

The Argument from Temporary Intrinsic

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1. The Story Thus Far

One of the most discussed arguments for the doctrine of temporal parts arises in connection with David Lewis's *problem of temporary intrinsics*:

Persisting things change their intrinsic properties. For instance shape: when I sit, I have a bent shape; when I stand I have a straightened shape. Both shapes are temporary intrinsic properties; I have them only some of the time. How is such change possible?
(1986: 203-4)

Lewis recognizes three solutions to the problem of temporary intrinsics:

First solution: contrary to what we might think, shapes are not genuine intrinsic properties. They are disguised relations, which an enduring thing may bear to times. One and the same enduring thing may bear the bent-shape relation to some times, and the straight-shape relation to others...

Second solution: the only intrinsic properties of a thing are those it has at the present moment. Other times are like false stories; they are abstract representations, composed out of the materials of the present, which represent or misrepresent the way things are. When something has different intrinsic properties according to one of these ersatz times, that does not mean that it, or any part of it, or anything else, just has them...

Third solution: the different shapes, and the different temporary intrinsics generally, belong to different things. Endurance is to be

rejected in favour of perdurance. We perdure; we are made up of temporal parts, and our temporary intrinsics are properties of these parts, wherein they differ one from another. (1986: 204)

Lewis goes on to argue against the first and second solutions, which leaves us with his favored account of persistence, the doctrine of temporal parts.

The purpose of this paper is to defend the first solution to the problem of temporary intrinsics that is mentioned by Lewis – the endurantist solution on which apparently monadic properties like *being bent* turn out to be dyadic relations that hold between persisting objects and times (or relational properties that have such relations as constituents).¹ Let us agree to call anyone who accepts this account a *relativizer*. In the following sections I distinguish three different objections to the relativizer’s account, each of which can be traced to the work of David Lewis. I also offer responses to each of these objections on behalf of the relativizer. In this way I hope to show that the problem of temporary intrinsics does not, in the end, have a significant role to play in the debate over the nature of persistence.²

2. Intrinsic and Extrinsic

I am currently sitting at my desk, typing on my computer. As such, I am currently bent. But, according to the relativizer, I do not have the non-relational property of *being bent*. Rather, I have the relational property of *being bent at the current time*. Some (e.g., Haslanger 1989: 123) have interpreted Lewis as claiming that the move from the non-relational property of *being bent* to the relational property of *being bent at t* takes us from an intrinsic property to an extrinsic property. The closest Lewis comes to making such a claim is in the following passage:

No doubt the friend of the first solution will draw a distinction that he will *call* the distinction between matters of one’s own intrinsic character and matters of one’s relationships: having a shape will go on one side, being an uncle on the other. But call it what he will, his

¹ Properties are taken to have a quasi-syntactic structure – they are, in some sense, “made up” out of their constituents. On this picture, the property of *being bent at t* includes as a constituent the relation of *being bent at*. It is in this sense that such properties are *relational*.

² I should like to say from the outset that I do not endorse the relativizer’s account. Still, I have always found this account quite natural and I have been puzzled by its apparent unpopularity. To my knowledge, only Mellor (1981: 111-4) endorses the position in print.

account reveals that really he treats shape, no less than unclehood, as a matter of relations. (1999: 188)

The notion of an *intrinsic* property is often glossed as follows: F is intrinsic if and only if whether an object is F depends solely on how that object is in and of itself, independently of anything else. The property of *being an uncle* is a paradigm *non-intrinsic* or *extrinsic* property. Since Lewis claims that the relativizer must treat *being bent* in the same manner as *being an uncle*, one might read him as claiming that relational shape properties like *being bent at t* turn out to be extrinsic. Whether or not this was Lewis's intended objection, I find it far from convincing.³ As a general point, not all relational properties are extrinsic. I have the property of *being such that my legs are longer than my nose*.⁴ This is a relational property, but it is also intrinsic to me – I have it solely in virtue of the way that I am in and of myself. More to the point, however, the relativizer can follow Sally Haslanger (1989: 123) in claiming that a relational property like *being F at t* is intrinsic if and only if whether an object is F at *t* depends solely on how that object is in and of itself at *t*, independently of anything else. I have the relational property of *being bent at the current time* solely in virtue of the way that I *now* am, in and of myself. I also have the relational property of *being an uncle at the current time*. But here I do not have the relevant property solely in virtue of the way that I *now* am, in and of myself – my nephew plays a rather important role in my being an uncle. In this sense the relativizer can distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic relational properties in the required way.

3. Being Bent and Being Bent At

A second worry for the relativizer's strategy concerns the connection between the property of *being bent* and the relation of *being bent at* (or the relational property of *being bent at t*). Here is Lewis once more:

...the properties *bent* and *straight* could at least sometimes be monadic: for instance when they are properties of momentary things. There is no reason in that case to take them as relations to times. So I want to know: where have the monadic properties *bent*

³ Note that the quoted passage is immediately followed by the claim that, "In this account, nothing has a shape *simpliciter*." (1999: 188) This leads me to suspect that Lewis was objecting to the *relational* feature of relational properties, and not their supposed extrinsicness.

⁴ I owe this example Brian Weatherston.

and *straight* gone? What have they to do with our new-found *bent-at* and *straight-at* relations, and our new-found relational properties constructed from these relations? (2002: 4)

Lewis's objection here seems to be this: if the relativizer has an appropriately liberal view concerning possibility, they should admit the possibility of instantaneous objects. So too, he should think that such objects could be bent. In the case of instantaneous objects, there is no motivation for replacing monadic properties like *being bent* with dyadic relations like *being bent at* or relational properties like *being bent at t*. So the relativizer should admit the possibility of an object having the monadic property of *being bent*. Given the general strategy endorsed by the relativizer, we know that he is also committed to the existence of an irreducible dyadic relation of *being bent at*. This leaves the relativizer with a difficult question: what is the relation between the monadic property *being bent* and the irreducible dyadic relation of *being bent at*?

First, let us note that it is unclear whether there is, as Lewis claims, "no reason" to say that a momentary object that is bent stands in the *bent at* relation to the unique instant at which it exists. The relativizer, again, says that the persisting objects of this world are only bent in the sense that they stand in the *bent at* relation to different times. And it would seem natural for the relativizer to claim that the momentary objects discussed by Lewis are bent in exactly the same way that the persisting objects of this world are bent. So it would seem natural for the relativizer to say that Lewis's momentary objects are only bent in the sense that they stand in the *bent at* relation to the single instant at which they exist.

Second, note that it is unclear whether the above considerations give us a reason to prefer perdurantism over endurantism. For, if the perdurantist has an appropriately liberal view concerning possibility, he should admit the possibility of enduring objects. Lewis, for one, makes such a concession:

[There] are worlds in which things persist through time not by consisting distinct temporal parts, but rather by bilocation in space-time: persisting things are wholly present in their entirety at different times. (1994: 475)

Suppose that, in addition to allowing for the possibility of enduring objects, the perdurantist allows for the possibility of enduring objects *that undergo intrinsic change*. Suppose, in particular, that the perdurantist allows for the possibility of enduring objects that are bent at some times and straight at others. These are nothing more than the irreducible dyadic relations

postulated by the relativizer. Of course, the perdurantist also accepts the existence of genuine monadic properties like *being bent*. Thus, liberal minded perdurantists face the exact same question that the relativizer does: what is the relation between the monadic property of *being bent* and the irreducible dyadic relation of *being bent at*?

Third, it seems as if the relativizer can in fact say something interesting about the relation between *being bent* and *being bent at*. I suggest that the relativizer ought to take the dyadic relation of *being bent at* as primitive and to then use that relation in order to say what it is for something to be *bent simpliciter*: *x* is *bent simpliciter* if and only if *x* stands in the dyadic relation of *being bent at* to every time at which it exists.⁵ This suggestion yields the desired conclusion that Lewis's instantaneous objects are bent *simpliciter*, since those objects stand in the relation of *being bent at* to every time (the only time) at which they exist. The suggestion also seems to make sense of the intimate connection between *being bent* and *being bent at*.

It is worth noting that even those perdurantists who are not as generous as Lewis was with possibility will accept the existence of the dyadic relation of *being bent at*. They will take this relation to be definable in terms of the monadic property of *being bent*: *x* stands in the dyadic relation of *being bent at* to *t* if and only if *x*'s temporal part at *t* has the monadic property of *being bent*. And here we seem to have reached a genuine standoff. The endurantist takes *being bent at* as primitive and uses that notion to define *being bent*. The (non-generous) perdurantist takes *being bent* as primitive and uses that notion to define *being bent at*. At this point it is unclear whether we have any substantial reason for favoring one account of persistence over the other.

4. Being Bent Simpliciter

The third and most familiar objection to the relativizer's strategy is a simple one: the view is inconsistent with the deeply held intuition that being bent is a *property*, not a relation. In other words, it is simply a datum that things can be bent *simpliciter*. Since the relativizer's solution to the problem of temporary intrinsics is inconsistent with the data, it must be rejected. Here are the various ways in which Lewis himself made the point:

If we know what shape is, we know that it is a property, not a relation. (1986:204)

⁵ I owe this suggestion to John Hawthorne. See also Hawley (2002: 18).

In this account nothing has a shape *simpliciter*. The temporary 'intrinsic properties' of things, so understood, do not deserve the name... Intrinsic properties are genuine properties, and a thing can have them *simpliciter*, without regard to any relationships to anything else. (1999: 188)

Under the endurance hypothesis, there is nothing left in a case of temporary bentness and straightness to have *bent* or *straight*. Or anyway nothing is left to have them *simpliciter*. (2002: 4)

It is tempting to accept these claims as they stand and, in turn, to reject the relativizer's solution to the problem of temporary intrinsics. But, on reflection, I find it hard to pin down the exact intuition to which Lewis appeals.

In several places, Lewis seems to suggest that the relevant intuition is this: persisting objects like you and I can be bent *simpliciter*. Here is Lewis:

In itself, considered apart from its relations to other things, it has no shape at all. And likewise for all other seeming temporary intrinsics; all of them must be reinterpreted as to different times... This is simply incredible, if we are speaking of the persistence of ordinary things. (1986: 204)

It may be true that ordinary folk have the intuition that persisting objects can be bent *simpliciter*. If there is such an intuition, it would seem to be inconsistent with the picture defended by the relativizer since, according to such a theorist, ordinary persisting objects are never bent *simpliciter* – they only stand in the *bent at* relation to various times. But even if there is a genuine conflict here, this gives us no reason to reject endurantism in favor of Lewis's perdurantism. For perdurantism itself is at odds with the idea that persisting objects are bent *simpliciter*. (Haslinger 1989: 119-20) On Lewis's preferred metaphysics of persistence, it is only short-lived temporal parts that are bent *simpliciter*. Persisting objects, on the other hand, only have relational properties like *being bent at t* – a persisting object has the relational property of *being bent at t* just in case its temporal part at *t* is bent *simpliciter*. Since perdurantism and endurantism are both inconsistent with the claim that persisting objects are bent *simpliciter*, intuitions of the above sort can give us no reason to prefer the former theory over the later.

Perhaps the preceding argument was too quick. Lewis writes:

There is more to say. To be sure, your perduring self does not have *bent simpliciter*. But as much of you as exists at t_1 does. In talking about what's true at a certain time, we can, and we very often do, restrict our domain of discourse so as to ignore everything located elsewhere in time. Restricting the domain in this way, your temporal part at t_1 is deemed to be the whole of you. So there's a good sense in which you do, after all, have *bent simpliciter*. The protagonist of endurance cannot say the same. (2002: 5)

But in fact the protagonist of endurance *can* say the same. Let us suppose that Lewis's basic suggestion here is correct: in talking about what is the case at a certain time, we restrict our domain of discourse so as to ignore the *objects* located at other times. If this is correct, it would seem equally plausible to think that we often restrict our domain of discourse so as to ignore *other times as well*. Suppose that a particular enduring object is bent at time t and that we are ignoring all times other than t . In such a context, we can truthfully say that the object in question stands in the relation of *being bent at* to every time at which it exists. Given the analysis suggested in the previous section, this entails that our enduring object is bent *simpliciter*. Thus, Lewis has provided the relativizer with a perfectly good sense in which an ordinary enduring object can be said to be bent *simpliciter*.

A second, more charitable, reading of Lewis is the following: it is a datum that some objects are actually bent *simpliciter*. On the assumption that there are no actual objects that are bent throughout their careers, the relativizer's proposal is inconsistent with this datum and should be rejected. What are we to make of this objection?

First, let us recall that the relativizer and the liberal minded perdurantist can agree that there are possible worlds in which nothing is bent *simpliciter*. So too, both parties can agree that there are possible worlds in which some objects *are* bent *simpliciter*. This is simply to repeat what has already been said. But, given this much agreement, it seems exceedingly odd to place such importance on the intuition (if indeed there is such an intuition) that some things in *this* world are bent *simpliciter*.

Second, let us note that the current line of objection can also be pressed against a variety of philosophical and scientific theories. According to Frank Jackson, for example, the primary quality view of color is committed to the claim that objects are never red *simpliciter*. Rather, objects are only red *relative to a certain kind of creature and a certain circumstance of viewing*. (Jackson 1998: 95-101) But, to paraphrase Lewis, if we know what colors are, we know that they are properties, not relations. According to the theory of relativity, it is never the case that one object is a meter away from another object *simpliciter*.

Rather, objects are only separated by a meter *relative to a particular frame of reference*. But, to paraphrase Lewis once again, if we know what spatial relations are, we know that they are dyadic relations, not triadic relations. I suspect that those who subscribe to the primary quality view of color or the theory of relativity will be completely unmoved by objections of this sort. So it is somewhat odd to find Lewis making the claim that the relativizer's position stands refuted by this very objection.

Finally, let us ask whether there is in fact a genuine intuition that some actual objects are bent *simpliciter*. When philosophers make appeal to intuitions, they most often have in mind the unreflective responses of the folk. How might one collect intuitions of this sort for the case at hand? One idea would be to simply ask the man on the street whether a particular individual is simply bent. If the individual in question is then sitting, the man on the street will surely answer in the affirmative. But here it is important to note that the English copula "is" is tensed. This is not to make the controversial claim that there are irreducibly 'tensed facts' in the world – it is simply to make a mundane observation about the English language. This simple observation, however, raises worries for this method of collecting intuitions. Since the English copula "is" is tensed, the man on the street will most likely take the question of whether our chosen individual is bent to be the question of whether that individual is *now* bent. And an affirmative answer to *this* question provides no evidence at all against the relativizer. What Lewis requires from the folk at this point is the intuition that something can be *tenselessly* bent *simpliciter*. How might one test for such intuitions? Well, one might ask the man on the street the following question: is it true that, whenever something is bent, there is a further object that exists for only an instant and that is simply bent? But here, of course, Lewis will not receive the response he requires – if anything, the man on the street will presumably give a *negative* answer to such questions. What this suggests is that the intuitions appealed to by Lewis are not the unreflective responses given by the folk. Rather, they are the considered opinions of philosophers who have spent some time dwelling on the issues in question. The relativizer, of course, has conducted just such an investigation and has not found within himself the intuition to which Lewis appeals. Thus the relativizer will not be moved by Lewis's third and final objection. In fact, the relativizer will probably go on to conjecture that it is our ignoring the tensed idioms of English that gives Lewis's objection whatever force it may have. I, for one, take this to be a plausible hypothesis.⁶

⁶ I thank John Hawthorne, Kris McDaniel, Ted Sider and Dean Zimmerman for helpful discussion.

References

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