

Persistence and Process

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Invited Talk at

Corpus Christi College, University of Oxford, Fraenkel Room

on 18th May 2017, 11:30 a.m. – 13:00 p.m.

In this talk I shall defend the view that process ontology offers a solution to the problem of persistence.

In the first part of my talk, I shall reconstruct the current debate on persistence in analytic metaphysics with respect to its underlying ontological commitments. More specifically I shall argue that the debate is stuck in a dilemma which results from neglecting the constructive role of change for persistence. Whether it is assumed that a persisting entity is an enduring three-dimensional substance or whether the persisting entity is thought of rather as a four-dimensional bundle of temporal parts, a convincing account of persistence is missed to the extent that change is eliminated from the metaphysical picture of reality. I shall claim that this indicates a shared commitment of both competing views to what I call ‘thing ontology’: an ontology that gives the ontological priority to unchanging things.

In the second part of my talk, I shall then show how switching to a process ontological framework allows for overcoming the dilemma of persistence. Process ontology assumes that reality is fundamentally processual and that what we use to call ‘things’, ‘objects’ or ‘substances’ are, ontologically speaking, stabilised processes. I shall explain how a process view of persistence, based on the core assumptions of process ontology, is able to acknowledge the constructive role of change for persistence in a way that accommodates insights from the natural sciences about the conditions of process stabilisation. I take my main inspiration from biology but I believe my claims also resonate well with important parts of physics.