

# Why So Tense about the Copula?

BEN CAPLAN

## 1. Introduction

In ‘Tensing the Copula’, David Lewis (2002) argues that a certain view, which some endurantists adopt to solve the problem of temporary intrinsics, fails. In this paper, I argue that Lewis’s argument fails. In section 2, I present the view and Lewis’s argument against it. In section 3, I reply to Lewis’s argument. In section 4, I conclude by considering why endurantists might want to reject the view anyway.

## 2. Lewis’s argument

In ‘Tensing the Copula’, Lewis (2002, p. 1) presents the well-known problem of temporary intrinsics as follows:

Things somehow persist through time. When they do, they have some of their intrinsic properties temporarily. For instance shape: sometimes you sit, and then you are bent; sometimes you stand or lie, and then you are straight. How can one and the same thing have two contrary intrinsic properties? How does it help that it has them at different times?

The problem of temporary intrinsics is thus the problem of explaining how a persisting object (e.g. I) can have one intrinsic property (e.g. *being bent*) at one time (e.g.  $t_1$ ) and another, incompatible intrinsic property (e.g. *being straight*) at another time (e.g.  $t_2$ ). A solution to this problem requires offering an account of what it is for a persisting object to have an intrinsic property at a time.

In *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Lewis (1986, pp. 202–4) uses the problem of temporary intrinsics to argue for perdurantism and against endurantism. Indeed, he says there that the problem of temporary intrinsics is the ‘principal and decisive objection’ to endurantism (Lewis 1986, p. 203). According to perdurantism, I persist by *perduring*: that is, by having different temporal parts at different times. According to endurantism, by contrast, I persist by *enduring*: that is, by being wholly present at every time at which I exist. Perdurantists can offer the

following account of what it is for a persisting object to have an intrinsic property at a time.

- (1) A persisting object  $x$  has an intrinsic property  $F$  at a time  $t =_{df}$   $x$ 's temporal part at  $t$  just has  $F$ .

For example, at  $t_1$  I have the property *being bent*, because my temporal part at  $t_1$  just has the property *being bent*; and at  $t_2$  I have the property *being straight*, because my temporal part at  $t_2$  just has the property *being straight*. In *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986), 'Rearrangement of Particles' (1988), and 'Tensing the Copula' (2002), Lewis argues that a variety of accounts of what it is for a persisting object to have an intrinsic property at a time that endurantists could offer all fail; so perdurantism prevails.

One account that endurantists offer appeals to tensed propositions: that is, propositions that are true at some times but not at others. (See e.g. Lowe 1987, p. 75; Haslanger 1989, pp. 120–1.)

- (2) A persisting object  $x$  has an intrinsic property  $F$  at a time  $t =_{df}$  the proposition that  $x$  just has  $F$  is true at  $t$ .

For example, at  $t_1$  I have the property *being bent*, because the proposition that I just have the property *being bent* is true at  $t_1$ ; and at  $t_2$  I have the property *being straight*, because the proposition that I just have the property *being straight* is true at  $t_2$ . (The proposition that I just have the property *being bent* is not true at  $t_2$ , and the proposition that I just have the property *being straight* is not true at  $t_1$ ; so these propositions are tensed.) Let's call anyone who endorses (2) a *propositionalist*.

Lewis (2002, p. 12) argues against the propositionalists' view in the following passage.

What is a proposition that obtains at some times and not others? It seems to behave exactly like a property of times, so let us take it to be just that. It 'obtains' at just those times that have it. If so, the proposition [the propositionalist] mentions is the relational property *being-a-time-t-such-that-you-have-bent-at-t*.

What is this property? It must be a structured property with *bent* as a constituent. If it were an unstructured property, or if it had the *bent-at* relation as a constituent in place of the monadic intrinsic property *bent*, we would not have succeeded in bringing *bent* back into the picture. Further, it must not have the *having-at* relation as a constituent, since it is supposed to be identical to the tensed proposition that you have *bent simpliciter*, not that you stand in some sort of relation to *bent*. But now something unfortunate has happened. Within the anatomy of the tensed proposition that obtains at

just those times when you are bent, in other words the relational property just considered, we find that we have reintroduced without explanation the very thing that we were trying to explain: the notion of an enduring thing having a monadic property at a time. I conclude that the proposal fails.

Lewis's objection is this. If the tensed proposition that I just have the property *being bent* is a property of times, then that tensed proposition is the property *being a time t such that I have the property being bent at t*. But within this property lurks the notion of a persisting object (i.e. me) having an intrinsic property (i.e. *being bent*) at a time (i.e. *t*); and it is precisely this notion that the propositionalists' view is supposed to explain.

### 3. A reply

Lewis's argument assumes that tensed propositions are properties of times. But propositionalists are free to reject this identification. Here's an argument for the claim that *untensed* propositions are properties of *worlds*.

- (P1) Untensed propositions are sets of worlds.
- (P2) Any set of this- and other-worldly objects is a property of those objects.
- (C1) So untensed propositions are properties of worlds. (From (P1)  $\wedge$  (P2))

The argument from (P1) and (P2) to (C1) is valid. And Lewis (1986, pp. 50–69) accepts both (P1) and (P2). So he has good reason to accept (C1). Here's a parallel argument for the claim that *tensed* propositions are properties of *times*.

- (P3) Tensed propositions are sets of times.
- (P2) Any set of this- and other-worldly objects is a property of those objects.
- (C2) So tensed propositions are properties of times. (From (P3)  $\wedge$  (P2))

The argument from (P3) and (P2) to (C2) is valid. And it is natural for anyone who accepts (P1) to also accept (P3). So Lewis has good reason to accept (C2). But propositionalists are free to reject either (P2) or (P3). Indeed, as Lewis recognizes in the passage quoted in the previous section, even propositionalists who accept (C2) need not accept (P2),

since such propositionalists will want to say that the property *being a time t such that I have the property being bent at t* is, not a set, but rather a structured property that contains the property *being bent*.

Indeed, once one sees why propositionalists need not identify tensed propositions with properties of times, one can see why the problematic notion of a persisting object having an intrinsic property at a time does not lurk within the anatomy of tensed propositions. Lewis (1986, pp. 55–7; 2002, pp. 3–4) allows that there is a notion of property on which properties are structured; and, in the passage quoted in the previous section, he is happy to let propositionalists help themselves to structured properties. This, in part, is why propositionalists need not accept the identification of tensed propositions with properties of times. But Lewis (1986, pp. 57–9) also allows that there is a notion of proposition on which propositions are structured; and, if propositionalists can help themselves to structured properties, then they can also help themselves to structured propositions. Once propositionalists do that, they should say that tensed propositions are structured propositions. For example, propositionalists should say that the tensed proposition that I just have the property *being bent* is the structured proposition represented as  $\langle \text{me, the property } \textit{being bent} \rangle$ . Within the anatomy of this structured proposition lurks nothing more mysterious than me and the property *being bent*. So, in so far as one finds notions in propositions, one finds within the structured proposition represented as  $\langle \text{me, the property } \textit{being bent} \rangle$  the unproblematic notion of a persisting object (i.e. me) just having an intrinsic property (i.e. *being bent*)—and not the problematic notion of a persisting object (i.e. me) having an intrinsic property (i.e. *being bent*) at a time (i.e. *t*). I conclude that Lewis's argument fails.

#### 4. Conclusion

Perhaps the motivation for identifying tensed propositions with properties of times is to allow propositionalists to offer an account of what it is for a tensed proposition to be true at a time. If tensed propositions are properties of times, and if properties of times are sets of times, then tensed propositions are sets of times, in which case propositionalists can offer the following account of what it is for a tensed proposition to be true at a time.

- (3) A tensed proposition  $P$  is true at a time  $t =_{df} t$  is a member of  $P$ .

(3) is in the analog of Lewis's account of what it is for an untensed proposition to be true at world: namely,

- (4) An untensed proposition  $P$  is true at a world  $w =_{df} w$  is a member of  $P$ .

But (3) requires that properties of times be identified with sets of times; and, as Lewis recognizes, this identification is something that propositionalists will want to reject.

Still, asking what it is for a tensed proposition to be true at a time reveals a cost that propositionalists incur. The following is a natural account of what it is for certain sorts of tensed propositions to be true at a time.

- (5) The proposition that a persisting object  $x$  just has an intrinsic property  $F$  is true at a time  $t =_{df} x$  has  $F$  at  $t$ .

Indeed, (5) follows from a more general but equally natural account, one that applies to all objects (whether they persist or not) and properties (whether they are intrinsic or not).

- (6) The proposition that an object  $x$  just has a property  $F$  is true at a time  $t =_{df} x$  has  $F$  at  $t$ .

But, on pain of circularity, (5) is not an account that propositionalists can accept. For (5) appeals to the problematic notion of a persisting object's having an intrinsic property at a time to explain what it is for a tensed proposition to be true at a time; and (2), which propositionalists accept, does the reverse: (2) appeals to the notion of a tensed proposition's being true at a time to explain what it is for a persisting object to have an intrinsic property at a time. So endurantists who want to accept (6) and hence (5) should not be propositionalists.<sup>1</sup>

468 University College  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3T 2N2  
ben\_caplan@umanitoba.ca

BEN CAPLAN

<sup>1</sup>Thanks to Rhonda Martens for the title, to Tim Schroeder for discussion, and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for funding in the form of a Standard Research Grant (410-2004-0702).

### References

- Haslanger, Sally 1989: 'Endurance and Temporary Intrinsic'. *Analysis*, 49, pp. 119–25.
- Lewis, David 1986: *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- 1988: 'Rearrangement of Particles: A Reply to Lowe', in his *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology*. Cambridge Studies in Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999, pp. 187–95. Originally published in *Analysis*, 48.
- 2002: 'Tensing the Copula'. *Mind*, 111, pp. 1–13.
- Lowe, E. J. 1987: 'Lewis on Perdurance versus Endurance'. *Analysis*, 47, pp. 152–4.