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Brain transplants and possible worlds: A response to Beck

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I am very grateful to Simon Beck for his thoughtful response to my paper "Transplanting Brains?" (2016). Needless to say, he raises more issues than I can hope to answer in a brief response. While Beck seemingly feels that the deck has been stacked against him, I think that the majority of his criticisms result from misconceptions and misunderstandings that I intend to straighten out in what follows. Before proceeding, I would like to draw attention to a worry that is lurking in the shadows. Perhaps Beck and I talk at cross purposes. While Beck is concerned with a metaphysical theory of personal identity that supposedly holds across all possible worlds—and as such places heavy importance on counterfactuals and intuitions—I am concerned only with the natural world with the aim of generating empirically substantiated hypotheses about how things really are when it comes to persons persisting through time. Now, here is a disclaimer: If the natural world does not exhaust reality, then my discussion is only partial. It goes without saying that most contemporary philosophers given a choice between going with science and going with intuitions, go with science.

Beck's commitment to a "brain cause" view

Beck begins by contesting my claim that his insistence on the causal role of the brain in creating and sustaining psychological continuity commits him to what I have called a "brain cause" view. I suggested that, since Beck explicitly submits that a person's distinct psychology is carried by one's cerebrum, the brain is necessarily constitutive for psychological continuity. However, Beck is sceptical as to whether he actually is committed to such a "brain cause" view. He cites John Locke in support of his scepticism, saying that he is "persuaded that Locke's old story of the prince and the cobbler reveals important things about the concept of personal identity" (Beck 2016, 132).

It might well be that Locke's story reveals something important about our intuitions regarding what would happen if the seat of one's psychology and the continuity thereof were to switch containers, as it were. What I was trying to get at, however, is that once the seat of psychological continuity has been identified as the cerebrum (as Beck has it), empirical constraints that come along with that cause-identification can no longer be ignored.[1] Otherwise there is simply no point of making it look like Beck's psychological continuity view is in keeping with materialism. And since Beck is a self-identifying materialist who emphasises the constitutive importance of the cerebrum for psychological continuity, he in fact *is* committed to a "brain cause" view—the details of which are up for debate of course. My point is that the pillars of materialism in painting an empirically accurate picture of how things really are cannot be dropped at whim once its consequences are no longer convenient. It is a straightforward conditional: If Beck is a materialist about personal identity, he must be responsive to constraining facts about the world.

1 In an important way, then, a materialist like Beck is in a different position than Locke, who was agnostic regarding the cause of psychological continuity (or "consciousness" in Locke's terms).

Testing our "deep commitments"

Beck sees the role of thought experiments in helping, or perhaps even enabling us to find out what we ultimately believe about something—the implicit conditions underlying our application of a concept. That is, they attempt to test our deep commitments—which roughly correspond to the necessary conditions for our application of a concept" (133).

I concur for the better part of it. However, I am uneasy about the decisiveness with which Beck wants to apply our present rough-and-ready intuitions[2] to possible world scenarios in order to unravel our deep commitments about how things actually are. On Beck's view, intuiting "whether we are able to apply our concept as we understand it *now* to a situation where a particular condition no longer obtains" (133), (emphasis in original) enables us to demarcate conceptual boundaries and reveals our deep commitments about personal identity.

Now, revealing or unravelling deep conceptual commitments is remarkably not the same as testing our present intuitions by applying them to counterfactuals (most of which are underdetermined, for good measure). There is a subtle, albeit important, difference in that the former aims to show that conceptual boundaries are blurry or confused, whereas the latter indicates that our present intuitions might be inconsistent when applied to counterfactuals. Even though both frequently go together, revealing our deep conceptual commitments is a more demanding task than testing our intuitions. Doing so is supposed to tell us something important about the *actual way* in which we apply our concept, and not just to expose how our intuitions potentially tilt when confronted with possible world scenarios.

The point of contention is Beck's conviction that our present rough-and-ready intuitions triggered by an underdetermined counterfactual effectively reveal important commitments about the concept of personal identity as we have it. That is a tall order. Beck admits that 'in circumstances radically different from ours, beliefs and practices which relate to how a concept is applied are very likely to be different' (134). Nonetheless he thinks that our present intuitions about such scenarios can tell us something important about our concept. My concern with this is that an appeal to intuitions triggered by counterfactuals depicting a world vastly unlike ours will more often than not be *unreliable* (maybe even irrelevant) when it comes to unravelling deep commitments about our de facto concept. Beck holds against this that a "thought experiment of the kind in question tries to isolate specific conditions—in our case whether being the same person requires being the same organism" (135). But this is exactly the point that I am contesting, namely that isolating specific conditions will *block* a revelation of deep conceptual commitments about personal identity, because it stipulates (without argument) that looking at these isolated conditions suffices to tell us something important. My argument was that this approach makes it impossible to get a grip on our concept of personal identity because of its interlocking with the actual social functionality of persons. I suggested that, for the problem at hand, this is a particularly pressing issue since the conceptual boundaries of personal identity are inextricably linked to the contingent de facto norms and structure of the natural world. Some of the conditions that we are supposed to ignore in Beck-style counterfactuals have shaped and informed the conceptual genesis of personal identity. That is why I indicated the social ontology of personal identity. If we, in our world, let alone beings in any other, have relational features different from our hypothetical counterparts in possible worlds, then we cannot simply ignore this constitutive social ontology of personal identity when testing deep conceptual commitments about *us*. To put it bluntly, in so ignoring, we would be comparing apples with oranges.

My earlier claim about Beck's commitment to a "brain cause" view ties in too with this issue. Contrary to his "brain cause" commitment, we are being asked to discard empirical constraints about transplants, body swapping, splitting, and all the rest of it when applying our present intuitions to such counterfactuals. But how and why, then, should these rough-and-ready intuitions reveal anything profound about a materialist conception of personal identity that ought to be responsive to exactly these constraining facts about the world?

2 By "rough-and-ready intuitions" I mean Beck's insistence on the conceptual authority of our present intuitive responses to counterfactuals that he takes to reveal important features of personal identity.

Claims of necessity and indirect support by refutation

Beck concedes that the alleged role of thought experiments as refuters has something to do with necessity claims. Even though, at the same time, he denies that his version of a psychological continuity view is based on intrinsic person-constitutive features that hold across possible worlds.

Be that as it may, Beck asserts that all the theories that he takes to be refuted by his cerebrum transplant case—i.e. Bernard Williams's, Eric Olson's and Marya Schechtman's—do make necessity claims. I concur in Williams's and Olson's case, but not in Schechtman's. Here's why. Schechtman's (2014) "Person Life View" asserts that a person persists as long as she is justifiably accorded the appropriate place in person-space, which involves the continuation of the original *locus of concern*—hinting at a normative dimension of personal identity that Beck does not seem to be much concerned with. On Schechtman's view, personal identity holds as long as at least two of the psychological, biological and social continuities (which usually co-occur) are in place. It can hardly be said that such an inclusive view makes necessity claims in the standard a priori sense; for *which* two of the three continuities suffice for personal identity is entirely contingent upon what happens in any given situation. We have to decide case-by-case, taking into account all the relevant details, whether the degree to which two of the three continuities hold suffices for according the person in question her place in person-space. So, in order to make an informed judgment about a person's identity, we inevitably need to know a great deal about the circumstances—suggesting that the result is not fixed a priori.

Beck continues by saying that thought experiments in general—and his version of the brain transplant in particular—can yield *indirect* support for psychological continuity views by way of refuting rival theories. However, "it goes without saying", Beck tells us, "that for it to offer indirect support for your theory, your theory must be consistent with the thought experiment" (136). But what exactly is *indirect* about their role then? I find it at best inattentive (at worst misleading) to describe such a role of thought experiments as *indirect*, when the supporting force stems mainly from pointing out how psychological continuity theories are *consistent with* our intuitions about these scenarios, and insisting that that is what enhances their plausibility. It is not the refutation of rival views *per se*, then, that allegedly supports Beck's case, but the rather direct "indirect support" of his view. Or perhaps Beck thinks that the role of thought experiments in support of his view is indirect because, as he rightly claims, a "single experiment at most offers a little confirmation of a theory in other fields. It also confirms every other theory consistent with the experimental result"(136). Well, if that is so, then their role can hardly be seen as supportive at all. Either way, not much lost ground is regained.

Somewhat in line with my charge that for virtually every theory fanciful thought experiments have been conceived to show that they get things wrong, Beck points out that we do not have to worry very much about "dubious ones" (136). I am very sympathetic to this thought, but then an important question requires careful attention: What exactly qualifies some thought experiments as dubious and others as relevant? This is particularly important for Beck's intended case to employ thought experiments primarily as refuters, since he argues, rather at odds with his claim of them being supportive, that "[t]hought experiments only become interesting once they reveal a problem" (136). On Beck's own account, an elaborate argument is needed in order to establish the relevance of a thought experiment for being able to decisively rule out a particular theory. Given the materialist Beck is, it stands to reason that this must have something to do with how well the thought experiment in question coheres with empirical evidence. However, if that is the case, we can safely disregard most everything that involves brain transplants. I will say more about this in a minute.

The empirical implausibility of brain transplants

It is true, as Beck says, that the empirical constraints I have pointed out apply not only to his version of the transplant case—they are an expression of my general scepticism about counterfactuals of this sort. The uneasiness I have about Beck's transplant case in particular stems from the demanding role it is supposed to fulfil in decisively refuting Schechtman's "Person Life View". When the argumentative importance of a thought experiment increases from mainly illustrative purposes to refuting a theory, so do the demands of its empirical plausibility increase, one would think. This

seems reasonable even more so if the discussion takes place within a materialist framework.

Beck thinks that my charge of ruling out disembodied minds because they are at odds with materialism is mistaken. He asserts instead that "the task of the materialist is to locate the concept of mind with all of its quirks—or as many of them as can be consistently retained—in a physical world"(138). Now, this is precisely the point at issue. Empirical evidence strongly suggests that we *cannot consistently retain* a conception of the mind that posits the discrete locus of our distinct psychology as the cerebrum. Contrary to what Beck claims, empirical evidence does mark cerebrum transplants that allegedly relocate a person's distinct psychology as implausible. As I have discussed in the initial article, the complex interplay between brains and bodies on all levels of human physiology and psychology blocks this possibility. Beck's suggestion that "a particular type of body—one that is very like mine" (138) will do, ignores the distinction between identity and exact similarity. As a result, a potential cerebrum-recipient-body very much like mine is still ever so slightly different from mine in terms of its neuronal, hormonal, immunological, nervous etc. functions, so that it would—for all we know empirically—most likely either completely reject my cerebrum or generate a psychology that is significantly different from mine. Granted, for argument's sake, that neurosurgical techniques of the future would render such an operation feasible—currently this is mere science fiction, of course. Beck's alluding to "clone bodies" makes matters worse, for it introduces an additional empirical impossibility; presuming that a clone body could be produced in a timely fashion to be ready-at-hand whenever a cerebrum transplant is intended.

Concluding remarks

When weighing competing theories of personal identity against one other within a materialist framework—in which both Beck and Schechtman operate—it is neither here nor there what our present rough-and-ready intuitions tell us about a cerebrum transplant case envisaged to occur in some possible world. There are at least two reasons for this: (1) Our present intuitions bear no epistemic (let alone ontological) authority about our concept of personal identity when applied to queer counterfactuals, and (2) the envisaged scenario invokes a concept of the mind that cannot be reconciled with empirical facts about brains and bodies as we know them.

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