**What’s the Problem with Personites?**

**Abstract:** According to four-dimensionalism, objects persist in virtue of having temporal parts. But my life could have been shorter than it actually is. So, a subset of my temporal parts—a personite—would have composed a person in some other possible world. Olson (2010) and Johnston (2016a, 2016b) think the existence of such beings entails moral disaster. Kaiserman (2019) argues that Johnston’s personite problem only applies to perdurantists. I argue that Kaiserman’s escape is technical at best—stage theorists still face the moral concerns which motivate the problem. To the extent stage theorists can escape the motivating concerns, perdurantists can, too. Thus, personite-like problems persist for all four-dimensionalists or none of them. But the four-dimensionalist is not without ethical response: I offer ways four-dimensionalists can diffuse the problem. Given a commitment to ‘ought implies can’, personites pose no obvious moral threat to mere mortals.

*Keywords:* personites, perdurantism, stage theory, counterpart theory

*1. Introduction*

Eric Olson (2010) and Mark Johnston (2016a, 2016b) argue that four-dimensionalism results in moral disaster due to the existence of person-like objects which overlap with persons and share their moral properties.[[1]](#footnote-1) Four-dimensionalists think an object exists at a time iff it has a temporal part that exists at that time. Consider the temporal parts from my birth until age sixteen: it seems plausible that duplicates of these temporal parts are persons in worlds in which I only live to be sixteen. I thus overlap with person-like entities—‘personites’—that appear capable of thinking, willing, et cetera.

Johnston thinks I inevitably act immorally toward these personites: I put beings who are non-identical to me under moral obligations which are only appropriate under conditions of strict identity. For example, by promising I make a being not identical to myself—a personite—obligated to uphold promises they did not make or undergo sacrifices for which they will see no reward. A shorter-lived part cannot consent to a promise made before they exist, nor receive a reward that comes to be after they cease to exist.

Identity between persons and personites is exactly what the four-dimensionalist cannot provide, though the reason for non-identity depends on the version of four-dimensionalism endorsed. Perdurantism and stage theory offer differing analyses of how persons persist through time. Perdurantists think that persons are spacetime worms composed of temporal parts or stages, while stage theorists think that persons *are* individual stages. Since nothing can be identical to a proper part of itself nor identical to a larger object of which it is a part, it follows that all four-dimensionalists will deny that persons are numerically identical with personites. If numerical identity is required for some moral behaviour, stage theory is doomed from the start—the view denies that there is strict numerical identity between persons across time.

Here is a brief reconstruction of the general argument:[[2]](#footnote-2)

P1. All persons have moral status.

P2. If a person has moral status, then all intrinsic duplicates of that person also have moral status.

P3. Personites in the actual world have intrinsic duplicates that are persons in some possible world.

C. Personites have moral status.

On this reconstruction, the response of the stage theorist is clear—the stage theorist can simply deny P3. Personites never have duplicates which are persons in any world, since only stages are persons. This is exactly what Kaiserman (2019) argues. He concludes that stage theory has a theoretical advantage over perdurantism, since the perdurantist does not have such a quick way of escaping the personite problem.

But stage theory has some (seemingly) radical counter-intuitive consequences. If only stages are persons, then I am not—strictly speaking—numerically identical to any individual psychologically connected to me, even five minutes before or after my temporally-bound stage. After all, no stage is numerically identical to another, distinct stage. Stage theorists aim to diffuse this counter-intuitive consequence by utilizing counterpart theoretic semantics.

I argue that Kaiserman is correct that stage theorists shouldn’t be concerned that duplicates of personites are persons in other possible worlds—P3 is easily denied, as the stage theorist will never have an intrinsic duplicate of a person or a part of a person which fails to be a person in some other possible world.[[3]](#footnote-3) But his solution isn’t an obvious stage theoretic advantage. First, the stage theorist still faces the moral concerns which motivate the personite problem, since certain moral practices appear to require numerical identity.[[4]](#footnote-4) The moral issues which concern Johnston appear to be motivated by an intuition that certain actions, such as promising, require numerical identity between the person promising and the individual fulfilling that promise.[[5]](#footnote-5) And Johnston and Kaiserman share the intuition that ‘*if* personites have moral status, much of our practical and ethical reasoning is wrong’ (Kaiserman, 215, emphasis his). But, according to stage theory, personites do exist and there is reason to think they might still receive moral consideration despite the easy answer to Johnston’s challenge. The personite problem appears to be a problem generated by non-identity rather than intrinsic duplicates.

Second, the counterpart strategy Kaiserman employs can just as easily be used by the perdurantist.[[6]](#footnote-6) ‘Identity’ is said in many ways, and perdurantists can (and do) frequently use notions of identity in terms of parthood. So, if the moral problems at issue are truly solvable by way of counterpart theoretic semantics, that solution is available to all four-dimensionalists.

To the extent that stage theorists can answer these moral problems, I’ll argue the perdurantist—and their personites, too—can as well. Thus, personite-like problems persist for all four-dimensionalists or none of them. Given this, personite problems cannot be used to argue in favor of a particular version of four-dimensionalism.

Whether or not the four-dimensionalist faces personite problems depends on ethical principles which are not as clear as we might like. I argue that the supposed ethical revolution can be averted by some fairly standard moral considerations. Particularly, a fairly standard ethical commitment to ‘ought implies can’ helps the four-dimensionalist avert the portended moral disaster. If it’s truly impossible to fulfill the personal interests of all personites—which it is, since the interests of some personites contradict each other—then I cannot be obligated to simultaneously fulfill the personal interests of *every* personite.[[7]](#footnote-7) And this is for the same reason that I cannot be simultaneously obligated to be both in Sun Valley and not in Sun Valley, unless I’ve accrued these moral obligations due to, say, previous contradictory promises I’ve made.[[8]](#footnote-8) But I have no say over whether four-dimensionalism is true, so there cannot be prior choices I’ve made which land me in a position of tragic moral choice where I cannot fail to act immorally. And tragic moral choices, if they exist, offer no independent reason to reject a metaphysical theory. Reality might just be tragic.

Given the nature of metaphysical possibility and a commitment to ‘ought implies can’, there is only one case where personite problems appear to provide a reason in favor of endurantism over four-dimensionalism. And that is the case of a being who has a choice about whether four-dimensionalism is true. A being which could choose how the universe is created or structured (say, God) has reason to create a three-dimensional universe in order to avoid personite problems. We can say this being ought to reject creating a four-dimensionalist world because they can do otherwise. Thus, personite problems could provide a theist who believes in an all-benevolent God some reason to think that four-dimensionalism is false—perhaps especially if they believe in an afterlife of punishment or reward.

*2. The personite problem*

First, a few standard definitions, taken from Sider (2001). *Parthood-at-t* is transitive and reflexive. According to Sider (58-59, numbering his):

Two objects overlap at a time *t* iff there is something at *t* which is a part of each of them. *x* is a fusion at *t* of a class of objects S iff (1) every member of S is a part of *x* at *t*, and (2) every part of *x* at *t* overlaps-at-*t* some member of S… *x* is an instantaneous temporal part of *y* at an instant *t* =df (1) *x* exists at *t* but only at *t*; (2) *x* is part of *y* at *t*; and (3) *x* overlaps at *t* everything that is a part of *y* at *t*.

Perdurantists think objects persist through time in virtue of having temporal parts at every instant of their existence; objects are maximal fusions of their temporal parts. Let the R-relation name what matters when considering the survival of persons and identity across time.[[9]](#footnote-9) Perdurantists think persons are maximal fusions of R-related instantaneous temporal parts.

These R-related temporal parts of persons are not identical, just like my left and right hand are not identical. The parts jointly constitute the person, who is numerically identical with themself across time in virtue of these parts. It is true that *I was in Canada* since I have temporal parts who were in Canada.

Perdurantism entails that there are personites, defined as follows:

‘If *x* is a person, then *y* is a personite of *x* iff *y* is a temporally continuous *non*-maximal R-interrelated fusion of two or more person-stages, each of which is R-related to every instantaneous temporal part of *x*’ (Kaiserman, 216).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Consider now a plausible principle regarding intrinsic duplicates:

*Duplicates:* ‘for all possible objects *x* and *y* and possible worlds *w* and *v*, *x* in *w* is a *duplicate* of *y* in *v* iff *x* instantiates exactly the same intrinsic properties in *w* as *y* does in *v*’ (Kaiserman, 217).

*Duplicates* entails that there are individuals who fail to be persons simply by modal accident. And modal accident should not determine whether one has moral status. Kaiserman presents Johnston’s argument as follows (217):[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. For all possible worlds *w* and possible objects *x*, if *x* is a person in *w* then *x* has moral status in *w*.
2. For all possible worlds *w* and *v* and possible objects *x* and *y*, if *x* in *w* is a duplicate of *y* in *v*, then *x* has moral status in *w* iff *y* has moral status in *v*.
3. For all personites *x*, there is a possible object *y* and possible world *w* such that *y* is a person in *w* and *y* in *w* is a duplicate of *x* in the actual world.
4. Therefore, all personites have moral status.

Kaiserman shows stage theorists can reject the above argument, since they deny Premiss 3. Stage theorists think that persons simply *are* instantaneous temporal parts, or stages. Stages are regarded *as* surviving and existing at a later time *t* if they are R-related to a person at time *t*. What makes it true that *I was in Canada* is not numerical identity nor parthood but rather that I am R-related to someone who was in Canada. Since persons are instantaneous stages, personites—which require two or more stages—won’t ever be duplicates of persons. Thus, personites don’t have moral status.

Kaiserman thinks the stage theorist need not be concerned with personite-like objects, even though most stage theorists do think they exist. Stage theory is often motivated by a commitment to mereological universalism, the view that any fusion of material objects compose another material object. So, despite identifying persons with stages, almost all stage theorists are committed to the existence of personites.[[12]](#footnote-12) But they don’t concern Kaiserman, who states (219):

From the perspective of the stage theorist, the four-dimensional objects worm theorists call ‘people’ are no different from, say, the fusion of me and Mick Jagger (or, more to the point, the fusion of me and my modal counterparts, if such things there be) – perfectly real, but not legitimate objects of moral or prudential concern, despite being composed of things which are.

This overstates the case. The stage theorist thinks that the four-dimensional objects perdurantists call ‘people’ have parts which are R-related to each other in virtue of mental continuity and connectedness; R-relations which are notably lacking in the fusion of Kaiserman and Jagger. Suppose I make a promise to you. Due to this promise, I (presumably) have certain moral obligations to future stages which are R-related to you which I do not have to modal counterparts of you. To say otherwise is to concede the point to Johnston, as four-dimensionalism would thus entail a radical overhaul of our current ethical beliefs and practices.

While Kaiserman notes that ‘one of the alleged advantages of the stage theory is precisely that extrinsic facts like whether something is R-related to something else do not make a difference to whether either of those things is a person’ (219), numerical identity isn’t everything—especially for the four-dimensionalist. And extrinsic facts can matter a great deal for the stage theorist. Parfit (1984) famously thinks that what matters in survival and particular ethical cases is whether there are the appropriate R-relations.[[13]](#footnote-13) To the extent that thinking or making choices is not synchronic and requires cooperation of other temporal stages, personite-esque problems resurface—the object presently caring about what matters and making promises isn’t identical to the thing which must fulfill the promises, et cetera. And according to stage theory, if these activities are diachronic, the objects primarily making and fulfilling these promises aren’t identical to persons. To the extent that moral commitment, deliberation, and action is diachronic, the moral life (counterintuitively) becomes divorced from personhood on the stage theoretic picture.[[14]](#footnote-14)

And Kaiserman has done nothing yet to block the concern that personites have moral status. Thus far, all we’ve seen is that there is not a quick argument for their moral status by way of intrinsic duplicates. But if we take Johnston’s motivation for assigning moral status to personites seriously, then the stage theorist faces theoretical pressure to explain why personites don’t also have moral status, even if personites are not granted the title ‘person’. (And in doing so, the stage theorist faces Johnston’s charge of ‘word worship’ again, albeit from a different direction.)

Johnston thinks that the ability to think indicates that a being has rational interests, and thus deserves moral consideration. As Johnston notes, the connection between thinking and personhood can be traced back at least as far as John Locke.[[15]](#footnote-15) Thinking is, plausibly, at least sometimes diachronic. Perhaps always. If so, then the property *being a thinking thing* is, on the stage theorist’s account, *derivative*: it’s possessed in virtue of more than one temporal stage (i.e., a personite). And something seemingly indicative of personhood (i.e., thinking) is thus granted to a person only in virtue of objects and events external to the person. The stage theorist does have a way of accounting for how the person (stage) has the *de re* property *being a thinking thing*, by using counterpart theory. The property *being a thinking thing* is granted to the parts in virtue of a collective activity of temporal parts of a personite. Given this, the stage theorist appears to have motivated reason for rejecting (2)—if extrinsic, diachronic relations can matter in such central cases, then we do not have powerful reasons to think that moral status itself is intrinsic. Why should moral status behave differently than other properties?

And since thought is granted to the stages only by way of a larger personite, it is not clear why this larger personite would *not* be a candidate for having the same sort of interests or moral consideration, perhaps even more so than the individual stages. We can disagree about what gets assigned the label of ‘person’. But Johnston and Olson are concerned about *why* we grant something that label, and Kaiserman has done nothing yet to dispel that central concern.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Some personites appear to be thinking, willing beings on either four-dimensionalist account. And to the extent that you think that thinking indicates personhood or ‘legitimate interests in how one’s life goes’ (Johnston, 2016b, p. 628), then you’ll think personites have moral consideration. When Johnston levels the charge of ‘word worship’ against the four-dimensionalist (and Olson the concern about merely linguistic personhood (265)), the concern is that the four-dimensionalist has lost the thread—our focus should be on agents with interests, rather than simply who is awarded the title of ‘person’. The personite problem motivates us to take a step back and look at why we’re using words (and thus determining moral status) in the particular way that we do. It’s not enough for the stage theorist to show that the above argument does not prove that personites have moral status. For simply refuting the argument doesn’t show that they don’t. And, notably, the theoretical underpinnings of stage theory provide reasons to think that personites do exist, and perhaps are even more capable of thinking and willing than stages (if acts of thinking and willing are generally diachronic).

Here, one might try to quickly escape the problem by positing that no agent or individual with rational interests can be a proper part of a person. But this claim needs motivation: why should we not conclude that a sentient being which can think, will, desire, et cetera is not an agent? Perhaps the issue is one of ontological priority. But here, too, the four-dimensionalist has trouble. According to perdurantism, it appears that the person thinks in virtue of thinking temporal parts. And the stage theorist faces a similar parthood problem, but from the opposite direction—some acts of thought appear to require more than one stage. In either case, there are temporal parts doing the actual act of thinking, but which do not receive the label ‘person’. Why are we not granting these thinking things moral status?

Olson and Johnston move our focus from the recipient of the label ‘person’ to the properties indicating moral consideration. The stage theorist thus still faces the central question: Is identity what matters for moral consideration?

*3. Whence moral status?*

Johnston draws our attention to moral status—however beings acquire it, and whatever accounts for it, moral status shouldn’t be modally fickle or fragile. Hence, he thinks intrinsic duplicates are relevant. Moral status means something; it tells us about what kinds of consideration a being is due. Given this, it shouldn’t be easily gained or lost due to extrinsic features of the world, such as what objects or events happen to be temporally adjacent to a being.

This is an intriguing line of argument coming from Johnston, since he presents cases (1992) where intrinsic properties are not always stable between intrinsic duplicates—intrinsic properties can be either masked or finked, and duplicates can either fail to have or fail to manifest identical intrinsic properties. Premiss (2) is thus less obvious than it may originally seem. Perhaps *personhood* is a maximal, dispositional property and can be masked or finked by adjacent R-related temporal parts, much like the *fragility* of a vase can be masked by bubble wrap or finked by a protective wizard. Or perhaps *personhood* is a highly fine-grained property, like *being a person unless R-related to further temporal parts*.

An intuition behind premiss (2) seems to be that certain properties, like moral status, shouldn’t depend on extrinsic features of the world. But this isn’t completely clear. Many intrinsic properties, such as having a particular shape, depend heavily on the cooperation of things extrinsic to me (such as laws of nature).[[17]](#footnote-17) Again, suppose thinking is a diachronic relation and stage theory is correct: it follows that whether I am capable of thought or willing depends on either what temporal stages are adjacent to each other or what counterparts I have. Given this, it is less surprising than at first glance that having moral status or being a person *could* depend on extrinsic things, or perhaps even be a candidate for an extrinsic property.

But there is an intuition that moral status shouldn’t be a modally fragile. Ethical consideration shouldn’t hang by a thread; intrinsic duplicates should be treated alike in terms of moral status, on pain of moral arbitrariness. So, I will suppose (for now) that the argument is successful and there are personites who do have moral status.

Even granting the conclusion, Johnston’s argument is less morally concerning than it might initially appear. His conclusion isn’t enough, yet, to cause morally explosive problems. Having moral status does not entail that one has *non-defeasible* or *non-derivative* moral status. And so having moral status does not automatically mean that an individual must be granted their individual interests, even if the individual receives moral consideration.[[18]](#footnote-18)

We must make claims about the ethical treatment of beings with moral status generally, and it’s difficult to get quick, clear-cut principles. Someone can think non-human animals have moral status but eat some of them. You may think that behavior incorrect, but there’s further argument to be made before declaring that such a person upends our most common ethical judgments by doing so. Even if we have a being with (uncontroversial) full moral status, Judith Jarvis Thomson (1971) famously gives cases in which she thinks there are beings with moral status whom we are not obligated to keep alive. Suppose you are kidnapped and, without your consent, connected a dying violinist so that the violinist can stay alive by using your kidneys. You can sever this medical condition, but in doing so the violinist will die. Thomson thinks that it is morally permissible to disconnect yourself from the violinist, even though the violinist has equal moral status and rights to life (48-49).

Perhaps personites are in the unenviable position of only having defeasible or overridden moral status. This isn’t necessarily an untoward consequence, since there’s no way to act toward the personites other than how we would act toward individual stages at a time, or the person considered as a maximal entity. So, granting the conclusion doesn’t necessarily entail moral revolution.

Kaiserman and Johnston agree that personites are ‘incompatible with our most basic ethical and prudential assumptions’ (Kaiserman, 215). The moral concerns of the personite argument appear to derive from the non-identity of the stages (and their fusions). A stage at time t5 isn’t identical to an earlier stage at t1. It seems that stage t5 should be able to object to upholding promise, since they can say ‘I didn’t make it!’. Sacrifices will have to be endured by countless stages who will go out of existence before the gains are realized or who couldn’t consent when the relevant decisions were made.

In essence, the morally explosive charge appears to be that it is morally wrong to hold a being responsible for the choices of a different (that is, non-numerically-identical) being. Given this, we must reformulate the argument, focusing on this central charge. I will show that once we reformulate the argument, we will see how four-dimensionalists stand or fall together: either they will both be able to diffuse the personite problem, or they will face the same problem premise.

*4. A reformulated personite problem*

Reformulating the argument is tricky, because the relevant ethical intuitions are not explicitly specified outside of motivating examples—though there is agreement between Kaiserman and Johnston that there would be moral disaster. As I showed above, the current personite problem is insufficient for generating moral revolution.

There appears to be an intuition that it is morally wrong to force an individual to undergo hardship (a) which violates their own personal interest (due to non-identity) or (b) to which they did not consent. The intuition is underspecified, but there are issues with each way of understanding the case. One complaint might be that there are demands which generally cut against a personite’s individual personal interest. But so far, we have not left normal moral territory. *Pace* ethical egoism, the ethical life places demands upon us all which may cut against our individual interests.

Suppose we understand this intuition in terms of consent. This will not be enough—given the psychological overlap between personites and persons, many personites plausibly *do* consent to their treatment. For example, a personite hard at work studying Hungarian will affirm that this indeed is what she wants to do.

But in Johnston’s favor, there do seem to be certain kinds of commitment which only appear appropriate under the idea that it is ‘the same person’ who makes and undertakes the commitment. As Johnston points out, perhaps our personite only consents to studying Hungarian because she believes she will benefit from knowing that language in the future (2016a, 212ff).

There do appear to be certain kinds of hardship in which it is morally wrong for an Individual *I* to force that hardship upon someone else. I will purposely leave it to the proponent of the personite problem to explicate these conditions further. For our present purposes, a general sketch of the kind of argument that needs to be made is sufficient. The heart of the personite problem thus appears to be something like the following:

PP1. *The Identity Intuition:* It is morally wrong for an Individual *I* to force certain kinds of hardship upon an individual non-identical to Individual *I*.

PP2. Given our practices, four-dimensionalist views entail many inescapable cases of an Individual *I* forcing certain kinds of hardships upon individuals non-identical to Individual *I*.

PP3. Therefore, four-dimensionalist views entail many inescapable cases of morally wrong behaviour.

A few things to note about this argument. First, this version of the personite problem posits a direct ethical challenge to four-dimensionalists (with the force that Johnston, Kaiserman, and Olson have been assuming). If the argument is successful, four-dimensionalism entails morally disastrous consequences. But it is still unclear what, exactly, those disastrous consequences are. It’s not clear that ethical principles are appropriate arbiters for deciding between theories about reality.[[19]](#footnote-19) Suppose I’m waiting for the results from my science experiment. Result A would entail large scale moral problems, and Result B would not have such problems. While it seems appropriate for me to *hope* that I will receive Result B, it would be illegitimate of me to conclude, for moral reasons, that my experimental result is Result B. We must not confuse an ought with an is. And four-dimensionalists take themselves to have many motivated reasons for their position, which don’t appear easily defeasible by the kinds of moral considerations the personite problem provides.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Second, the argument above avoids using the term ‘person’ for the reasons discussed above. While personites and their considerations motivate PP2, personites make no explicit appearance.

In the remainder of the paper, I will show that all four-dimensionalists can answer this version of the personite problem (along Johnston and Kaiserman’s version) in the same way. Either we understand ‘identity’ as numerical identity, or we do not. If we insist that the ‘identity’ of the personite problem is numerical identity, then the four-dimensionalist has principled reasons for rejecting the identity intuition and PP1. (I discuss this further in the following section.) But if we needn’t understand identity in terms of numerical identity (as the four-dimensionalists generally argue, and counterpart theory explains), the four-dimensionalist has an easy way of rejecting PP2: their view has no such entailments.

There are also more general reasons to reject PP1. As noted, “certain kinds of hardship” needs refinement. While certain situations clearly require the identity and consent of all involved (such as ethical sexual relationships), the general plausibility of this premise rests entirely on what kind of consent is necessary for ethical demands and responsibilities, as well as a discussion of what sort of ethical demands require explicit consent.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Kaiserman and Johnston assume the general ability to bind other (non-identical) agents is disastrous; I’m not convinced. I can, within reason, obligate others to fulfill my wishes, such as when writing a will. As an executor of a will, I’m (usually) morally bound to fulfill the promises of a being non-identical to me—and less related to me than a counterpart. And I can be bound by the promises of others, such as respecting a land treaty made before my birth. If I spot a drowning child and I’m able to save them, I ought to rescue the child.

These cases can be made consistent with the identity intuition. Perhaps the will executor is not responsible for the deceased’s wishes *per se*, but instead is responsible to carrying out said wishes in virtue of their choosing to fulfill the role. I might accrue responsibility for the drowning child because of another’s actions, but I hold no moral responsibility for the choices leading to the child’s predicament. Perhaps this is how the moral life generally operates, as some four-dimensionalists argue (see Nagel (1970) for an argument in this territory). And a ‘within reason’ restriction is instructive—the obligations mentioned are *prima facie* ones which are defeasible.

There is an important distinction between having a moral responsibility because of another’s choice and having moral responsibility for the actual choice of another agent. I highlight this distinction to show that there’s a line of response that already appears available (to a point) to the four-dimensionalist: personites might be responsible *because of* the actions of agents they are not identical to, but not responsible *for* the actual choices of earlier, non-identical agents. I can accrue moral obligation through no choice or fault of my own, and also by happenstance.

The moral issues that concern Johnston and Kaiserman seem motivated by an intuition that particular actions, such as promising, sacrifice, or long-term commitment, require numerical identity between, say, the person promising and the individual fulfilling that promise. But many instances of these kinds of actions do not involve numerical identity: presidents and ambassadors make commitments on behalf of their nation that other, non-identical (and non-R-related) individuals must carry out. Perhaps, though, the entity in question here is a nation—if France promises something, France must carry it out (or at least have a standard causal contribution, just like carrying out promises in contexts of human individuals). There are political obligations and promises, though, that do not appear to require consent or numerical identity. For instance, many citizens of nations appear to have ethical demands non-consensually forced upon them by mere accident of birth. While political legitimacy may require some general form of consent, individuals who don’t wish to have had the ethical demands placed upon them by their nation of birth can still be punished for treason. What occurs before and after I’m alive can be ethically relevant to the moral demands placed on me.

If four-dimensionalism is true, it seems plausible that the ethical life, vis a vis temporal stages to the maximal whole, is akin to citizens of a nation. If I can, as a citizen, be obligated to continue reparation payments that my country agreed to make years before my birth, it is not clear how a later stage or temporal part could not, by a similar token, also be obligated to uphold a commitment made by an earlier stage. The relationship, in cases of both nations and spacetime worms, is that of members or parts to a whole. And while there are concerns about the personal interest of parts to whole, in such cases of constitution there are general principles which subsume individual interest to corporate good—otherwise, taxation wouldn’t work.[[22]](#footnote-22) Person-to-person individual promising may require something stronger than what is present in the analogy of nations and states. But it is not instantly obvious that we need a moral overhaul in cases of non-identity: this ‘something stronger’ required for individual promising might well be the R-relation, or something granted by way of counterpart theory.

Suppose we want to understand the identity intuition solely in terms of individuals, and thus set aside the moral considerations of cases like nations, wills, and the demands of my environment. The crux of the issue is what it takes to be ‘the same person’—and here we must turn to metaphysics.

*5. Counterpart solution for all!*

Identity-related charges are theoretically difficult to level against the four-dimensionalist. Parfit (1984) argues that numerical identity is not what matters. Suppose identity is what matters in certain ethical situations. The four-dimensionalist need not believe this means *numerical* identity; ‘identity’ is said in multiple ways. Numerical identity is a one-to-one relation; perdurantists think it only holds for the entire spacetime worm and stage theorists think it holds for individual temporal stages.

Lewis (1983) calls the relation that tracks survival of persons the I-relation. It is a relation of parts to whole. Is the temporal stage at t1 the same person as a temporal stage at t5? Yes, says Lewis, if they’re I-related to each other. Lewis thinks the I-relation, for persons, is co-extensive with the R-relation.

So, is identity what matters in ethical considerations? The four-dimensionalist can say, ‘Yes, if by “identity” you mean the I-relation’. If you mean the one-to-one relation of numerical identity, which is *not* necessarily co-extensive with the R-relation, then the answer is ‘no, or at least, not obviously’. After all, perdurantists think that cases of fission show that a person can be morally concerned about what happens to someone not numerically identical to them, in virtue of having a shared temporal part with that other person.

The stage theorist takes this further: do persons persist through time? Yes and no. Yes, if we’re determining whether I’m R-related to a future stage. No, if we’re asking if I share a one-to-one relationship of numerical identity with a future stage. What makes it true that *I was in Canada,* and *I will be in Turkey* is that I have the appropriate R-related counterparts. This is akin to how Lewis (1986) makes sense of modal claims. What makes is true that *Humphrey could have won the election* is that Humphrey has a modal counterpart in another possible world who did win the election.

Kaiserman shows that counterpart theoretic semantics can postpone Johnston’s moral revolution.

The stage theorist can use counterpart theory to uphold the truth of our moral claims and intuitions like ‘It is wrong to hold a being responsible for the choices of another being’. It is true that I must uphold an earlier promise, as I *was* the being who made it—I have a stage counterpart which did just that.[[23]](#footnote-23)

But to the extent this counterpart theoretic strategy works, the perdurantist can also use it to escape moral concerns about personites. It’s not clear why the personites *wouldn’t* have the relevant counterpart relations with earlier stages with which they are not fusions. For the perdurantist: For any stage of a spacetime worm, it will either be a proper part of a personite or R-related to a personite. That seems enough for the counterpart strategy. Should we be worried about the stages themselves, we can utilize the counterpart strategy again.[[24]](#footnote-24) Perdurantists can use the same solution—and may have an advantage, to the extent that they can sometimes use numerical identity. The multiple, overlapping objects to which the perdurantist is committed shouldn’t concern us if we’re allowed to utilize counterpart theory—at least, they should not concern us more than personites concern the stage theorist.

An objection: The counterpart strategy won’t work for the perdurantist, as (numerical) *identity* is what matters to them. I see no obvious reason this must hold for personites. For the perdurantist, they’re not non-derivatively thinking or willing objects. It appears their moral status is derivative, perhaps in the same way as the perdurantist thinks thinking or being a handed thing is derivative.

By their nature, personites cannot have desires which differ from their stages (or otherwise relevantly small fusions, should desiring not be synchronic). Personites can’t worry about compensation except viastages, and it is unclear how we might even go about compensating them, other than in our behaviour toward stages (or relevant fusions). Thus, they’re just the sort of candidate to receive an alternative sort of analysis, should we be concerned about how to treat them (though they cannot share in our worry other than by having the exact same worries we do). Stage theorists admit that they are not always able to give a uniform analysis in terms temporal counterpart theory and counting, and concession is required. For example, Sider admits the sentence ‘“Fewer than two trillion persons have set foot in North America throughout history” is better handled by the worm-theoretic analysis’ (2001, 198). Why should this sort of mixed strategy not also be available to the perdurantist? Perdurantists can and do use counterparts in modal contexts (see Lewis 1986), so use here is not an ad hoc theoretical addition.

*6. Ought implies can*

Personites, by their very nature, won’t find any treatment toward them objectionable that the stages of which they are fusions do not.[[25]](#footnote-25) And we are able to account for their concerns via counterpart theory. It is unclear how we might even begin to compensate or harm personites other than via treatment of the individual stages (or relevant fusions) which compose them. Johnston (2016a, 632) finds this response insufficient: Why shouldn’t an earlier personite favor their own comfort over the advantages of later, non-identical beings?

A simple answer: there is no way to favor one temporal stage or personite in a hedonistic way without likely short-changing countless others. Suppose temporal stages in the middle of a foot race want to rest. They think about possibly quitting and fulfilling that hedonistic desire, even though they know this decision goes against the desires of other stages. (Perhaps the temporal stages are currently in first place, and winning is highly likely if they keep up the pace!) There is no way to privilege their desire to rest without short-changing the personites who wanted to race and the personites who would either persist or come into existence after a decision to quit. Here, it seems broad ethical considerations tell in favour of our ‘normal’ (pre-personite-problem) approach to ethical life and hard work. By working early on in life to ensure good habits, I increase the odds that personites later on will flourish. Without this sort of understanding, the lives of most persons—and personites—will be nasty, brutish, and short. And perhaps nonsensical. The best strategy appears to be aiming for long-term flourishing.

Four-dimensionalists should answer Johnston’s objections with a commitment to ‘ought implies can’. I cannot regard personites on their own terms, separated from temporal stages (or, perhaps, spacetime worms). There is no way to act morally—or immorally—toward a personite other than how one acts toward temporal parts at particular times. Our best odds of ethical treatment of a large number of personites—in terms of flourishing, habituation, maximizing higher-order goods, and so on—appears to be in terms of our ‘normal’ cross-temporal treatment of ‘agents’.

Saying I ought to act differently than I do toward personites, by considering all of their personal interests and short-changing no personite, implies that I can. And I cannot. The only way ‘I’ can act differently regarding my personites is by acting hedonistically now and dooming later stages to misery through no fault of their own. So, even if I change how I presently act in order to help some personites, I still cannot prevent the short-changing and suffering of personites. If personites do have competing, objective rational interests, there is no way to achieve the purely self-interested good of all. Personites thus appear akin to the sort of cases of competing interests that Thomson (1971) discusses; we need not conclude that full moral status entails certain indefeasible moral obligations.

The thoughts and judgments of the persons and personites at a particular time cannot differ.[[26]](#footnote-26) There might be disagreement between the stages *themselves* regarding their treatment, but this is a problem four-dimensionalists can solve in a manner similar to endurantists. Johnston wants to find ‘an appropriate solution to… an interpersonal decision problem arising within a single person’s life’ (2016a, 632). But the endurantist is no stranger to problems of cross-temporal disagreement with oneself (see Paul 2014 and Sullivan 2018). Desires and goals change over time. Everyone faces the problem of which temporal preferences we must honour.

The interpersonal decision problem posed by personites appears to either collapse into a more general decision problem that everyone faces, or it is one which can be solved by a commitment to ‘ought implies can’. In either case, the general moral considerations facing the four-dimensionalist are the same as those which face any theory. So, these interpersonal decision problems are not unique and do not immediately generate moral revolution.

Should I, for instance, save for retirement? This is a problem for both the four-dimensionalist and the endurantist: I don’t know whether I’ll survive that long. I might be far more short-lived than expected, in which case my personites—and me—will not see the benefits of our intense early labor of, say, studying Hungarian or saving for retirement. But this is a problem of predictive power and perhaps negative moral luck, rather than any particular problem for the four-dimensionalist. So, if what centrally matters for deriving moral obligations is prudential self-interest, the problem of whether I ought to save for retirement stands regardless of our theory of personal identity or preferred semantics. After all, I don’t know whether I will have future continuants (whether numerically identical or simply R-related to me), nor do I know how many I would benefit (or harm) from my present actions.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The difficulty of cross-temporal decision-making may provide some reason to think that either the moral life is not primarily concerned with the rational self-interest of agents, or it cannot reduce to it.[[28]](#footnote-28) To the extent we agree with this conclusion, we reject a fundamental motivation of the personite problem.[[29]](#footnote-29) This isn’t to say that there are no puzzles here.[[30]](#footnote-30) But problems of rational interest and cross-temporal disagreement are problems which face the endurantist, too.[[31]](#footnote-31)

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1. Olson (2010) appears to have originated the current problem, and frames the issue in terms of ‘sub-people’ and ‘cross-people’. I follow Johnston’s use of the term ‘personite’, since it can apply to many types of person-like arrangements of temporal parts. Additionally, the term ‘subperson’ has been historically used as a way to refer to marginalized racial groups and wrongly dismiss their full moral status (see Mills (1994)). Olson is concerned about the marginalization and ethical mistreatment of individuals he considers worthy of full moral status, but moral status is debatable in the personite conversation while such debate is not acceptable in other conversations in which the term appears. Olson’s use of the term ‘subpeople’ appears motivated by reference to non-maximal temporal parts. Thus, I hope Olson and others will take my application of the term ‘personite’ as a friendly amendment. In what follows, I focus on Johnston because he formalizes the concern in premise-conclusion format, which makes the stakes clearer (though the stakes continue to be under-formulated, as I’ll argue below). Since Kaiserman responds to Johnston, it’s a good place to start. While Johnston and Kaiserman are useful interlocutors, what’s at stake is not simply whether their particular arguments succeed or fail—the moral viability of four-dimensionalism is on the line. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A more formalized version of Johnston’s argument will be given in the following section. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This assumes that the truth of stage theory entails that perdurantism is necessarily false. If not, the personite problem returns in full force since duplicates of personites are persons in other possible worlds. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Indeed, Johnston levels the charge of ‘word-worship’ against those who would favour what is labeled a ‘person’ over the overlapping personites (2016b, 622). Olson thinks that linguistic conventions which favour the maximal ‘person’ rather than sub-people would be deeply implausible, since the semantics of personal reference should not be infused with such moral content (268). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There appear to be multiple moral problems in play, and Johnston (2016a) refers to “the problem of latter day personites”, “mayflies”, “the problem of fecklessness”, and more. Some of these problems are forward-looking (e.g., early personites can sacrifice for gains they never see), and others are backward-looking (e.g., some personites will receive punishments or rewards they did not earn and inherit obligations to which they did not commit). I will speak in more general terms, since a lack of identity appears to underlie all of the problems. You might find one of these issues—say, short-term sacrifice—more pressing than the others. But the general solutions will be the same, unless we’re going to privilege some sorts of personites over others, in which case there will be a motivated reason someone can give for this privileging. And the privileging issue appears to be exactly the sort of thing which concerns Johnston, Kaiserman, and the like—privileging appears arbitrary. So, I will leave any particular defense or motivation to those who think there is a solution related to privileging certain subsets of personites. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In fact, the stage theorist should want counterpart theoretic semantics to apply to personites as well—otherwise, the stage theorist will be unable to answer the moral concerns raised in Section 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There are good questions about which personal interests to privilege, but these don’t seem obviously different than standard problems regarding cross-temporal disagreement. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A commitment to ‘ought implies can’ need not run into problems of iterated conflicting oughts. If I’m blameworthy for conflicting promises, the principle implies that I could have avoided making these conflicting promises. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Parfit (1894) and Lewis (1983) identify the R-relation with mental continuity and connectedness. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I have some quarrels with how personites are defined (e.g., it’s odd that temporal continuity is required, since time traveler personites don’t appear impossible), but the definition is good enough for present purposes. It’s also notable that personites require two or more stages, since one might think a stage is an excellent candidate for a personite according to perdurantism, given Johnston’s reasoning—though I posit that’s resisted because that’s knocking at stage theory’s door, and one might quibble with instantaneous objects’ having moral status precisely because of concerns about how we might do things like compensate them, as compensation appears to be diachronic. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This argument is originally Johnston’s (2016a, 203-4). Kaiserman restates the argument with slightly altered premisses, which are reproduced here. Johnston motivates the premisses with the following labels. Premiss 1: ‘Persons have moral status’ (203). Premiss 2: ‘No difference in moral status between personite/person duplicates’ (203). Premiss 3: ‘Possible duplicating persons’ (204). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This follows even according to the perdurantist-focused definition of personites Kaiserman gives. If the stage theorist is not committed to personites, she eliminates the semantics she needs for endorsing claims like ‘I will be in Turkey’. If this were not so, the stages would not be rightly R-related. And unless we are discussing the personite which the stage theorist thinks encompasses ‘my’ maximal, R-related life, the personite in question is a non-maximal R-related fusion. The stage theorist additionally believes that there can be a maximal R-related fusion which is a personite. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Olson (2010) notes Parfit’s approach to concerns about the moral status of beings akin to personites or sub-people, but argues it results in mere linguistic view of personhood (265-269). A counterpart theoretic solution, if successful, escapes Olson’s charge of merely linguistic personhood, since counterpart theorists think the relevant individual has *de re* properties in virtue of their counterparts. Thus, the counterpart theoretic solution is not merely linguistic. I’ll return to this point in section 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The stage theorist is able to account for the relationship between persons and the ethical life via counterpart relations. But to the extent that counterpart relations are utilized, persons appear morally derivative, rather than a central focus of the moral life. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Johnston (2016a, 199ff) and (2016b, 628ff). The ability to think is taken to be indicative of having rational interests, even if the thinker cannot conceive of their interests as separate from another being or if the thinker would not endorse their interests. The moral concerns and interests are thus objective, not subjective, in nature. The connection between thinking and personhood is controversial if we take it to be a necessary requirement. However, we need not read it in this way, nor endorse such a strong requirement in order to cause problems for four-dimensionalists generally. We can understand thinking to be indicative of personhood or certain kinds of moral interests (and thus moral status). The connection with thinking is thus instructive for our purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. One potential way to dispel the concern is via Kovac’s “diachronic self-making”, where every use of the term ‘I’ refers to the person and not the person (2002, 468). However, this view still faces the problem of explaining why many experiencers only have one set of experiences, and the nature of the thinking parts to whole which allows for this. (For instance, it is odd to have a view of thinking which appears to require personites who can think some seemingly independent thoughts about being a personite, see 473). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Lewis (1997): ‘if two things are exact intrinsic duplicates (and *if they are subject to the same laws of nature*) then they are disposed to be alike’ (147, emphasis mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. There is no moral arbitrariness if we assume that personites have defeasible moral status. Assuming perdurantism, the maximal, spacetime worm (i.e., the person) in the actual world has the same kind of defeasible moral status as a personite. Suppose, in *w*, there is another temporal part located after what is the final temporal part of our person-worm in the actual world. In *w*, the intrinsic duplicate of our worm in the actual world would have her moral interests defeated in favor of a more maximal entity. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This is barring, perhaps, reasoning about the problem of evil, universe creation, or an afterlife—which is primarily reasoning about what a divine being ought to do. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Perhaps some metaphysicians take the evidence to be underdetermined and are in a William-James-style “will to believe” scenario (1896) when deciding between the theories of persistence. In such a case, perhaps the personite problem can help them rationally reason in favor of endurantism. But this sort of case doesn’t appear to be typical. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. If you say that identity is not what matters (like Parfit does), then there are ethical reasons to think the identity condition in the argument fails if it is read in terms of strict numerical identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. If competing personal interests between parts (or between parts and the whole) is all that’s required for moral disaster, we can run a (far too hasty!) personite problem against mereological universalism. The mereological universalist thinks that any plurality of objects has a fusion. These fusions can quickly interpersonal decision problems. The fusion of the moon and my left toe is an object. So, too, is the fusion of “my” 2023 temporal parts living by a river and the temporal parts of an individual living 300 years later, living by the temporal parts of the same river 300 years later. This sort of object can have competing interests: according to the 2023 parts, I have reason to fish for food, while according to the 2323 parts, I should not fish for food (fishing will depopulate the river and cause the ecosystem to collapse). Here, there are moral considerations which may tell against fishing; personal interest isn’t everything (though, we can cook up cases where fishing might be an individual’s only food source). So, perhaps most of these cases are cases of defeasible interests. A response in terms of defeasible interests also allows the four-dimensionalist to escape personite problems, see Section 3. However, some fusions are disjointed. To generate true problems of practical interest and personal interest, perhaps individuals must by appropriately R-related.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. I’m sympathetic to the proponent of the personite problem who wants to put forward something like the famous Humphrey objection, claiming that the counterpart theoretic response changes the subject and renders the wrong verdict (‘I asked about Humphrey and now you’re telling me about an entirely different individual!’). But we must not beg the question against the counterpart theorist. The counterpart theorist claims that Humphrey has *de re* properties like *possibly won the election* in virtue of his modal counterparts. There are arguments to be made against this claim, but they must be made elsewhere—and an incredulous stare won’t do. This is why my argument is in conditional form. *If* the counterpart solution works, then it works for all four-dimensionalists. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. We don’t always know the right counterpart relation, and so can still face difficulties for moral and prudential action on Kaiserman’s account. The right thing to say, I think, is that we ought to follow the principles regarding best practices (whatever those are) for the foreseeable future, such as ‘If I have a quasi-memory of making a promise, I have a prima facie obligation to uphold that promise’. Both the stage theorist and perdurantist can make use of this strategy. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Longenecker (2020) and Kovacs (2022) also note this implication, and their responses to the personite problem rely on this point. Longenecker formulates his response in terms of practical interests and an analogy—if all of the members of a rowing crew agree to undertake a voyage to Happy Island, then it is permissible to do so, even if individual crew members don’t know if they’ll survive the trip and they know some won’t survive. But this response seems to presuppose that every crew member is willing to undertake the voyage, which is questionable given the nature of doubt which can afflict “us” during long-term projects. Given the short-lived nature of personites, it is plausible there are numerous crew members on their way to the analogous Happy Island who don’t want to be rowing and actively want to quit. But they are forced into the trip and will only experience the trip, which again in the heart of the personite problem. Kovacs (2022) offers a response which assumes that personites are extremely altruistic (472). They very well may be! But I argue we can diffuse the personite problem *even if* there are personites who actively resent the position they are in, using nothing but fairly standard ethical reasoning and strategies already utilized by four-dimensionalists. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The personite problem appears to be a temporally specialized case of the problem of the many. We can generate problems of competing rational self-interest just by considering regular cases of the problem of the many. (Johnston’s motivating case of the Twenty-Oners (2016b, 625) appears to be such a case.) Suppose there are multiple objects sitting in my chair right now. We can consider ‘Lefty’, who is composed of the set of atoms R (me) plus an atom on the edge of my left pinky. ‘Righty’ is composed of R plus an atom on the edge of my right pinky. Now suppose I must walk through an atom shearer, which will shave off either the atom on ‘my’ left pinky or my right, depending on which way I turn. Should I walk left or right? Lefty and Righty have competing rational self-interest. One response to such problems is to reject that Lefty and Righty are thinkers or have rational self-interest. (This is similar to the sort of response Kovacs endorses.) This is a promising line of response, but shows that coinciding objects are not, in and of themselves, an ethical problem. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Kaiserman attempts to diffuse these concerns in the following way: ‘Rather than relativizing moral and practical claims to a choice of temporal counterpart relation, the stage theorist should simply insist that there is a particular counterpart relation – the relation I’ve called R – such that what I ought (both practically and morally) to do now depends on what will be true of me relative to that counterpart relation’ (220). Notably, this strategy (a) faces the above decision problems and (b) is again available to either all four-dimensionalists or none of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Given this, I don’t argue that the personite problem cannot provide us any ethical guidance. Perhaps the personite problem provides another reason to reject an act utilitarian view, according to which the right action is the one which maximizes the greatest happiness for the greatest number. We simply don’t know how many personites we can benefit or harm. This style of objection is a further application of the knowledge concerns which generally face the act utilitarian—we don’t know what the results of our labours might be. John Stuart Mill argues for a rule utilitarian account in part to avoid these knowledge concerns. Ethical egoism will be a non-starter, given the personite problem, though there are other reasons to reject that view. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Notably, Nagel (1970) rejects the idea that the moral life is concerned with rational self-interest, and explicitly utilizes four-dimensionalism to make his case. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Again, a theist who believes in an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God and an afterlife has reason to think God would make it so beings who suffer and long for salvation are numerically identical with the beings enjoying relief and salvation in the afterlife. Even if ought implies can, presumably a being like God could create a three-dimensionalist universe (see my “Eschatological Problems for Four-Dimensionalism” (*ms*.) and ‘The Problems of Sin and Salvation’ (*ms.*)). So, personite problems can provide some traction, but only when conjoined with other moral or metaphysical considerations. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Thanks to Alex Kaiserman, Chad Kidd, Erica Schumener for discussion, and especially to Rebecca Chan and Joshua Spencer for comments on this paper. Thanks also to audiences at the 2019 Eastern APA and the 2023 Metaphysics on the Mountain Workshop. I’m very grateful! [↑](#footnote-ref-31)