

PERSONAL IDENTITY LECTURE 3

1. An interesting difficulty arises for the psychological view if we consider cases of 'split consciousness'. Such cases are actual and occur when the connections between the brain hemispheres are severed (see Nagel, 'Brain bisection and the unity of consciousness' in his *Mortal Questions*). Let's consider a case of it that has probably never been actual but in principle certainly could be: a permanent and complete separation into two streams of consciousness ('Lefty' and 'Righty'); and the hemispheres are physically separated. Imagine now that you are going to face such a separation. The question is: do you survive as Lefty, as Righty, or as both? Or do you die?
2. There are four possibilities. Either (i) and (ii) you survive as Lefty alone or as Righty alone; (iii) you survive as both; (iv) you die. The argument against (i) and (ii) relies on the following principle: whether x is the same person as y depends only on intrinsic facts about x and y. This seems most plausible. It is called the only x and y principle (XYP): see Williams 'The Self and the Future' in his *Problems of the Self* p. 20.
3. The argument against (i) and (ii) is then this. It is clear enough that if you lost half of your brain but the other half sustained at least some higher psychological functions, then you would have survived. But then by (XYP), it follows that you survive as Lefty. This knocks out (ii) and (iv). Exactly parallel reasoning knocks out (i) and (iv) (again).
4. This leaves (iii). Some people think that (iii) is straightforwardly absurd, on the grounds that we are supposing A and B to be different people after the operation (e.g. Olson *The Human Animal* p. 47: Lefty and Righty are two people because they are in different rooms). But there is nothing logically wrong with a person having physically scattered parts, any more than there is anything wrong with a country having a physically scattered territory. It is as if the person who owned the disembodied hand in *The Adams Family* were to come back to life and reassert control over it.
5. What is wrong with (iii) is simply that it is incompatible with the future psychological careers of Lefty and Righty. That is: although they have a common psychological past, they will no doubt very shortly have quite incompatible psychological futures. This is the case both with sensory states and also with conceptually thicker psychological states such as belief: it could easily happen that Lefty is in pain and thinks it is raining, whereas Righty is not in pain and thinks it is not raining. That could happen, and if it did then we would seem to have as good reason for saying that Lefty and Righty are different people as we ever do for saying that of individuals.
6. So the psychological view entails that none of (i)-(iv) will hold, and that seems false. Notice that the same objection applies to physical theories of personal identity (see RP s100). In fact anything *composite* will do to generate this sort of difficulty—the bundle need not be psychological—and so the only view that survives is the Cartesian one.

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7. Parfit proposes instead that $PI = R + U$, where R is the relation of psychological continuity (that is, the ancestral of strong psychological connectedness) and U is uniqueness.
8. It follows from $PI = R + U$ that you cease to exist. Hence (XYP) is false on this view; but we may reinterpret it as a principle concerning not survival but what *matters* about it. Thus you do not survive. But what matters about your survival survives: in fact it survives twice over. Parfit says that there are two ways to die: the failure of U and the failure of R to hold between you and any future thing. When we ordinarily talk of death we mean the latter: but the former is a way of 'dying' too though it is really harmless. What matters about survival is not survival itself but R.
9. The view that R is what matters forces all of us to re-evaluate the attitude towards one's future life and one's subsequent death (by which I mean 'ordinary' death and not the funny sort of death that splitting amounts to, on Parfit's view). The extent to which *intellectual* acceptance of $PI = R + U$ can actually bring it about that you really believe it, is a psychological question. Hume's view about his basically Parfitian doctrine was that it is both depressing and impossible to believe for very long (*Treatise* I.iv.7). Parfit's own view seems closer to the Buddhist line that the belief is both liberating and also achievable given time and self-discipline.
10. $PI = R + U$ is certainly revisionary. Sidgwick had already noted this feature of the Humean account, on which there is only a series of feelings: 'Why should one part of the series of feelings be more concerned with another part of the same series, any more than with any other series?' (*Methods of Ethics* 419). The question is particularly pressing when we consider those 'parts of the series' that lack even a weak psychological connection with this one (though of course they are psychologically *continuous* with it).
11. When it comes to death there *is* something liberating about $PI = R + U$. At T1 there will be a few experiences and other sorts of mental episodes that are more or less closely related by memory and other causal connections to my present experiences, and many that are not. Later at T2 there will *also* be a few experiences etc. that are more indirectly connected with my present ones, and many more that are not. So in so far as it matters to me, things are not much worse at T2 than at T1. But my death occurs between T1 and T2. Death 'is merely the fact that, after a certain time, none of the experiences that will occur will be related, in certain ways, to my present experiences. Can this matter all that much?' (RP 282)