

Personal Identity and the Radiation Argument

abstract: Sydney Shoemaker has argued that, because we can imagine a people who take themselves to survive a 'brain-state-transfer' procedure, cerebrum transplant, or the like, we ought to conclude that we could survive such a thing. I claim that the argument faces two objections, and can be defended only by depriving it any real interest.

1.

Imagine a society of beings like ourselves but more technologically advanced. They have a machine that records the entire state of a human brain and imposes it onto another brain (destroying the first brain in the process), creating a person psychologically indistinguishable from the original. These beings--call them the Progressives--often have this done because high levels of radiation in their environment would otherwise ruin their health. They use another machine to make duplicates of themselves with blank brains, which they keep in lead vaults for this purpose.

The Progressives take themselves to survive the 'brain-state-transfer' procedure, and act accordingly. They speak of what they themselves will do after their next 'body-change', and of what they did before the previous one. They hold people responsible for the actions of the person from whom they inherited their brain state. Their laws and customs reflect this: the brain-state recipient is entitled to the brain-state donor's property, is legally married to the donor's spouse, is considered the parent of his or her children, and so on. Imagine further that the actual laws of nature operate, and that there are no immaterial souls or the like. The Progressives know this, and know all the relevant physical facts about how the transfer procedure works.

According to Sydney Shoemaker, this story suggests that we could literally move from one human being to another by having our brain state 'transferred'. He writes,

There is no clear sense in which [the Progressives] can be said to be mistaken about a matter of fact in regarding the procedure as person-preserving. If we confronted such a society, there would, I think, be a very strong case for saying that what they mean by "person" is such that the BST-procedure is person-preserving (using "person" in their sense)...But there would also be a strong reason for saying that what they mean by 'person' is what we mean by it; they call the same things persons, offer the same characterizations of what sorts of things persons are, and attach the same kinds of social consequences to judgments of personal identity--i.e., personal identity has with them the same connections with moral responsibility, ownership of property, etc. as it does with us. But if they are right in thinking that the BST-procedure is person-preserving, and if they mean the same by 'person' as we do, then it seems that we ought to regard the BST-procedure as person-

preserving.¹

I will call this the Radiation Argument. Naturally radiation, or for that matter brain-state transfer, is only an accidental feature of it. Shoemaker takes much the same argument to show that a person would go along with his transplanted cerebrum (1999, 292-294). Other variants are easily imagined.

The argument has two main premises. First, the Progressives are correct in believing that they survive brain-state transfer. More precisely, what they mean by 'person' is such that 'persons' in that sense survive it. I take this to mean that the things they use their personal pronouns and proper names to denote really do survive brain-state transfer. Second, they mean the same by 'person' as we do. A Progressive who says, 'I am fifty years old,' means the same as you and I mean when we say it. I take this to imply that the referents of their personal pronouns are the same beings, or at any rate the same kind of beings, as the referents of our own pronouns. Now if what the Progressives mean by 'person' is such that persons in that sense really do survive brain-state transfer, and they mean by 'person' what we mean by it, so that we ourselves are persons in that sense, then it follows that we too can survive brain-state transfer. Hence, a liberal sort of psychological continuity would be sufficient for us to persist through time, and physical or spatio-temporal continuity would be unnecessary. This would be an important result, ruling out a wide range of alternative views about our identity through time.

2.

What are we to make of this argument? Perhaps the most obvious question is why the Progressives couldn't be mistaken in believing that their machine moves them from one human being to another. If the argument is to have any force, there must be some reason to suppose their belief to be true other than the antecedent conviction that we ourselves, or persons in general, could survive this. Why should anyone unsure about whether we could survive brain-state transfer agree that the Progressives could survive it? What principle lies behind the claim that, because the Progressives understand how the procedure works, their belief that they survive it must be true?

Presumably Shoemaker doesn't think that their belief is made true by the mere fact that they hold it and act as if it were true. A society can believe virtually anything and act accordingly. They might believe in a theistic god and live sincerely religious lives. Clearly that would not make it the case that there was a theistic god. Nor can we suppose that the Progressives' believing that they survive brain-state transfer is strong evidence for their surviving it. We are given no reason to think that they are especially acute metaphysicians. The view, rather, is that there is somehow nothing for them

¹ 1984, 109f.; see also 1997, 299f. For a similar argument, not involving radiation, see Hirsch 1982, 290f.

to be mistaken about. We could understand how they might be mistaken, Shoemaker says, if their belief were based on the false assumption that the machine transferred an immaterial soul. But they are supposed to be 'under no misconception concerning matters of fact' (1984, 109).

This is puzzling. Isn't it a matter of fact whether someone whose brain is altered in a certain way survives or perishes? Either she does or she doesn't (or it is indeterminate). Whichever it is, anyone who thinks otherwise is mistaken. How could there be nothing to get wrong? And if there is nothing to get wrong, how could there be something to get right?

We could understand Shoemaker's claim if the Progressives' talk of personal identity were not about numerical identity at all, but about some other relation that uncontroversially holds in the relevant situations. Suppose that what made it true to say that Martha went in for her brain-state transfer yesterday and came out with a new body today was not that any one being did both those things, but that the one who did the first related in a certain way that did not imply numerical identity to the one who did the second, and that a social convention made it appropriate to speak and act as if beings related in that way were identical. (Compare: what makes it true to say that the Prime Minister was a woman ten years ago and is a man now is not that anyone changed sex, but only that a certain woman of ten years ago relates in a way not implying identity--holding the same political office--to a certain man of today.) Then there would indeed be nothing for the Progressives to be mistaken about, unless they are mistaken about which beings did what when and whether they relate in that way. The way the Progressives think and act would suffice to put the relevant convention in place, and claims made in accordance with it would be true. But Shoemaker says explicitly that we are to take the Progressives' statements to express numerical identity (1999, 393)--as they must if the argument is to show anything about our numerical identity.

Or someone might say that there are rational, intelligent, self-conscious beings that can survive brain-state transfer--'BST-survivors' for short. In fact there are as many BST-survivors as there are Progressives: every Progressive in some sense coincides with a BST-survivor. In that case, the Progressives' belief that they survive brain-state transfer could be false only if their personal pronouns and proper names failed to denote BST-survivors. But the way the Progressives think and act would surely suffice for their pronouns to pick out BST-survivors if there are any to be picked out. Hence their belief, in the circumstances, would be true.

But if this is what Shoemaker is assuming (as it seems to be), he owes us an argument for it. Many respected philosophers doubt whether there are or even could be BST-survivors. If this doubt is intelligible, then we can understand perfectly well how the Progressives could be mistaken in thinking that they survive brain-state transfer: there may simply be nothing in heaven or on earth that could survive such a thing.

Perhaps the Radiation Argument is simply directed at those who already accept the existence of BST-survivors. (They are not rare.) Every

argument needs premises, and no argument will persuade everyone.

But this would deprive the argument of any real interest. Anyone who believes in the existence of BST-survivors will almost certainly already believe that our identity consists in psychological continuity of the sort that obtains in the brain-state-transfer case. No one ever thought that, although there are BST-survivors, we are not those things. For an argument to have any persuasive force, it must give those who don't yet accept its conclusion a reason to do so. But there is unlikely to be anyone who, before encountering the Radiation Argument, found its hidden premise more probable than its conclusion. So it looks like no one has any use for Shoemaker's argument.

3.

Perhaps, somewhere, there are philosophers in need of the Radiation Argument. Or perhaps the first premise, that the Progressives are not mistaken, can be defended in another way. In any case, the argument faces a second problem, independent of the first. If the Progressives' beliefs about what they can survive must be true, then presumably the same goes for other imaginary societies who hold beliefs about survival inconsistent with theirs. And if what those other societies believe about themselves must hold for us as well, we get a conclusion inconsistent with Shoemaker's.

Imagine a second society with the same marvellous technology as the first. They too occasionally have their brain state 'transferred' to another head. But they do not take themselves to survive this. They see it as a way of committing suicide--though a nobler and less selfish way of doing so than the usual method, as it typically results in someone willing and able to look after the dead person's affairs. Those who submit to the procedure take tearful leave of their loved ones and expect never to see them again. No one speaks of what he will do after his next body-change, or what he did before his last one. The recipient of a person's brain state is never held responsible for the donor's actions, does not incur his debts, is not considered married to his spouse, is called by another name, and so on. Imagine further that these beings--call them the Conservatives--are subject to the same laws of nature as we are, and have no false beliefs about how the device works.

If we take the Radiation Argument as our model, it seems we must conclude that the Conservatives are correct in believing that they don't survive brain-state transfer. More precisely, what they mean by 'person' is such that brain-state transfer is not person-preserving. The things they call persons and use their personal pronouns to denote do not and could not survive such a thing. You might think that the Conservatives and Progressives don't really disagree, but simply mean different things by 'person'. But this is hard to accept given that the Progressives mean by 'person' what we mean. That, Shoemaker said, was because 'they call the same things persons, offer the same characterizations of what sorts of things persons are, and attach the same kinds of social consequences to

judgments of personal identity--i.e., personal identity has with them the same connections with moral responsibility, ownership of property, etc. as it does with us' (1984, 110). This holds equally for the Conservatives. Hence, Shoemaker's reasoning suggests that the Conservatives' personal pronouns refer to the same beings, or at any rate the same kind of beings, as our own.

But now the trouble is only too plain. If the things the Conservatives call persons really cannot survive brain-state transfer, and they are precisely the things we call persons, then it follows that we too cannot survive brain-state transfer. So the sort of mental continuity that obtains in brain-state transfer is not sufficient for us to persist--contrary to the conclusion of the Radiation Argument. And since either argument would appear to be sound if the other is, both must fail.

Someone might avoid the conflict by saying that what we mean by 'person' is indeterminate as between what the Progressives mean and what the Conservatives mean. Our concept of a person is not precise enough to determine whether we could survive brain-state transfer. I suppose this means that the way we use our personal pronouns and other expressions does not determine whether they refer to BST-survivors or to rational beings that could not survive brain-state transfer (rational human animals, for instance). But this would not support the Radiation Argument. It contradicts the argument's second premise, that we mean the same by 'person' as the Progressives mean. Worse, it would make it indeterminate whether 'we' could survive brain-state transfer, whereas the conclusion was meant to be that we could definitely survive it.

To defend the Radiation Argument, we must show that the parallel argument commits some fallacy that the original argument avoids. Perhaps the Conservatives could be mistaken about whether they survive brain-state transfer in a way that the Progressives could not be: although there is nothing for the Progressives to be mistaken about, there is somehow room for the Conservatives to get it wrong. Or there may be reason to think that the Conservatives, despite appearances, don't mean by 'person' what we mean by it, a reason that somehow doesn't apply to the Progressives. But the only ground I can see for either claim is the antecedent conviction that, although there are BST-survivors, there are no rational beings that cannot survive brain-state transfer, or, alternatively, that what we mean by 'person' implies that we could survive brain-state transfer. And to suppose such a thing at the outset would be to assume the point at issue.

Or someone might think that the second story is impossible or unintelligible in a way that the original is not. In some ways the Conservatives may be harder to imagine than the Progressives. The beings who resulted from brain-state transfer in my story would be in the odd position of apparently remembering all and only the past experiences of what they took to be someone else. They would tend to feel responsible for what they thought were someone else's acts. Their relations with their predecessors' friends and relatives might be awkward. (Imagine trying to persuade a child who resulted from the procedure that she is not the person

she thinks she is.) And so on.

This hardly suggests that the Conservatives are psychologically impossible, especially if we are willing to grant the possibility of brain-state transfer or cerebrum transplant. At best one might argue that, because the Conservatives are harder to imagine than the Progressives, the Progressives are right to think that they survive brain-state transfer while the Conservatives are mistaken to think that they don't. But then Shoemaker's argument would come to little more than this: In a certain frame of mind (trying to imagine what it would be like), we find it easier to believe that we could survive brain-state transfer than to believe the contrary; therefore we could survive it. This may have some force, though it also faces well-known difficulties (in other frames of mind--in listening to an entertaining story, for instance--we find it easy to accept all sorts of things whose possibility would otherwise be doubtful). Whatever its merits, though, this is hardly the substantial new argument Shoemaker appeared to be giving.

I conclude that the Radiation Argument provides no new reason to suppose that we could survive brain-state transfer, cerebrum transplant, or anything else.²

References

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²I thank Sydney Shoemaker for comments on an earlier version.