SPLITTING PERSONS, SPLITTING HAIRS

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I

A number of philosophers have examined the issue of personal identity by discussing thought experiments like brain transplants and similar hypothetical events. One such philosopher is Ernest Sosa; others are Derek Parfit, Robert Nozick, and Bernard Williams. These philosophers' arguments are genuinely intriguing, and the arguments are developed in pains-taking detail—indeed, one could say in *hair-splitting* detail. But I will argue that this method suffers from a fundamental conceptual flaw. Therefore, these arguments do not require analysis on the level of hair-splitting, however skillful that splitting might be. It follows that any such argument, however carefully developed, must be incapable of successfully supporting any philosophical conclusion whatever.

The method in question consists in performing thought experiments, analyzing the conceptual results, and drawing conclusions. In the present case, the thought experiments frequently involve persistence of identity over various forms of brain transplants. But I will argue that no number or variety of such arguments based on thought experiments can be conclusive, because the concepts involved (such as personal identity) are indeterminate in such imaginary situations. We cannot learn anything of importance by envisioning cases that the concepts have never evolved to handle.

Sosa's strategy is to examine the concept of personal identity by considering various examples. He begins by inquiring as to the nature of a person:

> The person is not a soul—an immaterial thinker taking up no space. (1)
>
> Nor is the person ever its body (cum brain) or the

> collection of particles that then constitute its body. (1)

The former point is not argued here; the latter is. This collection of particles was formerly "spread over much of the surface of the earth, its sure fate again in due course" (1). Sosa then offers an "Aristotelian" answer to the question, What is a person? Its culmination is:

> The life of a person through a sequence of occasions is a sequence of embodied psychological profiles, occasion by occasion, interrelated by causal links such as realized intentions and true memories. The endurance of a person across a sequence of occasions consists in the embodiment of a psychological profile by a body on each of those occasions, and in the appropriate causal linkage amongst those embodiments. (3)

Sosa next proceeds to analyze this concept by a series of three thought experiments involving brain transplants that he calls "logical and even scientific possibilities, if not yet technologically accessible" (3). I hope to make it clear that my argument is *not* to claim that these experiments are impossible—logically, scientifically, or any other way. Instead, I mean to challenge their usefulness as a basis for drawing philosophical conclusions.

Throughout the discussion, Sosa draws heavily on the medical discovery that the brain is divided into two hemispheres having significantly different functions and that these hemispheres can be surgically separated with remarkable results. This discovery also has influenced other philosophers who recently have been using similar thought experiments, such as Parfit.

Sosa's three examples of "possible" transplants are:

> Poss. 1. Transplanting a brain from a body to another very similar body (say, of an identical

twin) in such a way that the psychological profile embodied most directly by that brain remains through the transplant—so that memories, desires, beliefs, etc., remain nearly unaltered.

Poss. 2. Transplanting a brain hemisphere from a body to another very similar body, at the same time destroying the other (cancerous) hemisphere, in such a way that once more the psychological profile remains.

Poss. 3. Transplanting a brain hemisphere from a body to another very similar body, while the other hemisphere (also healthy) is transplanted to a third very similar body (as might happen with triplets), in such a way that in both cases the psychological profile is preserved. (4)

The purpose of the examples is to see how personal identity would be preserved—or not preserved—through the changes. In Poss. 3, Sosa argues, the original person's life would simply come to an end at the time of the transplant operation. This is because neither of the two hemispheres has any pride of place to be identified as the continuation of the original person. What has happened is that, at that time, one person's life has ended and two more have begun.

Sosa's conclusion is that, for identity to be preserved, there must be no branching. On this account, "A life L continues in a later state S if that state S better satisfies the criteria than does any competitor S'" (4). An additional requirement, though, would be that state S must meet "certain minimum requirements" of shared characteristics (5). For example, if the closest contender to be the survivor of Cary Grant were a central African gorilla, the gorilla would not qualify.

But this raises additional problems, including one cited by Parfit (479): What is the minimum similarity that will suffice? The problem is that, whatever minimum is specified,

the difference between a state considered to satisfy it and a very similar state must be trivial. It seems unreasonable to make something so critical as personal identity hinge on trivial differences (Sosa 6).

Sosa gives two answers. I will include only the first, since it, in effect, states my own thesis. Sosa's answer is that many of our concepts are vague and indeterminate; and, his example is a sand dune: how many grains of sand are required to constitute a dune? There simply *is* no answer (6). The concept is indeterminate: everyone would agree that two grains are insufficient and so are probably two thousand or even two million. But at some point disagreement would set in between perfectly competent speakers of the English language as to whether the gradually accumulating pile of sand did or did not constitute a dune. And none of these speakers would be simply wrong.

My point against Sosa's overall argument is the same as his point about sand dunes: the concepts are so indeterminate that no answer can be wrong. But, if no answer can be wrong, then none can be right. If correct, this criticism does not depend on hair-splitting details but would undermine the entire philosophical method on which the arguments in question are based.

II

Suppose you are the one about to undergo transplantation of the two hemispheres of your brain into two other bodies and you very much want to survive the operation. How can you insure that it is *you* that survives? What in fact will constitute survival of *your* identity?

The overall theme of the Sosa article is to analyze the meaning of survival of the individual's identity over time and changes in circumstances. The conclusion is that it *matters* whether one's identity survives, and the problem is to determine what such survival would mean. Sosa draws a series of comparisons to illustrate this concern.

Suppose, he suggests, that someone has a strong desire to obtain a cube, but this person has not noticed that a cube is a solid having six sides and twelve edges (11-12). Must this person also have a desire to obtain a solid with six sides and twelve edges? Not necessarily, Sosa answers, for the cube-desiring individual may not consider the number of sides and edges important: it would be perfectly possible to wish to obtain a cube and not even have thought of the number of sides or edges. So, even though a cube necessarily does have this number of sides and edges, those numbers need not be the object of desire.

Similarly, this confusion between conscious desire and conceptual necessity occurs with survival on any of the analyses Sosa considers. For instance, he defines "My surviving" as:

> *My life's extending without branching, by means of appropriate causal relations linking present and past stages to future stages.*

And he defines "My 'surviving'" as:

> *That my influence extend by means of appropriate causal relations linking present and past stages of my life to future psychological states, with or without branching.*

Finally, he defines "My 'quasi-surviving'" as:

> *That the sequence of psychological states constitutive of my past and a present life be followed by further psychological states with a certain "similarity," whether accompanied or not by either causal influence or nonbranching.* (12)

The question, then, is which, if any, of these conceptions of survival or its analogues is important to the individual who wishes to survive the transplant operation.

III

It is the method of answering this question that I mean to challenge. The method is that of conceptual analysis—a method that is, of course, central to philosophical inquiry. But every method has its limits. Sometimes these limits are set by the concept itself. In order to show why I believe those limits are exceeded in such arguments, it will be necessary to state how I believe concepts operate in the course of ordinary language.

The meaning of words is determined by their use—a thesis hardly original with me and for which I will not argue here. For present pruposes I will simply note that this premise is a concept of ordinary language philosophy of the general sort espoused by Ryle, Wittgenstein, and many others.

Since the meaning of words depends on their uses, their meaning depends on the uses to which they have been and are put. This means that the meanings of words and concepts must depend in large part on the experiences of the users of the language and on the circumstances in which they have found themselves and have heretofore had occasion to discuss. But, the arguments in question *radically* envision different experiences and circumstances to which the concepts have never been applied; and, therefore, the meanings of the concepts in such contexts remain undetermined.

A familiar example should help to illustrate my point. Philosphers have frequently discussed the word "copper" and what is contained in that concept. Copper is electrically conductive, but is electrical conductivity part of the *concept* "copper"? Is it "analytic," as we say, that copper is conductive of electricity? What we need to ask is whether a material exactly like copper in every other way—soft, yellow, ductile, metallic, but not electrically conductive—would still be copper. (Of course, physics tells us that there are laws of nature guaranteeing that whatever material that had *all* the other characteristics of copper, the atomic structure in particular, would be conductive. But this is not the philosopher's problem.)

My point is that there *is* no correct answer to this

question. No one has ever seen such a material; therefore, no one has ever had to say anything about it or to make any judgments or decisions about what to call it. No one has ever chosen to use the word "copper" to describe such a material, and no one has ever refused to use it in that way. Since meaning is determined by use, the meaning of the word "copper" in such a case is simply *not* determined. No progress can be made arguing either for or against the use of "copper" to apply to this material, for there simply is no meaning established. Any argument either way will totally miss the point.

The point is the same with the brain transplant arguments. To argue on conceptual grounds about *who* would be the true continuer of the identity of a person whose brain was split between two bodies is like arguing about whether our nonconductive yellow metal should be called "copper" (or arguing about how many grains of sand a sand dune requires). There is no answer to be found on conceptual grounds, for the meaning of the concept is undetermined in a context so radically removed from any in which it has ever found application.

So, this is quite enough to show that the thought experiment arguments in question are fundamentally conceptually mistaken. It is not necessary to show that they are mistaken in hair-splitting detail.

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