

Dennett – Where am I?

The case: Dennett's brain is put in a vat so he can go explore some radioactive substance underground in Tulsa Oklahoma. When he awakes from the surgery he names the brain "Yorick" and the body "Hamlet" and himself "Dennett." Where is Dennett?

Different views:

- (1) Where Hamlet goes there goes Dennett. Problem – Body swapping
- (2) Where Yorick goes there goes Dennett. Problem – Dennett is thinking "Obviously I'm not inside a vat right now."
Further support: He imagines robbing a bank in California (the vat is kept in Texas). Several questions arise
 - Whose jurisdiction would he be under? CA or TX?
 - Would CA put Hamlet in prison and leave Yorick happily in his vat in Texas? Or would TX put Yorick in some dark dungeon? Dennett notices he's prefer the latter.
 - Could the Houston people provide an alibi by claiming he was in Texas during the bank robbery?
- (3) Dennett is wherever he thinks he is – At any given time a person has a point of view and the location of the point of view is the location of the person. Problem – sometimes we are ignorant about where are. Imagine we are lost in the woods, or believe we are in some other country, etc. Response: in such cases we are still sure that we are in our own body.
 - But...not obviously in Dennett's current situation. Does this view entail that Dennett is in some indeterminate location?
 - Someone in a Cinerama who is under the illusion that he's on a roller coaster and forgets momentarily that he's seated in a theatre.
 - Workers who operate mechanical arms undergo a shift in point of view
- (4) Dennett exists in two places – just like you can stand with one foot in Rhode Island and one foot in Connecticut. Problem: Hamlet goes to Tulsa Oklahoma for his underground expedition. Then gradually he gets disconnected. First he can't hear, then he can't speak, then he can't see, then he becomes paralyzed until...Dennett experiences himself as disembodied and fully believes himself to be in Houston.
 - Did he move faster than the speed of light (when the last radio signal died)? Does this show that he's not a material object?
 - Compare to: a treaty being signed changing the "location" of a country. Does this show that countries aren't physical objects? In a sense yes, in a sense no. But do we think of ourselves as in some sense abstract objects, like we might think of a country?

The story continues:

Dennett is put to sleep for about a year while they work on getting him a new body. When Dennett wakes up with his new body (Fortinbras) he goes to visit Yorick in the vat and just for fun turns the switch to “off” but nothing happens!

“It seems that before they had even operated on the first occasion they had constructed a computer duplicate of my brain, reproducing both the complete information-processing structure and the computational speed of my brain in a giant computer program. After the operation, but before they had dared to send me off on my mission to Oklahoma they had run this computer system and Yorick side by side. The incoming signals from Hamlet were sent simultaneously to Yorick’s transceivers and to the computer’s array of inputs. And the outputs from Yorick were not only beamed back to Hamlet, my body; they were recorded and checked against the simultaneous output of the computer program which was called “Hubert” for reasons obscure to me. Over days and even weeks, the outputs were identical and synchronous...Hubert’s input, and hence activity, had been kept parallel with Yorick’s during my disembodied days.” (6)

Before waking Dennett up they hooked Hubert (rather than Yorick) to Fortinbras.

Dennett now has the option of switching the control of his body back to Yorick from Hubert. He tries it out and nothing happens. He flicks the switch back and forth and notices no difference whatsoever. He realizes it doesn’t matter which one he’s hooked up to. He settles on Yorick.

He gets set up with a device that controls connections to both brains, and he is the only person that has access to these connections. (Dennett requests this in part to make sure that the other brain doesn’t get hooked up to a separate body and create a bunch of havoc in his financial and social affairs, in addition to puzzlement about which one he is). There’s a switch on the device which allows him to switch between brains from time to time just for kicks, but the switch is unmarked so he never knows which he is.

At a certain point Dennett is giving a lecture and flips the switch as a demonstration. Here’s what emerges:

“THANK GOD! I THOUGHT YOU’D NEVER FLIP THAT SWITCH! You cant imagine how horrible it’s been these last two weeks – but now you know; it’s your turn in purgatory. How I’ve longed for this moment! You see, about two weeks ago – excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, but I’ve got to explaini to my...um, brother, I guess you could say, but he’s just told you the facts, so you’ll understand – about two weeks ago our two brains drifted just a bit out of synch...and of course once the process started, it snowballed, for I was in a silightly deifferent receptive state for the input we both received, a difference that was soon magnified. In no time at all the illusion that I was in control of my body – our body – was completely dissipated. There was nothing I could do – no way to call you. YOU DIDN’T EVEN KNOW I EXISTED! It’s been like being carried around in a cage, or better, like being possessed – hearing my own voice say things I didn’t mean to say, watching in frustration as m yown hands performed deeds I hadn’t intended. You’d scratch our itches, but not the way I would have, and you kept me awake, with your tossing and turning. I’ve been totally exhausted, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, carried around helplessly by your frantic round of activities” (8).

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