Personal Identity & Split Brain Cases

We have seen that the body, soul, and psychological continuity theories of personal identity over time each have their difficulties.

In response, we might be tempted to give up the idea of a persisting “self” altogether. David Hume was certainly tempted to do so: Try to think about your “self”, he suggested. You cannot. Or, when you do, the only things you are thinking about are individual impressions, such as hot, cold, light, dark, love, hate, pain, pleasure, etc.

He thought that it followed from this that all “you” are is a bundle of successive impressions, or perceptions. But, there is no underlying, stable thing called a “self.” How COULD there be? The bundle of impressions is just a collection of “variable and interrupted” parts. How can THAT constitute identity? How can THOSE things be what compose something stable, continuous, and persisting?

So, one “solution” is to reject the persistence of personal identity. When you are shown a picture of some particular 10 year old who others claim is YOU, you should respond, “No, that’s not me. I was never 10 years old. I only began to exist a moment ago, and I will cease to exist a moment from now. For, you see, there is no such thing as a ‘self’, or a person that persists through time.”

Potential solution?: But that option probably seems absurd to most. So perhaps, then, we should combine the psychological view with one of the other two views, such that person A at time-1 and person B at time-2 are numerically one and the same person if and only if person B is (1) psychologically continuous with A, and (2) is composed of the same substance as A—e.g., has the same soul as A, or has bodily continuity with A.

Problem: Split Brain Cases: Derek Parfit describes recent experiments in which someone who has had the two hemispheres of their brain severed seem to be experiencing two distinct streams of consciousness.

In the experiment, a thin wall is placed in front of the nose, such that the left eye sees only the area on one side of the barrier, and the right eye sees only the other side. The person is then told to write what they see—but a pen is placed in EACH hand. If the left eye sees a red shape, the left hand writes “red”, while the right eye is seeing a blue shape and the right hand writes “blue”. What is more, when asked to write down how many colors they see, each hand writes down “ONE”. It is as if the two hemispheres are BOTH independently answering the questions asked of the person, and neither is aware of the existence of the other!
This experiment seems to indicate that, in certain cases when one’s brain is split, TWO distinct streams of consciousnesses arise, and neither consciousness is aware of the other. But, then, the following sort of scenario could be problematic for a body/psychology hybrid view of personal identity:

**Split Brain:** Imagine that, not only are the two hemispheres of your brain separated, but that half of your brain is taken out and put in one body, while the other half is put into another body. After the operation, BOTH bodies claim to be YOU, BOTH having all of the memories of your past.

Now ask: Which of the two individuals who survived the operation is YOU? The body-psychology hybrid view seems ill-equipped to answer, for:

(i) BOTH individuals are psychologically continuous with the pre-operation you, since both individuals remember going into surgery, etc.

(ii) BOTH are materially continuous with you, since both individuals contain one hemisphere of your original material brain.

*Note: The same problem arises for the Closest Continuer Theory, since BOTH individuals are EQUALLY close continuers of the person who existed before the operation; i.e., they are both TIED for the position of ‘closest continuer’.*

**Not Both:** But, clearly they cannot BOTH be numerically identical to you, for then that would mean that these two individuals would be numerically one and the same person as one another. And yet, clearly, these two individuals would FAIL Locke’s criteria for sameness of person. Call the individual with your left brain hemisphere ‘Lefty’ and your right brain hemisphere ‘Righty’. It seems obvious that:

(i) It would be irrational for Lefty to fear the pain of Righty being stabbed (and vice versa), and also irrational for Lefty to be excited about the pleasure of Righty being massaged (and vice versa).

(ii) It would be unjust/unfair to punish Lefty for a crime that Righty commits, and vice versa.

So, it seems as if we cannot say that BOTH individuals are you. So, then, we must either (a) pick Lefty or Righty, or else (b) admit that you did not survive the operation.
Not Neither: But, it seems odd to say that you did NOT survive the operation—i.e., that NEITHER Righty nor Lefty are numerically identical to you. For, imagine that, rather than the operation above, you are instead only in a terrible car accident that destroys one hemisphere of your brain. Things like this HAVE in fact happened, and in these cases, it is intuitively the case that the person who got into the accident is the same one who survived it. So, then, persons CAN survive the loss of one hemisphere of their brain.

However, now imagine that, rather than one hemisphere being DESTROYED, instead the accident only caused your two hemispheres to be severed—and your body was so mangled that the doctors were forced to transplant those two hemispheres into two other bodies. Wait... That's just the split-brain case!

The problem is that, when only ONE hemisphere survives, we DO intuitively want to say that you survive. But, then, why should the fact that BOTH hemispheres survive make it such that you do NOT? It is absurd to suggest that the presence of some OTHER hemisphere makes all the difference between whether or not you survive an accident. Imagine waking up in a hospital after a crash. “I survived!” you say.

“Not so fast,” the doctors clarify. “We’re not sure if you survived yet. We’re waiting to see if the other hemisphere of your brain survived. If it did not, then you DID survive; i.e., you are the person who crashed. But, if it DID, then you did NOT survive; rather you are numerically distinct from the person who crashed.”

That seems absurd. And so we should not say that NEITHER Lefty nor Righty are identical to you.

Not Just One: Unfortunately, it also does not seem to make sense to say that Righty is you, but Lefty is not (or vice versa). For neither hemisphere of your brain seems to have any more claim to being you than the other. Both are psychologically continuous with the pre-operation you, and both possess (we’ll assume) exactly 50% of your original brain’s matter. So, how do we decide which individual you are? Righty or Lefty? Either choice would be arbitrary.

Conclusion: Interestingly, the lesson that Parfit draws from this is that David Hume was right—concluding that there is NOT such a thing as a “person” who persists over time. Do you agree?