

# Roquentin Persistence

James R. Jones  
SUNY Oneonta (Oneonta, NY)

**Abstract:** A great debate in metaphysics is how it is that objects persist through time while maintaining their transtemporal identities despite the problem of temporary intrinsics, in which there is a change in their intrinsic properties.

I argue that *things* are abstract constructions, or coherent systems of interdependent constituents as perceived by a subjective mind. The only intrinsic properties we ought to concern ourselves with are those of the indivisible constituents that compose all of reality. Using Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, I explain that these indivisibles are unorganized 'facts' that create the world, and require a subjective mind to process into meaningful information. Without us, the world is the naked and amorphous blob that sickens Sartre's Roquentin in *Nausea*, and lacks *things* with any individual identities.

*"The time has come," the Walrus said,  
"To talk of many things:"  
Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass*

A much debated issue in the philosophy of metaphysics is how it is that *things* persist over time. Existing things, it seems, are born, prolong, and then die.<sup>1</sup> The three main camps to this debate are the perdurantist view, the endurantist view, and the presentist view. David Lewis summarizes the different views well:

Let us say that something *persists* iff, somehow or other, it exists at various times; this is the neutral word. Something *perdures* iff it persists by having different temporal parts, or stages, at different times, though no one part of it is wholly present at more than one time; whereas it *endures* iff it persists by being wholly present at more than one time. (*Plurality*, 210)

[The presentist holds:] A so-called persisting thing, if it really exists, is located entirely in the present. (*Copula*, 224)

The perdurantist view is commonly described as saying that things exist as space-time worms, where a little exists here, and a little exists there, spread throughout an interconnection of space-time as spatial and temporal parts that sum to the whole of the thing. Why postulate the

---

<sup>1</sup> An allusion to Sartre's *Nausea*: "Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance." (p. 133)

existence of temporal parts? This notion arises out of the crux of the debate: The Problem of Temporary Intrinsic.

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. (*Plurality*, 211)

“How is such change possible?” Lewis asks. How is it that a thing can exhibit one intrinsic property at a moment in time, and then exhibit a second intrinsic property at a different moment in time, and continue to persist as the same thing, when they are contradictory properties? Being careful to note:

It is *not* a solution just to say how very commonplace and indubitable it is that we have different shapes at different times. To say that is only to insist – rightly – that it must be possible somehow. (*Plurality*, 211)

Lewis continues his discussion, by analyzing the three solutions to the problem of temporary intrinsics that he is aware of:

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...

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...

Third solution: the different shapes, and the different temporary intrinsics generally, belong to different things. ... We perdure; we are made up of temporal parts, and our temporary intrinsics are properties of these parts, wherein they differ one from another. (*Plurality*, 211-212)

The endurantist will agree with the first solution, creating time indexes –  $t$ ,  $t+1$ ,  $t+2$ , etc. – that allow the thing to bear contradictory properties at different times. The presentist will, obviously, argue the second solution. And Mr. Lewis, the perdurantist, after refuting the previous two ‘solutions,’ sides with the third, simply because it is the only solution left and it appears to solve the problem.

The view that Lewis and the other perdurantists advocate presupposes not only the existence of temporal parts, but also the existence of time as a fourth-dimension. A number of the discussions that I have read, pertaining to persistence over time, completely lack discourse on the nature of time itself, and merely discuss the nature of things persisting through it. This appears, to me, to be a presumptuous maneuver. How can one engage themselves in a serious analysis of how things persist through time without first engaging in an analysis of time itself? I make no motion towards hubris to state that I have an understanding of time, or even that it exists independent of a mere abstract human concept. I simply wish to present it to the forum of discussion, as it should seem to be an obviously relevant matter. For instance, we unreflectively associate age with persistence through time, i.e. the longer a thing persists, the greater its age. Can a thing age without change? Or is age change? I submit this inquiry because there are some that believe time is a measure of change; to this effect, the question of how it is that a thing that undergoes change through time persists as the *same* thing would be absurd; for if it did *not* change, it would not be persisting through time. Supposing this view of time (as a measure of change) to be true, an objection to this would be that the change the thing underwent was not towards any of its intrinsic properties, and, therefore, it is still the same thing. To argue this, I believe, would be to argue that age is a relation,<sup>2</sup> nothing more than the difference (measured in temporal units) between the thing's present existing moment in time and its first existing moment in time. However, if one is a perdurantist, like Lewis, they cannot make this move. In response to the first solution that Lewis listed above, he said, "If we

---

<sup>2</sup> To argue that age is not an intrinsic property would be to argue that it is an extrinsic property, and as extrinsic properties are contingent on *other* things, they are, thus, relational. However, relational properties are not necessarily extrinsic.

know what shape is, we know that it is a property, not a relation.” (*Plurality*, 211) Given this, it would be contradictory of him to not hold the same for dimension (height, length, and width). And, as he believes that time is a fourth-dimension, age would be represented as an extension through time on his space-time worm just as intrinsic a property as its extension through space. Clearly, the nature of time is crucial in debating the *sameness* of a thing as it persists through time.

Another important issue of discourse is the language of ‘identical’ and ‘the same’. In order to sufficiently proceed in this debate, I will first analyze and differentiate these two terms. In everyday usage, I believe we commonly use them incorrectly. In referring to identical twins, we will say that they are *identical*, but not *the same*, as they are not *the same* person. Similarly, we speak this way of assembly-line products, saying, for example, they are *identical* stools, in that they share particular physical properties, but not *the same* stools, or not *the same exact* stools, as they do not share *the same* identity. Therein being the linguistic blunder: ‘identical’ glaringly derives from ‘identity’.<sup>3</sup> The philosophical usages I have encountered, however, use the terms synonymously and interchangeably to coincide with Leibniz’s Law. Also known as *the indiscernibility of identicals*, Leibniz’s Law “states that if *a* and *b* are identical, then *a* and *b* have all the same properties.” (Beebee, 208) When considering this law, if location in space-time or identity are (intrinsic) properties, then, as two things cannot share a spatiotemporal location or a common identity (in the same respect), we are not truly discussing

---

<sup>3</sup> From Medieval Latin *identicus*, from Late Latin *identitās*, *identity*  
"identical." *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 13 Dec. 2008. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/identical>>.

two things, but *one*. However, if they are relations,<sup>4</sup> then we may be discussing *two* (or more) things that share all (intrinsic) properties but have different locations in space-time and different identities, e.g., the ideal assembly-line stools. It would seem that our everyday usage of ‘identical’ coincides with this second interpretation of Leibniz’s Law. For my purposes, I will designate two things that correspond to this second interpretation as ‘the same’, and I will use ‘identical’ to refer to two things that merely share the same identity (and as realized above, those *two* things will really be *one* thing). I say “merely share the same identity” to differentiate from discussion about two objects that share the same spatiotemporal location, because that is, in reality, a discussion concerning one specific thing in one specific place at one specific time. In contrast, two things that “merely share the same identity” allows conversation of one thing in relation to the multiple spatial locations it has been over the multiple temporal indexes<sup>5</sup> it has existed. Furthermore, concerning the *sameness* of things, I wish ‘intrinsic properties’ to be accepted as referring to the properties that are *obviously* not accidental properties. In this way, shape is to be accepted as an intrinsic property, because I do not wish

---

<sup>4</sup> I believe that spatiotemporal location is, indeed, a relation. One can easily imagine an object moving about in space-time. One, then, ought also be able to imagine a ‘stationary’ object as space-time moves around *it*, much like a large box being moved around a hovering humming bird. As such, I hold, objects and space-time to be independent of one and other, making an object’s spatiotemporal location an extrinsic relation.

I also believe identity to be an extrinsic relation. It may seem, at first, that this goes against our basic intuitions; the notion of an object’s identity that is extrinsic to the object itself seems absurd. As an identity holds no concrete position in space-time, it is abstract. Furthermore, an identity is a particular, as it can only be common to one thing (in a respect). This makes an identity either a (theoretical) *trope*, or merely an abstract concept. In either case, an identity attributes a particular as a unique individual, and an individualized particular is meaningless without an *other* to which it is distinct of, or other than. Therefore, an identity can only exist as a relation to an extrinsic *other*.

<sup>5</sup> In using the term ‘temporal index’, I do not align myself with the endurantists, nor do I claim that temporal indexes exist. To make such a claim, one would bear the burden of having to explain how time is to be divided into parts and what size part qualifies as a temporal index. I use the term only in its basest of comprehensible meanings.

to debate the definition of ‘intrinsic properties’ or ‘shape’ here, nor do I feel it necessary at this moment; the reason for this will become clear later.

In a discussion concerning how it is that things persist through time while maintaining their transtemporal identities, it would seem obvious that we ought to examine the nature of *things*. For the sake of clarity, from here on, I shall use the term ‘continuant’ to refer to one of these *persisting things*. Firstly, I would like to distinguish between five different descriptions of how a continuant may persist through time:

- (i) A continuant is unchanged,<sup>6</sup> and unmoved through space.
- (ii) A continuant is unchanged, but moved through space.
- (iii) A continuant is *simply* changed (e.g., a finger is bent).
- (iv) A continuant is changed via the replacement of parts (e.g., the ship of Theseus).<sup>7</sup>
- (v) A continuant is changed via chemical or biological process.

Given these, how does a continuant maintain its identity through time? Continuant (i) seems to be an easy case to accept. Imagine a box (at rest) floating in a hypothetical empty space where there are no outside forces to act on it; as time passes, the box persists – unchanged and unmoved. This, of course, assumes that time is not a measure of change, as none has occurred. But, in any case, the identity of the box appears to be intact. Continuant (ii) can be represented by that same box drifting through a same space – unchanged, but moved. As I view spatial location to be a relation, I see no difference between (i) and (ii) in regard to the intrinsic

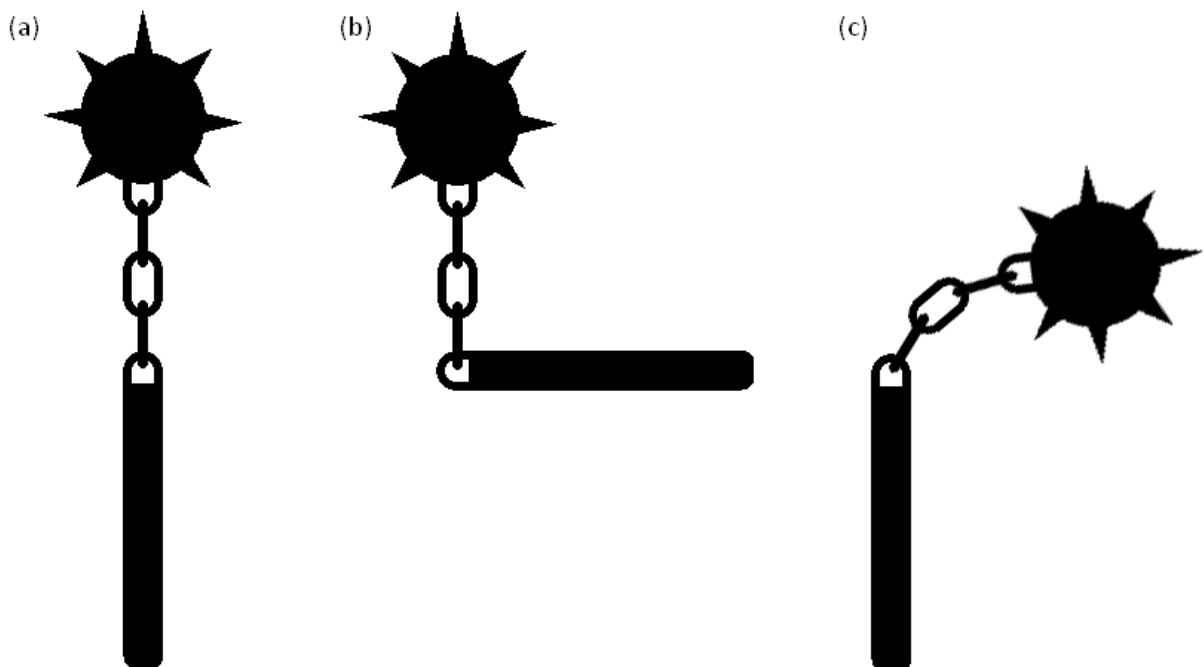
---

<sup>6</sup> In saying ‘unchanged’, I mean to say that it persists as the *same* continuant, ‘unchanged’ in its intrinsic properties.

<sup>7</sup> The ship of Theseus is a philosophical paradox concerning a ship that has, over the years, had all of its original parts replaced. The question there being, “Is it still the identical ship?”

properties of the continuant or its identity. Continuants (iii), (iv), and (v), however, fall victim to change in their intrinsic properties, thus complicating the matter.

Let us look at continuant (iii), or, as it suggests, a finger that has been bent. How is it that a finger could go from straight (presumably) to bent, and remain the identical finger? The finger has undergone a change in shape, and is, therefore, not the *same* finger, but it is still somehow (according to intuition) the *identical* finger. To answer this, an examination of how it is that bending occurs ought to be done. Bending one's finger, an observer can see wrinkles of skin fold on themselves in the crevices that form where the joints are located. Interesting as this may (or may not) be, it is of little help. Instead, let us turn our attention to the diagram of medieval flails, and let us assume that it depicts the identical flail at temporal indexes (a), (b), and (c):



The flail at (a) can be said to be straight, while at (b) and (c) it can be said to be bent. From the diagram, it seems that the only difference between (a) and (b) is that the handle at (b) has

rotated, or (quite simply) moved. As the handle has simply moved, it represents a type (ii) continuant, and is, therefore, both the same and identical handle as that at (a). Once this has been understood, it follows that the flail at (c) underwent a similar change: the chain links and the spiked ball have changed their spatial positions, and remain the same and identical continuants. In what condition does this leave the flail as a whole, however? At (b) and (c), the flail originally seemed to illustrate a continuant of type (iii), like the finger. Now, it appears that the flail, as a whole, has not bent, so much as individual parts of it have moved. Is shape an intrinsic property of the flail, or is it a mere product of the arrangement of its parts? Imagine that there is a picture representing the flail at a temporal index (a'), and that it looks the same as the flail at (a), except that it is stated that the flail at (a') has had one chain link exchanged for another – providing a 'flail of Theseus' example of a type (iv) continuant. Additionally, imagine a temporal index of the flail at (a''), representing a time between (a) and (a'), in which the chain link that is later exchanged is rusted – a type (v) example. It is obvious that the flail is no longer the *same* flail, as it has changed, but is it still the identical flail, and is that what is still of prevalent importance? At (a'), a chain link of the chain of the flail has been replaced; at (a''), iron molecules of a chain link of the chain of the flail have oxidized. If we look deep enough, we will continue to find parts of parts of parts, until we reach (theoretically) an indivisible part. And if we *zoom out* enough, we will find that the flail is part of a display, which is part of a room, which is part of a wing of a museum of a street, and so on, until we reach: "which is a part of the entirety of physical reality." What is the flail?

The flail is an abstract construction categorized by the subjective mind. Our everyday continuants are coherent systems of interdependent constituents. In order to understand the

world, we place identities on these ‘coherent systems’ that are all around us, and we categorize them. Outside of this subjective categorization, reality exists as an amorphous blob. Sick from the *things* that surround him, Sartre’s Roquentin reflects:

Things are divorced from their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic and it seems ridiculous to call them seats or say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone, without words, defenceless, they surround me, are beneath me, behind me, above me. They demand nothing, they don’t impose themselves: they are there. (*Nausea*, 125)

And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness. (*Nausea*, 127)

Without a subjective perspective, *things* are nameless, and meaningless. To this extent, we create the world. I am not advocating a theory of physical nihilism, as I believe that there exists a physical reality. I believe in Sartre’s physical reality, a reality where *things* “in themselves, secretly, they are *superfluous*, that is to say, amorphous, vague, and sad.” (*Nausea*, 131)

Metaphysics is concerned with that which exists; that, too, is where I place my concern. And what exists, it would seem, is not the macro-world of flails and stools, but the micro-world of whatever the smallest constituents of reality are. This, sadly, may be a limitation of metaphysics, however. It may have to be left to the duty of science to delve into the deepness of the microscopic world. Will there be an end to these constituents, to these parts of parts?

As our reality has proven time and again, it is bounded by limitation. Einstein discovered that energy and mass have an associated equivalency. To this end, I imagine that the limitation of size for a constituent of mass would be that of a size that, when split, would divide not into more material parts, but into energy. It is of these indivisible constituents that we should direct our inquiries of intrinsic properties and persistence through time, for they are what truly make

up the world, not the abstract constructions of our subjectivity. What would be the intrinsic properties of these constituents – charge and/or spin? These small bits of matter, combined with our perception, create the world we understand.

Much like computer data is a slew of unorganized facts, so, too, is reality. The data is raw material, and without meaning. A processing unit is required to organize the data into information, to give it meaning and purpose. *We* are that processing unit, creating a ‘world of explanations and reasons’ out of a ‘totality of facts’.

[T]he world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence. A circle is not absurd, it is clearly explained by the rotation of a straight segment around one of its extremities. But neither does a circle exist. (*Nausea*, 129)

- 1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.
  - 1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by their being *all* the facts.
  - 1.12 For the totality of facts determines what is the case, and also whatever is not the case.
  - 1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.
  - 1.2 The world divides into facts.
  - 1.21 Each item can be the case or not the case while everything else remains the same.
  - 2 What is the case—a fact—is the existence of states of affairs.
  - 2.01 A state of affairs (a state of things) is a combination of objects (things).
  - 2.011 It is essential to things that they should be possible constituents of states of affairs.
- (*Tractatus*, 7)

How does a macro-world continuant maintain its identity as it persists through time? A *thing* keeps its identity because a subject categorizing it continues to categorize it as the identical *thing*, despite the fact that it may be different from moment to moment. Identity is a tool that allows us to discuss the world. Even if the world exists completely in flux, we do not perceive it that way. We perceive the world in such a way that we are able to discuss it and make references to *things* that we share a common and comprehensible perception of, to coherent systems of interdependent constituents.

- 2.03 In a state of affairs objects stand into one another like the links of a chain.
- 2.031 In a state of affairs objects stand in a determinate relation to one another.
- 2.032 The determinate way in which objects are connected in a state of affairs is the structure of the state of affairs. (*Tractatus*, 13)

The handle and the spiked ball are linked together by the links of a chain to create the flail, a coherent “state of affairs” composed of a “combination of objects” that “stand in a determinate relation to one another.”<sup>8</sup>

A state of affairs, like a chain, is not just a collection, but a collection that holds together in a determinate way. (Mounce, 19)

Reality exists as an enormous system of matter and energy working under accordance of natural law(s). Asteroids plow into planets constantly. Stars go supernova, and then black hole, swallowing everything that comes near them. Galaxies can be seen swirling into one and other, billions of light years away, like cosmic hurricanes, destroying countless worlds, and possibly countless more sentient life-forms. The universe allows these events to happen with complete indifference. This *system* of reality can be broken down and understood as smaller, interdependent systems. *Everything* is interdependent in this universe-sized system; if it weren't, absolute-zero would be an attainable temperature, because a location unaffected by something else's heat would exist – but (as far as we can theorize) it doesn't. As life on this planet (arguably) began as one cell, that divided into two cells, and so on and so forth, one could view all life on this planet as a single organism, a single *system*. Instead, we take this single system and understand it as smaller systems that we label as individual organisms. One of these systems, say, one understood as a human being, can be broken down into yet smaller systems. The human brain is a system. This system – still operating under the same natural law(s) – interacts in such a manner that it creates a sentient consciousness that is aware and

---

<sup>8</sup> I make no defense (here) to suggest my construal of Wittgenstein to be a correct interpretation (if there exists such a semantic possibility); I use it merely as a language to communicate my point.

aware of its awareness; it self-reflects, and it categorizes concrete and abstract *things* to better understand its reflections.

It is consciousness that illuminates them, that delineates form within the chaotic world of Things and gives it meaning; it is consciousness that makes of a meaningless agglomeration an outline, a chair, a definite object. Thus when consciousness says "there is a chair," it is separating from the chaotic world of Things a tiny portion of matter and conferring on it a structure and a meaning. It becomes indifferent to the rest of the world in order to consider the chair; to delineate the chair within a maze of phenomena, it assumes that everything else does not exist; it relegates everything else in Nothingness. (Marill-Alberes, 48)

We give relevance to an otherwise indifferent reality.

### Works Cited

- Beebe, Helen, and Julian Dodd. Reading Metaphysics : Selected Texts with Interactive Commentary. Oxford: Blackwell Ltd., 2007.
- Lewis, David. "On the Plurality of Worlds." Reading Metaphysics. Oxford: Blackwell Ltd., 2007. 209-12.
- Lewis, David. "Tensing the Copula." Reading Metaphysics. Oxford: Blackwell Ltd., 2007. 223-30.
- Mounce, H. O. Wittgenstein's Tractatus : An Introduction. New York: University of Chicago P, 1981.
- Marill-Alberes, Rene. Jean-Paul Sartre: Philosopher Without Faith. Trans. Wade Baskin. London: The Merlin P, 1964.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, and H. Carruth. Nausea. Trans. Lloyd Alexander. Grand Rapids: New Directions Corporation, 1959.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. Bungay: Richard Clay and Co., Ltd, 1963.