

Personal identity and division

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1 Divided brains

Parfit describes real examples in which subjects' corpus callosum is severed, and the two hemispheres of the brain cannot exchange information in the usual way. These cases already pose a challenge to non-reductionist views of personal identity, since it is difficult to answer in any plausible way the question of just how many persons inhabit the body of a split brain patient.

He then describes an imaginary case which is similar in important respects:

My Physics Exam. I am taking an exam, and have only fifteen minutes left in which to answer the last question. It occurs to me that there are two ways of tackling this question. I am unsure which is more likely to succeed. I therefore decide to divide my mind for ten minutes, to work in each half of my mind on one of the two calculations, and then to reunite my mind to write a fair copy of the best result. What shall I experience?

Parfit then extends the case in a way designed to make trouble for non-reductionist views:

Suppose first that I am one of a pair of identical twins, and that both my body and my twins brain have been fatally injured. Because of advances in neuro-surgery, it is not inevitable that these injuries will cause us both to die. We have between us one healthy brain and one healthy body. Surgeons can put these together.

Parfit, thinks, plausibly, that one could survive this surgery. He then considers a further case:

My Division. My body is fatally injured, as are the brains of my two brothers. My brain is divided, and each half is successfully transplanted into the body of one of my brothers. Each of the resulting people believes that he is me, seems to remember living my life, has my character, and is in every other way psychologically continuous with me. And he has a body that is very like mine.

Call the two resulting people A and B. Then, Parfit says, we have four options:

- (1) I do not survive.
- (2) I survive as A (but not B).
- (3) I survive as B (but not A).
- (4) I survive as both A and B.

Parfit argues against (2) and (3) — what, he asks, could ground the fact that I am one of A or B, but not the other?

He considers a reply on the part of the dualist:

‘If we believe in Cartesian Egos, we might be reminded of Buridans ass, which starved to death between two equally nourishing bales of hay. This ass had no reason to eat one of these bales of hay before eating the other. Being an overly-rational beast it refused to make a choice for which there was no reason. In my example, there would be no reason why the particular Ego that I am should wake up as one of the two resulting people. But this might just happen, in a random way, as is claimed for fundamental particles.’

But then the dualist is forced to claim that both A and B are psychologically continuous with me, even though my immaterial soul goes with just one — which seems odd.

He also argues against (4), on familiar grounds.

This leaves option (1). This is certainly odd, given what we said about the case of identical twins. But Parfit thinks that if we go for option (1) — as he thinks we should — an even more striking conclusion follows.

2 Why division shows that personal identity is not what matters

If we go for option (1), this suggests a view of personal identity which explains it in terms of (i) psychological continuity plus (ii) the requirement that the relevant chain

of psychological connections be non-branching. As he puts it, we can understand personal identity (PI) as $R + U$ — where U is the uniqueness requirement.

But then, Parfit thinks, we can see that personal identity is not what matters. Rather, what matters is just psychological connectedness of the right sort (which he calls ‘relation R ’). For if personal identity was what mattered, we would regard ‘My Division’ as vastly worse than the case of the twins. But that is implausible.

Here is one way to bring out the implausibility. Imagine that you suffer a devastating accident. The only way you can be saved is by individually taking the hemispheres of your brain and trying to attach them to a body. Suppose that this surgery, for each hemisphere, has a 0.6 probability of success. You have the option of having this surgery tried for both of your hemispheres, or just for one. It seems obvious that you should have it tried for both, as this increases the chances of success. But if we think that personal identity is what matters, this would be a mistake. After all, you do not survive in the case where both surgeries are successful — so the probability of survival is better if you do one surgery rather than two (0.6 to 0.48). So you should prefer just the one surgery. But is this what you would choose? (On an alternate version, imagine that you have to make this choice on behalf of a loved one.)

3 Why psychological continuity is what matters

If personal identity is not what matters, what does matter? Parfit considers four possibilities:

- (1) Physical continuity
- (2) Relation R with its normal cause
- (3) R with any reliable cause
- (4) R with any cause

Against (1), he argues that survival of the whole body does not matter; more plausibly, the brain matters. But why ‘single out the brain in his way’? Presumably only because it is the carrier of psychological continuity. But if this is right then physical continuity is not what matters.

Against (2), he argues that once we see that physical continuity is not what matters, there is no reason to put much weight on whether our psychological continuity in any given case has its normal cause.

Parallel considerations count against (3). In advance of deciding whether to teletransport to Mars, the reliability of the machine should clearly be a factor. But if it is in fact successful in a given case, I should not care whether the machine is typically successful — rather, we should regard that as like a case in which I have a surgery that is rarely successful, but works in my case. The reliability of the surgery is irrelevant to the goodness or badness of the outcome.

He concludes that (4) is correct: psychological continuity is what matters.

What does this tell us about the Branch Line case? After all, there my Replica is not perfectly psychologically continuous with my present self.

He draws an analogy:

The Sleeping Pill. Certain actual sleeping pills cause retrograde amnesia. It can be true that, if I take such a pill, I shall remain awake for an hour, but after my nights sleep I shall have no memories of the second half of this hour.

I have in fact taken such pills, and found out what the results are like. Suppose that I took such a pill nearly an hour ago. The person who wakes up in my bed tomorrow will not be psychologically continuous with me as I am now. He will be psychologically continuous with me as I was half an hour ago. I am now on a psychological branch-line, which will end soon when I fall asleep. During this half-hour, I am psychologically continuous with myself in the past. But I am not now psychologically continuous with myself in the future. I shall never later remember what I do or think or feel during this half-hour. This means that, in some respects, my relation to myself tomorrow is like a relation to another person.

Suppose, for instance, that I have been worrying about some practical question. I now see the solution. Since it is clear what I should do, I form a firm intention. In the rest of my life, it would be enough to form this intention. But, when I am on this psychological branch-line, this is not enough. I shall not later remember what I have now decided, and I shall not wake up with the intention that I have now formed. I must therefore communicate with myself tomorrow as if I was communicating with someone else. I must write myself a letter, describing my decision, and my new intention. I must then place this letter where I am bound to notice it tomorrow.

I do not in fact have any memories of making such a decision, and writing such a letter. But I did once find such a letter underneath my razor.

This is importantly analogous to the Branch Line case. But we do not find the idea of taking such a sleeping pill terrifying. On the contrary, we might think that it would be a little better if the person who wakes up tomorrow remembered the thoughts I had after taking the sleeping pill — but this would only be a little better. Just so, we might think that it would be a little better if my Replica was conscious of the thoughts I had after emerging from the teletransportation machine — but only a little bit better.

One difference is that I overlap with my Replica, but do not overlap with the person who will wake up in my bed in the morning after the sleeping pill is taken. But it is hard to believe that this should matter much — this is just like the case of the physics exam, which we do not find terrifying.