

# One More Reason Not to Tense the Copula

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## Abstract

The paper shows that the Endurantist view which opts to temporally modify the copula (tense the copula, as David Lewis put it) faces some difficulties, additional to those exposed by Lewis, when trying to provide a palatable semantics for the tensed and non-tensed uses of existence.

This paper presents a problem for a well-known version of *Endurantism* the one that proposes to temporally modify the copula - “tense the copula”, as Lewis in [10] puts it - in order to explain the having of certain properties by persisting individuals. Endurantism is the claim that the numerical identity of an individual is preserved through time, or - as it is also alternatively pronounced it is the view according to which an individual can be *wholly present* at more than one temporal cut. Consider two distinct temporal cuts -  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ ; to maintain that there is an individual  $O_1$  existing at  $t_1$  which is numerically identical to an individual  $O_2$  existing at  $t_2$  is tantamount to endorse the existence of an enduring individual and, hence, of Endurantism.<sup>1</sup>

The problem addressed is properly formulated only when Endurantism is paralleled to a cognate view, Universalism. For this reason, the two positions are first introduced (§1); the three different versions of Endurantism are then considered (§2); finally, attention to one of these is given, showing the problem and rejecting some attempts to solve it (§3).

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<sup>1</sup>If we allow individuals travelling through time, then an enduring individual may have more than one ‘temporal’ *part* at a given time; that is,  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  may coincide, while  $O_1$  and  $O_2$  are still two distinct parts of the same individual. See [12] and [9]. I shall leave cases of this sort on a side here.

## 1 Realism and Endurantism

I sit in the library and look around me. Everywhere I see similarities and differences. The brownness of this shelf is the same as the brownness of that chair, whilst they have different shapes; these two books have been bound by the same material, yet with pieces of different sizes and colors; that girl now sitting in front of the computer is the same one I saw yesterday playing field hockey. This is all familiar to us, but how does ontology make sense of it?

When it comes to similarity, there are two sorts of ontologies: *realism* and *particularism*. Realists believe that similarities obtain because:

*Realism:* Among the denizens of reality, some are repeatable or multi-located.

Now, Realism concerns not only what is ordinarily regarded as a property, such as *Brownness*, but also what ordinarily is regarded as an individual, for instance Maria. This may strike a reader as odd, because the distinction between individuals and properties is at times cashed out in terms of repeatability. However, as argued in [4], repeatability divides particulars from generals, not individuals from properties. As it is widely accepted, properties may be particular (tropes) or general (universals); the terminology here employed recognizes a parallel distinction between individuals that are particular (e.g. stages of perduring individuals) and those that are general (e.g. enduring individuals). In other words, each of the following sentences (when held as literally true) is sufficient to entail Realism:

1. *Brownness* is here on the shelf, but it is also there on the chair.
2. Maria, who is here today, was playing field hockey yesterday.

Next, we distinguish two kinds of Realism:

*Universalism:* Among the denizens of reality, some are repeatable and have a qualitative aspect.

*Endurantism:* Among the denizens of reality, some are repeatable and lack a qualitative aspect.

In other words, Universalism is the form of Realism which concerns what ordinarily philosophers call ‘universals.’ Endurantism is the form of Realism which concerns what ordinarily philosophers call ‘individuals.’

The definitions of Universalism and Endurantism proposed draw the distinction between individuals and properties by appealing to the qualitative character of an entity. Qualitative character accounts for what something is like. Properties such as *Being a dog*, *Being brown*, *Being noise* all give character to the world. One way to illustrate what character is starts from our experience. When Socrates watches Fido the dog, the three properties listed above are those explaining what his experience is of: it is of a dog, it is of brownness, and it is of noise. The properties explain the content of the experience. However, qualitative character is not dependent upon subjective experience. Possibly, not all properties make a difference to experience; that is, possibly we do not experience all qualitative character of reality. Properties are what provide reality with its character, whether we are capable of grasping it or not.

The qualitative character is one among several candidate traits telling apart individuals from properties. Actually, for some, whether the two categories can be told apart at all is still an open question;<sup>2</sup> other favorite ways to draw the distinction include the following:<sup>3</sup>

- (i) Properties can repeat in time as well as in place, while individuals cannot repeat in space (but might repeat in time, according to an Endurantist).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>See [22], [19], [18], [17], [15], and [16].

<sup>3</sup>For a thorough discussion of the topic see also [4].

<sup>4</sup>See [1], [19].

- (ii) Properties always relate to the same number of individuals, while an individual can relate to a different number of properties.<sup>5</sup>
- (iii) Properties are known directly, while individuals are known only inferentially from individuals, or *vice versa*.<sup>6</sup>

I concede that some among (i), (ii), and (iii) might be valid (I lean towards (i), for example). Yet, not much will hinge upon this discussion here. If you are so inclined, you may plug in your favorite trait in the definitions of Universalism and Endurantism given above.

Realism can also come in an extreme form, according to which:

*Radical Realism:* All denizens of reality are *repeatable* or *multi-located*.

To Radical Realism correspond also extreme versions of *Universalism* and *Endurantism*:

*Radical Universalism:* All denizens of reality are repeatable and have a qualitative character.

*Radical Endurantism:* All denizens of reality are repeatable and lack a qualitative character.

The fact that Realism involves also ordinary individuals is not always acknowledged. When the term ‘realism’ was first introduced in the early Scholastic, discussion about persistence of ordinary individuals did not represent a major concern. Thus, it grew to be standard lore to use the term to refer to Universalism. This, however, misrepresents both views. Realists are not those who allege the existence of properties; they are those who allege the existence of repeatable entities *simpliciter*. And nowadays, with Endurantism, we came to recognize

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<sup>5</sup>See [2] and [17].

<sup>6</sup>See [22], [23], and [14].

that there are some entities - that is, ordinary individuals - that repeat in time. Monia was here yesterday and she is there today. She repeats in time.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from realists, stand particularists. They hold that:

*Particularism:* Among the denizens of reality, some are unrepeatable.

The unrepeatable entities can either have or lack a qualitative character. Thus, Particularism will come in two sorts:

*Mild Nominalism:* Among the denizens of reality, some are unrepeatable and they lack any qualitative character.

*Mild Tropism:* Among the denizens of reality, some are unrepeatable and each has a determinate qualitative character.

It is important to note that Particularism, in both its non-radical forms, is compatible with the non-radical forms of Realism. On the other hand, Particularism can come in a radical form too:

*Radical Particularism:* All denizens of reality are unrepeatable.

Correspondingly, we will also have two forms of Radical Particularism:

*Nominalism:* All denizens of reality are unrepeatable and they lack any qualitative character.

*Tropism:* All denizens of reality are unrepeatable and each has a determinate qualitative character.

Nominalists will then reconstruct properties as classes/sets/mereological sums of individuals.<sup>7</sup> For Tropists, instead, ordinary properties, such as redness, are

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<sup>7</sup>There are many ways of construing qualities out of individuals. For a well-rounded overview, see [1].

construed as similarity classes/sets/mereological sums of unrepeatable properties. Individuals are also construed as classes/sets/mereological sums of unrepeatable properties; but, unlike ordinary properties, individuals are classes/sets/mereological sums of compresent tropes, where the compresence relation can be further analyzed, for instance, in terms of joint action or spatio-temporal proximity.<sup>8</sup>

To recap, here below is a comprehensive schema of the metaphysical positions one can take regarding the existence of individuals and properties. The top half contains the four versions of Realism, the bottom half the four versions of Particularism.

	<b>Qualitative character</b>	<b>No qualitative character</b>
<b>All repeatable</b>	radical universalism	radical endurantism
<b>Some repeatable</b>	universalism	endurantism
<b>Some not repeatable</b>	mild tropism	mild nominalism
<b>None repeatable</b>	tropism	nominalism

## 2 Three Versions of Endurantism

Given the affinities depicted above, it is somewhat striking that Endurantists and Universalists have put a different emphasis over the issue of repeatability. The latter, indeed, spend a good deal of their theoretical effort in explaining how on earth we can make sense of the idea of entities (i.e. properties) that exist more than once. On the other hand, Endurantists do not have a unique claim to which they subscribe; rather, you might struggle to find a discussion of repeatability in most of the papers published on the subject.

In a way, rather than facing head on the metaphysical conundrum posed by the repeatability of individuals, so far Endurantists tried to fix their theories by

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<sup>8</sup>This picture of trope-theory usually referred to as “trope-cluster theory” - is but the most ontologically parsimonious and most elegant version of trope theory. Other Tropists defend versions that include either individuals or universals, or both individuals and universals as fundamental entities alongside tropes.

changing individuals' properties. Suppose, for example, that it is afternoon and that Maria is happy. Since in the evening she might be sad - and she would still be identical to the individual in the afternoon - her being happy cannot be so to speak an *absolute feature* of Maria, but a transient one. This is the so-called *problem of temporary intrinsics*, which much attention has received in recent literature starting especially from the discussion of it contained in [11]. For an endurantist, there are fundamentally three ways of expressing Maria's change in mood.

First, you may modify the property itself, *Being happy*, claiming that it exists only relative to a certain time. Maria is not just happy:

3. Maria is *happy-in-the-afternoon*.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, there is no contradiction in believing that the very same individual Maria can be happy-in-the-afternoon and sad-in-the-evening, as these properties are relative to different temporal contexts. Unfortunately, this solution runs into a host of problems; for instance, David Lewis famously remarked that it renders all intrinsic properties extrinsic; moreover, it seems to make properties such as *Being-happy-in-the-afternoon* and *Being-happy-in-the-morning* heterogeneous.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, you may believe that it is the whole fact that Maria is happy to be in need of a contextualization; it obtains in a certain way, that is in-the-afternoon (or - one could say - *afternoonishly*):

4. *In-the-afternoon*, Maria is happy.

This is a so-called adverbialist view of endurance, as it follows a (adverbialist) strategy, which was initially adopted by authors such as Chisholm in order to provide a theory of perception that avoided commitment to perceived entities

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<sup>9</sup>See [20]: 111-114.

<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of the problems with this view, see especially [11]: 202-204.

(thus, for example, we do not see the chair, but we see *chairly*).<sup>11</sup> As Gallois and Varzi have shown, this view runs into some complications when iterated adverbs are involved, as in:

5. *In the afternoon: in the morning*, Maria is happy.<sup>12</sup>

Some endurantists, finally, claim that it is the *Having* relation occurring between individuals and properties to be in need of revision. According to those, that Maria is happy in the afternoon would be expressed, in the theory, as follows:

6. Maria *is-in-the-afternoon* happy.<sup>13</sup>

As Mark Johnston - one of the main champions of Endurantism - put it: “the problem of identity through intrinsic change looked like a problem only because we forgot about the possibility of relativising existence.”<sup>14</sup>

In a posthumous paper dedicated to this view, Lewis succinctly depicted it as the one opting to “tense the copula”, and this label is by now widespread. Yet I find the terminology misleading and in the sequel I will use the expression “temporalizing the copula.” This is because the Lewisian terminology tends to get confused with the distinction between tensed *versus* tenseless theories of time. Rather, to hold that the *Having* relation is in need of revision is compatible both with a tensed and with a tenseless conceptions of existence. Indeed, to temporalize the copula differs from holding that existence is tenseless *tout court* in two respects. First, because to be at stake is just the copula - what also goes under the name of *exemplification relation*; and while this may be regarded as a way of existence, most would deny that it is the only way of existence. Secondly, because the view suggests to temporalize the copula *only where needed*; and -

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<sup>11</sup>See [5] and, for a defense of an adverbialist version of Endurantism, [13], [7], and [6].

<sup>12</sup>See [24] and [6].

<sup>13</sup>See [8] and [21].

<sup>14</sup>[8]: 129.

as we shall see below - we may not need to temporalize every occurrence of a copula. In other words, I conjecture that the strategy of temporalizing the copula is guided by the following principle:

R: Only where needed, the exemplification relation is temporalized (i.e., relativized to a certain time).

Now, the strategy of temporalizing the copula clearly parallels the Universalist solution to the problem of repeatability: both stress that the path out of the woods is in the way of existence of a repeatable entity. However, a glance at the literature on Endurantism will show that such parallel has not been recognized. In the remaining, I will further peruse this analogy, as this will reveal some problems for those who temporalize the copula that have so far gone unnoticed.

### **3 One More Reason Not to Tense the Copula**

As stated, principle R leaves open under what circumstance the temporalization is indeed needed. To start off digging towards our problem, we should tell apart two main refinements of the principle:

R1: There are two exemplification relations: one (temporalized) for troublesome properties, the other (non-temporalized) for all the other properties.

R2: There is only one exemplification relation which is temporalized and which holds for all properties.

R1 defends a form of dualism regarding the exemplification relation, while R2 is in keeping with more standard monism. The trouble is that, no matter whether the supporter of R will opt for R1 or R2, her position will arguably not be tenable. The problem is best considered when cross-temporal relations

are brought into the picture. These are relations holding between two or more individuals existing at different times, or between two different ‘temporal cuts’ of a same individual. Consider the following sentence:

7. Maria is sad in the afternoon but happy in the evening.

R1 and R2 offer us the option between two different interpretations of 7. The trouble is that any of those will result problematic and here is why.

### 3.1 Dualism About Exemplification

Suppose first to endorse R1. You will, hence, analyze 7 by relativizing only the problematic predicates, as follows:

8. There is an  $x$  which *is-in-the-afternoon* sad and there is a  $y$  which is-in-the-evening happy, and  $x$  is identical to  $y$ .

In 8 we have a non-temporalized occurrence of the exemplification relation “is identical to” and two temporalized occurrences “is-in-the-afternoon” and “is-in-the-evening.”<sup>15</sup> The Endurantist endorsing R1, thus, affirms that the individual in the afternoon,  $x$ , is without qualification numerically identical with the individual in the evening,  $y$ ; indeed, both  $x$  and  $y$  are Maria. By the same breath, however, she maintains that, when she utters that Maria is happy in the afternoon and sad in the evening, she is using the other sense of existence, the temporalized one.

This move is suspiciously *ad hoc*. We are not offered an independent criterion to temporalize a property other than the need to avoid incurring in some semantical and, probably, ontological problems. To put things in a different way. 8 stands only if we postulate that there are a *rarified* and an *abundant*

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<sup>15</sup>Clearly, those who deny that identity is a genuine relation e.g. Wittgenstein may forgo the following discussion; I am here presuming that the majority of Endurantists do not belong to this camp.

Maria. The first has only few selected unqualified properties; the other has the unqualified properties plus many other qualified ones.<sup>16</sup> Under this interpretation, numerical identity and identity through time are treated as two thoroughly different chapters in metaphysics. R is not a constitutive principle of the numerical identity of an individual, but only of the way in which such individual persists through time.

The treatment of the problem of whole presence offered by 8 parallels the one often given by Universalists when trying to explain the repeatability of universals. Some are Platonists and argue that a universal exists even when not exemplified; this is because universals have rarified and abundant existences: the rarified universal has all properties that are essential to that universal. Aristotelians, on the other hand, deny this: to them, a property may exist only if exemplified.<sup>17</sup> However, there is a key difference between the two versions of Realism. Endurantism is theoretically interesting only when combined with Aristotelianism: if you are a Platonist, presumably for you persistence is not constitutive of individuals and thus Endurantism becomes superfluous. Aristotelianism, on the other hand, sits ill with principle R, because R requires the existence of Maria as an entity having only rarified properties, but an Aristotelian would accept only entities that have abundant properties. If Platonism is the only option, however, by resorting to 8 an Endurantist undermines its own position.

### **3.2 Monism About Exemplification**

Suppose, instead, to endorse R2 and thus to apply the exemplification relation across the board. Here the difficulty is to express the “is identical” in a way

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<sup>16</sup>The dualism here hinted probably suggests that some sort of platonistic view is held, or at the very least some distinction between abstract entities (rarified Maria) and concrete ones (abundant Maria). But there is no gain in sorting out this point for the present discussion.

<sup>17</sup>For an example of Platonism see [3]; for one of Aristotelianism, [1].

that is not too weak. One could, indeed, interpret 7 thusly:

9. There is an  $x$ , which *is-in-the-afternoon* sad and there is a  $y$  which *is-in-the-evening* happy, and  $x$  *is-in-the-afternoon* identical to  $y$  and  $x$  *is-in-the-evening* identical to  $y$ .

However, 9 does not seem strong enough to express Endurantism. The Endurantist does not want to claim simply that  $x$  is identical to  $y$  *on some occasions*, e.g. in the afternoon or in the evening. The identity is not relative to any time, that is, it is tenseless. However, R2 is incompatible with tenseless predication.

In order to accommodate this point, the supporter of R2 can claim that the identity in question is valid with respect to any possible context:

10. There is an  $x$ , which *is-in-the-afternoon* sad and there is a  $y$  which *is-in-the-evening* happy, and, for any time  $t_i$  and any world  $w_j$  at which  $x$  and  $y$  exist,  $x$  *is-at- $t_i$ -in- $w_j$*  identical with  $y$ .

This rendering of 7 seems to fare much better than the other interpretations: it does not presuppose dualism about exemplification; also, it posits a stronger identity between  $x$  and  $y$ .

Yet, something is still missing. The endurantist, indeed, does not only want to say that  $x$  is identical to  $y$  relatively to any time and world at which  $x$  and  $y$  exist. 7 is an identity claim holding *across* different times (and worlds). But, how to express cross-temporal relations in a temporalized language? The cross-temporal identity claim cannot be unqualified, on pain of reintroducing dualism about exemplification; and, it cannot be referring to different temporal stages of Maria, as a perdurantist would have. We seem to be at stall. 10 is a suitable candidate to interpret 7; however, conceptually it is weaker than any ‘standard’ interpretation of repeatability adopted by the cognate universalist. Can we do any better?

### 3.3 Resorting to Meta-Language?

There is a third possibility. It moves from the suggestion that the identity of Maria across time is established not in the language of the theory (the object language), but in the meta-language; and, while the object language is strictly temporalized, the meta-language is not. Here is an interpretation building upon the suggestion:

11. “Maria is sad in the afternoon but happy in the evening” *is true* iff “Maria” *refers* to an  $x$  and a  $y$  such that  $x$  *is identical* to  $y$ ;  $x$  *satisfies* the predicate “is-in-the-afternoon sad”; and  $y$  *satisfies* the predicate “is-in-the-evening happy.”

Any occurrence of a non-temporalized predicate (e.g. “refers”) is now considered to be unproblematic because the meta-language admits of such predicates, although the object language does not.

This solution does not suffer from the conceptual weakness of 10 and does not run into any of the problems that 8 or 9 presented. However, a new question now emerges: what are the roles played, respectively, by the temporalized object language and by the non-temporalized meta-language in the formulation of Endurantism? In other words: which of the two languages expresses Endurantism? As we have seen, the object language is inadequate, *per se*, to establish the identity of Maria across time. On the other hand, the meta-language alone, being non-temporalized, cannot express the fact that Maria changes over time. It seems that both are required. If this third interpretation of R2 is correct, then, we have to express our ontology with both the object language and the meta-language. This is not unworkable, but it is arguably bizarre.

## 4 Conclusion

David Lewis had already warned us in [10] - temporalizing the copula may be an unpalatable option for the endurantist. Now we have one more reason not to do so. Endurantists who opt to temporalize the copula have a few theoretical options. They may choose a two-fold interpretation of the exemplification relation (as in 8); but, their move would seem questionably *ad hoc*. Alternatively, they may take up a single interpretation of exemplification; yet, their theory would not retain a good deal of its conceptual strength. Finally, they may express their view with the aid of meta-language; the result, however, will be a theoretical hodge-podge. Whichever way you go, you have a high price to pay.

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