
Reconsidering a transplant: A response to Wagner

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Abstract

Nils-Frederic Wagner takes issue with my argument that influential critics of “transplant” thought experiments make two cardinal mistakes. He responds that the mistakes I identify are not mistakes at all. The mistakes are rather on my part, in that I have not taken into account the conceptual genesis of personhood, that my view of thought experiments is idiosyncratic and possibly self-defeating, and in that I have ignored important empirical evidence about the relationship between brains and minds. I argue that my case still stands and that transplant thought experiments can do damage to rivals of a psychological continuity theory of personal identity like Marya Schechtman’s Person Life View.

Some background

Nils-Frederic Wagner (2016)¹ takes issue with my argument (Beck 2014) that influential critics of ‘transplant’ thought experiments make two cardinal mistakes. He responds that the mistakes I identify are not mistakes at all. The mistakes are rather on my part, in that I have not taken into account the conceptual genesis of personhood, that my view of thought experiments is idiosyncratic and possibly self-defeating, and in that I have ignored important empirical evidence about the relationship between brains and minds. Once all of these are taken into account, the case that I have suggested in support of these thought experiments and a psychological continuity theory (PCT) of personal identity disappears, and what emerges is a case for its rivals—especially the one I highlighted for criticism, Marya Schechtman’s Person Life View.

Transplant thought experiments are those in which the cerebrum of one individual is envisaged as being successfully transplanted into the “decerebrated” body of another. They have often been taken as central to the case for showing the PCT to be correct, in that we respond that we would go along with our cerebrum and psychology into a new body. This intuitive response is consistent with how that theory explains identity—as a matter of overlapping psychological connections forming the continuity that marks personal persistence. My focus on such thought experiments was not because I see them as crucial to supporting the theory of personal identity that I think comes closest to getting things right. Rather, it was because they seemed to be most suited to meeting the demands of critics of thought experiments (and that theory) in the personal identity debate. In fact, the ones on

¹ All references to Wagner are to this paper.

References

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