

**THREE-DIMENSIONALISM RESCUED:
A BRIEF REPLY TO MICHAEL DELLA ROCCA**

In an important and subtle article,¹ Michael Della Rocca offers a new characterization of 3d'ism and 4d'ism in order to break the impasse between them.² On the new characterization, 3d'ism is distinguished by a commitment to primitive persistence; 4d'ism is not. Focusing only on part of his long and complex discussion, I want to isolate Della Rocca's argument that 3d'ism is incoherent, with two aims in view: First, to show that his argument against 3d'ism is unsound; and second, to rescue 3d'ism as newly characterized³ from 'Parfit's Plausible Principle' (PPP). If I am successful, 3d'ism will remain as secure as ever.

There are two main ingredients of Della Rocca's argument against 3d'ism: First, there is the idea of *primitive persistence*. Let 'primitive persistence' name the view that there is no independent explanation of the trans-temporal identity or nonidentity of an object. On 3d'ism, "the persistence of the object is explained in part in terms of the persistence of the object itself. Thus, the persistence of the object is not really explained

¹ Michael Della Rocca, "Primitive Persistence and the Impasse between Three-Dimensionalism and Four-Dimensionalism" this JOURNAL CVIII,11 (November 2011): pp. 591-616. Hereafter, page numbers referring to this article will appear in parentheses in the text.

² I follow Della Rocca in using the terms "3d'ism", "4d'ism", "3d'ist" and "4d'ist" in obvious ways.

³ Officially, the new characterization applies to the difference between 3d'ism and 4d'ism, but I'll also use the term to apply to 3d'ism as being committed to primitive persistence.

at all; it is primitive.” (596) The 3d’ist, but not the 4d’ist, is committed to the claim that “persistence is primitive, inexplicable.” (593)

Second, there is ‘*Parfit’s Plausible Principle*’. Let ‘PPP’ name the following principle concerning branching and identity, to which, Della Rocca says, both 3d’ists and 4d’ists are “deeply committed” (593):

(PPP) In a case in which there are objects, A , B , and C , $B \neq C$, B and C are equally and significantly causally and qualitatively continuous with A , and there is no other object besides A which exists at the same time as A and which is such that B and C are as causally and qualitatively continuous with it as they are with A , then it cannot be the case that $A = B$ and $A \neq C$ and it cannot be the case that $A \neq B$ and $A = C$. (599)

Della Rocca’s main argument against 3d’ism can be set out as follows: (606):

- (a) PPP.
 - (b) PPP commits one to the rejection of primitive persistence in general.
 - (c) 3d’ism commits one to primitive persistence.
- ∴(d) 3d’ism is incoherent.

Although valid, this main argument is unsound. Consider an example that Della Rocca himself uses: Swinburne’s view of personal persistence in terms of sameness of soul. Call this view ‘sameness-of-soul’. Sameness-of-soul poses a dilemma for PPP: Either sameness-of-soul does not violate PPP or sameness-of-soul does violate PPP. As we shall see, either way, one of the premises of Della Rocca’s main argument is false.

Consider the first horn. Suppose that sameness-of-soul does not violate PPP. Indeed, Della Rocca explicitly argues that sameness-of-soul does *not* violate PPP. If B

“has” A’s soul, but C does not, then “it seems natural to say that B’s states are causally continuous with A’s states in a way that C’s states are not. Thus B and C are not equally *causally* and qualitatively continuous with A, and so the fact that $A = B$ and $A \neq C$ does not violate PPP.” (601, emphasis his)

Not only does sameness-of-soul not violate PPP, but also it does not commit one to primitive persistence, according to Della Rocca. Della Rocca says, “[E]ven on Swinburne’s view, persistence and nonpersistence of persons in a case of apparent fission is grounded; in particular, it is grounded in the presence or absence of a soul.” (601) Grounded persistence is incompatible with primitive persistence. So, Della Rocca’s argument leads to the conclusion that sameness-of-soul is incompatible with primitive persistence.

Now we have a counterexample to premise (c): Premise (c) holds that 3d’ism commits one to primitive persistence, and sameness-of-soul is paradigmatically a 3d’ist view; so premise (c) leads to the conclusion that sameness-of-soul commits one to primitive persistence. But Della Rocca’s argument leads to the conclusion that sameness-of-soul is incompatible with primitive persistence, and hence does *not* commit one to primitive persistence. If Della Rocca’s argument on the first horn of the dilemma is correct, then premise (c) is false.

Consider the second horn of the dilemma. Suppose that Della Rocca is wrong, and that sameness-of-soul does violate PPP. Here is a sketch of how, despite Della Rocca’s above argument, sameness-of-soul may violate PPP. Construe causal continuity as follows: X and Y are equally causally continuous with Z just in case for each of Z’s causally efficacious states, there is a qualitatively indiscernible causally efficacious state

of X and a qualitatively indiscernible causally efficacious state of Y. Now suppose that B “has” A’s soul, and that C “has” a soul with states causally and qualitative indiscernible from—but not identical to—the states of A’s soul. Then, B and C are equally causally and qualitatively continuous with A. So, from PPP, it follows that “it cannot be the case that $A = B$ and $A \neq C$. However, on sameness-of-soul, $A = B$ and $A \neq C$. So, on the second horn of the dilemma, with the help of a (qualitative) construal of causal continuity, sameness-of-soul does violate PPP. This outcome saves premise (c), but provides a counterexample to premise (a)—PPP.⁴

In short, sameness-of-soul either violates PPP or it does not. If it does, then premise (a) is false, and if it does not, then premise (c) is false. Either way, Della Rocca’s main argument is unsound. Either PPP (premise (a)) or 3d’ism with primitive persistence (premise (c)) must be rejected. Of course, rejecting either premise would render Della Rocca’s argument against 3d’ism invalid; so, his argument is either unsound or invalid.

Now turn to my second aim. My second aim is to save 3d’ism on its new characterization (premise (c)) by rejecting PPP. It is easy to see that the putative incoherence of 3d’ism stems entirely from PPP if we notice that 3d’ism is characterized by commitment to primitive persistence (premise (c)) and PPP is committed to rejecting primitive persistence (premises (a) and (b)).

⁴ There may be philosophers who would respond that if sameness-of-soul violates PPP, so much the worse for sameness-of-soul. Although I am no advocate of sameness-of-soul, the hypothetical response in the context seems hopelessly dogmatic. In any case, the target of my argument is Della Rocca, who does not simply dismiss sameness-of-soul out of hand, as he saw in the discussion of the first horn of the dilemma.

Is there a positive argument for PPP that does not just appeal to the authority of its adherents? The closest that Della Rocca comes to a positive argument for PPP is to say that violations of PPP would be arbitrary:⁵ “[I]n insisting on PPP, one claims that it cannot be that $A = B$ (say) and $A \neq C$, and that this is so *because* such identity and nonidentity would be arbitrary, primitive.” (602, emphasis his) However, this “arbitrariness” objection does not support PPP. PPP says of a state of affairs that “it cannot be the case.” Nothing about arbitrariness bears on what “cannot be the case.” Arbitrariness may give reason to believe that something is or is not the case: arbitrariness is an epistemic matter, but PPP is a metaphysical, not an epistemic principle.

Indeed, there would be no quarrel with an epistemic version of PPP that had the same antecedent as PPP but that had the following as a consequent: “...then we would have no reason to believe or claim that $A = B$ and $A \neq C$, and we would have no reason to believe or claim that $A \neq B$ and $A = C$.” Call this epistemic version of PPP ‘the epistemic principle.’

There are two advantages of the epistemic principle over PPP. (i) Since arbitrariness concerns the reasons we have to believe that something is the case, rather than the fact that something is the case, the “arbitrariness” objection supports the epistemic principle better than it supports PPP. (ii) The epistemic principle does not rule out 3d’ism coupled with primitive persistence. Indeed, the epistemic principle (but not PPP) allows a coherent description of fission of primitively-persisting 3d’ist objects: In the case of some views of primitively-persisting 3d’ist objects, there is a fact of the

⁵ Although he mentions several times how entrenched and how “difficult to challenge” PPP is (606), Della Rocca does not give a straight-out argument for PPP. His defense of PPP is an appeal to authority, together with an intuition of PPP’s plausibility.

matter as to which, if any, of a 's fission-products is a , without anyone's being able to know what that fact is. There is a true disjunction, 'Either $a = b$ (and $a \neq c$) or $a = c$ (and $a \neq b$) or a goes out of existence altogether.' A view of personal identity (e.g., sameness-of-soul) may give one reason to believe the disjunction, without giving one reason to believe any of its disjuncts. In light of these advantages of the epistemic principle over PPP, there seems to be no bar to exchanging the epistemic principle for PPP and accepting 3d'ism coupled with primitive persistence. That is, it seems rationally open to reject premise (a) and to accept premise (c).

Why do so many philosophers seem to endorse PPP? Perhaps they do not realize that the "arbitrariness" objection supports only an epistemic principle. Let me venture a more profound reason, at least in the case of personal identity: PPP—which has the consequence that "there is no difference between objects without a qualitative difference" (615)—sets a path for the reduction of persons to subpersonal elements, as we see in Parfit. By contrast, 3d'ism combined with primitive persistence opens a way to a nonreductive view that takes human beings to be ontologically significant entities without any immaterial parts.⁶ I suspect that how one decides between PPP and primitive persistence depends in large measure on one's reductive or nonreductive proclivities.

In any case, a 3d'ist may well claim that persistence is "primitive, inexplicable," and happily reject PPP—perhaps in favor of the epistemic principle that I proposed.

There is no incoherence in a 3d'ist view coupled with primitive persistence. The incoherence that Della Rocca finds in 3d'ism has its source entirely in PPP. PPP is

⁶ Lynne Rudder Baker, "Personal Identity: A Not-So-Simple Simple View," in Georg Gasser and Matthias Stefan, eds., *Personal Identity: Complex or Simple?* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 179-91.

independent of Della Rocca's new characterization of the difference between 3d'ism and 4d'ism. So, one may reject PPP, while accepting Della Rocca's the new characterization (e.g., premise (c)). One need only reject the consequences for the new characterization that depend on PPP.

Notwithstanding the views of Parfit and Della Rocca and the host of other philosophers who support PPP, we have been given no good reason to accept PPP over 3d'ism coupled with primitive persistence, or equivalently, to accept premise (a) over premise (c). Three-dimensionalism remains unscathed.