9. DELMAS LEWIS ON PERSONS AND RESPONSIBILITY: A CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT. Delmas Lewis has argued that the tenseless view of time is committed to a view of personal identity according to which no one can be held morally responsible for their actions. His argument, if valid, is a serious objection to the tenseless view. The purpose of this paper is to defend the tenseless by pointing out the pitfalls in Lewis' argument.

In a recent article, Delmas Lewis offers what he considers to be a new and powerful objection to the tenseless view of time. The overall structure and heart of his argument may be stated as follows:

(1) If a person is to be held responsible for a past action then he must be the very same person who performed that action. That is, responsibility presupposes that a person is an enduring entity persisting through change.

(2) According to the tenseless view of time, however, "a person is not an entity enduring or persisting through change, because there are no such entities on this view."

(3) Therefore, on the tenseless view persons cannot be held responsible for their actions.

On the basis of this argument Lewis concludes that "Any philosopher who holds that we are sometimes responsible for our actions has a conclusive reason to reject the tenseless view of time." The purpose of this paper is to defend the tenseless view against Lewis' objection. I shall proceed by arguing that Lewis' argument is either unsound because the second premise is false; invalid because a nonsubstantialist account of persons can account for responsible action; or question begging because the first premise assumes what needs to be proved.

We can begin to cast doubt on the second premise by noting that two recent defenders of the tenseless view, Hugh Mellor and Jeremy Butterfield, have explicitly denied it. Interestingly, Mellor's argument for treating persons as enduring entities without temporal parts is virtually isomorphic to Lewis' argument against the tenseless view. Mellor argues that "the first prerequisite for moral and legal responsibility is
identity through time. Nothing and no one can be held responsible for an earlier action unless he, she, or it is identical with whoever or whatever did that earlier action. Now whatever identity through time may call for elsewhere, here it evidently requires the self-same entity to be wholly present both when the deed was done and later when being held accountable for it. I will consider the cogency of this argument below, but the point I want to emphasize now is that given Mellor’s views on persons and time, (2) is certainly suspect. Why, then, does Lewis believe that on the tenseless view persons cannot be entities enduring or persisting through change?

There seem to be three arguments. His first argument is a fallacious appeal to authority. Lewis mentions an article by Ronald Hoy in which Hoy concludes the tenseless theory of time (by which he means Grünbaum’s mind-dependence theory of becoming) goes hand-in-hand with a non-substantialist or temporal parts doctrine of the self. Unfortunately, Lewis simply assumes, without any discussion, that Hoy’s argument in support of that conclusion is valid. Since, however, Hoy’s conclusion is controversial we must briefly attend to the argument in support of it.

According to the defenders of tense there are certain features of experience that cannot be made intelligible without supposing the reality of tense. One stems from the fact that while we engage in a great number of actions throughout our lifetime only a small subset of them are experienced now. So how can the tenseless view, according to which all events exist tenselessly at their respective dates, explain why my experience of writing a reply to Lewis of May 1, 1987 (= t₂) and not my experience of reading Lewis’ paper on April 1, 1987 (= t₁), is present? Hoy claims that the problem of temporal location does indeed create a problem for the tenseless view if one assumes that a person is an enduring entity that is strictly self-identical throughout its existence, but that it does not arise if a person is really a four-dimensional process (or a whole having temporal parts). He therefore concludes: “that a tenseless theory of time . . . goes hand-in-hand with a view of persons according to which a person-at-a-moment is only loosely identical (gen-identical) with the ‘same person’ at other times in ‘its’ career”. Lewis takes the cogency of Hoy’s argument for granted, but it can be questioned.

Mellor has argued that the problem of temporal location can be answered even if one assumes that a person is in the strictest sense the same through time. To see how we must first say something more about Mellor’s views on time. On the “token-reflexive” account that Mellor propounds, the temporal relation between the date at which a tensed sentence is uttered and the event or thing that such a judgment is about provides an objective basis for the truth value of any tensed sentence. A present tense sentence token is true if and only if it occurs at (roughly) the same time as the event it is about; a past tense token is true if and only if it occurs at a time later than the event it refers to and so on. Thus, on the token-reflexive account the truth conditions of tensed sentence and judgment tokens are tenseless facts.

With this background we can give Mellor’s explanation of why my experience of writing this reply to Lewis’ article and not my experience of reading it is present. He would say that since as a matter of tenseless fact it is t₂, a sentence token of type “I am presently writing a reply to Lewis’ article at t₂”, is, by its token-reflexive truth conditions
true, whereas a sentence of the type "I am presently reading Lewis' ar-
ticle at t1", is, by those same conditions, false. Consequently, my expe-
rience of writing this reply is present. Undoubtedly, defenders of tense
will find something to criticize in Mellor's account and the debate will
continue. My point, however, is not to settle the dispute, but merely to
claim that Lewis cannot simply assume on the basis of Hoy's remarks
alone that the tenseless view must reject the view that persons are en-
during entities.

Lewis' second argument in support of (2) may be stated as fol-
lows:

(4) If persons are enduring entities then we must accept a
realistic account of tense.

(5) However, if we accept the reality of tense, then tense-
less view of time is false.

(6) Therefore, if persons are enduring entities then the
tenseless view is false, or equivalently, if the tenseless
view is true, then persons are not enduring entities.

The problem with this argument is that step (4) is false. We can begin
to see why by first noting that Lewis interprets the doctrine that per-
sons are enduring entities to be the claim that personal identity is un-
analyzable, and that persons are substances that remain literally the
same through change. That is, he aligns himself with the views of Chis-
holm and Swinburne on personal identity. A person is a substance that
has properties and experiences, it is not a succession of experiences
appropriately related. The question we must ask, therefore, is this: "Why
does Lewis think that the substantialist view of personal identity implies
the reality of tense?"

Lewis' argument in support of (4) begins with an apparent para-
dox concerning identity:

(7) Suppose the "present you" has one set of properties
and the "former you" another.

(8) Then, since two things x and y cannot be strictly the
same thing unless they have all their properties in
common

(9) It appears to follow that the "present you" and the
"past you" cannot be the same thing.

To this argument Lewis, following Chisholm, makes the following reply:
"If tense is real, then, it makes perfect sense to say that the 'present
you' had the same properties that the 'former you' had, because the only
relevant existing thing to which 'former you' can refer is the present
you. That is, it is possible to understand 'former you' in terms of 'the
present you at an earlier time' on a tensed ontology, as it is not possi-
bile to do on the tenseless view".10 Appealing to tense is one way of ex-
plaining how one and the same thing can have incompatible properties,
but it is not the only way. The apparent difficulty may also be resolved
by introducing absolute time in the form of moments. The individual that
exists at t1 (the "former you") has all the properties that the individual
that exists at t₁ (the "present you") has even though it has different properties at t₁ and t₂. For, on this version of the tenseless view, individuals have (tenselessly) all the properties they ever will have. If, for example, at t₁ P is thinking of Plato and at t₂, P is not thinking of Plato (but thinking of Descartes), then P has (tenselessly) the properties of thinking of Plato at t₁ and of thinking of Descartes at t₂. Thus, on this view of time and change persons can be enduring entities even if tense is unreal. Thus, (4) is false and consequently, Lewis' second argument for (2) is unsound. Let us see if his third argument fares any better.

Lewis states the question of personal identity as follows: "What does it mean to say that person P₁ at t₁ is the same person as person P₂ at t₂". He goes on to claim that, as the tenseless theory maintains, persons are composed of temporal parts, then "it is misleading to ask what it means to say that Jones-at-t₁ is the same person as Jones-at-t₂. For Jones-at-t₁ as well as Jones-at-t₂, strictly speaking are not persons at all, but temporal parts of Jones. And, strictly speaking, they are not identical, because they are different temporal parts of Jones in much the same way that his feet and hands are different spatial parts of him". Lewis' argument seems to be that:

(10) Since temporal parts of persons are not persons and

(11) Different temporal parts existing one before the other
cannot be identical, it follows that

(12) The existence of temporal parts is incompatible with
the existence of persons as enduring entities.

Of course this argument, even if valid, does not establish that the tenseless view must deny that persons are enduring entities. For, as I have argued, a proponent of the tenseless view may claim, without inconsistency, that persons do not have temporal parts. The point I wish to make now, however, is that the existence of persons with temporal parts is compatible with their being continuants, and that therefore, (12) is false.

To see why this is so note that the question: "What does it mean to say that the person P₁ at t₁ is the same person P₂ at t₂?" is ambiguous. For the phrase "the person P₁ at t₁" may mean "the temporal part P-at-t₁" (more simply, 'p₁'). Or, it may also mean "the entity P, of which P-at-t₁ (p₁) is a part". Clearly if we mean the former then it is misleading, indeed false, to assert that P-at-t₁ (p₁) is the same person as P-at-t₂ (p₂), but this does not imply that the person of which these two different stages are temporal parts is not the same at these different times. For, on the second interpretation we can say that the person P which at one stage in its life (p₁) is thinking of Plato, is the very same person P that at a later stage (p₂) is not thinking of Plato. Thus, the existence of temporal parts is compatible with treating persons as enduring entities which in the strictest sense persist through change. Consequently, even if detensers are committed to temporal parts, (12) is false, and therefore Lewis has not established that premise (2) is true.

Interestingly, this analysis of time and change which recognizes continuants with temporal parts shows that there is a third way of deal-
ing with the incompatible properties problem that (a) countenances persons as enduring entities, (b) is compatible with the tenseless view of time, and (c) does not imply the reality of moments. For on the temporal parts analysis the property of duration, the familiar temporal relations of earlier than, later than, and simultaneity and also, a temporal part-whole relation, are the only intrinsically temporal entities. 13

Let us summarize the argument to this point. Lewis' thesis that the tenseless view of time cannot be reconciled with the view that persons are sometimes responsible for their actions ultimately rests on the premise that the tenseless view must deny that persons are enduring identities. I have argued that Lewis has not established that crucial premise, and therefore has not provided any reason, much less a "conclusive reason", to reject the tenseless view. A further question is whether or not a Humean-type view which denies, from an ontological point of view, that persons are true continuants can be reconciled with the common belief that we are morally responsible agents. It is to that question that I shall next turn.

Suppose we assume that the tenseless view is committed to maintaining that a person is not a substance, but a succession of mental and/or physical experiences and events. Then we can recast Lewis' original objection to the tenseless view as an objection to the psychological or physical continuity view of personal identity:

(I') Morality, responsibility, and human action presupposes a conception of persons as persisting agents having an identity through time.

(2') On any non-substantialist, Humean-type view of persons, persons are not persisting agents having an identity through time.

(3') Therefore, on a Humean-type view, there are no morally responsible actions.

The difficulty with this argument is that it is either unsound because (2') is false; invalid since a Humean-type view can give an account of responsibility and human action; or question begging because (1') assumes what needs to be proved.

Commonsensically, the thesis that "responsibility implies persisting agents or identity through time" is in some sense true, but it is not nearly as evident as Lewis and Mellor claim that its truth requires the existence of a simple continuant that remains the same through time. 14 Those who analyze personal identity in terms of psychological continuity could very well accept the truism that responsibility implies identity, but deny that responsibility implies the existence of persons as Lewis conceives of them. For if we analyze a person as a succession of experiences, then we could agree that a person at t2 is responsible for the deed of a person at t1 if and only if the person at t2 is identical with the person at t1, and then go on to say that the person at t2 is identical with the person at t1 if and only if there exists or could exist an experience at t2 which is or contains a memory of (and/or is in some way psychologically connected or continuous with) the experience of performing the deed at t1. Analogously, if we analyze a person as a living human body, then we could agree that a person at t2 is the agent
who is engaging in an action begun at $t_1$ if and only if the person or agent persists from $t_1$ to $t_2$ and then go on to say that the person (agent) at $t_2$ is identical with the person (agent) at $t_1$ (i.e., persists from $t_1$ to $t_2$) if and only if $P$ at $t_1$ is physically continuous with $P$ at $t_2$. In short, a Humean need not deny the common sense truth that persons are perduring agents. Consequently, if (1') is taken for what it is namely, a metaphysically neutral, pre-analytic truth of common sense then the argument is unsound because (2') is false. Of course if the phrase "persisting agent having an identity through time" is interpreted in terms of a Cartesian-ego, then (2') is true, but then the argument in which it occurs is invalid. For the pre-analytic truth of (1') together with (2'), construed as denying a specific metaphysical analysis of that truth, is compatible with the existence of morally responsible agents.

If, on the other hand, Lewis simply assumes under the guise of common sense that the truism expressed by (1') is the metaphysical view that persons (agents) are simple substances then he begs the question against the Humean by assuming that his analysis or ontological interpretation of common sense is correct. Perhaps Lewis would reply that since our concepts of morality, responsibility and human action or what we mean by statements that employ those concepts, are intimately bound up with persisting agents, it follows that the correct metaphysical analysis requires simple continuants. Elsewhere I have argued that the inference from what we ordinarily mean by so-and-so to what there is in the world in virtue of which so-and-so is true, is fallacious because it is based on a mistaken concept of analysis.\(^\text{15}\) I shall not, however, argue that point again here since I have already established that even if Lewis is correct and persons are literal continuants, the tenseless view of time can be defended against his objection.

ENDNOTES


2 Ibid., 306.

3 Ibid., 306. For a recent criticism of the subjective view of time from a philosopher sympathetic with the tenseless account see, M.M. Schuster, "Is the Flow of Time Subjective?" *Review of Metaphysics* 39 (1986), 695-714. For a defense of the tenseless view against numerous other objections see my *Temporal Relations and Temporal Becoming: A Defense of a Russellian Theory of Time*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984), especially chapters V-VIII.


Ibid., 275.

Mellor's notion of a 'tenseless fact' is problematic as I argue in "Mellor's Real Time" Nous 19 (1985), 105-11.


Ibid., 307.

Ibid., 306.

And Harold Noonan has argued that temporal parts of persons are themselves persons in "The Four-Dimensional World" Analysis 37 (1976), 32-9 and in "A Note on Temporal Parts" Analysis 45 (1985), 151-2.


This common sense truism has recently been abandoned by Derek Parfit in Reasons and Persons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), Part III.