

A phenomenological argument for stage theory

Josh Parsons – 10 July 2013

Abstract: Stage theory holds that the objects of ordinary discourse are instantaneous stages of four-dimensionally extended objects. This view contrasts with worm theory, according to which the objects of ordinary discourse are themselves four-dimensionally extended. This paper presents an argument that the way we experience time is more consistent with our being instantaneous objects than with our being temporally extended throughout our entire lifetimes. By argument to the best explanation therefore, experiencing subjects – persons – are stages; since persons are among the objects of ordinary discourse, worm theory is false.

Stage theory, in the philosophy of time, is the view that ordinary objects – persons, and chairs and tables, or, in another formulation, the things that fall under sortals (such as the sortals “person”, “chair” and “table”) – are instantaneous stages in a four-dimensional universe.¹ My future self in five minutes time is a later stage in my life than me; he isn't numerically identical to me, but for good rational reasons, I have his interests at heart. One of the earlier stages in my life opened my bank account; he isn't numerically identical to me either, but for good rational reasons, my bank manager will allow me (and my future stages) to withdraw from it. Worm theory is the view that ordinary objects, or the things that fall under sortals, are space-time worms – aggregates of stages. I stand to my present stage in just the same way that I stand to my past and future stages; all are temporal parts of me.

So construed, stage theory and worm theory are both very general. Both say something about *all* ordinary objects, or *all* sortals. I want to focus on what these theories say about one special case, the case of me. If stage theory says that all persons are stages, then since I am a person, it follows that I am a stage. If worm theory says that anything that falls under a sortal is a worm, then since I fall under the sortal “person”, I am a worm. I am going to present an argument to the conclusion that I am a stage (and when you read it, you may be convinced that you are, too).

Here's the argument: my experience, right now, is as of a single time. Perhaps an instant, or perhaps a time with a short duration, but certainly not the whole of my life. As I sit here writing this paper, what seems real to me in experience is my desk, my computer, my surroundings *now*.² My birth, my death, and the events that will take place in my life in an hours time are not part of my experience. It just seems to me as though I experience the world from the position of a stage, not of a worm.

Now let's assess this argument. It could be used as an argument, not for stage theory, but for presentism – the thesis that only the present moment exists.³ The presentist has a good explanation of why my experience is the way it is: I only experience one time because only one time – the present – exists. The trouble with this argument as an argument for presentism is that it is in bad company. Just as I only experience the present, I only experience the nearby; just as past and future things are absent from my experiences, so are distant ones. As I write this paper, my experience is

1 See Sider (1996; 2000; 2001, 188–192) and Hawley (2001, 41–46). An important early defence of stage theory, though not under that name is Parfit (1971).

2 It might be objected that I do experience the distant past – when, for example, I look at the night sky, and see a supernova occurring, the light from which has taken a million years to cross interstellar space. I don't think that this objection is fatal to the phenomenological argument but I'd like to put off saying why until I've analysed the argument a bit further. For the reason why it's not fatal, see footnote 4.

3 For an excellent discussion of a wide variety of phenomenological arguments for presentism and its relatives, see Skow (2011). Skow considers an similar argument to mine, which he calls “The argument from the Presented Experience”, as an argument for the “moving spotlight” version of the A-theory, and he comes, cautiously, to a similar conclusion, which is that this argument favours stage theory over worm theory. My argument differs from Skow's in that it is an argument to the best explanation, while Skow's is intended to be a deductive argument; we also reply to objections differently; and my argument does not make use of Skow's concept of “availability”.

as of my office, not as of the far side of the galaxy. But it would be absurd to conclude on that basis that distant things are not real. Similarly, I only ever experience my experiences, not anyone else's. But it would be absurd to conclude on that basis that everyone else is a zombie. You may well suspect that the argument fails as an argument for stage theory in just the way that it fails as an argument for presentism. I will now explain why that is not the case.

The phenomenological argument is an argument to the best explanation, and as an argument for presentism, it fails because presentism, while a good explanation of why my experience is the way it is, is not the only such explanation – and, arguably, the other explanations are better. The non-presentist explanation of why my experience is as of the present is strictly analogous to explanations the presentist herself would give as to why experience is as of the nearby, and why I experience my life and not anyone else's. So the presentist is in a tough position.

Let's just think about what that alternative explanation is. I experience the nearby rather than distant because experiences are mediated by causation, and it's easier for things that are nearby to have a causal impact on me than things that are distant. Distant things aren't any less real, it's just harder for them to affect me. As in the spatial case, so in the temporal (runs the anti-presentist explanation) – times other than the present don't show themselves to me in experience not because they are less real than the present, but because they are temporally distant and so it is harder for them to affect me.⁴ The explanation of why tonight's television gameshow seems more real to me than gladiatorial combat in the colliseum is the same as the explanation of why my office seems more real than the far side of the moon. In both cases what may seem unreal is real enough, but located at a spatial or temporal distance from me.

Other things being equal, this explanation of why I find myself experiencing the present and not any other time is as good as the presentist's. I would argue (but not here) that other things are not equal – that we have good reasons from science for thinking that there is no ontological difference between past, present, and future – and that favours the anti-presentist explanation over the presentist.

The anti-presentist explanation of why just one time appears to me in experience can comfortably be given by the stage theorist. According to the stage theorist I am located at just one instant, and it is the events of that instant (and its near past) that seem most real to me. But this explanation cannot be given by the worm theorist. According to the worm theorist I am temporally located in at least 40 or so different years (and hopefully many more) each of which is equally real. But one alone of those 40 years (and one moment of that year) seems far more real to me in experience than any other. Why is this? The worm theorist cannot give the answer that we gave to the presentist, for he does not think that I am more temporally distant from any of those years than any other. Last year is just as real as, and I am located there just as much as this year. Why then are my experiences of events of this year and not of last?

Here's how the worm theorist might reply: "It's a premise of the phenomenological argument that your experience privileges one instant over all others. But that premise is false. You are a persisting being, changing over time, and what you experience also changes over time. Over your life, you experience each of the times you are located at, one at a time. So each of those times seems real to you in turn. You're begging the question by supposing that your experience today is more real or more yours than your experience tomorrow, or last year."

4 And here we are able to give a reply to the objection of footnote 2. It's not that I never experience the past; rather I experience the near past, and the more past something is, the more unusual it would be to experience it. Sometimes I experience things in the very distant past, as when I see the supernova of a million years ago. But that supernova was very lucky indeed that it should be in just the right place that I should see it a million years later. The present is still privileged in my experience in that I experience many more present events (or near past events) than distant past ones.

I don't find this reply satisfying. Here we come down to raw phenomenological introspection. It just doesn't feel that way to me. My experience isn't as if I were related in the same way to all the events of my life. It doesn't seem to me that I am a creature experiencing a long history of change, but not located more at any one point than any other. It seems to me that I am a creature that is experiencing one episode in the history of my life. I think it probably seems that way to you as well, but if it doesn't there's nothing I can do.

The worm theorist can give a better reply, in any case, I think. Before stating it, I'd like to draw a distinction concerning phenomenological arguments in general. When replying to an argument that has a phenomenological premise, one can do two things that are not always clearly distinguished. On the one hand, one can deny that the person giving the argument has phenomenology they report; on the other, one can accept that they do, but explain that it is the result of an illusion. The former move is not always wrong – people in the grip of a Cartesian theatre model of the mind may think that a square flagstone appears trapezoidal to them, because of the effect of perspective. They think this because they think that the flagstone ought to look trapezoidal – it is projected onto a trapezoidal region of the mental videoscreen. But it's not crazy to say that someone who thinks this is just wrong about how things appear to them. I remember believing that square flagstones looked trapezoidal to me; and looking back I now see that I was wrong – I was in the grip of a theory that distorted my beliefs about my own experience.

The worm theorist's first reply was of this former kind: it denies that things even *seem* the way that the phenomenological argument wants to say that they are. A more promising reply is of the second, more concessive kind, that posits an illusion. Here's the worm theorist again: "You are a persisting being, changing over time, and what you experience also changes over time. At each time, you experience the events of that time (and not others) and this creates the illusion that you are at that time and not any other. There is a good evolutionary explanation for this illusion. As animals, we need to find food, escape from predators, and find mates. At each time at which we make decisions that may impact on these ends, it is important that we respond to the state of the world at that time (and not at any other at which we exist). Evolution has therefore equipped us with cognitive apparatus that makes us feel, at each time, that that time is more real, or that we are more located at that time, than any other. This feeling makes it easier for us to quickly make decisions about what is affecting us at each moment, but it also gives rise to an illusory (and evolutionarily harmless) impression that stage theory or presentism are true."⁵

This explanation seems plausible in itself. It is reasonable that evolution might give us that sort of cognitive apparatus, and that that might give rise to an illusion of this kind. But it does not seem to me that any illusion of this kind can do justice to the phenomenology I experience. Consider: at each time, says the worm theorist, I am subject to an illusion – a different illusion for each time – to the effect that that time and it alone is the one I am located at. Let us grant that this is so. This still does not explain my phenomenology. Each of the illusions is equally real and I am equally subject to all of them. But even granting that the illusions exists, it does not seem to me that I am subject to all of them. It seems to me that I am subject to just one! Perhaps there is a space-time worm who is experiencing all of these illusions in succession, but it does not seem to me that I am he. It seems to me that there is one specific illusion as of my being located at one particular time that I am subject to, and not any other. Why is that particular illusion more vivid to me than any of the others that are equally real and equally mine? I do not think that worm theory can give any adequate answer.⁶

5 For a similar, and plausible, evolutionary explanation of a different aspect of temporal phenomenology as an illusion, see Dyke and MacLaurin (2002); I think Dyke and MacLaurin are spot on in that paper, but their explanation cannot apply to the phenomenological argument given here, for the reasons stated in the text, below.

6 One interesting answer of which I'm not sure whether it's adequate or not posits a regress. As well as producing a first-order illusion at each time to the effect that I am at that time and that time only, my cognitive apparatus produces at each time a second-order illusion to the effect that that the first-order illusion of that time and it alone is affecting me. And there are third-order illusions, and so on and so on.

Suppose I'm right so far.⁷ Let's go back to the big picture. I've been thinking of stage theory and worm theory as rival views about what sort of thing I am – a stage or a worm respectively. But the two theories, as presented in the relevant literature are more general than that. They are normally construed as saying that all ordinary objects, or all the things that fall under sortals, are stages, or worms, respectively. We might take from the phenomenological argument that stage theory is true – but we needn't; perhaps some hybrid view might prove attractive. I will briefly mention a couple of possible hybrids.

“Persons are stages, bodies are worms.” Perhaps there's something special about the way persons persist. The considerations that are relevant to whether I am the child born to my parents, or to whether the senile old man in the dock is the war criminal who committed the crimes he's accused of are different from the consideration relevant to whether this is the same sofa I had yesterday or whether the ship in the museum is the same ship Theseus sailed in. The theories of personal “identity” that most people find immediately attractive – variants on Locke's memory theory – are disturbingly friendly to the possibility of fission, in a way that the most attractive theories of the identity conditions of sofas, ships and even human bodies are not. Stage theorists often defend their view on the ground that it handles fission better than worm theory. Perhaps stage theory is correct for persons, and worm theory is correct for everything else.

“There is a stage who knows it, but can't say so.” Perhaps worm theory is totally correct, construed as a semantic theory – the theory that worms, and not stages, are in the extension of sortal terms. Perhaps it's even correct that personal indexicals refer to worms. Then “I am a stage” is false. This doesn't change anything about the phenomenological argument – it just follows that it can't be expressed in English (or any other natural language). In front of you, right where you see me, there is a stage who knows that he is a stage, and is trying to tell you so. But all that he can say to communicate this is a sentence that expresses the false proposition that the worm he is part of is a stage.

⁷ I have not addressed here whether stage theory is subject to phenomenological objections itself. One such objection is that some (or all?) experiences take time, and it is not therefore possible for an instantaneous stage to experience them (or anything). For a discussion of this kind of objection in the context of presentism, see McKinnon (2003). There are at least two possible replies to this. First, the stage theorist could say that the property of having such-and-such an experience is relational – a matter of “stand[ing] in an appropriate network of counterpart relations to other stages with appropriate features” (Sider 2001, 198). See also Hawley (2001, 53–55). Second, though Hawley and Sider both think of stages as instantaneous, that does not have to be the position this paper argues for. For all I've said, it could be that I am extended in time for the space of a few seconds, long enough for my phenomenal properties to be intrinsic to me.

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