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Brain Damage and Personhood

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts in

Philosophy at

Massey University

Anne Jennifer Mackenzie

1991

ABSTRACT

In certain cases of specific brain-damage, neurologists are often puzzled about the patient's status as a person. They suggest that the person is changed, diminished, or even absent, but it is not clear why. Can a philosophical account of personhood help answer their questions?

My aim is to show that a philosophical understanding of personhood can be improved by taking account of actual cases of brain-damage. At the same time, a philosophical analysis enriched in this way can help to dispel uncertainty and perplexity concerning those cases.

I outline a necessary condition of personhood and show reasonable justification for it. The condition combines the notions of consciousness, being a continuing subject of experience, and awareness of being such a subject. Assuming the condition is justified, I go on to consider its application. I suggest that cases of very specific brain-damage may provide clues to capacities which are essential if the condition is to be satisfied. A closer examination of what must be the case if an individual satisfies each of the parts of the condition shows that this is difficult to determine.

The main part of my project has two sections. Firstly, I focus on the condition itself. I show that memory for experiences is essential for having a sense of oneself as a continuing subject of experience and I answer possible objections to this claim. Memory alone is insufficient, for the memories need to be processed into something like a narrative. This processing calls for a basic linguistic capacity and so this capacity is also necessary if the condition is to be satisfied.

In the second part of my project, I select accounts of brain-damage described in the literature. I choose seven cases where experiential memory is impaired, one case where linguistic capacity is lost, and one case of profound deafness where linguistic capacity did not develop until quite late. A final case is an example of very severe brain-damage where minimal memory and linguistic capacity were recovered while much else remained lost.

Considering these two parts together, I point out how the philosophical analysis can help us to understand just what it is that the patients have lost. At the same time, the case studies show that the sense of self is diminished when there are specific memory and linguistic deficits. The patients, despite being mobile, articulate and intelligent, cannot function as persons in many respects. Their difficulties support my claims about the necessity of memory and linguistic capacity. Further support comes from the case where memory and linguistic capacity are recovered to some extent in the face of devastating losses.

Overall I try to show that a philosophical analysis of the concept of a person will be enhanced if we take note of cases of specific brain damage. We can gain insights from sympathetic accounts of the lives of these patients and an enhanced philosophical account can contribute to our understanding of the plight of the brain-damaged.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my supervisor, Dr Roy Perrett, for his helpful comments advice and criticism, and especially for always having time to discuss this project. I am also grateful for his patience and encouragement.

I also wish to thank Duncan, Sarah and Hamish Mackenzie for tremendous ongoing support and encouragement, and my thanks to Hamish Mackenzie for formatting the final draft of this thesis.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
CHAPTER 1.....	1
PERSONS AND HUMAN BEINGS.....	2
CONDITIONS OF PERSONHOOD	7
ASLEEP, DRUGGED OR STUNNED	10
THE RELEVANCE OF BRAIN-DAMAGE.....	12
LOCALIZERS VERSUS HOLISTS	13
Holist objection	14
Materialist objection.....	16
CHAPTER 2.....	17
CONSCIOUSNESS	17
SUBJECT OF EXPERIENCE.....	18
CONTINUING SUBJECT OF EXPERIENCE	19
SELF-RECOGNITION.....	22
WHEN DOES THE CONDITION NOT APPLY?	23
CHAPTER 3.....	25
TWO OPPOSING POINTS OF VIEW	25
MEMORY	26
Memory gaps.....	27
False memories.....	28
Too much of a good thing	28
The need to establish order.....	28
Sorting the wheat from the chaff	30
NARRATIVE	31
Gaps need not destroy continuity.....	31
Falsity need not be a worry.....	31
Sequential order	32
Significant or trivial	32
EMOTIONS AND NARRATIVE	34
Strong emotion seems to reveal value.....	34
Animals - emotions without narratives	37
LANGUAGE	42
Narration is independent of words	42
Narration is dependent on language	44
Broadening the notion of language	45
Linguistic capacity	46

CHAPTER 4.....	48
MEMORY	48
Korsakoff's Syndrome	48
LANGUAGE	49
Aphasia	49
Deafness.....	50
JIMMIE G.	50
WILLIAM THOMPSON.....	52
H. M.	54
PATIENT KOCH.....	55
PATIENT KUR.....	56
CLAPARÈDE'S PATIENT.....	58
C. SCOTT MOSS	58
JOSEPH.....	60
LYOVA ZASETSKY	61
CHAPTER 5.....	66
MEMORY - WHAT IS LOST OR ABSENT.....	66
Relationships and projects	66
Coherence	66
Significance and meaning.....	67
Emotional responses.....	67
MEMORY - PRESERVED OR PRESENT.....	68
Cognitive and procedural memory.....	68
An inner story in suspense - or terminated.....	69
LANGUAGE	71
Loss of linguistic capacity	71
Undeveloped linguistic capacity	72
"I'LL FIGHT ON".....	73
CONCLUSION.....	75
SUMMARY.....	76
BIBLIOGRAPHY	78