

A DISCRIMINATIVE ONTOLOGY FOR FUTURE SELVES

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Abstract. The article presents a critique of the commonly held assumption about the practical advantage of endurantism over perdurantism regarding the problem of future-directed self-concern of a person. The future-directed self-concern of a person crucially depends on the possibility of the right differentiation of diverging futures of distinct persons, therefore any theory of persistence that does not entail a special non-branching relation of a person to only their future self seems to be counterintuitive or unrealistic for practical purposes of personal persistence. I argue that this pragmatic rationale about future-directed self-concern is equally challenging for both theories of persistence. Moreover, I indicate, that both of these theories fall and stand on the practical feasibility of hidden ontological presuppositions about specific second-order notions of concerns of persons for their future.

Keywords: personal survival; self-concern; future self; perdurantism; endurantism; ontology

Introduction

The future-directed self-concern of a person is a common practical rationale according to which, all things being equal, it is consistently rational for a person to be interested in their personal survival (Parfit 1984, 307). After all, it is usually very common for persons to be interested in their future, to plan their future, to expect a certain future for themselves. Moreover, it seems, that persons without this rationale would greatly reduce certain aspects of intelligibility of their motivational consistency, and so also lose some features of intentional transparency for other (different) persons (Ikäheimo 2019, 13). In short, we typically believe that persons act and care for themselves, and we also, by this belief, act towards them.

Certainly, the ordinary character of this type of concern is not unproblematic. One obvious counterexample may be the praiseworthy reality of rational interest of persons for the future of other-selves and other entities. From this prescriptive point of view, the concept of future-directed self-concern may be problematic since it invokes a false aggravation of normative supremacy of a person's concern for only themselves and only for their future. In this article, however, I will not

address the plethora of possible ethical issues related to self-concern¹⁾, but instead, I will focus on the descriptive part of any (be it good or ill-fated) future-directed self-concern. The necessary condition for any kind of future-directed self-concern naturally depends on the existential reality of the self, future, and concern; thus, on the ontological grounding of a person's survival and persistence²⁾. However, there are, among others, two competing answers regarding the right ontology of a person's persistence, namely perdurantism and endurantism³⁾.

Perdurantism maintains that the persistence of a person is grounded by the change of temporal parts (Rimell 2018, 577). Different temporal parts are trivially different entities; thus, it seems that according to perdurantism the future-directed self-concern of a person entails an interest of one entity (one temporal part) for a different entity (another temporal part). This, however, is not the case in endurantism, since endurantism does not rely on the concept of alternation of parts, but on the notion of a future persistence of the whole person (Fellelli 2017, 79). Therefore, it seems plausible to maintain that only endurantism is compatible with requirements for a robust ontological grounding of future-directed self-concern.

Contrary to this assumption, I argue that the notion of future-directed self-concern of a person could, in some cases, be problematic for perdurantism as well as endurantism. And this by symmetry means, that I will try to show, that both of these theories are equally successful regarding the problem of future-directed self-concern of a person because both of these theories depend on hidden presuppositions about specific notions of a derivative concern of a person for their future⁴⁾. The structure of this article is therefore as follows: The next part describes the challenge of future-directed self-concern for perdurantism and presents possible solutions for the incorporation of future-directed self-concern into the framework of perdurantism. The second part of the article is focused on a critical deconstruction of the idea about a direct correspondence of endurantism with the groundings for future-directed self-concern of a person. I will conclude, that this correspondence of endurantism with future-directed self-concern is similarly derivative as some of the possible solutions of perdurantism.

Perdurantism and the Future-directed Self-concern

Persons have a special attitude towards their survival as well as a specific interest in the quality of their survival. In this sense, it is rational for a person to engage in actions that will ensure that person's survival into the future, as well as to be involved in activities that will guarantee a sufficient quality of the person's survival in the future⁵⁾. Thus, the justification of future-directed self-concern is grounded (condition a.) if the future will be experienced by the very same person, and (condition b.) if the person in question will possess certain qualities in the future. In other words, future-directed self-concern is grounded by the diachronic identity of a person ((a) – the future of the same person, distinct future) and by the possibility of changing of properties in the future ((b.) – different properties, diverging futures). Within the debates about

the grounding of future-directed self-concern, attention is paid primarily to the first assumption. Usually, this assumption about identity is meant to imply that future-directed self-concern is grounded only if a *Person* at t_1 and a *Person* at t_2 are the same person, i.e., only if P at t_1 and P at t_2 are identical.

However, such grounding of future-directed self-concern seems to be problematic for the theory of perdurantism. Perdurantism does not presuppose that P at t_1 and P at t_2 are identical since they represent only different temporal parts, i.e. different entities. These different entities are not connected by a relation of identity, but only by a relation of continuity (Le Poidevin 2020) or a so-called relation of genidentity (Schmidt 2015, 608). On this basis, then, it is clear that perdurantism and the first assumption about the right grounding of future-directed self-concern are contradictory. And since they are in contradiction, it can be assumed that perdurantism is incapable of grounding the future-directed self-concern of a person or moreover is inept at ensuring a person's habitual access to themselves (Koons & Pickavance 2015, 226).

The most common perdurantistic response to this challenge is the strategy of relativization (e.g., Braddon-Mitchell & Miller 2020). The strategy of relativization aims, as the name has it, at a relativization of the future-directed self-concern into a form that could be satisfied by perdurantism. The relativization strategy has two basic steps. First, by the above definition, future-directed self-concern appears to be built on the assumption that P at t_1 and P at t_2 are identical; however, this definition seems to be discriminatory because only endurantism can satisfy it. Second, a proponent of the relativization strategy would therefore point out that to preserve theoretical neutrality, it could be more appropriate to reformulate the definition of future-directed self-concern in a more moderate manner. For example, a less restrictive definition could entail that the concern in question is safeguarded if P at t_1 and P at t_2 are connected by a sufficiently robust relation. The controversy regarding future-directed self-concern would then consist only in the question of whether we should choose the relation suggested by endurantism (identity) or the relation assumed by perdurantism. The forms of a perdurantic relation may vary, but most common proposals often point to some sort of physical, psychological (Hershenov 2011) or narrative continuity (Muñoz Corcuera 2021).

However, the relativization and replacement of identity by a relation of continuity lead to two problematic results. First, any appropriation of a relation of continuity in personal identity trivially leads to the fact that momentary occurrences of a person are connected together only gradually (Braddon-Mitchell & Miller 2020, 3830). And if the occurrences in question are connected only gradually, then the future-directed self-concern is gradual as well. But this may lead to a strange consequence, that a person should always be more concerned about their future in the next second than about their future in, let's say, the next two seconds. From an ordinary practical point of view, it would seem that there should be no difference at all regarding a person's rational interest in these two cases since both are primarily guided by a

concern about the self (preservation of the self)⁶. Thus, the relativization strategy necessary requires a time-specific relativization of attitudes towards selves. Second, even if we assume that the relation of continuity between P at t_1 and P at t_2 is sufficient enough regarding the challenge of future-directed self-concern, then this relativization also implies that P at t_1 and P at t_2 are consequently different entities, since they are only continuous and not identical. In other words, even according to this relativistic approach of perdurantism, a person's interest in their future is strictly speaking a concern of one entity for the future of another entity. But a concern of one entity for another entity's future is certainly not that entity's interest in its own future. Hence, it seems that a strict future-directed self-concern of a person is not secured by this strategy.

The second perdurantistic response to the aforementioned challenge could be based on a modification of requirements of identity for the grounding of future-directed self-concern. The replacement of identity by continuity in the previous strategy led to a possible misinterpretation of the right target of future-directed self-concern. A proponent of a modification strategy could therefore contend that although perdurantism does not presuppose identity at the level of temporal parts, it does presuppose identity at the level of the whole object that is composed of those temporal parts (Braddon-Mitchell & Miller 2020, 3806). Perdurantists usually believe that an object is a four-dimensional entity, and a four-dimensional entity extends not only in space but also in time, therefore this entity is always identical with itself over time (Rea 1998). The modification strategy could then simply propose that the future-directed self-concern would be grounded if P at t_1 and P at t_2 are one and the same person. Such a revised definition of grounding the future-directed self-concern could be secured by endurantism as well as perdurantism. The only difference between those theories would be in the disagreement on how precisely are P at t_1 and P at t_2 one and the same person. According to endurantism, they are one and the same person because P at t_1 and P at t_2 are identical. According to perdurantism, they are one and the same person because P at t_1 and P at t_2 are both parts of an identical four-dimensional object. In short, the modification strategy assumes that the perdurantistic four-dimensional perception of objects can be merged with a neutral definition of future-directed self-concern. According to this strategy, perdurantism ensures future-directed self-concern of a person by respecting the identity requirement for grounding of this concern. In this sense, it is a strategy that does not reject future-directed self-concern, nor does it relativize future-directed self-concern with continuity. Thus, it is a strategy that could refute the usual belief in incompatibility of perdurantism with the future-directed self-concern.

Unfortunately for perdurantism, this solution also bears some hidden costs. While it may be true that this strategy could provide a possible perdurantistic grounding for the future-directed self-concern, it is also true that this solution is quite demanding. The unusual demand lies in the consequence that the future-directed self-concern can

be also grounded by a relation of parts of a person to a four-dimensional whole of a person. Hence, the problem with this solution is that the proposed interest of one part for another part is not direct but only mediated through participation in a continuous four-dimensional person object. In summary, the future-directed self-concern could be safeguarded by perdurantism, but only if we accept that an indirect, derivative, and second-order notion of grounding of this concern is acceptable.

Endurantism and the Future-directed Self-concern

Endurantism presupposes that the persistence of an object is guaranteed only if this object is wholly present at more than one point in time (Lewis 1986, 202). The notion “wholly present” indicates that the object must be present in these distinct moments with all of its properties (whole). Thus, according to endurantism, a person persists in distinct moments of time by the virtue of having all of their properties in these moments. From a practical point of view, this means that if a person persists into the future, they will be “represented” in that future by the very same entity (the same person). Hence, according to endurantism, the individual occurrences of a person over time are connected to each other by a relation of strict identity (Barker & Dowe 2013, 5). The first condition (condition a.) for grounding of future-directed self-concern stated that the concern is safeguarded if the future will be experienced by the very same person, i.e. if P at t_1 and P at t_2 are identical. Endurantism presupposes strict identity between the momentary occurrences of a person, therefore the correspondence of endurantism with the first condition is pretty straightforward. Endurantism is then generally regarded as a theory that secures the plausibility of a future-directed self-concern and other normative practices (Miller 2010, 569). However, the identity requirement is just only one part of the practical grounding for the future-directed self-concern of a person. And this may be the main blind spot of endurantism regarding this type of concern.

The second condition (condition b.) states that the concern is grounded if the person in question will possess certain qualities in the future, i.e. if the qualities of P at t_1 can change into qualities of P at t_2 . This condition is built upon a practical stance that requires the possibility of changes of a person in the future. After all, persons are interested in their future not only because of some abstract theoretical concepts of a self and a future but mainly because they believe in the reality of a distinct future for themselves. Persons are interested in their future since they can, in one way or another, change in that future. Persons usually also assume that actions, activities, decisions of a person in the present may have consequences for the state, circumstances, properties of that person in the future. Without this practical grounding, any present activities that secure or prevent the formation of certain characteristics and qualities of a person in the future are meaningless and without a target. Hence, the future-directed self-concern is not only grounded by the identity of the self, but also by the possibility of change in the future self.

The second condition for grounding the future-directed self-concern of a person, however, may be deeply problematic within the presuppositions of the theory of endurantism. Endurantism presupposes that a person will persist into the future only if the person is exactly the same over time. That is, for a person to persist, endurantism requires the existence of all and exactly the same properties of P at t_1 and P at t_2 . However, the second condition for grounding of future-directed self-concern of a person requires a possibility of change in the properties of that person. Same properties (identity, sameness of properties of a person over time) are not different properties (change, different properties of a person over time), therefore the presuppositions of endurantism and the second condition for grounding of the future-directed self-concern of a person seem to be in contradiction.

Endurantism could use two basic strategies for solving this incompatibility problem. The first strategy of endurantism may be to reach for indexicalism. According to indexicalism, the contradiction between requiring same properties and changing properties of a person is resolvable by neutralizing some of these properties by temporalizing (indexing) them into moments of time (Van Inwagen 1990, 247). According to this strategy, different properties are not different properties of the person, but specific time-indexed properties of moments in which the person is or will be situated. In other words, the different properties end up not being the properties of that person but are properties of those moments (time). If the properties are properties of those moments, then changing them cannot threaten the endurantistic presuppositions about the necessity of strict identity in persistence. Persistence is preserved since the same properties of the person are preserved over time. The changing properties required in the second condition for grounding the future-directed self-concern will simply be the properties of the moments (circumstances) in which the person will be in the future.

Unfortunately for endurantism, the adoption of indexicalism also requires the acceptance of some other dubious consequences. First, indexicalism requires that many (if not all) properties should not be viewed as standard independent properties, but rather exclusively as time-dependent relations. But such a revisionist view of properties may not be accepted by all of the participants in the discourse about persistence (e.g., Lewis 2002). The problem is that properties may actually disappear from our ontology since they are in indexicalism necessarily substituted by relations (relations to moments). Second, indexicalism requires us to see some properties present at different moments necessary as different properties. Thus, according to indexicalism, some property can't exist at two different moments, since at two different moments this property is not one property, but actually, two distinct properties which are indexed to those moments. But then again, such a perception of properties is in an obvious contradiction with the normal perception of properties, which usually maintains that the same property can exist at two different moments. Hence, it is questionable whether, in order to save endurantism and its compatibility with the

second grounding of the future-directed self-concern, we should accept such a harsh revision of our usual perception of some (if not all) properties.

The second endurantist strategy could make use of a more refined type of indexation of properties, namely adverbialism. Within this strategy, some properties are described not as time-indexed qualities, but as time-related properties (Benovsky 2006, 63). Thus, the difference between these two strategies is that indexicalism neutralizes properties directly through indexing them to moments, adverbialism neutralizes properties indirectly through relating them (*having of*) to moments. Therefore, adverbialism does not presuppose a radical change in the perception of properties, but only a change in the perception of ownership of these properties (relation of *having* a property at t_i). On this basis, then, adverbialism could resist some of the aforementioned problems of indexicalism. For example, adverbialism could maintain that the same property could exist at different moments since the property in question could be the same but just differently owned. Moreover, adverbialism does not necessarily presuppose that all properties are only relations since these properties are ontologically distinct and only diversely possessed in time.

However, even if we assume the subtler strategy of adverbialism, then the worries regarding the practical grounding of the future-directed self-concern of a person remain. Adverbialism describes some properties by changing the perspective on ownership of properties. But who actually possesses these changing properties? If these diverse properties are possessed by the person, then this would threaten the endurantistic assumption about the necessity of sameness of properties for the persistence of a person. Thus, the changed properties must be possessed by time (moments). From the perspective of future-directed self-concern, then, adverbialism leads to a very similar problem of change in properties as indexicalism does. In both strategies, apart from semantics, the changed properties are assigned to moments, to time, to circumstances. In the case of indexicalism, the properties are assigned to moments directly by indexation, in the case of adverbialism indirectly through ownership in time. However, if the properties in question end up being directly or indirectly properties of specific moments, then this obviously means that they are not properties of the person. And if these properties are not the properties of that person, then it is questionable why any person should care about these alien properties. Of course, endurantists might reply that this person should be interested precisely in these and no other properties because that person will be in contact with only these properties through a specific time-indexed or time-related way of having them. But that consequently also means that the person will be in contact with these properties only indirectly through a new ersatz relation to these properties. Thus, the second condition for grounding the future-directed self-concern can be safeguarded through endurantism, but only if we accept a derivative notion of a second-order relation of properties to a present and future self.

Conclusion

Both perdurantism and endurantism could safeguard conditions for groundings of the future-directed self-concern of a person, but both only via an introduction of specific second-order notions of concerns and selves. In the case of perdurantism, the identity condition could be replaced through a specific relation of parts to a whole. In the case of endurantism, the change condition could be mediated through a specific relation of properties to moments. However, the feasibility of these substitutions is questionable from a practical point of view. Since in the end, perdurantism describes the future-directed self-concern of a person as a situation where a present entity is only derivatively interested in another entity's future (another temporal part), and endurantism designates this concern as a state where a present entity is interested in another entity's derivative properties (properties of times). Of course, both theories could add to this that the future-directed self-concern is justified because these other entities are in some special way related to the original person. But this consequently means that both theories ground the future-directed self-concern of a person only if we accept hidden ontological presuppositions about specific derivative notions of a concern of a person for their future.

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NOTES

1. A substantial review of the general problem of the relationship between ethics, ontology, and the self is beyond the limited scope of this article. For topical surveys, see Bogdanov (2016), Frunză (2020), and Sauchelli (2021).
2. I do not want to imply a strong thesis that would claim that the rationality of every self-concern depends on ontology. However, I do believe that every rational concern should have, at least, a proper ontological target (in the sense of existence). For a review of pragmatic aspects of ontology see Donev (2020) and Synytsia (2021), and for a discussion about ontological groundings of self-concern, see Wolf (1986) and Kind (2004).
3. Perdurantism is usually referred to as four-dimensionalism and endurantism as three-dimensionalism (Balashov 2011). The debates about four-dimensionalism and three-dimensionalism are associated with philosophical interpretations of modern physics and discussion about space, time, and space-time. In this article, I will use the terms perdurantism and endurantism as broad labels for two competing views on the persistence of ordinary objects (e.g., persons).
4. I have outlined a more detailed discussion of this argument in Odorčák (2017; 2020).
5. For a critical discussion about reasons for and against the reality of self-concern, see Setiya (2015).

6. However, this does not mean that time-discounting is necessarily irrational. My point is centered primarily on the identity of the self. For a critique of usual justifications of the rationality of time-discounting, see Ahmed (2020).

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