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Persistence



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Table of Contents

CHRISTIAN KANZIAN	
Preface of the Editor	1
STEVE BARKER & PHIL DOWE	
What is Endurance?	5
ARKADIUSZ CHRUDZIMSKI	
Enduring States	19
PIERRE GRENON & BARRY SMITH	
Persistence and Ontological Pluralism	33
LUDGER JANSEN	
The Diachronic Identity of Social Entities	49
JONATHAN LOWE	
How Are Identity Conditions Grounded?	73
UWE MEIXNER	
A Brief Ontology of Spatial and Temporal Localization	91
KRISTIE MILLER	
Ontology, “Existence” and The Role of Intuition	103
EDMUND RUNGGALDIER	
Sortal Dependence of Persistence	119
JOHANNA SEIBT	
Beyond Endurance and Perdurant: Recurrent Dynamics	133
PETER SIMONS	
The Thread of Persistence	165
ERWIN TEGTMEIER	
Persistence	185
List of authors	197

Preface

The problem of persistence is as old as the tradition of systematic ontology: How can we explain that the middle-sized standard objects of everyday's life like tables, cats or human beings are regarded normally as remaining "the same", even if they change their properties and their material constituents? The most radical solutions are that either change is considered as illusionary or that the things stay the same. The first solution is labelled sometimes as "Parmenidean", the latter as the "Heraclitean" position. (I leave it aside whether this labelling is historically appropriate or not.)

The Aristotelean assumption of substances as diachronic identical bearers of properties and of changes may be understood as a kind of "middle" position avoiding the mentioned extremes. The reality of "remaining the same" is guaranteed by substances, the primary beings. They survive the gain and the loss of "accidents", what grounds ontologically the phenomenon of change. The historical success of Aristotle's ontology can be explained by its fitting into the conceptual framework of our everyday's language. We speak about things as if they would remain the same through time, and as if they would be able to change. And we act in everyday's life as if that would be really the case. Some philosophers say that Aristotle's ontology is perfectly "intuitive", alternatives to it "counter-intuitive".

But is intuitivity really a necessary condition of truth for ontological theories? (That it cannot be sufficient seems to be undeniable, also amongst the greatest optimists concerning intuitivity.) Is it not the case that 21st century-ontologists must also take into account the results of modern natural sciences? And these results are very clear: the physical basis of our world cannot be covered by the framework of Aristotle's, or any other Aristotelean substance-ontology. The supporters of Aristotle reply that it is not the task of ontology to provide a physical theory of the world in a more general terminology. Ontology is no "inductive" discipline. It is a philosophical description of the structures of everyday's world as it is. The investigation into its physical constituents is another enterprise. The "physical-

ists” fight back by insisting that the object of ontology is reality on all its levels, also on the level of the physical basics.

The acceptance respectively the denial of substances is in most cases crucial for the understanding of persistence. The supporters of substance-ontologies normally commit themselves to the interpretation of persistence which is called “endurance”. Tables, cats and human beings are identical through time in a strict sense. The relation of diachronic identity is primitive, not analysable and thus not derivable from underlying relations. Things are continuants existing in three spatial dimensions, without any temporal extension. They exist at each moment “as a whole”. Physicalists and other sceptics concerning substances deny that. They concede that in everyday’s life we speak about tables, cats and human beings as the same through time. But ontologically considered their identity is “gen-identity”, reducible to more basic relations like spatio-temporal or causal contiguity. Things “perdure” as the sum of numerical different four-dimensional spatio-temporal “phases”.

The aim of this edition should be that this standard picture of the current debate about persistence is perhaps informative for the beginning, but shorthanded if we really want to grasp the actual ontological discussion. There is much more than the endurance-perdurance alternative, the acceptance and the denial of continuants. And there are new arguments, new perspectives, and new theoretical backgrounds worth to be considered in the context of our ontological problem.

New aspects are brought into the debate (to start alphabetically) by Arkadiusz Chrudzimski who discusses the phenomenon of endurance not only with regard to the category of things, but also to states. Ludger Jansen enlarges the scope of persistent objects to social entities, and discusses their characteristic mode of remaining the same in time. Uwe Meixner provides a discussion of the problem of persistence starting from the topic of spatial and temporal location, arguing for four kinds of objects distinguishable by their being in space and time. Kristie Miller’s article attends to intuitions to which ontologists frequently appeal to. But when is that appeal useful? An answer is given by focusing on our “existential intuitions”. Erwin Tegtmeier’s intention is to reflect the problem of persistence from the perspective of an adequate understanding of temporal relations and the existence of entities in time.

That there is more than the simple acceptance respectively the denial of continuants is documented in the articles of Johanna Seibt and Peter Simons. Seibt is reflecting the hidden presuppositions of the debate about persistence and develops, from the perspective of a new process ontological framework, a new account of persistence that aims to avoid the notorious problems of endurance and perdurance. Simons gives a new interpretation of continuants as “invariants” based on underlying gen-identical occurrences. Pierre Grenon & Barry Smith are suggesting a moderate form of ontological pluralism concerning persistence: a combination of three-dimensionalism (for substances) and four-dimensionalism (for occurrences).

That the persistence of a thing has to do with it's kind or sort may be seen as a common theme in the articles of Steve Barker & Phil Dowe, Jonathan Lowe, and Edmund Runggaldier. Barker/Dowe give a new account on endurantism referring to the classical concept of “haecceitas”, the individual “whatness” of a thing. Jonathan Lowe asks for the ontological grounds of identity conditions. The answer is that the identity conditions of entities of any kind K are grounded in the essence of K's, what it is to be a K. Edmund Runggaldier argues against conventionalist, attempts to solve the problem of persistence, and sticks to the sortal dependence of identity to defend an endurantist position.

I express my thanks to all of “my” authors here in this volume. I am very happy to have contributors from all over the world, who are leading ontologists representing different positions concerning our topic. I am also grateful to Dr. Hans Burkhardt for the invitation to edit this collection, and, as always, to our publisher ontos represented by Dr. Rafael Hüntelmann.

May this book advance the discussion of one of the core problems of ontology, and persist happily in the libraries with as many readers as possible.

Christian Kanzian, February 2007