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What is a Continuant?

Abstract

In this paper, I explore the question what a continuant is, in the context of a very interesting suggestion recently made by Rowland Stout, as part of his attempt to develop a coherent ontology of processes. Stout claims that a continuant is best thought of as something that primarily has its properties at a time, rather than atemporally – and that on this construal, processes should count as continuants. While accepting that Stout is onto something here, I reject his suggestion that we should accept that processes are both occurrents *and* continuants; nothing, I argue, can truly occur or happen (unless it is instantaneous), which does not have temporal parts. I make an alternative suggestion as to how one might deal with the peculiar status of processes without jettisoning a very natural account of occurrence; and assess the consequences for the category of continuant.

In this paper, I want to explore the question what a continuant is. The topic is, of course, not new, but I hope I can be forgiven for plodding once again over very well-trodden territory by the fact that recent work on the category of *process* has afforded some new and rather surprising perspectives on the issue. I shall take as my starting point the interesting suggestion recently made by Rowland Stout, as part of his attempt to develop a coherent ontology of processes, that a continuant is best thought of as something that primarily has its properties *at a time*, rather than having its properties primarily *atemporally*.¹ I shall attempt shortly to explain what this means, and why Stout says it – but for now, the important point is that Stout believes that it is a consequence of adopting this criterion of continuant-hood that the entities he calls *processes* turn out to satisfy it, an outcome that is clearly revisionary so far as the extension of the class of continuants is concerned. For many, of course, have been inclined to think of substances (human persons, horses, oak trees, tables, etc.) as the classic continuants and the contrast class is generally the class of *occurrents*. Events are often mentioned as the paradigmatic occurrents, but for those who believe (as both Stout and I do) that processes deserve separate recognition, it is natural to suppose that since processes also occur, they ought to fall, along with the events, on the occurrent side of the continuant-occurrent divide. According to Stout, though, processes are both continuants *and* occurrents – a conclusion that evidently puts pressure on the way in which these two categories have traditionally been explicated and understood.

One reaction to this situation might just be this: that Stout has simply redefined the term ‘continuant’ and is using it rather differently from the way in which it is normally used – and so it should not be surprising, and indeed is not particularly interesting, that his continuants turn out to be a different set of entities from those more usually thought of as falling under the term. But this appraisal would, I think, be unduly deflationary; the issues raised by Stout’s treatment of processes are about much more than the proper usage of the word ‘continuant’. For what Stout’s suggestion highlights is that some of the features that have generally been thought of as defining the class of continuants can come apart in ways that are unexpected. Moreover, even Stout himself has not fully appreciated the extent to which the category of process, broadly understood as I think he understands it, is a challenge to various comfortable orthodoxies concerning the nature of endurance, perdurance, and so on. For Stout is inclined, in suggesting that processes are continuants, to insist that they are thereby to be placed with substances in the class of things which lack temporal extension and temporal parts

¹ Stout, forthcoming in *Mind*. Aficionados of my work (if indeed there are any) will know that I have already discussed some of Stout’s views on processes in considerable detail in my (2013). On that occasion, however, my topic was the category of process itself; here, I want rather to discuss the lessons that a consideration of the category of process might afford for our understanding of the concept of a continuant.

– and thus to accept at least the orthodox view that to be a continuant implies the absence of temporal parts. Whereas I shall try rather to suggest that this is an unstable, as well as an implausible position. There is no alternative to the recognition that it is much less easy to say what it is to be a continuant than perhaps has been generally assumed.

In the first section of the paper, I shall outline and try to explain Stout's view, both of continuantness and of processes, in order to show how he arrives at his position. In the second, I shall consider and develop what I take to be a major problem for Stout's claim that processes lack temporal extension and temporal parts and will try to argue that it cannot be readily overcome. In the third section, I shall then try to argue, by means of a diagnosis of the way in which I believe we construct our concepts of the various categories of occurrent, that processes can, in a sense, satisfy Stout's criterion of continuantness *even though they possess* temporal extension and temporal parts. We are, therefore, in a position to accept a version of Stout's view that processes are continuants, without having to deny (implausibly) that they also have temporal parts. My conclusion will be, though, that the oddness of this claim shows that time has come to make some decisions about how the concept of a continuant is to be deployed, and that we cannot any longer continue to assume that we all know exactly what it denotes.

1. Stout on the category of occurrent continuants

Stout begins his discussion from the definition of a continuant which is offered by W.E. Johnson in his logic textbooks from the 1920s. Johnson defines a continuant to be:

that which continues to exist throughout some limited or unlimited period of time, during which its inner states or its outer connections with other continuants may be altering or may be continuing unaltered ... (1924, xx-xxi)

Johnson thus identifies two main criteria as being essential to the category of continuant: (i) continuants must continue to exist throughout a period of time and (ii) continuants may change (and also retain) their properties over time. Let us take the two criteria in turn and explicate them a little further, with examples.

The first criterion of continuantness is continued existence through time. It might be said that this will not suffice to distinguish continuants from non-instantaneous occurrents – but evidently a particular understanding of the notion of continued existence is implied. An individual horse, for example, continues to exist *in its entirety* from the moment of its birth (or perhaps of its conception) until its death. But occurrents, plausibly, are not like this. Though they exist, they do not in the same way *continue to exist* throughout the period of time during which they are occurring, because they do not exist *in their entirety* at each instant of the period during which they are occurring. Indeed, events seem essentially to be unable to be present at instants, just as such. A football match which kicks off at 3pm, for example, is not wholly present at 3.15pm. And there is difficulty even with the suggestion that perhaps at least a *part* of the event must be present at 3.15pm, since the suggestion that an event cannot be present at an instant in time would seem to apply as much to the shorter events which might constitute the temporal parts of longer ones, as to the longer events themselves. If an event which takes ninety minutes cannot be present at an instant, for example, then surely an event which is a sub-part of this event that takes a second, or even a millisecond, cannot be present at that instant either. What is capable of presence in the instant, indeed, in the case of events, seems to shrink to an extensionless point. Note the contrast here with the case of enduring entities, conceived of along endurantist lines, where the whole entity is thought of as entirely present at each successive moment of time.

One might think, of course, to challenge these suggestions about the distinction between continuants and occurrents, by embracing some form of four-dimensionalism. Some have suggested that we should think of substances, no less than events, as possessors of temporal parts² – and if we

² See e.g. Russell (1927); Lewis (1976; 2002); Sider (2001).

were to think of them in that way, they would no longer count as entities of the distinctive continuant kind either – we would have to reconceptualise change wherever it occurred as a succession of varying temporal parts. On this view, as David Lewis puts it, “[a] persisting thing is like a parade: first one part of it shows up and then another” (Lewis, 2002, p. 1). But to adopt such a position, I think, would be to engage in revisionary metaphysics; there seems to me little doubt that so far as descriptive metaphysics is concerned, a persisting thing is not at all like a parade. I cannot hope within the scope of this paper to defend three-dimensionalism *tout court*; the attacks on it have been too powerful and wide-ranging for that to be a sensible ambition to pursue within the confines of so short a piece. It would be wise, however, for the reader to note that the discussion which follows rather presupposes that some version of three-dimensionalism is, at the very least, the right account of the way in which we ordinarily *conceptualise* what Lewis calls ‘persisting things’, even if perhaps there might be room for doubt about whether this conceptualisation is adequate to the ultimate nature of reality.³

Johnson’s second criterion asserts that a continuant may change its properties over time, or indeed may fail to change its properties throughout a period of time during which it persists. During the life of an individual horse, for example, many of its properties (e.g. its size and its weight) will be altering whereas others, for example, the number of legs that it has, will remain the same (barring unfortunate accidents). But again, events seem to be different; indeed, there are powerful arguments which suggest that events are not subjects of change at all.⁴ Suppose, for example, that a car is driven on a journey which begins at t1 when the car sets off from point A and finishes at t3 when the car arrives at point B. The car’s journey might be smooth until time t2, while the car is on the motorway, and then bumpy between t2 and t3, as the driver turns off onto poorly maintained minor roads. But was the whole event which was the car’s journey between A and C first smooth and then bumpy? Plausibly, the answer to this question is ‘no’. The whole event was never smooth at any point, and it was never bumpy either. The whole event which took place from t1 to t3 is in a certain important sense *static* – it has the properties it has, and there is nothing more to be said. The event itself does not change, any more than an apple changes which is redder on one side than on the other. It is merely that some of its parts - in this case, temporal, as opposed to spatial parts - possess properties which are different from those of certain other of its parts. That is all; what we have here is therefore not true change, but merely succession.

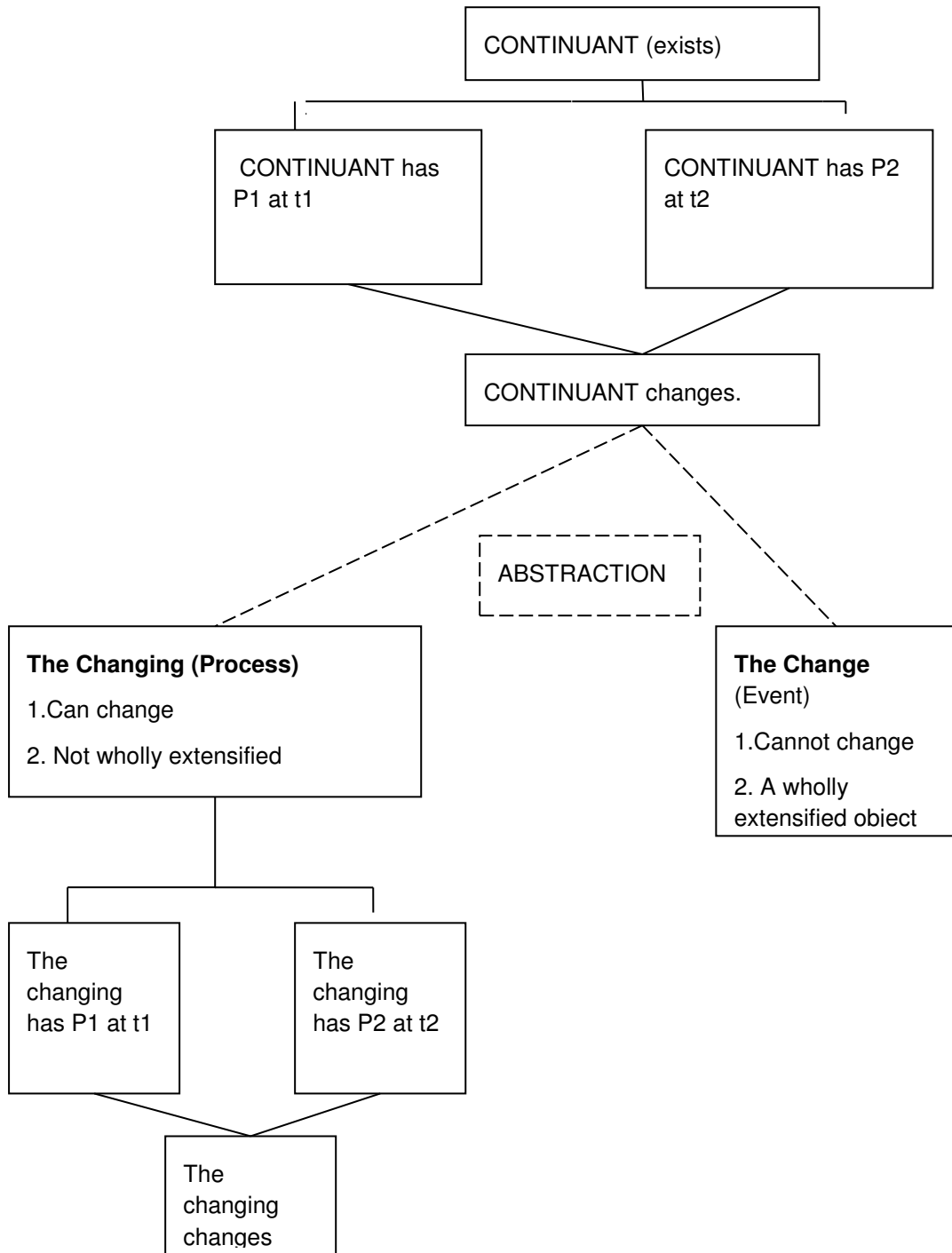
Thus far, then, we have two criteria which might seem to distinguish things like horses – the continuants – from things like car journeys – the occurrents. Occurrents do not continue to exist (in their entirety) throughout periods of time and neither are they subjects of change. Instead, they *are* changes. Stout’s suggestion, though – and it is one that I have also endorsed in previous work⁵ - is that although *events* do not change, there are occurrent entities that do. These are the *processes* – and the canonical way of referring to them is via expressions which are dependent on the progressive aspect of verb forms. Thus, for example, although the whole event of the car’s journey from A to B was not first smooth and then bumpy, there is nevertheless *something* with an occurrent nature which was first smooth and then bumpy – and this is the process of travelling which *was going on* throughout the whole period between t1 and t3. The process is something which is continuously present throughout this whole period, and which, as Johnson’s second criterion demands, may change its properties over time. The *process* of travelling was indeed first smooth and then bumpy. A process, therefore, thus understood, seems to meet Johnson’s second criterion of continuanthood.

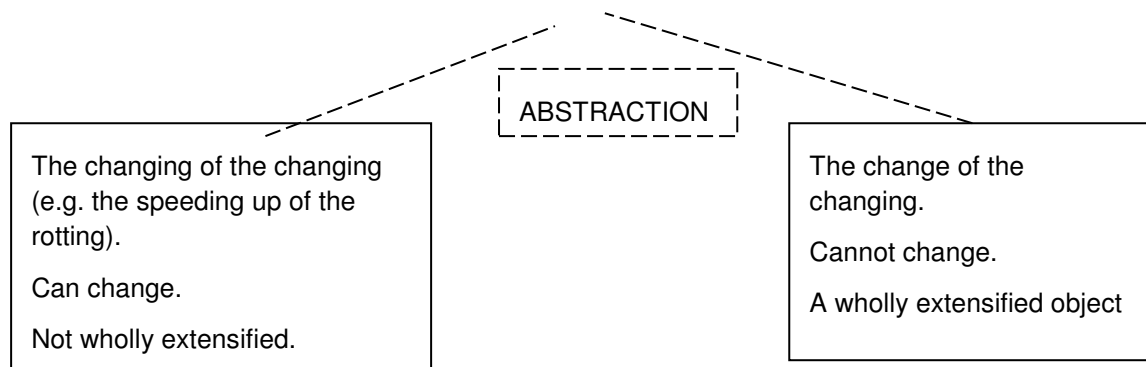
³ And even if it were ultimately to be agreed that physics, or metaphysics, or a judicious combination of the two, had revealed four-dimensionalism to be the better view, my inclination would be to think that what would then have been shown was not that horses, chairs, trees and the rest of it were four-dimensional entities – but rather that we should give up our belief in horses, chairs, trees, and the rest of it, replacing them in our ontology with appropriately conceptualised four-dimensional space-time worms. But that is an argument for another place.

⁴ See, for example, Dretske (1967), Mellor (1981), Hacker (1982), Simons (1987), Galton and Mizoguchi (2009).

⁵ See Steward (2012) and (2013).

It may help to cast some light on the distinction I have just drawn between events and processes, which I know is apt to seem mystifying to begin with, to consider the following diagram. What the diagram attempts to show is that there are two ways in which, when a substantial object changes, we can abstract to form the idea of an individual occurrent. We can abstract to form the idea of the *change* the object has undergone (or will undergo), that is, the *event*; or we can abstract instead to form the idea of the *changing it is (or was or will be) undergoing*, that is, the *process*. An event is not itself capable of change. It is what I have called in the diagram a “wholly extensified object” meaning that its being consists entirely of the set of temporal parts which together constitute the change in the original thing. But when we abstract in the second way, the object of which we form the idea is not an event, but a process. A process, unlike an event, *is* capable of change. It can have a property at one time, and a different property at another. An apple, for example, can be rotting quickly at t_1 and more slowly at t_2 . In that case, the process of rotting has a property at t_1 that it no longer has at t_2 – and thus looks to be an entity that satisfies Johnson’s second criterion of continuance.





As I have already mentioned, Stout claims that there is a simple distinction which can be seen to underpin a range of different ways of characterising continuants, including Johnson's. This is the distinction between things which primarily have their properties at a time and things that primarily have their properties atemporally:

When you ascribe a property to a continuant, you do not just link the continuant with that property. You have to link the property and the object in a temporally specific way. For example, ascribing the property of being grown up to the philosopher Arthur Prior, cannot be done without specifying in some way the time when he was grown up; grown-upness is not attributed to Prior independently of a time.⁶

Stout concedes that *certain* assignments of properties to continuants may be atemporal – for example, it may be atemporally true of Prior that his year of birth was 1914. That is why it is necessary to include the word 'primarily' in the definition of a continuant. But most of these atemporal property ascriptions, one might think, will be essentially derivative ones – ultimately dependent on assignments of properties at times. For example, Prior had in 1914 the property of being born – and it is on the basis of this genuinely temporal ascription that he comes to have the atemporally ascribed property that his year of birth was 1914. (The past tense 'was' here serves not to locate the time at which Prior has the property but rather merely to signal the fact that 1914 is now in the past).

Events, by contrast, have their properties primarily atemporally. The event which consisted in car's travelling from A to B, for example, was smooth between t1 and t2 and bumpy between t2 and t3. But the use of the past tensed 'was' here does not genuinely signify a tying of the travelling event to a complex property that it had at some time *in the past*. Rather, the event has the complex property atemporally. No matter what time we assess the event with respect to, it will have the property of being a travelling that was smooth between t1 and t2 and bumpy between t2 and t3. There is no

⁶ Stout, forthcoming. No page reference yet available.

particular time at which it has this property – it has it always. Once again, there may be *some* properties of events which are had at times – such as the property that the travelling has of *being in the past*, for example. It has that property now – but did not have it, presumably, while it was occurring or before it had occurred. So again, we must speak of events *primarily* having their properties atemporally, while admitting that there are certain exceptions to the general rule. But on the whole, these exceptions will tend to feel derivative and artificial, dependent upon relations borne by the events to other things (such as a human perspective, for instance). The idea is that we will be able to maintain in sufficiently robust generality the thesis that continuants differ from events in possessing their properties primarily at times.

Stout connects his criterion of continuantness to some of the others that have been offered in the literature, suggesting that his idea provides a way of understanding and grounding some of the other suggestions that have been made about what it is to be a continuant. David Lewis, for example, suggests that if there are continuants (or endurants, as he calls them) we should conceive of them as things which can be wholly present at different times – though of course he believes that the suggestion that there are any such things is deeply problematic.⁷ He also claims that continuants, if there were any, would lack temporal parts. Kit Fine has claimed that the distinguishing feature of continuants is that they are present in time in a different way from the way in which they are present in space – unlike occurrents, which are present in time in the *same* way as they are present in space.⁸ Events are present in space and time by being extended both in space and time. Continuants, on the other hand, though they are extended in space, do not have extension in time. Their presence in time, according to Fine, is of a different kind from their presence in space, a kind of presence which is not constituted by sheer extendedness throughout a dimension. Stout claims that his suggestion that continuants should be thought of as entities that have their properties primarily at times can be seen as grounding these other claims on the part of Lewis and Fine. I want next to suggest, though, that this cannot quite be right. For these various distinctions do not all carve up the territory in the same way – as can usefully be seen, in fact, by considering the category of process, and a particular problem that arises for Stout's view that processes can be conceived of as occurrent continuants.

2. A Problem for Occurrent Continuants

On Stout's view, events and processes are both occurrents. But he believes that processes are *continuant* occurrents, while events are not. My worry about this view can be brought out by asking the following question: What is it to be the sort of thing that *occurs* or *happens*? What is it that events and processes have in common in virtue of which they both count as occurrents, while continuants do not?

It is very natural, I think, in considering what the difference might be between occurrent entities and continuant ones, to appeal to the idea that occurrents, but not continuants, have temporal parts. There is a successive mode of existence, one might say – one part of the thing is followed by another and then another and the whole succession constitutes the whole occurrent entity. But this is not the case for continuants – or not, at any rate, given the endurantist conception of those entities which I am taking for granted for the purposes of the present paper. Continuants do *not* consist of one part of the thing followed by another and then another. They are not extended in time at all – though of course, they are in existence at some times and not others, so that an extent can be given to what might be called their *lives*.

But if we endorse Stout's suggestion that there are occurrent continuants, and at the same time embrace the suggestion that his conception of what it is to be a continuant somehow grounds, or is the basis of these other claims made by, for example, Lewis and Fine, about temporal parthood and temporal extendedness, we must relinquish this ready way we have of understanding what it is to be

⁷ Lewis (2002).

⁸ Fine (2006).

an occurrent. If some occurrents *are* continuants, as Stout thinks, we can hardly understand what it is to *be* an occurrent by drawing on an account which invokes criteria for occurrenthood (the having of temporal parts and extendedness in time) which are inconsistent with those for continuanthood. The price of Stout's view, then, is that we cannot explain what it is to be the sort of entity which occurs by resorting to the usual sorts of claims about temporal parthood and extendedness in time. For none of those claims is true, according to Stout, of the occurrents which are processes.

We might, of course, be tempted to try to define occurrence or happening in other terms. But I for one have no idea where to turn if we are not allowed to appeal to the resources provided by these ideas concerning temporal parts and extendedness in time. Continuants do not happen – at least, not if one is a three-dimensionalist. Why not? Well, because their inception is a different kind of inception from the kind of inception represented by the beginning of an occurrence – for it is the beginning to exist of an entity which is wholly there from the first moment. It is the beginning to exist of an entity which does not subsequently unfold – whose mode of remaining in being through time is quite different from that of a happening entity, because it does not consist in the successive occurrence of temporal parts. It is the beginning to exist of an entity which is not extended in time in the way that it is extended in space, just as Fine proposes. But Stout cannot say any of these things in elucidation of the nature of occurrence – precisely because all these things that I have said prevent continuants from being the sorts of things that occur are, on Stout's view, true of processes. They too, on Stout's view, are wholly present at each moment of their existence; they lack temporal parts and they are unextended in time. And yet, according to Stout, they *occur*. Surely it must be a puzzle how they can be said to do so.

What, then, are the options? It might be possible, I suppose, to deny, on reflection, that processes occur, but that does not seem to me to be a happy solution. It is surely central to our conception of what a process is that it is some variety of happening or occurrence. Moreover, one would then be faced with the difficult question of how processes are to be distinguished properly from other sorts of continuants – and it is not at all obvious that there are any plausible options which do not invoke somehow the notion of occurrence. My suggestion is that the best bet is to accept that things that occur must have temporal parts and temporal extension and thus that processes must also have these things. But does this mean that processes must also have their properties atemporally, like events, and hence that Stout's view of processes must be entirely jettisoned? I shall try to argue in the remainder of the paper that this does not follow. What we require is the recognition that Stout's two alternative ways of possessing properties are not exhaustive of the options – and once this is clear, they way is open to accept an event-process distinction which permits the possibility of change to processes but not to events.

The construction of the categories of happening

A way to begin to think about the question whether processes have their properties primarily at times is to ask what sorts of intrinsic properties processes might have. Take something like the ongoing dripping of a tap. Here are some adjectives we might apply to such a processual dripping: *persistent, continuous, ongoing, constant, incessant, perpetual, unremitting, sporadic, intermittent, irregular, steady*. These are not, of course, the only sorts of adjectives one can apply to a process – but they have a good claim, I think to be amongst the more intrinsic sorts of properties a process can be said to have – contrasting thereby with such properties as being annoying, or taking place near to a sink, or having been caused by a perished washer. Let us ask the question: Are these properties had by the dripping primarily at times? One might at first be tempted simply to reply “surely not”. For one might worry that these properties simply presuppose a temporal extent in their bearers and so cannot be meaningfully attributed at individual instants of time. The dripping, for example, might be constant between t_1 and t_2 and then intermittent between t_2 and t_3 . But one might think that it simply does not make sense to say of a dripping that it was persistent *at t_1* , since such properties of drippings as

'being persistent' are essentially such as to be possessed *between times*. They cannot be had at instants.

It might be said of course that substantial continuants also frequently have their properties between times – and so, of course, they do. My car, for example, can be blue between t1 to t2 and then red between t3 to t4, after I have had it resprayed. But we can think of this very readily as equivalent to the claim that my car is blue at every instant between t1 and t2 and red at every instant between t3 and t4. Whereas we cannot think of the claim that a process is constant between t1 and t2 and then intermittent between t2 and t3 as similarly equivalent to the claim that the process is constant at every instant between t1 and t2 and intermittent at every instant between t2 and t3 because these claims do not make sense. Properties basic to the nature of processes cannot be properly attributed at instants, which might seem to suggest that processes clearly fall on the 'occurrent' side of the continuant/occurrent divide, as it is characterised by Stout.

But this is not in fact an easy thesis to maintain, if the only alternatives we have in view are those which Stout offers us. The problem is that it seems clear that processes do not have their properties primarily atemporally, either. One can think of a dripping, of course, as a completed whole, an entity which consists in a particular set of temporal parts – but that is, I think, both in my terms and in Stout's, to think of an *event* and not a process. If one is genuinely thinking of the *process* of dripping, one is thinking of something that *goes on* through a period of time, now having this kind of character (steady, say), now that (irregular, say). But an entity which can be subject to change in this way cannot have its properties primarily atemporally. For if change is constituted by the having of a given property P1 at t1 and the subsequent loss of P1 and its replacement by P2 at t2, say, then the entity which is changed must have been such as to have property P1 at t1 in the first place.

What, then, is going on? Have we not now arrived at a contradiction? In order to accommodate the fact that processes seem to be able to change over time, we seem to have had to acknowledge that they *do* possess their properties at times – but we began by saying that it seemed as though properties such as being constant, irregular and the like, precisely presupposed the temporal extendedness of the entities to which they are applied. The answer to the conundrum, I think, is that though entities must indeed be temporally extended in order to have these sorts of properties at all, just as a line must have some length in order to make sense of the idea of its having a gradient, we are capable of idealisation in our thought about such extended entities, capable of thinking about them in such a way that their 'between time' properties are thought of, when idealised in a certain way, as had *at* the times which fall within the relevant period. To say that the dripping of a tap was persistent at t1 is a way of saying that t1 was a moment which falls within a period of time *over which* the dripping was persistent, just as to say that a curve has such and such a gradient at point p is to say that a tangent to the curve drawn at point p has that gradient. Talk of possession of any of these sorts of properties *at times* is an idealisation, but an intelligible one, akin to the idealisation involved in taking derivatives. Processes, therefore, though they do indeed have temporal extension and temporal parts – as they must, in order to be occurrents at all – can also be said to possess their properties at times - and are definitely *not* such as to possess their properties atemporally.

Stout contrasts continuants with events, recall, by saying that continuants have their properties primarily at times, while events have their properties primarily atemporally. But consideration of the case of processes suggests, I think, that there is in fact a third alternative. Processes have their most important intrinsic properties in neither of these ways. They have their properties primarily *between times*, and this implies that they share in some of the characteristics continuants are generally thought to have, and some of the characteristics occurrents are generally thought to have. They must have temporal extension and temporal parts, if we are even to make sense of the predicates that are centrally applied to them. Nothing can be intermittent, for example, or sporadic, that does not have a distribution along the temporal dimension. But because these properties may change as the process goes on, processes nevertheless pass some tests for continuantness. It seems to me that Stout is right that they pass Johnson's second test. A process is

indeed something which can change its properties over time – notwithstanding its possession of temporal parts. There is a sense in which processes also pass Stout's own test for continuance – a process possesses its properties primarily at times, given the availability of idealisation, and does not possess its properties primarily atemporally. But – and this is important – they continue to fail Johnson's first test. Because processes have temporal parts and temporal extension, they do not exist in their entirety at each moment of their existence, in the way that substances do. A process is an essentially unfolding entity, which is what secures its right to be thought of as an occurrent, notwithstanding its satisfaction of certain of the criteria for continuance.

I conclude, then, that there is no contradiction in the notion of an occurrent which satisfies at least some conceptions of continuance, including (once idealisation is accepted and allowed for) Stout's own. But *contra* Stout, we need not relinquish the appealing idea that occurrence demands temporal parthood and extendedness in time in order to accept this. And that is, to my mind, to clear away the major obstacle to the acceptance of a version of the continuant view of processes – since it enables us to preserve a very appealing account of what it is to be the sort of thing that can occur in the first place.

What, then, finally, are continuants? The question demands a decision, not a discovery – though the decision is only necessary due to a discovery! We could use the term 'continuant' to apply to things which are susceptible of change – but we will then have to say that being a continuant does not exclude occurrence, extendedness in time, or the having of temporal parts. Or we could use the term 'continuant' in such a way as to emphasise Johnson's first criterion and to maintain the traditional contrast with 'occurrent', but then we will have to accept that some occurrents are capable of change and possess their properties in ways that are not merely atemporal. It does not seem to me to matter much, in the end, which we do. But it does matter that we recognise that in the category of process we have a type of entity poised most interestingly between perdurance and endurance, sharing certain features traditionally thought of as characteristic of each, and showing thereby that these features do not necessarily belong together.

School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science
University of Leeds
Woodhouse Lane
Leeds
LS2 9JT
UK
h.steward@leeds.ac.uk

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