Brain Transplants and Personal Identity: A Dialogue

Derek Parfit and Godfrey Vesey (1974)
395 A doctor successfully transplanted a monkey’s head onto another monkey’s body.

A philosophical problem:

- *Brown and Robinson both had tumors and their brains had been removed to perform the surgery required to excise the tumors.*

- *Their brains were accidentally switched and human with Brown’s body and Robinson’s brain did not survive the surgery.*

- *The one with Robinson’s body and Brown’s brain does survive.*
Brain Transplants

- 395 The Brownson (Robinson’s body and Brown’s brain) regains consciousness with all of Brown’s memory and life history.

- Except for his body the man is Brown.

- If this accident doesn’t cause enough problems, suppose this grisly experiment:
  - Brown’s brain is split in half and each half is placed in the head of a brainless man. (A person can survive with only half a brain.)
A Transporter Accident


- The transporter malfunctions and sends Will back to the enterprise as well as rematerializing him again on the planet.

- For the next 10~ years Will Riker lives both on the Enterprise as well as on the forsaken planet.
Quasi Memory

396 Parfit defines q-memory:

- I am q-remembering an experience if (1) I have a belief about a past experience which seems in itself like a memory belief, (2) someone did have such an experience, and (3) my belief is dependent upon this experience in the same way (whatever that is) in which a memory of an experience is dependent upon it.
396 "Two people can, in theory, q-remember doing what only one person did."

So two people can, in theory, be psychologically continuous with one person.
Psychological Continuity

- 396 Parfit’s thesis is that there is nothing more to personal identity than this “psychological continuity.”

- Psychological continuity does not ensure personal identity, because there may be psychological continuity in more than one person by a branching relationship, as in Brown or Riker.
Psychological Continuity

- 396 Vesey: Is personal identity an all or nothing matter?
- 396-397 Parfit: Thinking that identity is exclusive to the continuous me that shall either live or die is false.
Identity

- 397 Parfit: The question of what is going to happen to me given 3 different possibilities, doesn’t have an answer.

- First, “I am going to be both people,” leads to a contradiction.

- Both will live different lives, as two different people.

- If they are different people, I’m not going to be both of them.

- They can’t be different people and the same person at the same time.
397 Second, I’m not going to be both of them but just one of them.

No contradiction, just wildly implausible.

I have exactly the same relation to both of the ensuing people.

There’s no reason to say that I’m one of them rather than the other.
Third, I am going to be neither of the ensuing people.

This answer is grossly misleading.

If I am going to be neither of them then there will be nobody that is me. That is tantamount to death. I cease to exist.
Firstly, there is no true answer to the question: “What’s going to happen to me in the case of a transporter accident like Riker’s or an operation to split my brain and transplant the halves into two different empty skulls.”

Second, deciding on one of the options obscures the nature of the case.
Identity

398 Thirdly, the case isn’t puzzling. We know exactly what is going to happen. But…

We call the relation of psychological continuity *identity* when only one individual lives through the operation.

But we don’t call it identity if I’m psychologically continuous with two future people.
Though the relation to the two ensuing people can not be called identity it can be called survival.

“So here we’ve got survival without identity. And that only seems puzzling if we think that identity is a further fact over and above psychological continuity.”
399 Scenario Two:

When I die, they will map the states of all the cells in my brain and body.

A few months later they will have constructed an exact duplicate of me out of organic matter. And this duplicate will wake up fully psychologically continuous with me.

Secular Resurrection! (materialist supposition)
Identity

- 399-400 Will that person who wakes up a few months later be me or somebody else who is exactly like me?

- Club metaphor:
  - Club active in Britain
  - Club closes
  - Club opens in U.S.
  - Is it the same club or a completely new club that is exactly similar?
Identity

400-401 There is no difference.

What if my brain were gradually replaced with identical, artificial cells?

At what point do I cease to be me?

Never, each step I remain and at the final step, I am still myself as in the case of secular resurrection.

The dualist will have a problem with this one. “He’s going to have to invent some sort of theory about the relation of mind and body to get round this one.”
Psychological Continuity

401 “The philosophical importance is, I think, that psychological continuity is obviously... a matter of degree.”

Parfit: Should one be punished as much for a crime committed long ago as for one committed recently? No.

402 With respect to an inheritance, should a distant relative get the same share as a child of the deceased?

Are you the same person you were 5, 10, 20 years ago?

Psychological continuity does not imply identity.