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THE INDETERMINACY OF IDENTITY: A REPLY TO BRUECKNER

(Received 7 May, 1992)

Though much of Brueckner's paper seems to me correct, there are some misunderstandings, and some claims that I would like to question.

I

I wrote that, on the Psychological Criterion,

'X today is one and the same person as Y at some past time if and only if (2) X is psychologically continuous with Y, (3) this continuity has the right kind of cause, and (4) there does not exist a different person who is also psychologically continuous with Y.'¹

As Brueckner notes, (4) seems to make this criterion circular, since it asks whether Y is psychologically continuous with some person *different* from X. To avoid this circularity, I revised (4) to read 'it has not taken a 'branching' form.'² Brueckner suggests how we might explain this *non-branching clause*. Our criterion might be:

X and Y are stages of the same person if and only if (1) X is psychologically continuous with Y, (2) this relation has the right kind of cause, and (3) there is no stage Z which is either psychologically continuous with X but not with Y, or psychologically continuous with Y but not with X.³

Consider the imagined case that I called *My Division*. This can be shown as follows:

[Repeat the diagram from Brueckner's page 5]

Though A is psychologically continuous with B, our criterion must deny that these are stages of the same person. This is achieved by Brueckner's clause (3), since there is another stage, C, which is psychologically continuous with A but not with B.

Brueckner objects that, since I defined psychological continuity as a transitive relation, C *is* psychologically continuous with B.⁴ But, as I

wrote, psychological continuity is only transitive when considered in one direction in time.⁵ Though A is psychologically continuous with both C and B, they are not psychologically continuous with each other. So Brueckner's formulation may be what we need.⁶

II

Near the start of his paper, Brueckner discusses an argument that David Lewis attributes to me. According to this argument, since what matters in survival is psychological continuity and connectedness — or, for short, relation R — and R has a different logic from identity, what matters cannot be identity. Brueckner objects that I need to *show* that R is what matters.⁷ I cannot simply assume this claim, since it is part of my conclusion.

I did not assume this claim. When I wrote the passage that Lewis discusses, I had not even mentioned psychological continuity and connectedness.⁸ My argument was this:

- (A) Identity is a one-one relation. One person cannot be identical with two different people.
- (B) What matters in survival need not be one-one. In My Division, my relation to each of the two resulting people would contain everything that matters.

Therefore

- (C) Identity cannot be what matters.

Premise (B) was not part of this argument's conclusion. Nor did this argument need to show that (B) is true, since I had already defended (B) in my discussion of My Division.

When Brueckner considers a later version of this argument, he again objects that I assumed that R is what matters, though that is part of what I was trying to prove.⁹ As before, that is not so. My main claims were these. Suppose that one half of my brain was successfully transplanted into someone else's empty skull, and the other half was destroyed. I claimed that, on any plausible view, the resulting person

would here be me. But my relation to this person would be intrinsically the same as my relation, in My Division, to each of the two resulting people. When this relation takes a branching form, it cannot be identity. But it must still contain what matters. As I wrote, *nothing is missing*. This relation fails to be identity only because I also stand in this same relation to the other resulting person.¹⁰

This argument could be summarized as follows:

- (1) I would not be identical to each of the two resulting people.
- (2) My relation to each of these people would contain what matters.

Therefore

- (3) Identity cannot be what matters.

(2) does not assume that R is what matters. I did go on to make that claim, and I said that, on my view, R could have any cause. But I postponed my defence of that view, since it is neither required nor supported by this argument.¹¹ We could accept (2), but believe that it matters greatly whether R has its normal cause: the continued existence of enough of one's brain. In My Division, that condition is fulfilled. We might even believe that R does *not* matter. According to Unger, all that matters is the continued existence of enough of one's brain to support minimal psychological functioning.¹² We might claim that, even on this view, my relation to each resulting person would contain what matters.¹³ That is all this argument requires.

III

Brueckner then advances an interesting objection to this argument. I claimed that, in a case like My Division, personal identity would be *indeterminate*: though we can ask what would happen to me, this question would have no answer.

Brueckner's objection is this. In arguing that identity is not what matters, I seemed to appeal to the claim that there is indeterminacy. But, in arguing for indeterminacy, I appealed to the assumption that

identity *is* what matters. And I later seemed to claim that, since identity is *not* what matters, there is no indeterminacy. So, if my argument succeeds, it undermines one of its own premises.¹⁴

To meet this objection, Brueckner suggests, I could present my argument as a *reductio*. I could argue that, if identity *were* what matters, there would be indeterminacy, and, if there were indeterminacy, identity would *not* be what matters, so identity cannot be what matters. But such an argument, Brueckner says, would not support the whole of my 'desired conclusion', since it would not support my claim that R is what matters.

Since that claim was not part of my conclusion, this argument could be presented as a *reductio*. But it need not be. The argument need not assume that there is indeterminacy.¹⁵ Nor did I ever abandon that assumption.

The argument could be put like this:

- (1) My relation to each of the resulting people would contain what matters.
- (2) It is not true that this relation would be identity. Either (A) it is *not* true that I would be either of these people, or (B) it *is* true that I would be neither of them.

Therefore

- (3) Identity is not what matters.

Premise (2) could be defended in two ways. We might claim that, to the question 'Would I be either of the resulting people?', there is no true answer. That would support (2)(A). Or we might claim that it's determinately true that I would be neither of these people. That would support (2)(B). I defended (2)(A). But it would not have mattered if, after concluding that identity is not what matters, I had changed my view, and accepted (2)(B). The argument would not have been undermined.

Brueckner suggests that I did change my view. He quotes this misleading passage:

The case of division supports part of the Reductionist View: the claim that our identity is not what matters. But this case does not support another Reductionist claim: that our

identity can be indeterminate. If we abandon the view that identity is what matters, we can claim that there *is* an answer here to my question. Neither of the resulting people will be me.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, Brueckner takes *me* to be claiming here that, if identity is not what matters, it is determinate that I would be neither of these people. But my point was only that, while this case shows that identity is not what matters, it does not help to show that our identity can be indeterminate. I had already claimed that, in a sense, there is an answer to our question. Some may think that this answer is determinately true.

As I had earlier explained, my own view is different. I believe that, in this case, our question would be indeterminate. It would also be an *empty* question: even without answering this question, we could know exactly what would happen. But this is one of the cases where, though such a question is empty,

[It] has, in a sense, an answer. The question is empty because it does not describe different possibilities, any of which might be true, and one of which must be true. The question merely gives us different descriptions of the same outcome. . . . But, if we do decide to give an answer to this empty question, one of these descriptions is better than the others.¹⁷

That is the sense in which, on my view, the answer is that I would be neither of these people.

Brueckner is puzzled by these remarks. He writes:

If a given question is really empty, if . . . [all the possible answers are] neither true or false . . . it is hard to understand the sense in which the question has an answer. . . . Maybe one 'answer' is more comforting than another, or maybe one has some other desirable practical consequence. But . . . no answer is better than another in respect of *truth or conformity to the facts*.¹⁸

There is no disagreement here. When I call one answer best, I am not claiming that it is true, or fits the facts. On my view, there is no true answer, since our concept of a person doesn't settle this question. My claim is only that, if we decide to refine our concept, so that we *give* this question an answer, this would be the best description. It would be arbitrary to say that I would be *one* or the *other* of the two resulting people. We could not say that I would be *both* without either violating the transitivity of identity, or distorting our concept of a person. That is why it would be best to say that I would be neither of these people.¹⁹

Brueckner suggests that we should not choose between these descriptions. Either this question 'is genuinely empty, and has no answer whatever', or one answer is determinately true. If this question really is empty, it is 'misguided' to refine our concept so as to give it an answer.

I agree that, in most of the so-called 'problem cases', we should not try to give our questions answers. We should not try to choose between the different criteria of personal identity. That is unnecessary, and it may lead us to forget that our questions are empty — that, even without answering these questions, we can know everything. But, if we take care not to be misled, it is sometimes more convenient to adopt one description. And that seems true of My Division. It is more convenient to describe this case as involving three different people.

IV

In the last part of his paper, Brueckner argues that, in this case, personal identity *is* determinate. He is surprised that this is not my view. He points out that, on the Psychological Criterion, which I seem to endorse, it is determinately true that I would be neither of the two resulting people. He could have added that the same is true on my preferred version of the Physical Criterion. My only 'apparent reason' to reject this answer Brueckner takes to be Williams's objection to the 'non-branching' clause in these two criteria. But that is no reason, since I go on to reject that objection.²⁰

Why do I reject this answer? I am prepared to say that, in this case, I would be neither of the resulting people. If I call this the *best description*, why do I deny that it's *the truth*?

One ground for denying this I have just mentioned. I believe that, at some level, most of us continue to assume that our identity is a deep further fact, which must be determinate. While we are still drawn to that assumption, it would be misleading to call this answer determinately true. That would suggest that this fact is missing.

If we are convinced Reductionists, we may not be misled. On my view, though our question is empty, because it is not covered by our concept of a person, we could best refine this concept by choosing one description. We might not be adding much if we called this description

true. We might only be claiming that we have *already* refined our concept in this way. Or we might be claiming that, in such cases, the simplest and least arbitrary description deserves to be called the truth.

Neither claim, however, seems to me justified. I do not believe that we have already refined our concept in this way. Nor would it help to call this answer true *because* it is the best description. We can here reapply one of Brueckner's points. According to this description, I would be neither of the two resulting people. But that is only the best description if identity is *not* what matters. If identity *is* what matters, that description wrongly implies that division would be as bad as death. It would thus be question-begging if, while we are arguing that identity is not what matters, we called this the best description.

Brueckner suggests that, if we claimed it to be determinate that I would be neither of the resulting people, our argument would be stronger. Is that so? As we have seen, the argument can take two forms. We can claim:

- (1) My relation to each of the two resulting people would contain what matters.
- (2) Either
 - (A) It is *not* determinately true that this relation is identity,
 - or
 - (B) It is determinately true that this relation is *not* identity.

Therefore

- (3) Identity cannot be what matters.

How much difference does it make whether we appeal to (A) or (B)?

According to Mark Johnston, it makes all the difference. Johnston agrees that, in My Division, my relation to each resulting person would contain what matters. But this does not show, he claims, that identity is not what matters, since it is not determinate that this relation is *not* identity. Only if this *were* determinate could we draw that conclusion.²¹

Johnston's distinction seems to me implausible. On his view, it is of great importance whether some future person would, determinately, *not* be me. If that is true, how can it have *no* importance whether some

future person would determinately *be* me? If it would matter greatly if I would be determinately dead, why does it not matter that I would not determinately still be alive?

If we could appeal to (B), our argument might be stronger. But, for the reasons given, I believe that we cannot appeal to (B). There is no special further fact which would make it determinately true that I would be neither of the two resulting people. Those who offer other descriptions do not fail to understand our concept of a person. Nor would it help to call this description true because it is the best description. In the context of this argument, that would beg the question.

If we appeal to (A), we can argue:

- (1) My relation to each of the resulting people would contain what matters.
- (2) It is an empty question whether this relation is identity, and it would not be a factual mistake to describe it as non-identity.

Therefore

- (3) Identity cannot be what matters.

That argument seems to me good enough. If my relation to some future person contains what matters, and it is an empty question whether this relation is identity, how can identity be what matters?

V

Brueckner ends by suggesting that we should give up the view that there can be indeterminacy. He discusses the imagined case in which my brain and body is destroyed and Replicated. I claimed that, in this case, it would be indeterminate what would happen to me. But I conceded that, if I was inside the Teletransporter, asking 'Am I about to die?', I might find it hard to regard this as an empty question. I might still be inclined to believe that there must be an answer. We would accommodate that intuition, Brueckner says, if we claimed that my Replica would be me.²²

There would, he adds, be another advantage. As Bruckner points

out, My Division cannot show that R is what matters. For all that case shows, it may matter whether R has its normal cause, the continued existence of enough of our brains. I believe that it would not matter if R had an abnormal cause. Brueckner suggests that, to defend that conclusion, I should claim that my Replica would, determinately, be me. If Teletransportation is merely a way of traveling, physical continuity cannot matter. He concludes, 'there is all the more reason for Parfit to dissociate himself from Indeterminacy Reductionism'.²³

These remarks puzzle me. First, I do not see how, if we are Reductionists, we can plausibly maintain that personal identity must be determinate. For that to be true, our identity must involve some special further fact, such as the existence of a Cartesian Ego. And Brueckner does not appeal to any such fact. He suggests that, even as Reductionists, we should reject the view that there can be indeterminacy.

In defending that view, I appealed to the *Combined Spectrum*. In that range of imagined cases, both physical continuity and psychological connectedness would have all of their possible degrees. We can ask whether, in each of these cases, the resulting person would be me. In the first case, the answer is clearly Yes; in the last case, it is clearly No. If personal identity must be determinate, somewhere in this range of cases there must be a sharp line. It must be true that, up to this line, it is determinate that the resulting person would be me, and that, in the very next case, it is determinate that he would *not* be me. Unless we believe in some special further fact, it is incredible, I claimed, that there could be such a line. I concluded that, in the cases in the middle of this spectrum, our question would have no answer.

Brueckner objects that, if we draw this conclusion, we face a similar problem. We must believe that, up to some line in this range of cases, the resulting person would determinately be me, and that, in the very next case, it would be *indeterminate* whether he was me. And we must believe that there is a second sharp line, marking the last case of indeterminacy. If there cannot be one sharp line dividing the spectrum into two areas, how could there be two such lines, dividing it into three?

There is indeed a problem here, that of how to handle borderline cases of borderline cases. I do not know how to solve this problem. But I am sure that it cannot show that there are *no* borderline cases. It

cannot show that, to all questions, in all conceivable cases, there must be determinate answers. So I remain convinced that, if we are Reductionists, we should claim that, in some cases, personal identity would be indeterminate.

Even if we keep that view, we might claim that Teletransportation is not such a case. We might claim that my Replica would determinately be me. If we made that claim, would this help to show, as Brueckner suggests, that R is what matters? Would it help to show that it does not matter whether R has its normal cause, the continued existence of our brains?

I believe not. First, it is not determinately true that my Replica would be me. Nothing is gained by making a claim that is not true, or is, at best, so controversial. Second, we have already argued that identity is not what matters. Given that conclusion, we can hardly argue that physical continuity does not matter *because* it is not required for identity.

I do believe that, if anything has the kind of significance that most of us take identity to have, what has such significance is R with any cause. But that view must be defended in a different way.²⁴

NOTES

¹ *Reasons and Persons*, OUP, 1984, p. 207.

² In the reprinting of 1987.

³ Anthony Brueckner, 'Parfit on What Matters in Survival', *Philosophical Studies* 70 (1), this issue, page 6. (Later page references will be to this article). Brueckner states his criterion in terms of relation R, which also includes connectedness. We can ignore this difference here.

Page 6 above. Brueckner states his criterion in terms of relation R, which also includes connectedness. We can ignore this difference here.

⁴ Page 6.

⁵ 'Personal Identity', *Philosophical Review* LXXX (1971), footnote 29, and *Reasons and Persons*, p. 302.

⁶ Unlike me, Brueckner treats psychological continuity as a relation between person-stages. While that is more accurate, it needlessly prolongs his exegesis. Thus he is puzzled by my claim that psychological continuity could take 'a one-many or branching form'. As he points out, *every* person stage is psychologically continuous with many other person stages. All I meant is that one *person* could be (as in My Division) psychologically continuous with two or more different people.

⁷ Page 7.

⁸ 'Personal Identity', section II.

⁹ Page 13.

¹⁰ *Reasons and Persons*, Sections 89–90.

¹¹ *Reasons and Persons*, p. 262.

¹² Peter Unger, *Identity, Consciousness and Value*, OUP 1990, Chapter 7.

¹³ Unger himself would not make this claim, since he would regret the 'loss of focus' that division brings.

¹⁴ Pages 13—14.

¹⁵ As Brueckner at one point suggests.

¹⁶ *Reasons and Persons*, p. 264.

¹⁷ *Reasons and Persons*, p. 260.

¹⁸ Page 15.

¹⁹ Brueckner finds my remarks puzzling in another way: I seem to favor saying that I would *not* survive *because* my prospect would be as good as survival. But that was not my reason. If we could use the word 'survive' so that it always coincided with what matters, that might be the best course. But, as My Division shows, that is impossible. My point was rather that, when we see that identity is not what matters, we lose our reason to oppose the simplest and least arbitrary description. We can allow ourselves to say that I won't survive, because this ceases to imply that my prospect is as bad as death.

²⁰ Page 18

²¹ Mark Johnston, 'Human Concerns Without Superlative Selves', in *Reading Parfit*, edited by Jonathan Dancy, Blackwell, forthcoming.

²² As he writes, 'Once again, Indeterminacy Reductionism is serving Parfit poorly.' Page 19.

²³ Page 20.

²⁴ For a further discussion of these questions, see my contribution to *Reading Parfit*, *op cit*.

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