

Personal Identity & Split Brain Cases

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

A Hybrid Solution?: Perhaps 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 seems 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. The left eye sees a red shape, and 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 consciousness arise, and neither consciousness is aware of the other. But, then, the following sort of hypothetical 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 that the Closest Continuer Theory ALSO seems unable to answer the question. For, 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'.]

2. Four Possible Answers: Logically, there are only four possible answers to the question, 'Which individual is you?' They are:

- (i) Both Lefty and Righty are you.
- (ii) Neither Lefty nor Righty are you.
- (iii) Lefty is you (but Righty isn't).
- (iv) Righty is you (but Lefty isn't).

(i) 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:

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

(ii) 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.

(iii) – (iv) 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.

3. Conclusion: Bundle Theory of Self: Interestingly, the lesson that Parfit draws from this is that, strictly speaking, persons NEVER survive from one moment to the next!

Since none of the candidates for persistence of identity consistently yield plausible results, we might be tempted to give up the idea of a persisting 'self' altogether. 18th century philosopher 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 fleeting impressions of mental phenomena such as red, blue, sweet, sour, hot, cold, light, dark, love, hate, pain, pleasure, belief, opinion, doubt, etc.

Hume thought that it followed from this that all "you" are is a collection, or **bundle**, of successive impressions. But, there is no underlying, stable thing called a "self" that survives from one moment to the next; no unifying thread that ties all of these sensations together. 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 altogether. There is no persisting '**ego**' or '**self**'. 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."

Parfit agrees. Imagine that some W&M students create a 'Philosophy Club' which adopts certain rules and holds regular meetings. When the students graduate, the club goes defunct. But, a decade later, some students form a club of the same name, and adopt the same rules. Asking whether someone at t_2 is the same person as someone at t_1 is like asking whether the latter club is the 'same club' as the earlier one. The question is simply confused. [*What do you think? Were YOU ever 10 years old?*]