including the fairly natural proposal that we think of persons as person-*stages* who bear non-symmetric temporal counterpart relations (which is what the SP-relations would be on this precisification) to one another, in virtue of which claims about what the person did, or will do, are made true. Rather than pursuing that view here, though, we will focus on what we call the *centred worm view.*

According to the centred worm view, persons are mereological fusions of person-stages combined with a perspective: those person-stages that bear SP-relations to one another, seen from the perspective of one of them. Hence persons are *centred* four-dimensional worms. We need the apparatus of a centred worm in order to make sense of the different perspectives of the various person-stages that are parts of the worm. After all, these person-stages can disagree about which relation is the SP-relation, and hence can disagree about what would and would not be survived, and about which other person-stages are its continuers. The analogy is with centred worlds. A centred world[[28]](#footnote-29) is a tool used in semantics where we distinguish how things are objectively, from how things seem from perspectives within a world. So objectively speaking, there are only whole worlds. Such a perspective leaves out the indexical facts: what the time is, where one is, who one is, what is nearby and so on. These perfect naturalistic features are only visible from a location within a world. At that location a certain time is the time, the person-phase is whoever is there located, the future is the part of the world that is a certain temporal direction from that location, and so on. So ‘centred worlds’ are introduced to make sense of this: they are ordered pairs of worlds, and locations within the world.

We construct centred worms by analogy. Worms are just the fusion of a set of person-stages. But this uncentred perspective can’t reveal who is who, in the case where the stages disagree about who is who. Centred worms bring back this perspective, as there are as many centred worms as there are ordered pairs of the worm and a person-stage that is part of it. So just as on the centred worlds approach, there are many centres within a single world, each reflecting a different perspective of someone at that location in the world, so too, on the centred worlds approach there is a single worm, and many centres, each corresponding to the perspective of the person-stage at that centre.

Then just as we can assess the truth of a proposition at different world centres, so, too we can assess the truth of a proposition at different *worm* centres. Hence it can come out as true when assessed at one worm-centre, P, that some person-stage, P\* is SP-related to P, and yet also be true, when assessed at worm-centre P\*, that P is not SP-related to P\*. Of course, propositions about the conative attitudes of each person-stage, and propositions about the nature and degree to which CPC relations hold between person-stages, are simply true or false *simpliciter*. It is only propositions about the obtaining, or not, of the SP-relation between certain stages that can only ever be evaluated as true or false at a *centred* worm.

What, though, are *persons* on this view? There are really two options. On one view, for each person-stage, P, there is a worm that is the fusion of all those person-phases *to which P* is connected via the SP-relation, as it were, from P’s perspective. Relative to each such person-phase, then, there is some person composed of just those person-phases to which said person-phase is connected by the SP-relation. For any such worm, then, there are multiple persons: each distinct person being a *centred worm.* So there are many distinct centred worms, although there is only one worm. Whether this is ontologically parsimonious depends on your take on the ontology of centred worms. If you think centred worms are ontologically ‘innocent’[[29]](#footnote-30)—nothing costly added to the worm and its centres—then you might think so. Otherwise not. Regardless, on this view there are many persons cohabiting where there is a single worm: one person for each centre of that worm. In addition, there will sometimes be overlapping worms, where from the perspective of one centred worm P\* is a part of the worm in question, and from the perspective of P\* it is not part of the worm in question. In such cases we don’t just have one worm with multiple centres, we have multiple overlapping worms with different centres.

The alternative is to identify the person with a single worm (if you think there is a way to form a complete, maximal worm, the parts of which comprise the set of all the SP-relevant stages by the lights of *every* relevant stage), and use the centred worm story as a formalism to describe the SP-relations from the perspective of each person-phase. On this view persons have a less direct relationship to the SP-relation. The person is something like a maximally connected set of person-phases connected by the SP-relation in either direction. Then there is a single worm which includes both stages P and P\*, since from P’s perspective P\* is a continuer. On this view it is the SP-relations that obtain between person-phases, rather than the existence of the person, which most directly explain patterns of concern. After all, on this view P\* is part of the same person as P, despite the fact that from P\*’s perspective P\* is not a continuer of P. The benefit of this view is economy. There is only one person, and the centred worms play only a formal role. The cost is that the relation between persons, and the relations that explain patterns of concern displayed by a person-phase, is indirect.

There is an important complication for this second view, which makes it less attractive by our lights. As we just saw with P and P\*, it’s possible that perspectives from within a ‘worm’ disagree as to which stages should be included in the worm in any way. Thus from those perspectives, the worm which is the person might, for example, be rather smaller than the uncentred worm. So the uncentred worm has to be understood as a fusion of person-stages considered relevant by *any* of the stages. The centring process will then make different parts of that large worm the ‘person’ by the lights of that centre. But that still requires specifying which stages should be used in this construction process. There is no parallel with centred *worlds,* except in the case that you think that the criteria for being a world is up for grabs: let’s suppose it’s optional whether spatio-temporally isolated regions can be part of the same world. In that case, it might turn out that if agents at centres disagree faultlessly about this, the world in one sense would have different extent at different centres, while there is an overall world comprised of all those regions regarded as bearing the same-world relation to one another, by any agent. The same problem would arise then: you would need to decide which stages were relevant to world construction before constructing the overall world. But it is more plausible in the case of worlds that what constitutes a possible world is an objective metaphysical fact which does not depend on agent’s views, rather than a perspective dependent matter.

So far, we have we wondered how we ought determine who I—the person—am (i.e. which person-phases are person-phases of me). Is who I am determined entirely by my (i.e. this very person-phase’s) conations, or is it partly determined by the conations of the phases to which I (this person-phase) am SP-related, for instance, some chain in which my conations determine my continuer phase, but that phase’s conations determine which phase is the next continuer, and so on. Our view is that each person-phase’s conations entirely determine to which other person-phases that person-phase is SP-related: the conations of the person-phases to which that person-phase is SP-related do not matter, except for determining the existence of different persons comprised from the same person-phases.

We can now ask a similar sort of question, but instead of wondering who I am, we can wonder *who I would have been.* Consider actual person-phase p, and the modal counterpart of person phase p, person-phase c. Suppose that c’s conations are quite different from p’s, so that the CPC around which c organises its conations is different from the CPC around which p organises its practices. For instance, let’s suppose that p organises its conations around the psychological continuity relation, while c organises it around the physical continuity relation. Now suppose that actually, one of p’s continuers suffers a terrible accident, and thereafter there are no phases that are psychologically continuous with p. Suppose, too, that the same accident falls one of c’s continuers; but c survives, since there are physical continuers. Ought p to think that, had things gone differently, he would have survived the terrible accident? That is, ought p to think that had things gone differently, the physical continuity relation would have been the SP-relation, and hence there would have been some post-accident physical continuer? Or ought p to think that had things gone differently, he would have had false views about what he would survive, but, in fact, he would not have survived the accident?

The latter would be the right attitude if it is p’s actual conations that settle the modal truths; the former is the right attitude if it is p’s counterfactual conations which settle the modal truths. To think that it is p’s actual conations that settle the modal truths is to endorse a *rigid* version of conativism; to think that it is the counterfactual conations that settle the modal truths, is to endorse a *non-rigid* version of conativism. While we think there is scope for dispute here, we are tempted by the non-rigid version: we are tempted to say that had things gone differently, conatively speaking, p would have been able to survive different events than p in fact p is able to survive.

That brings us to the end of our articulation of the view. Shortly, (§6) we will have more to say about why we prefer direct private conativism to other versions of conativism, and, in particular, we will have more to say about the connection between the private conations central to our account, and the public conations that figure in other accounts. In particular, we will consider a very general objection to conativism: that since the various different conations can pull in different directions, that is, can be organised around different CPCs, any conativist view either ends up being objectionably pluralist about persons, or, alternatively, must tell some story about which set of conations are the ones that matter, something which, in turn, looks difficult to achieve. Before we turn to these more general worries, however, first we want to consider a couple of specific objections to direct private conativism.

**5. Objections to Direct Private Conativism**

**5.1 The objection from implausible consequences.**

We noted above that we take there to be constraints on which relations can be CPCs. In particular, we said that something is CPC only if its being desired (in the relevant ways) is compatible with (but not entailed by) ideal rationality and relevant knowledge. But why think that? Well notice that it might be that the primitive attitudes of anticipation and origin can be held towards just about anything (stages of tables, lemons, cockroaches etc.). To consider some examples, suppose there is a relation, R, that holds between a particular person-phase we will call Freddie, and some future dustbin stage—D—and its holding is desired (or otherwise conatively relevant) to Freddie in part in virtue of the presence of primitive attitudes of anticipation. In virtue of that, Freddie is SP-related to D. But that is absurd. Or consider Felicity, the current person-phase of Freddie’s girlfriend. Freddie cares a lot about Felicity’s welfare. There is some relation, R, that obtains between Freddie and a future person-stage, Fr\*, that is bodily and psychologically continuous with Freddie. There is also some relation, R\*, that obtains between Freddie and a future person-phase that is bodily and psychologically continuous with Felicity. Call that future stage Fe\*. Suppose that for any goods, Freddie is indifferent between Fr\* and Fe\* having those goods. So it may seem as though there is a relation, namely R\*, that holds between Freddie and Fe\*, whose holding is desired (or otherwise conatively relevant) by Freddie in part in virtue of the presence of primitive attitudes of anticipation. In virtue of that Freddie bears the SP-relation to Fe\*. But that is, perhaps, absurd.

We think the direct conativist ought say that what matters for the obtaining of the SP-relation is the obtaining of those primitive attitudes that it is possible to hold *after ideal rational reflection,* *in the face of relevant knowledge*. In particular, we think that something counts as a CPC only if its being desired is not incompatible with ideal rationality and relevant knowledge. Before we show how this proposal helps resolve these problems, it’s worth noting a couple of important clarifications. Our claim about CPCs is not the claim that actual person-phases are capable of ideal reflection. Something counts as a CPC just in case *were things like us to engage in ideal reflection,* then, in the face of relevant knowledge, we would have certain conations towards it. That only requires that there is some world in which we engage in ideal reflection, not that that world is the actual world.

To see how this helps, consider the dustbin case. Let’s suppose that R is the relation that holds between the Freddie-stage and the dustbin-stage. We can imagine that Freddie desires to be extended by R in part in virtue of the presence of primitive attitudes of anticipation toward D. For perhaps Freddie can primitively anticipate being a future dustbin. But Freddie cannot *ideally* anticipate being a dustbin, because one can only ideally anticipate being something if there is some way that it is to be that thing. Perhaps Freddie can anticipate being a dustbin in some sense or other. But knowing all the facts about dustbins, and knowing all the facts about anticipation and consciousness, she could not anticipate being a dustbin. So, were Freddie ideally rational, and were she to know all the relevant facts—facts about dustbins and consciousness—she could not anticipate being D. So the R relation is not a CPC: thus it is false that there is an SP-relation obtaining between Freddie and the dustbin-stage. For, recall, the SP-relation is the relation that holds between two person-phases when some CPC holds between those person-phases, and that CPC’s holding is desired, or otherwise conatively relevant.

That brings us to the case of Freddie and Felicity. Plausibly, the relation R\* that holds between Freddie and Fe\* is a CPC. But does Freddie desire that relation in part in virtue of the presence of primitive attitudes of anticipation? No. While Freddie is indifferent between goods accruing to Fe\* and to Fr\*, that is no reason to suppose that she is indifferent because she anticipates the experiences of *both* Fr\* and Fe\*. Plausibly, the reason Freddie wishes certain goods to accrue to Fe\* is on the basis of entirely other-regarding attitudes. We will have more to say about these attitudes in §4. And of course, if Freddie does primitively anticipate the experiences of Fe\* things are more complicated. For now, we need only note that we have no reason to think that Freddie bears the SP-relation to Fe\* just in virtue of being indifferent between the well being of Fr\* and Fe\*.

But why care about what one might ideally be able to (for example) anticipate, and thus limit the list of CPCs? Indeed, one might worry that doing so threatens to undermine the extent to which direct conativism can meet either the faultless disagreement or the practical concern desideratum. With regard to the former, one might worry that genuinely faultless disagreement is not possible between ideally rational and relevantly knowledgeable person-phases. For, one might think, under those conditions all person-phases will organise their conations in the same manner. But we see no reason to suppose that this is so. If one is a rationalist about desire—if one thinks that some fundamental desires are rationally mandated and others rationally impermissible—then one will suppose that is so. We, however, are Humeans about fundamental desires: while it can be more, or less, rational to have certain instrumental desires, one’s fundamental desires are neither rational nor irrational: they just are what they are. If different person-phases can have different fundamental desires—as surely they can—then even under conditions of ideal reflection and relevant knowledge, those person-phases may well organise their conations around quite different CPCs. Hence this characterisation of CPCs is consistent with there being disagreement (and hence faultless disagreement) between person-phases regarding which CPC is the SP-relation. The rationality requirement will only eliminate different conations where those differences are due to either cognitive error, or instrumental desires that are not properly in the service of fundamental desire.

The second worry is that this will undermine direct conativism’s ability to meet the practical concern desideratum. For some actual person-phase might not actually desire what they would desire in conditions of ideal reflection and relevant knowledge. That, after all, is precisely the position in which Freddie finds herself with regard to D. These are cases in which what some person-phase in fact cares about—it’s actual *particular* practical concerns—can come apart from facts about survival. Freddie’s practical concerns include concerns about D, but Freddie is not, on our view, SP-related to D. So we are committed to saying that it’s only one’s *idealised* practical concerns that cannot come apart from survival. For while our account constrains which relations can be CPCs, by appealing to rationality and knowledge, we could instead have said that it is a person-phase’s ideal conations—their conations after ideal reflection, and in the face of relevant knowledge—which settle which relation is the SP-relation. Of course, which conations we would have, after reflection, is in part determined by the conations we in fact have. So our actual conations play a role in setting which CPC is the SP-relation: it’s just that the way they settle this goes via some idealisations. But that, we think, is as it should be. At a more abstract level, our practical concern is not for momentary whims, or for things that we would not care about if we were a little better informed. It’s only a weak requirement of practical rationality to say that our practical concerns are with what we would desire when not utterly misinformed or otherwise confused.

That brings us to a second specific objection to direct conativism.

**5.2 The objection from empty concepts**

Here is what we take to be another important objection. If some set of person-phases bear the SP-relation to Freddie because of Freddie’s conative states, then what sense can we make of Freddie trying to deliberate over what desires she *should* have with respect to some set of person-phases? A hard line conativist would deny the coherence any such deliberation. Freddie’s desires are all there are to fix the matter, and if, for instance, she has no such desires, then there is simply no fact of the matter which set of person-phases bear the SP-relation to her. If she does have such desires, then the matter is fixed: we know which person-phases bear the SP-relation to her, and no question can arise as to whether she *ought* to care about those stages, rather than some other stages.

But we think this is too quick. Surely Freddie could think in this way: I care about survival. I also care about certain future person-phases in the way that I should care about them if they are me. But am I right to care in this way? Perhaps for many people, this thought would be epiphenomenal—it would have no effect on the desires that they would have. But let’s suppose that Freddie is especially sensitive to the teachings of philosophers, and her desires move with whatever she is most persuasively taught in philosophy class is the best theory of personal-identity. When the lecturer is especially eloquent in favour of physical continuity, she comes to care about future physical continuers. When the lecturer is especially enthusiastic about psychological continuity, she is prepared again to sign up for teletransportation.

By itself the example is no objection to an account of the nature of the SP-relation, which says the relation depends on relevant desires. It shows just that what those desires are might depend on many things—including metaphysical views (false or otherwise) about the nature of the SP-relation. And in turn, the relevance of those metaphysical views is itself determined by conations: it’s a conative fact that someone *cares* about best metaphysics.

But it does, perhaps, show that there is something wrong about direct conativism as a straightforward account of the *concept* of personal identity, at least as possessed by Freddie.

Earlier in the paper, we suggested that although there are other ways of framing the account, at least for expository purposes our preferred way of framing it is as a conceptual analysis. But this example suggests another way of thinking about conativism, in which understanding the concept of the SP-relation plays a role in determining that conativism is the right account, but the role is of there being a best deserver (which is not conativism) which gets *revised* to conativism in the light of best philosophy.

So perhaps Freddie’s concept is not a concept of the relation that holds between two person-phases when some CPC holds between those person-phases, and that CPC’s holding is desired, or otherwise conatively relevant. For we know that she is prepared to countenance the possibility that she does not bear the SP-relation to the very person-phases she does care about in the required ways. So what might her concept be?

She might have a concept individuated at least in part by the appropriate response to tokening that concept: the *concept* of ‘same person’ is the concept of the relation that holds between person-phases when those stages *should* be related by conative relations of a certain kind. When should Freddie have such conative relations? This is something about which the concept is too uninformative, and this, the thought goes, explains the lack of convergence in the literature.

If there were deep metaphysical facts about personal identity, then presumably Freddie should have those conations when those facts obtain. It is to the extent that Freddie believes this that she is tempted to defer to best philosophy on the matter of what her desires should be. But as we noted at the very beginning of this paper, we believe that there are no such facts—just the desires with respect to other person-phases whose origin, in best Humean style, is varied according to personal and cultural difference, and not subject, within the limits we discussed, to rational scrutiny. The concept Freddie has when she is in her introspective, theoretical mode (and, we suspect, many people have) is clear about how you should behave and desire *if* you grasp that the SP-relation holds, but is silent on when it holds. It is in this sense an ‘empty’ concept: empty of decisive guidance about its extension, though not empty about what one should do when one judges that it obtains.

If this is Freddie’s concept, then our proposal has to be understood as revisionary is a certain way. On discovering that there is nothing in the world, or in the concept, which normatively determines when the relation obtains, but recognising the importance of organising her life around such a concept (which makes elimination hard), Freddie revises[[30]](#footnote-31) to the view that the relation holds whenever the relevant desires *do in fact* obtain, (with only the vestigial rational constraints of the kinds we have discussed in section §5.1). Hence Freddie revises to conativism.

**6. Different Conations and the Threat of Pluralism**

One very general objection to conativism proceeds as follows. Different conativists identify different conations as being important in settling which person-phases the SP-relation obtains between. Indeed, some conativist proposals identify a set of many kinds of conations, including both public and private, as jointly settling this matter. Yet it seems as though these various conations can ‘come apart’ in the following sense: different conative states can be organised around different CPCs.[[31]](#footnote-32) Different public conations—conventions—can be organised around different CPCs: legal practices regarding who is responsible for what, about who gets to own what, and so on, might be organised around a different CPC than, say, certain other social and inter-personal conventions regarding how we track people over time, how we treat people over time, and so on. For instance, various *other-regarding* practices—the practices we enact with regard to person-phases that we don't take to be SP-relation to ourselves (such as our family, children, friends, parents, and so on) taking care of other individuals, treating some person-phase as though it is a continuer of some earlier phase, and so on, might come apart from other social and legal conventions. Legal conventions might mandate that certain person-phases are not responsible for certain behaviours (children, those with limited cognitive capacities, those suffering mental illness or dementia etc.) of earlier person-phases, and yet other social conventions and other-regarding practices might involve treating those same person-phases as though they are continuers of earlier phases. Relative to some sets of practices infants, and those with limited cognitive capacities, might be treated as phases of a persisting person, and relative to other practices, they might not, suggesting that different sets of practices (and hence conations) are organised around quite different relations.

Indeed, other-regarding practices might come apart from *self-regarding* practices—private conations that involve first-personal conations such as anticipation and regret (and so on) and distinctively prudential attitudes. It is easy to imagine that some person-phase, p, organises its self-regarding practices around the psychological continuity relation, and does not anticipate the experiences of any person-phase with which it is not psychologically continuous. Hence p thinks that he has no continuer phases that are in a persistent vegetative state; instead, p supposes that if such an event comes to pass, then that event is the cessation of there being any continuers of p (p does not survive). Yet p’s family (and indeed other social institutions) might organise their *other*-directed practices in such a way that they treat the vegetative phases as though they are continuers of p. Thus a whole range of other-regarding practices *with regard to p, and p’s continuers,* might be organised around a relation other than psychological continuity. If those conations are the right ones, then they settle that p does have continuers that are in a vegetative state.

Shoemaker (2007) takes away from this the idea that rather than attempting to locate some *unique* relation that is the personal identity relation, instead, the only reasonable project is to articulate the various different ways in which our practical concerns are organised around various relations in the world. For accepting, as we do, that there are no further metaphysical facts that outstrip the various conative facts and the facts about which (non-SP-involving) relations obtain between person-phases, there is no further fact to which to appeal, to determine which of these relations *really is* the personal identity relation. A slightly different way forward (but perhaps largely bookkeeping) would be to embrace *person pluralism,* a view countenanced (but rejected) by Schechtman (2014; chapter 1) according to which there are different *kinds* of persons—a legal person, a moral person, a familial person, and so on—each corresponding to a set of person-phases united by some relation around which the legal, moral, familial, and so on, conations are organised.

Schechtman rejects pluralism on the grounds that there really is just one person: we don’t act as though there are whole bunch of largely overlapping persons; we don’t talk of moral persons, and familial persons, and legal persons, and social persons. We act as though there is just one locus, *the* person. Schechtman’s response to the worry is to suppose that persons—who for her, are things that engage in *person lives*—are things that *under normal circumstances* develop psychological capacities and features and engage in certain kinds of social interactions—that is, they are things typically subject to the self-regarding and other-regarding conations already mentioned. But this allows that there can be cases in which, for instance, the psychological capacities are missing: so long as the life in question is a person-life, we have a person, and we have a person-life if there are sufficiently rich other-regarding conations. So it is possible for a persisting person to have none of these characteristic psychological capacities, and that is so because that person exists within a set of social structures and conventions, and practices, all of which ultimately depend on conations, some of which any particular individual might lack. On this view, then, there is a unique relation that realises the SP-relation, and it is determined by the totality of conations, including, quite crucially social institutions and structures and other-regarding practices.[[32]](#footnote-33)

Our concern with this approach is that it results in a gap between certain kinds of practical concern, and survival. Of course, there is no gap between the *totality* of conations, and survival, since the former determines the latter. But let’s revisit person-phase, p, who organises his self-regarding practices around the psychological continuity relation. P does not care about any future phases that are in a vegetative state: as far as p is concerned, those are not his continuer phases. Moreover, p wishes that were a cataclysmic event ever to befall his body, that body would not be kept alive by machine; after all, as far as p is concerned, he failed to survive that event. In that event he does not want his body kept alive; he wants his organs donated so that some good can come of the tragedy. According to Schechtman (2014 p 147-148), however, when the cataclysmic event happens, p does in fact survive, on the assumption that the relevant social and other-reading practices are as we just described them; his body is kept alive; his family visits and reads to him; they treat the resulting phases as though they were continuer phases of p, and so on. P’s conations do not matter: they play effectively no role in determining under what circumstances p survives. Of course, one might be attracted to such a view: but we find it unpalatable to think that p’s practical concerns—including p’s idealised practical concerns—entirely come apart from the facts about p’s survival.

Quite generally, conativist views face a dilemma: they can either concede that pluralism about persons is right, or tell some story about why *these*, rather than *those*, conations, settle the SP-relation. But if conations are all there are—if there are no further metaphysical facts that settle the SP-relation—then it’s hard to see what account one could give, of why one set of conations are the right ones, and others are not. Even if one could provide some reason to prefer one set of conations to another, the resulting view would run the risk of falling foul of the practical concern constraint. If different practical concerns track different relations, and if all of these practical concerns matter to us, then insofar as just one of those relations is determined to be to the SP-relation, that SP-relation will come apart from at least some of those practical concerns.

Conativisms that appeal to a range of different conations, which can come apart from one another, face a related problem. Mixed conative views, which appeal to both private and public conations, are a case in point. These views face the problem that the very things that they take to settle which CPC is the SP-relation might pull in different directions when it comes to doing the settling. It might, then, be indeterminate, relative to certain person-phases, which relation is the SP-relation. Alternatively, such views might take something closer to Schechtman’s route, and in some sense privilege certain of these conations. One might say that all those conative states are necessary preconditions for there being persons, but that only some of them settle which CPC is the SP-relation.[[33]](#footnote-34) As we already noted, however, that returns us to the issue that at least some practical concerns will come apart from the SP-relation.

Here is what we want to say. We think that something like pluralism is the right response to this dilemma. But how is that consistent with our earlier defence of direct conativism? Well, one can think of this as a defence of direct conativism in a context in which we conceive of the SP-relation as a self-regarding relation. That is to say, when we talk of the SP-relation, we are talking of the relation that obtains between person-phases, and which is the relation tracked by certain distinctively first-personal and prudential concerns. The SP-relation, conceived like this, is clearly an important relation. ‘Same person’ in this sense, is the thing I care about, in a certain sort of way, when I care about having continuers of a certain sort. What settles whether this relation obtains between person-phase p, and other person-phases, are p’s direct conative states.

None of this, however, is to deny that there are important *other*-regarding practices, and that there are other senses of ‘same person’ that map onto those practices. A natural way to put this is that there are both self-regarding SP-relations—SP-relations that are settled by distinctively first-personal, agentive, and prudential conative states—as well as other-regarding SP-relations—SP-relations that are settled by distinctively third-personal, and social, practices. This allows that different relations might realise the self-regrading SP-relation, depending on which direct conative states some person-phase has, just as it allows that different relations might realise the other-regarding SP-relation, depending on which other-regarding and social practices some person-phase, or set of phases, has.

Moreover, conceiving of things in this manner opens up the prospects for considering the ways in which self-regarding and other-regarding conations do, and ought, interact. For instance, we previously described a case in which p’s self-regarding conations are organised around a very different relation than are p’s family’s other-regarding conations towards p. Whether one thinks that, by and large, other-regarding conations about p, and p’s own self-regarding conations, ought coincide (at least when appropriately idealised) will depend on broader ethical considerations. Communitarians, for instance, might see no reason why other-regarding conations with respect to p, ought mirror p’s own self-regarding conations. Others might disagree, supposing that this is to fail to respect certain aspects of p’s autonomy. Our aim is not to resolve that issue here, but merely to note its importance. Our core claim is just that there is an especially important sense of ‘same-person’ which is the self-regarding sense that we have articulated, and is the key one relevant to deliberation about one’s future, and it is this sense, we think, that is settled by direct conations of the relevant person-phases.

7. Conclusion

The scope of different forms of conativism is wide, and there is much more to be said about the connection between different conations: public and private, self and other-regarding. We hope, though, to have provided an overview of some of the options, and gone some way towards showing why one might find something in the vicinity attractive.

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1. Put this way the view is a form of cognitivism; one could have a non-cognitivist version according to which judgments about the SP-relation express certain conative states, but we will not discuss that version here. Much, but not all, of what we go on to say would apply to such a version. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. We say that it’s a matter of conceptual analysis, in part, just to have one version of the story playing centre stage. The first order features of our account would be no different in some important ways if it were a metaphysical discovery that SP-relations are relations-when-conatively relevant, for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. This is not to suggest that all conativists suppose that conativism is true as a matter of conceptual analysis. It is not clear, for instance, that this is exactly Kovacs’ (2016) view. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. For discussion of synchronic conventionalist views see Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (2004) and Kovacs (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Since the personal-identity relation comes with various different kinds of metaphysical baggage, we’ve introduced the SP-relation in order to target the relation that we have in mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Though we use the term ‘phase’ in this context, we don’t intend the sort of heavy-duty notion that Johnston introduces by his talk of phase sorts, or crypto phase sorts, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. We take conventions to be a kind of conation in that conventions are organised system of behaviours and choices that reflect underlying conations. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See Lewis (1976); Sider (2001); Shoemaker (1984, 2003) for reductionist accounts of the SP-relation in terms of similarity and causal connectedness. We take it that ‘further fact’ or ‘simple views’ (as described by Parfit (1984 p210) and defended by, *inter alia,* Swinburne 1984) according to which the presence of these features is at best evidence for the presence of the SP-relation are much more likely (though perhaps not required) to suppose that the relevant relation is identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. In part that is because we think that what makes something an account of personal-identity (rather than something else) is that what it tracks, plays a certain role in our prudential and moral theorizing (i.e. meets the practical constraint). Dummett (1981 p 358) makes a similar point. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. See Eklund (2004) and Shoemaker (2007 and 2016) for a discussion of the ways in which accounts of person-identity can ‘come apart’ from accounts of the ways in which we ought to structure our prudential or moral concerns. Schechtman (2014; chapter 1) is one theorist who takes seriously the practical concern desideratum. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. See Miller (2006) for a defence of this view that deals with the obvious issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. See Johnston (1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. For a defence of this claim see Sider (2001a), Braddon-Mitchell and West (2001), Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (2004); Miller (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. An attitude about ‘who one is’ probably is an expressive matter. But the point here is that in such a version of conativism there is a fact of the matter about the SP-relation which might in part depend on what states are expressed, rather than claims about the SP-relation having themselves an expressivist analysis. For work on ‘who one is’ (though not necessarily in the context of a conativist account of personal identity), see Schechtman (1996; 2011); Frankfurt (1987; 1988); Ludwig (1997); Lindemann Nelson (2001; 2002) and Rudder-Baker (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. We say ‘appear to be’ beliefs because they are states without content: nothing about them fixes their intension, and if beliefs are individuated intensionally they aren’t beliefs. They only gain content if this is filled in by conative attitudes. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See Braddon-Mitchell and West (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. See Braddon-Mitchell and West (2001), Miller (2009) and Kovacs (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Schechtman notes that on her view persons are unified loci of interaction and that ‘It is not up to us what conditions must be met for there to be a unified locus of interaction, or for a single locus to continue” (2015; p 196.) But of course, it is up to us, at least in the sense that it *depends* on us, what our conative states, and the conventions and practices that depend on that states, are, and, moreover, were those conative states different in various ways, then the facts about the SP-relation would be different. As far as we are concerned, that is all that is required for a view to be conativist or, more specifically, conventionalist. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Indeed, one might think that this is all they depend on. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Braddon-Mitchell and West (2001) characterize person-directed practices in this manner. Their view is probably best interpreted as a version of practice-based conventionalism. See also Johnston (1989); Unger (1990), Nozick (1981), Perry (1972). We think that Schechtman (2014) also endorses a version of practice-based conativism, though she would not self-describe as a conventionalist. It may also be that would allow somewhat less faultless disagreement than the view allows, for it may be that she thinks that any recognizably human society will have relevantly similar practices of this kind (or at least, practices that don’t differ in such a way that would result in quite different relations being the SP-relation). Schechtman allows, however, that once the public conventions are in place (and private conations are required for this) the presence of these conventions, alone, can ground there being a persisting person, even if the person-phases in question do not have the capacity to have the sorts of first-personal conative states that are typically thought to be definitive of persons. See for instance (Schechtman 2014 p 106). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. This view is explicitly endorsed by Kovacs (2016) and (ms) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Examples of conative versions of conventionalism, (some of which are weak conventionalism, and some strong conventionalism) include Braddon-Mitchell and West 2001; Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (2004); Miller (2009) and Johnson (1989). Views of this kind have also been gestured towards in Nozick (1981 p 69), Unger (1990 p66) and Whiting (1986). See also D. Shoemaker (2003) for a related view according to which “our identity as functioning, well-developed agents is constituted by our nexus of cares.” Eklund (2004) calls views of this kind *self-concern relativism.* [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. See Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (ms) for a defence of this view. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. As Parfit (1984), notes. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Braddon-Mitchell and West (2001) and Sider (forthcoming) also argue for views with this feature. In addition, Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (ms) argue for a version of the desire-first view according to which the SP-relation comes in continuous degrees. On that version of the view, it can be that although both P and P\* are, from each of their perspectives, SP-related to one another, nevertheless from P’s perspective the SP-relation holds to degree .5, say, and from P\*’s perspective the SO-relation holds to degree .7. We won’t get into the complexities of that view here. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Having made the choice we just did, we are absolved from making decisions about whether the direct SP-relations hold between phases and their neighbours, or between phases and certain other phases, or phases and all other phases. For on our view, which of these is the case (from the perspective of a phase) is an empirical matter of what that phase’s conations are like. A defender of the view that there is some independent metaphysical fact, but who thinks that various conations are relevant to determining the SP-relations, has the task of saying which of these views is true as a matter of independent metaphysical fact. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. As first introduced by Lewis (1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. By analogy with Lewis’ view about mereological fusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Of course on some accounts of the nature of concepts, it is sometimes part of a concept how one should revise on making various sorts of discoveries about actuality (two-dimensional concepts are one such example). In which case we get to preserve the idea that our story is a conceptual analysis, which says certain things about the SP-relation conditional on there being no metaphysical facts necessarily connected with various conations. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Shoemaker (2007) makes this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. As Schechtman puts it “according to PLV (the person life view) persons are loci of interpersonal interaction whose integrity as unified wholes results from complex and dynamic interactions among biological, psychological and social processes” (2014 p 184). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. This is one way of reading Schechtman’s proposal. One could, of course, go this route but disagree with Schechtman about which conations are relevant to settling the SP-relation. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)