How to Explain the Importance of Persons

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Abstract

We commonly explain the distinctive prudential and moral status of persons in terms of our mental capacities. I draw from recent work to argue that the common explanation is incomplete. I then develop a new explanation: we are ethically important because each of us is the object of a pattern of self-concern. I argue that the view solves moral problems posed by permissive ontologies, such as the recent personite problem.

Keywords: moral status, self-concern, permissive ontology, the personite problem, ethical singularity

1 Introduction

Persons especially matter, both prudentially and morally. Persons are the referents of our pronouns, the relata of our interpersonal relationships, and the default focal points of our practical reasoning. We assume that our practical and evaluative focus on persons—rather than brains, bodies, or hedonic pleasure—is justified and not globally criticizable. It would be shocking, then, if it turned out that we were making a radical error in treating persons as distinctively important.

Not only do we assume that our person-based practices are beyond global reproach, but we think there is a demand for us to treat persons well. Persons deserve to be treated a certain way, and treating them otherwise can be a moral error. We hold that persons are a source of reasons such that, if we fail to appropriately respond to those reasons, then we are doing something wrong.

These are heavy issues, and their heft demands an explanation. Why do persons matter? What is the source of the special moral and prudential significance of persons, and why are other objects (like brains, mannequins, or parts of persons) not similarly significant? What's so special about *us*?

A common explanation cites our mental capacities to explain why we matter.[1] Persons are more important than mannequins because persons reason, feel, or care while mannequins do not. A person matters more than an ant because we are more rational, more sentient, and more caring than ants are. However, this explanation only goes so far. It doesn't explain why brains, the top half of humans, and other unusual parts of persons don't matter in the way persons do. After all, brains, the top half of humans, and many other parts of persons are mentally sophisticated in the way persons are. These odd objects share our brains, and so they also seemingly share our mental capacities to think, feel, and care. Yet they do not matter like we do, and so our explanation falls short.

Trouble for the common explanation arises if these unusual objects exist and share our mental capacities. These claims are widely held, but they are not universally endorsed. Some have argued that at least some of the odd objects are not conscious because the odd objects are not maximal (Sider 2003). However, this view requires that consciousness is extrinsic, which is contentious. Beyond this, the permissive ontologies that recognize the existence of these unusual objects have been denied, but there are powerful arguments in their favor.[2] So, for the purposes of this paper I will assume that a permissive ontology is true and that the unusual objects can think, feel, and care. It is worth stressing that the problem arises even for quite modest permissive ontologies. If brains exist, can think, and are distinct from human beings, then the common explanation is not enough.

For any plausible permissive ontology, the common explanation

[1] Tooley (1972), Singer (1993), Harman (1999), McMahan (2002), Jaworska (2007)

[2] For proponents of permissive ontologies, see, among many others, Lewis (1986), Yablo (1987), Heller (1990), Hawley (2001), Sider (2001), Bennett (2004), Thomasson (2007), Leslie (2011), and Fairchild and Hawthorne (2018) See Korman (2020) for an extensive review of the literature on restrictive versus permissive ontologies.

is incomplete. The failure of the common explanation can be drawn out in dramatic fashion by examining the recent *personite proble*m developed by Mark Johnston.[3] The personite problem shows that four-dimensionalist views of personal identity like that of Lewis (1976) are committed to the existence of 'personites'—proper temporal parts of persons. As with other odd objects, the common explanation cannot explain why persons matter in a way that personites do not. The explanatory gap reveals holes in the moral intelligibility of our way of life.

One may be inclined to appeal to a theory of personal identity to tell us which objects are persons and how—or for how long—those objects persist.[4] However, theories of personal identity do not supply the desired explanation of our special importance. For example, even if it's true that human persons are essentially human animals, we must still explain why human animals are ethically superlative (if they are). So, we should first inquire into the conditions that are intelligibly of distinctive ethical importance. Only after should we draw out implications for a theory of personal identity.

This approach—seeking a non-arbitrary foundation of ethical privilege—may also address whether we are wrong in being person-centric. Some have recently suggested that some temporal parts of a person may independently deserve to be privileged objects of normative discourse (Das and Paul 2020, Dietz 2020). If that's right, then we are systematically failing to appreciate reasons in our midst. What's more, the plausibility of these suggestions shows that we do not really understand whether or why persons are ethically special.

In this paper, I develop an explanation of the special ethical significance of persons that completes the common explanation. The key innovation is isolating a special mental power that is uniquely possessed by persons and is not possessed by brains, our top-halves, personites, or any of the other odd objects that partially or fully coincide with us. The proposal I develop is that an entity is ethically significant (in the way we are) when it is *the object of a pattern of*

[3]Olson (2010), Johnston (2010, 2016, 2017, 2021). See also Kovacs (2016, 2020) for discussion of related problems that Kovacs labels the *problem of overlappers*. Kovacs argues for a view of personal identity that explains how we can know we are not any of the non-person overlappers. However, that view does not explain what is ethically special about persons.

[4]For example, Kaiserman (2019) argues that the stage-view avoids the personite problem; I think his solution requires resources developed here. See footnote 18.

self-concern. As developed here, self-concern is a radical overhaul of a classic idea, built for the modern age of permissive ontologies.

Before I proceed, I want to point out that while the proposal to follow is intended to explain why persons—i.e., self-conscious beings such as typical adult humans—matter morally, the explanation can also be extended to some non-human animals and non-person humans. Some forms of self-concern are possessed by sophisticated animals such as dolphins and elephants. Additionally, simple analogs of self-concern such as pain and fear are plausibly possessed by virtually any sentient animal. So, an analogous explanation could be provided in those cases. However, I don't have room to discuss applications to these cases in detail, so I set them aside in this paper.[5]

In section 2, I show how the common explanation fails to explain the moral status of persons and then diagnose the problem. In section 3, I characterize my proposed alternative. In section 4, I develop a metaphysics of diachronic self-concern stated in terms of counterparts. In section 5, I show how the new view recovers the distinctive ethical significance of persons, in particular by showing how it solves the personite problem.

2 Moral Status and the Problem with the Common Explanation

The special ethical significance of persons has both prudential and moral aspects, but for simplicity I will focus on finding an explanation for why persons have moral status, i.e., why our interests are morally considerable.

Our interests place moral demands on the actions of others. I have an interest in not being hit by a reckless driver. And, if I am hit with a car by a reckless driver, then they owe me compensation. Morally considerable interests come into play twice over in this case, and each way exemplifies the temporal structure of moral status. First, I was harmed in the past, and I am due compensation because of that offense. Second, while a person is not typically obligated (special relations aside) to provide benefits to someone else, in this case the reckless driver forfeits that sanction. They are on the hook because they harmed me.

[5]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this important question.

How does the common explanation make sense of the fact that I should be compensated? Recall that the common explanation appeals to our mental capacities, such as our abilities to reason, feel, or care. Different accounts differ in the details, but we can sketch a representative answer here. Perhaps I am owed compensation because I suffered as a result of the harm or because I was deprived of something. Or perhaps I am owed compensation because my life was put at risk. These explanations inevitably appeal to the stake I have in the events in my life. My stake in my life is explained, in turn, by appeal to the fact that I am conscious, aware of myself over time, and/or care about my life.[6] Even this brief sketch goes some way toward rendering my deserts intelligible—at least when considered in contrast to the claim that I have no such deserts.

The common explanation involves identity facts: the offended is the same entity as the would-be compensated; the offender is the same entity as the would-be compensator. So, the explanation of why I am owed compensation appeals to two types of facts: my mental sophistication (in virtue of which I can have a stake in things), and my identity over time (in virtue of which I have a stake in particular past or future events). Similarly, the explanation of why the offender owes me compensation appeals to their own mental sophistication (in virtue of which they can be responsible) and their identity over time (in virtue of which they are on the hook for particular past events).

Crucially, according to the common explanation, the fact that x has moral status is wholly explained by x having its intrinsic mental properties—and not by x's identity conditions, persistence conditions, or temporal extent. Note that many four-dimensionalists dispute the notion of 'persistence conditions' and instead appeal to temporal or modal counterparts. To remain neutral on this theoretical issue, I'll simply talk of 'persistence properties', which includes the temporal extent of the being, facts about its counterparts, and its persistence conditions (if there are such things). So, x's identity conditions and persistence properties do not figure in that explanation. Identity conditions and persistence properties merely delimit the temporal properties of x's interests: they help determine what x's interests are, but they are not part of the explanation for why x's interests are morally significant. As a result, if the common explanation is complete, whether x has moral status is independent from x's identity and

[6] I have a stake in my life because, as Francis Kamm puts it, I stand to "get something out of continuing to exist" (Kamm 2005).

persistence properties.

The problem is revealed when we think systematically about moral demands in the context of permissive ontologies. Permissive ontologies characteristically recognize the existence of distinct overlapping objects. Distinct objects have distinct identity conditions and often have different persistence properties. For example, in the classic case of the statue-shaped lump of clay, a permissive ontology typically recognizes the existence of both the statue and the lump, and these objects have different persistence properties. So, if we squash that bit of clay, we destroy the statue but only deform the lump. The lump survives being squashed, while the statue does not. In the same way that the lump overlaps with the statue, there are objects with distinct persistence properties that overlap with persons. There are brains, top-halves of humans, personites, and more. Brains and human top-halves partially overlap with persons at a time. Personites fully coincide with persons at a time, though they have different temporal extents. All of these overlapping objects pose problems for the common explanation, but the problem posed by the existence of personites is the most dramatic.

On plausible permissive ontologies, there are many personites.[7] Personites are exactly like the persons with which they coincide, except that they have radically different persistence properties. Frequently, even over short time intervals, some personites go out of existence while others come into existence. The problem is that, if it's wrong to force someone with moral status to compensate for harmful actions that they did not commit, then we face a moral conflict in forcing anyone to compensate for past harms. That's because, for any person who harmed someone, there are many personites coinciding with that person but where the personites did not commit the harmful act. These "latter day" personites did not commit the harmful act because of their temporal extent: they only came into existence after the harmful action (cf. Johnston 2016: 213). So, compensation for that harm appears to be both morally required and morally prohibited. Or, at the very least, we are in a situation where the interests of the person and many of the personites cannot be jointly satisfied. As Johnston (2017) points out, the level of conflict is massive because of the large numbers of distinct entities.[8] Moreover, similar conflicts

[7]See Eklund (2020) for an additional defense of the existence of personites.

[8]Different ontologies disagree on the number of personites. An especially popular ontology is *liberal perdurantism*, which holds that each distinct spatiotemporal region is exactly occupied by a distinct object. On that view, if time is continuous, there are uncountably

arise when delaying gratification, enforcing promises, taking out loans, and so on. Indeed, virtually any action faces serious moral hurdles. This is the personite problem.[9]

From a flatfooted perspective, it's preposterous that a personite could have morally considerable interests that conflict with those of the person. The only interests right here are mine! This thought expresses our default presumption of ethical singularity, articulated by Johnston (2017) as the principle that:

> "The only being with a moral status to be found within a person's spatiotemporal envelope is that person." (2017: 12)

I take it that I have shown how the common explanation cannot establish ethical singularity, even in a modest permissive ontology. Because personites overlap with us, they share all our physical and mental properties.[10] If you can think, feel, and care at some time, then so can any other object that overlaps with your thinking/feeling/caring parts at that time. The common explanation cannot account for your singularity. It is incomplete.

On the other hand, it's independently compelling that moral status is explained somehow by special mental capacities. Mannequins don't have moral status because they don't have mental capacities like ours. That's true! The question is, how can we extend that idea to explain why personites and other odd objects also lack moral status?

To explain the moral difference between persons and 'odd' objects, we will have to exploit a property of persons that is not had by the other partially or fully overlapping entities. Following Fairchild

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infinitely many personites coinciding with any (temporally extended) person at any time.

[9]The personite problem has other aspects in addition to rampant conflicting moral demands. One issue is that of *infinitary paralysis*, which shows that consequentialism does not avoid the problem (Johnston 2017: 635-41). If time is continuous, then it turns out that there are uncountably infinitely many personites. Nearly any action whatsoever can then be shown to be infinitely bad and also infinitely good—producing rampant practical impasses. If time is not continuous, then another issue arises: longer lives contain many more personites. If that's right, then against our ordinary sensibilities, longer lives should be heavily prioritized in our ethical reasoning. Fortunately, if we can show that none of these personites (or other fellow-travelers) have what it takes to matter morally, then the three problems of conflicting demands, infinitary paralysis, and the overwhelming priority of long lives are all avoided.

[10]Again, this assumes that these mental capacities are not extrinsic, pace Sider (2003).

(2019), I'll call a property that is necessarily shared by fully overlapping objects *neutral*, and I'll call any property that distinguishes such objects *sortalish*. As an example, HAVING MASS M is a neutral property because the lump of clay and the coinciding statue necessarily share their mass. In contrast, BEING A WORK OF ART is a property had only by the statue, so that property is sortalish. (Whether the statue has the property depends on the *sort* of thing the statue is.) The common explanation fails because the mental capacities it appeals to are neutral[11], so they are shared by coinciding objects. The key here is to find a morally relevant feature that is appropriately sortalish, i.e., that distinguishes persons from the other objects.

More specifically, I propose that we begin with the classic Lockean powers of personhood and adopt a nearby sortalish strengthening of those powers. Inspired by Locke's influential definition of a person[12], the Lockean powers are powers of self-conscious reflection. Elsewhere, Locke discusses 'concernment' as important to what we are, so it's natural to help ourselves not just to self-reflective thought, but also to ways of feeling and caring.[13] Putting these notions together, we have self-concern: a way of thinking about and caring for oneself first-personally.

That characterization is not yet suitably sortalish. There is a sense in which personites, brains, and human top-halves have such abilities. They can look at themselves in the mirror and think "There I am" in a seemingly uncriticizable way. On the other hand, persons seem to have a privileged relation to the patterns of self-concern they instantiate. For example, many first-personal beliefs that the non-person overlappers token will be false about them. Some of the parts of myself that I care about are not parts of my brain. This is a clue that we are on the right track: there is something about self-concern that promises to be suitably sortalish. But spelling it out in detail is not

[11]In fact, mental capacities are what we might call super-neutral: they are necessarily shared by objects that share thinking *parts*. That's why the common explanation fails for partial overlappers. The sortalish property I appeal to distinguishes persons from both full and partial overlappers.

[12]Locke defines a person as "a thinking intelligent being, with reason and reflection, that can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, at various times and places" (Locke 1689/1975).

[13]See, e.g., 4.2.14 of Locke (1689/1975). See also Strawson (2011), especially chapter 4 for a discussion of Locke's notion of concernment. On the relevance of caring for moral status, see also Jaworska (2007) and Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2014).

trivial.

The approach is to locate, within our attitudes, a rich pattern of self-concern that is highly selective. But we will have to do some work. For example, it's not enough to appeal to our capacity for first-personal thought. The notion that first-personal thought refers reflexively to the thinker is not sufficiently selective because brains and personites are also thinkers. It's also not enough to appeal to the stronger semantic claim that 'I' refers exclusively to the person that tokens it.[14] Rather, we must appeal to a sortalish mental capacity that plausibly imbues only persons with their distinctive ethical significance.

3 Sortalish Self-Concern

The relevant notion of self-concern is a special way of caring for an entity that is *directed selectively* at that entity and *ascribes value* to that entity. Like any sort of concern for something, self-concern is a pattern of interrelated attitudes and dispositions.[15] Self-concern is different than other kinds of concern, such as concern a child might have for a stuffed toy, because of the distinctive affect, phenomenology, and functional profiles of the attitudes and dispositions involved.

The proposal is that BEING THE OBJECT OF A PATTERN OF SELF-CONCERN is the sortalish property of persons that explains our distinctive ethical significance. The sortalish nature of self-concern arises from its being selectively directed at a certain sort of object. The evaluative and reason-giving weight of self-concern arises from the value it

[14]Noonan (2010) defends this semantic claim to solve the thinking animal problem. The main problem with this view is that it's just false that 'I' always refers to the person. Sometimes we use 'I' to refer to avatars, short-lived selves, or imaginary characters. See Parfit (2012) for relevant discussion. A second issue is that we can introduce new terms that refer to overlapping objects (Johnston 2017). I discuss the latter point in section 5.

[15]This notion of self-concern is inspired by similar notions from Johnston (1989) and Martin (1997). See also Korsgaard (1989), Rovane (1997), Schechtman (2001), and Johnston (2010), especially chapter 4, for theories that take similar attitudes to play a role in determining personal identity. I don't have space to discuss differences between these views and mine, but a few differences are worth noting here. First, the views of Korsgaard and Rovane appeal to a *normative* standard of rationality, which I do not think is required. Second, unlike the views of Martin and Schechtman, I do not think that self-concern requires that the subject can accurately anticipate their mental states at other times. In both cases, these requirements are too demanding to be met by ordinary people in many desired cases.

ascribes to its object. I will now provide a substantive characterization of four expressions of self-concern to show how the two components (selective directedness and value ascription) work.

First consider a simple manifestation of self-concern: your reaction to stubbing your toe. When you stub your toe, there are mental states that collectively ascribe negative value to that event. These mental states have two kinds of components: felt components that are the source of value of the event; and representational and/or functional components that are the source of the selective directedness of the mental states. The felt components involve phenomenology, affect, and motivational aspects, such as pain or an urge to recoil. The representational and/or functional components involve your representations of your toe as a part of you, having intentions to move your toe or protect it, and so on. Importantly, the mental states directed at your stubbed toe are an interconnected part of the broader web of self-concern. The toe-directed mental states contribute to the selective directedness of the web. In particular, your attitudes about your toe are (some of) the attitudes in virtue of which the object of self-concern is determined to be something with that toe as a part.

A second example of self-concern is fear of anticipated future experiences, such as if you are nervous about an upcoming public speech. Anticipatory self-concern attitudes, such as excitement or fear, have as their object one's future condition. The attitudes ascribe positive or negative value to one's expected experiences. The ascription of value depends on you taking a certain future person (or entity) to be you. So, if you believed that the future person who will experience that event is not you, you would not be afraid. This way of ascribing value is a determinate way in which you are invested in, concerned for, and identifying with that future person. And the conditions that a future person has to meet in order for you to have such attitudes contribute to the selectivity to your pattern of self-concern. If you care for what your life will be like during that public speech, then the future public-speaking person is included within the purview of your self-concern.

A third expression of self-concern is the anger one might feel about a past event, such as if you are angry about having been insulted at a party. While fear or anxiety are prospective attitudes, anger tends to be a retrospective attitude. These types of expressions of self-concern help delimit the temporal extent of the interests of a person. Retrospective attitudes often have a special relation to memory. When you remember having been rudely insulted at a party, the phenomenology of that episodic memory may bring along (by psychological default) a sense of having been that person in that situation. The episode may also elicit an intimate first-personal 'reliving' of the feelings one experienced during the original event. The attitudes and feelings that accompany the memory are directed selectively at, and ascribe value to, that past person and the events it lived.

A fourth and final example of self-concern is the excitement or aversion one might feel about imagined possibilities, such as how one might feel about the imagined possibility of becoming a parent.[16] Whereas conscious awareness to one's body contributes to the mereological purview of one's self-concern, and whereas prospective and retrospective attitudes contribute to the temporal extent of one's self-concern, modal attitudes delimit the modal profile of one's self-concern. Such attitudes make it the case that one is not self-concerned with the especially modally fragile entities that coincide with oneself, such as the object that overlaps with you but which cannot become a parent.[17] If there is a necessarily childless entity that overlaps with you, then it is not the object of your self-concern because, according to your reaction to imagined possibilities, your self-concern is not selectively confined to it.

These aspects of self-concern each contribute to its selective directedness. Because self-concern is selectively directed, it induces the sortalish property of BEING THE OBJECT OF A PATTERN OF SELF-CONCERN. If we understand the property of BEING SELF-CONCERNED as requiring BEING THE OBJECT OF A PATTERN OF SELF-CONCERN, then being self-concerned is also sortalish. Most of the objects that overlap with a person, including brains and personites, are not self-concerned in that way—a claim I will defend further in section 5.

If our concerns are organized around the conditions of personal identity, then persons uniquely (among overlapping objects) satisfy that sortalish property. It's plausible that our self-concern is directed

[16]This sort of attitude is explored empirically and theoretically in McCoy, Paul, and Ullman (2019).

[17]An entity that could not survive becoming a parent may seem especially exotic, metaphysically. However, given that becoming a parent could be psychologically transformative for some people (Paul 2014), and given that it is natural on a neo-Lockean view such as that of Parfit (1971) or Lewis (1976) to define a person's survival conditions in terms of permitted degrees of psychological change, it's not so exotic to suppose there could be entities defined in this manner that could not become a parent.

at ourselves qua persons, but I aim to shore up that claim in the next section. In particular, I address complications that arise if self-concern changes over time.

4 The Diachronic Structure of Self-Concern

I've described substantive features of self-concern and some of its manifestations. This section is devoted to getting clearer about the structure of self-concern over time.

Self-concern is meant to explain how a person is a singular source of ethical significance among the overlappers. Ideally, we can demonstrate that self-concern unifies the parts of a person, over time and at a time, into a singular unit of ethical significance.

Note, however, that ethical singularity can be stronger or weaker, depending on how temporally extended that singular unit is supposed to be. A weaker version holds that, within the spatiotemporal region of a person at each time, there is only one being with moral status. The strongest version holds that within the whole lifetime of the person there is only one being with moral status. I'll call the stronger principle *lifetime ethical singularity* and the weaker principle *stagewise ethical singularity.*

Stagewise singularity can in principle solve the problems posed by personites and other odd objects. If it's true that there's just one ethically important thing overlapping with any particular person at any particular time, then there is room to argue that there is no threat of inevitably violating some entity's interests.[18] For example, it's plausible that

[18]Along these lines, Kaiserman (2019) argues that the personite problem does not arise for the stage view of personal identity. Kaiserman argues that because persons are instantaneous on the stage view, there won't be any person-like objects that coincide with yet are distinct from the person. However, this argument does not solve the personite problem because it doesn't secure stagewise singularity. There are two ways stagewise singularity could still be false. First, because stages have diachronic interests, even stagewise singularity requires that there is a unique morally privileged temporal counterpart relation that determines those interests. Otherwise, conflict will still arise. Kaiserman only helps himself to that assumption, but it could fail for reasons already canvassed in Johnston (2016). Second, there could be instantaneous person-like entities, distinct from persons, that partially overlap with persons. To rule out this possibility, we need a morally privileged parthood relation, too. Otherwise, we have not secured stagewise singularity. I argue that self-concern provides the morally privileged counterpart relation. A similar argument shows that self-concern provides a privileged parthood relation too.

there couldn't be both demands to impose certain costs and demands to not impose those costs on that entity. On the other hand, our way of life seems to better fit lifetime ethical singularity, so I hope to work toward that stronger principle. The first goal of this section is to show how self-concern could ground stagewise ethical singularity. The second (more tentative) goal is to show how to bridge the gap from stagewise to lifetime singularity.

Self-concern is a causally robust psychological condition that unites a person into a singular ethically privileged whole. We can state this condition in terms of privileged parthood and counterparthood relations that are generated by an instance of self-concern. For brevity, I focus on the temporal counterpart relation generated by self-concern. Analogous parthood and modal counterpart relations could also be developed.

In what follows, I will try to remain neutral about questions of temporal ontology, such as whether objects persist by having temporal parts, as on perdurantism. However, how exactly we should state the view may depend on that issue. For example, because self-concern characteristically extends beyond the present moment, the perdurantist will not say that an instantaneous stage of a person is, strictly speaking, self-concerned; rather, they will say that the stage is a temporal part of an extended being that is self-concerned. I assume that the proposal can be coherently stated in either perdurantist or endurantist terms, and I aim to describe the view in neutral terms. So, while I will discuss 'selves' in what's to come, that could be understood as picking out temporal parts (on a perdurantist view) or entities considered as they are at certain times (on an endurantist view).

An entity is a *self* at time t just in case there is self-concern at some time about its condition at t. Whereas we might normally think of a self as the subject of certain mental states, here we think of a self as the object of certain mental states. Notice that the mental states needn't be instantiated at time t. Because self-concern can be directed across time, an entity can be a self at a time even if contemporaneous mental states do not ground self-concern about it. For instance, I am a self now, but I would still be a self even after I lose my capacity for self-concern (such as if I suffer from extraordinary brain damage). That is so because my current mental states ground self-concern that extends to that possible future condition in which I have brain damage.[19]

[19] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me for clarity on this notion.

The temporal counterpart relation that is generated by self-concern knits together selves over time in the following way: if x is self-concerned at t_1 about y's condition at t_2, then y is a counterpart of x. In principle, this relation can fail to be reflexive, symmetric, or transitive. Yet as a matter of psychological fact, creatures such as human persons are typically self-concerned about their current condition, and in those cases the counterpart relation is reflexive. There are some possible cases, such as that of extraordinary brain damage mentioned above, where reflexivity may fail. Because reflexivity only fails in atypical cases, in what follows I assume that the counterpart relation tends to be reflexive. I discuss symmetry and transitivity of the counterpart relation below.

Being self-concerned is sortalish. If x is self-concerned, there will typically be many entities coinciding with x that are not self-concerned. That's because they have mereological, temporal, or modal properties that deviate from the purview of self-concern. For example, you aren't self-concerned with the object always composed of the molecules that constitute you currently, as that object cannot survive metabolizing a glucose molecule. Rather, you are only self-concerned about something that can survive metabolizing glucose, as evidenced by the fact that you do not fear dying merely from the metabolization of glucose.

Retrospectively, for any self x, x's counterparts extend into the past to the extent that x is self-concerned about the condition of a self at those times. That typically includes past selves from whom x inherited memories, but it may extend further. Each of us may especially care about our infant self, as evidenced by my being especially interested in seeing what I looked like at that age, or your being upset at learning that you were dropped on your head. Each such self y_1, y_2, and so on, existing at different times and for whom x exhibits self-concern, will be counterparts of x on this model.[20]

With the counterpart framework in mind, I can give a new gloss to my overall thesis. My claim is that only the self-concerned being x has morally considerable interests at that time, and the temporal extent of x's first-personal interests are grounded in the temporal extent of the counterpart relation generated by x's pattern of self-concern.

We could stop here, and the account would allow for a revisionary picture of the units of ethical significance. On the view described so

[20]Strictly speaking, the perdurantist will say these selves y_1, y_2, and so on, are distinct objects, while the endurantist will hold that they are one and the same object that exists at multiple times.

far, if we hold that the relevant counterpart relations are fixed by synchronic psychological traits rather than over time, it could turn out that interests change from one moment in time to the next. Then the interests that are grounded in self-concern would be *time-relative.* Interestingly, there is an account of time-relative interests, along with arguments that it delivers compelling verdicts in a range of cases.[21] On the other hand, my secondary goal is to show that the approach can support the ordinary person-based notion of interests. That notion presumes lifetime ethical singularity.

To recover lifetime singularity, we need to find a compelling sense in which self-concern encompasses an entire lifetime. In that case, the time-relativity of interests drops out because the self has the same interests over time. If that result can be established, then the privileged unit of ethics is the whole person.

On such a view, the counterpart relation must be an equivalence relation. If self-concern induces an equivalence relation, then for any two selves in a person's life, each is self-concerned for the other. An equivalence relation is reflexive, symmetric, and transitive. As I mentioned earlier, reflexivity typically holds within the life of an ordinary human person because we are psychologically constituted such as to be self-concerned for our immediate condition. Symmetry and transitivity require more substantive arguments.

I have not yet specified whether an entity's self-concern is wholly grounded in its intrinsic, current psychological traits, or whether its self-concern is also grounded in facts about other times or other objects. Let's call the former notion *t-intrinsic self-concern.* This notion of self-concern includes all of the self-directed attitudes or dispositions that a being has at a time entirely as a matter of how it is at that time.

It's certainly possible that t-intrinsic self-concern fails to be symmetric or transitive. For example, I am t_2-intrinsically self-concerned (at t_2) for my infant self who existed at t_1, but is it true that my infant self was t_1-intrinsically self-concerned (at t_1) for me at t_2? No, if my infant self did not have any attitudes about me at that time. Further, supposing that my infant self was t_1-intrinsically self-concerned with its immediate continued existence and that its t-intrinsic self-concern will become less myopic over time, then transitivity fails too. That's

[21] McMahan (2002). Some people like the view (DeGrazia 2007), but others have criticized it (Broome 2004, Liao 2007, Greaves 2019). See McMahan (2019) for replies to critics.

because there will be a chain of selves where x_1 is t-intrinsically self-concerned for x_2, x_2 for x_3, ..., and x_n for x_{n+1}, but where x_1 is not t-intrinsically self-concerned for x_{n+1}.

In principle, we could stipulate that self-concern proper is simply the transitive and symmetric closure of t-intrinsic self-concern. However, I believe this thesis gets the moral facts wrong. Take a case like that of Methuselah as discussed in Lewis (1976). Consider a very long-lived human being who completely changes their psychological traits many times over, but where there is a chain made up of links of myopic t-intrinsic self-concern from the beginning to the end of this life. To assume just on this basis that we have a lifetime singular being of ethical significance is too quick. Rather, some further substantive condition must be met.

The psychological possibility of non-transitive and non-symmetric t-intrinsic self-concern shows that, if we are to secure any substantive sense in which self-concern is symmetric and transitive, we must take a broader view of which facts determine the profile of self-concern. We must allow that facts about x's self-concern at t_1 are grounded in facts that are not intrinsic to the mental states of x at t_1. There are two ways to do this. First, we could hold that self-concern is diachronically determined. Or, second, we could hold that self-concern is socially determined. I defend each in turn, but I won't decide between them. These claims are optional additions to the core approach and are unnecessary for solving the personite problem.

On the diachronically determined version, we secure the symmetry and transitivity of self-concern by holding that it is *open* and *cumulative*. Self-concern is open when its present profile is partly settled by future facts. Self-concern is cumulative when its present profile is partly settled by past facts. On this version, it's not the case that my infant self is not self-concerned for me, even if its t-intrinsic self-concern didn't include me. That aspect was open when I was an infant, and it is settled by facts that came later. Because that pattern of self-concern later included me, I am a counterpart of the infant. Along these lines, I propose the following principles to govern openness and cumulation.

> **Openness**: if x_2 is t_2-intrinsically self-concerned (at t_2) for x_1's condition at earlier time t_1, then x_1's self-concern includes anything included in x_2's t_2-intrinsic self-concern.

> **Cumulation**: if x_1 is t_1-intrinsically self-concerned (at t_1) for x_2's condition at later time t_2, then x_2's self-concern includes anything included in x_1's t_1-intrinsic self-concern.

Because I am, at current time t_2, t_2-intrinsically self-concerned for my infant self and my current self, openness ensures that I am included in my infant self's self-concern, recovering transitivity and symmetry in that case. Cumulation ensures that, if a past self is, at t_1, t_1-intrinsically self-concerned for itself and for my current t_2 self, then I am self-concerned, at t_2, for that past self. Cumulation recovers transitivity and symmetry in some cases where a future self does not otherwise include a past self in their t-intrinsic self-concern.

If self-concern is open and cumulative, then it will typically be transitive and symmetric. In those cases, it would be an equivalence relation, and there would be just one self-concerned being within the life of a person. Then, lifetime singularity obtains.

However, there are cases where there is reason to reject openness and/or cumulation, in which case transitivity or symmetry may then fail. Consider the following case. Suppose I am now t-intrinsically self-concerned with my 60-year-old self but not t-intrinsically self-concerned with the self as it will be afterward, having developed severe dementia. That is, suppose I don't care what happens after I develop severe dementia; let them do as they wish, for it is no business of mine. But suppose further that my 60-year-old self is t-intrinsically self-concerned for the future self with severe dementia. In that case, there may be good reason to suppose that lifetime ethical singularity fails. Perhaps there really are two morally important beings, with two distinct sets of morally considerable interests, that overlap my 60-year-old self and where only one of them would survive with dementia. It has been noted that the interests of my future self might conflict with my current interests in exactly these cases.[22] My account provides possible grounds for and an explanation of this discrepancy. So, while the self-concern account allows that there are realistic cases where stagewise interests at one time diverges from stagewise interests at another time, that may be a compelling prediction, not a mistake, of the view.

[22] McMahan (2002), Walsh (2020). There is a converse worry that someone could disavow a past self and thereby not be morally responsible for that past self's actions, on my account. In principle, something like that is possible. However, in practice, my account does not have this implication because human persons cannot adjust their own psychologies radically enough to become genuinely not self-concerned for their past selves.

The second way to secure lifetime singularity appeals to social determination. This approach begins with the general observation that each individual self inherits a large swath of their self-concern from a social background of person-centric practical reasoning. We tell our children that they should go to school in order to live an easier life overall, we worry about what it will be like for them to care for us in our old age, our parents tell us stories about funny things we did as toddlers, and so on. Webs of questions, habits, and conventions shape our thoughts and feelings.[23] On the whole, the complex web of our practices can help fill out our self-concern, giving determinate content to an individual's otherwise indeterminate mental states. These social facts help direct our judgments, values, beliefs, and desires so that they are organized around a sense of ourselves as persisting objects. And so, when we reflect on what we care about, we find ourselves thinking about the object at the center of the web—the person—who is the target of our self-concern.

On this version of the view, the pattern of someone's self-concern is determined in part by the social fabric in which they are embedded. Then, infants' self-concern proper need not be indeterminate, even if their t-intrinsic self-concern is indeterminate.

So, we can see how patterns of self-concern could determine an equivalence class of selves, at least in some circumstances. And we have seen that securing a time-indexed notion of univocal t-intrinsic self-concern is fairly straightforward. With these options in mind, let's now see how the proposal explains our distinctive, *singular* ethical status.

5 Explaining Why We Matter

To see how the condition of sortalish self-concern explains why we especially matter, let's see why odd objects are not objects of self-concern. In particular, I explain with an example why personites aren't objects of self-concern. The explanation shows how coherent moral individuation flows from facts about our psychology.

[23]Cf. Adams (1989), who endorses the thought that "the way we care about persons is and should be affected by the deep embedding of the concept of personal identity in a complex web of social practices", and Wolf (1986) who develops a version of that idea. Johnston (1989) also takes the infant's social circumstances to determine its conditions of persistence.

Consider again the incident where a reckless driver hits me while I am walking. Call the reckless driver Pat. Suppose Pat gets caught a few weeks later and is ordered by the court to pay my medical bills along with additional monetary compensation. Imagine that the demands require a humbling apology that will be unpleasant for Pat. There are many personites, overlapping with Pat, that came into existence after the reckless driving incident and exist up through and after the payment of compensation. So, many personites have the burden of compensating me imposed on them even though they did not cause any harm. Why does this imposition not violate morally considerable interests?

The short answer, supplied by the proposed account, is that personites do not have morally considerable interests because they are not objects of self-concern. To see why personites are not objects of self-concern, note that there are no mental states located in Pat that are sensitive to those personites. Or, more carefully, there are no mental states that both qualify as expressions of self-concern and are appropriately organized around any of the personites. After all, no first-personal attitudes are sensitive to the coming-into-existence of any of those personites. Moreover, even if you explained what personites were so that Pat could think about some particular personite, that wouldn't bring along with it self-concern about the personite. For example, Pat would not become angry that some personites were made to pay for harm they did not inflict. So, while it may be possible for Pat to think about personites, those thoughts do not carry the various emotional, affective, and evaluative components that are constitutive of self-concern. Those thoughts are not functionally integrated in the right way with Pat's concerns.

At this point, we can address an argument given in Johnston (2017). Johnston notes that it's not defensible to deny an entity moral consideration merely because the available language does not have terms that refer to them in a first-personal way. Johnston suggests that we can easily introduce a new term to our language, "wehere", to enable personites to refer to themselves first-personally. "Wehere" is stipulated to refer to all and only the personites that coincide with the person at the time of tokening. Then, personites would have the ability to self-refer, at least plurally. The ease with which we can remedy the personites' linguistic disadvantage, without changing what they are like in other respects, suggests that their linguistic disadvantage isn't justifiably disenfranchising.

I grant that Johnston shows that self-*reference* is not an ability that makes a moral difference. On the proposed view, the relevant condition is self-*concern*—a rich value-laden analog to self-reference. Does an analogous objection show that personites are just so close to being the object of self-concern, if only they were freed of the limitations of person-centric ideology? If personites are nearly capable of being self-concerned in that they only would have to change slightly in order to become an object of self-concern, then it may not be defensible to deny them moral status on that basis.

My response to this objection is twofold. First, I claim that it's not psychologically possible for a human mind to instantiate self-concern for each of multiple personites. This rules out the possibility of rampant conflicting moral demands. Second, while it is possible for a human mind to instantiate self-concern for just one personite, there are psychological constraints on how that self-concern can be directed. (For example, it's not within your power to be indifferent about what happens tomorrow, but that is what would be required in order for your pattern of concern to be organized around a personite that ceases to exist tonight.) These psychological constraints preclude the possibility of bizarre or wildly conflicting moral demands flowing from personites. Each of these responses plays on the theme that the structure of interests is intimately connected to the structure of self-concern.

The two claims together (to be defended just below) refute the idea that personites nearly possess morally enfranchising mental capacities. These claims show that personites are not on the verge of caring about themselves. Rather, it would take deep psychological transformations to create personite self-concern—transformations that would destroy one set of interests and bring forth a new set of interests altogether. So, there is no sense in which something with moral status is being unfairly disregarded.

Now, to defend the first claim. There are constraints, flowing from limitations in our psychology and from the nature of self-concern, that preclude the possibility of consistent and rich *plural* personite self-concern. Plural personite self-concern is where there is, contained within one mind, a plurality of distinct patterns of self-concern, each of which is organized around a distinct personite. As a matter of human psychology, this is not possible because a human mind cannot co-instantiate each of a variety of patterns of self-concern. The states that constitute self-concern directed at one personite crowd out the states that would count as self-concern for a different personite. For example, you can't both fearfully anticipate dying tonight and also be convinced that you will wake in the morning. Or, a little more tentatively, there are drastic limitations to how many patterns of self-concern one could thoroughly instantiate.

I do grant that, if some psychology could be constructed such that there were rich patterns of self-concern organized around a plurality of distinct things, then that would produce a plurality of coinciding entities each with (perhaps conflicting) morally considerable interests. Arguably, that would be the right moral diagnosis. But that's not the sort of restructuring that can be accomplished merely by introducing new terms or ideology.

The core barrier to plural self-concern is the functional cohesiveness of human psychology, which precludes attitudes that are simultaneously strong, pervasive, and conflicting. So, I cannot contain a 'self' that is deeply concerned about dying at midnight on December 31st, 2023, and also contain a self that is excited about going on vacation in January 2024.

Functional cohesiveness can break down. There is a medical procedure where the corpus collosum, the part of the brain that carries neural activity between the brain hemispheres, is severed. In such cases, it's plausible that patients have divided consciousness. It's plausible they might also develop divergent concerns: perhaps one hemisphere is self-concerned, in some sense, with a prospective future self that has dementia, whereas the other hemisphere rejects that future self. What do we say about this case?

I think the appropriate diagnosis is that there are difficult, uncomfortable, and conflicting moral demands that are generated by this person's psychology. It is genuinely a case where the psychology of a person begins to look more like the psychology of two people. In this case, it may be appropriate to regard this person as having two sets of interests that sometimes diverge. That is a verdict that is explained by my account.

Now for the second claim. I agree that a pattern of self-concern could in principle be organized around a single personite, such as the personite that cannot survive the onset of dementia. But here again, there are limitations that flow from the nature of our psychology and from the nature of self-concern that prohibit some forms of self-concern. It's plausible that a human's self-concern could be consistently and richly organized around conditions that exclude having severe dementia. Then, that person's self-concern extends up to, but not into, that future condition. (Note that ethical singularity still obtains in that case.) In contrast, however, self-concern cannot be organized around the arbitrary cut-off points that demarcate the boundaries of many of the personites. For example, some of the personites go out of existence when psychological connectedness is disrupted just a little too much. (Say, if two selves are connected to the tragic degree of 0.49 instead of Parfit's preferred degree of exactly 0.5.)[24] The attitudes that constitute self-concern are not sharply sensitive to that kind of fact, and it's hard to see how those attitudes could be systematically sensitive in that way. After all, many memories of past events will persist anyway, and the continuation of those memories brings along self-concern. So, while it's plausible that conditions other than the expected conditions of personal identity could delimit the purview of self-concern, those are not bizarre cases inevitably riddled with moral harm.

To close, I will address Johnston's argument from duplication (Johnston 2016: 203-4). The argument has three premises, which are roughly that: (1) for any personite, there is an intrinsic duplicate of that personite in some possible world, where that duplicate is a person; (2) moral status cannot differ between intrinsic duplicates; and (3), all persons have moral status. Therefore, because moral status is intrinsic and the personite is intrinsically just like a possible person, then for any personite, that personite has moral status.

I reject premise (2). The premise is implausible because sortalish properties are not shared across duplicates, whether or not those properties are intrinsic, and sortalish properties quite plausibly ground moral status—as I've argued in the case of BEING SELF-CONCERNED.

If sortalish properties can be intrinsic, then intrinsic properties can differ between duplicates. (The statue-shaped hunk of clay could be a duplicate of a statue distinct from it even though it has different sortalish properties. Duplication then consists in having the same non-sortalish, i.e. 'neutral', intrinsic properties.) Then, a personite and a duplicate could differ in a morally relevant intrinsic respect. After all, the properties that distinguish the statue from the clay, as well as those that distinguish the hunk of matter that constitutes you from you, are all sortalish properties. It is plausible that some such property is necessary for moral status.

If, on the other hand, we say that sortalish properties are not

[24] Parfit (1984: 206). The 'degree' of connectedness stands for the proportion of psychological traits in the person directly preserved over a relatively short time interval.

intrinsic—siding instead with the duplication criterion of intrinsicality—then it's quite plausible that the grounds of moral status are not intrinsic after all (just like BEING A STATUE). That may be a revisionary conclusion, but it's an inevitable implication of employing the duplication criterion of intrinsicality when there are coincident objects.

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