

# Class Nine: The Metaphysics of Uploading

Philosophy and Science Fiction - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 The Case of Uploading

- **Three Questions:** In the *Black Mirror* episode “San Junipero,” love interests Yorkie and Kelly end up, upon death, having their minds uploaded to a virtual reality where they can live their lives together. The ending seems quite happy. *Should it?* We can break this question down into three questions:
  - **The Question of Reality:** One of the things that seems to be a main concern of the characters is whether the virtual world that uploads live in is in fact *real*, and whether one can lead a meaningful life in it.
    - \* We already considered this question in the last part of the course with Nozick arguing against the significance of life in the “experience machine,” and Chalmers arguing that virtual reality could be just as real as non-virtual reality. Let us assume that Chalmers is basically right.
  - **The Question of Consciousness:** Though it doesn’t seem like an issue at all in “San Junipero,” we might also wonder whether a digital upload could be conscious at all.
    - \* We briefly considered this question in the discussion of Bostrom, and we’ll consider it in more detail in the next part of the course, but let’s put it aside for our purpose and assume that consciousness could be underlied by computer processes rather than brain processes, with conscious beings existing in virtual reality.
  - **The Question of Survival:** If one is uploaded to San Junipero upon one’s physical death, will one actually “pass over”? Will one survive the upload?
    - \* The episode seems to assume that the answer to this question is “Yes.” However, it’s not at all clear.
- **The Promise of “San Junipero”:** The song “Heaven is a Place on Earth” plays repeatedly throughout the episode. The title of the song is to be taken quite literally. San Junipero promises to be heaven, but on Earth, specifically, in a computer warehouse. Going to heaven, of course, assumes that you *survive* the passage to heaven. You’ve only made it to heaven if it’s *you* who’s made it there. Supposing you have your mind uploaded, do you make there? Or does just some duplicate of you?

## 2 Corabi and Schneider’s Case for Skepticism about Uploading

- **The Propertied-Substance View:** A person is a *substance*, a object-like entity existing in space and persisting through time, that bears *properties*. Though the theorists we’ve been reading have not held such a view, most people, in fact, hold one. For instance, anyone who endorses:
  - A **dualist** account of personal identity, according to which a person is identical with an immaterial soul that is distinct from but somehow connected to a physical body.
  - A **physicalist** account, according to which a person is identical with the specific set of molecules that makes up one’s brain and body.

- \* That's how they characterize such a view, but it's not clear that anyone actually holds such a view (for the reasons laid out by Locke).
- An **animalist** account, according to which a person is identical with an animal, which (once again, remember Locke) isn't identical with a specific collection of molecules.
- **The Main Objection:** In the case of uploading, we have a case of radically discontinuous motion that is incompatible with the persistence of a person across the uploading in any property-substance view.
- **The Secondary Objection:** In most cases, it seems like the person will continue to exist after the information has been taken, and this introduces the same worries as the branch-line teletransportation case.
  - In "San Junipero," we don't have any branching cases; it seems like the data is gathered at exactly the point that the person dies, so that we have a single stream of consciousness without any discontinuity.
  - But we can imagine a case in which the lethal injection failed (perhaps the doctor grabbed the wrong tube), and the person persists beyond their brain's having been scanned and uploaded. This raises serious concerns.
  - Once we're skeptical about the branch-line case, we start to wonder about why simultaneous destruction and uploading would actually make things better.

### 3 Responses From (and Back To) Dennett and Parfit

- **A Potential Response from Dennett:** The main argument has to do with the discontinuous motion that would be involved in uploading, but the motion of selves is precisely the sort of thing that can be discontinuous!
  - Consider again the case where I'm in the cave in Tulsa, with my brain envatted in Houston, where, after the signals fail and my body loses all connection to my brain, I find myself back in Houston, envatted.
  - Consider again the analogy to centers of gravity—if you stick a piece of gum on a baseball bat, you change the location of the center of gravity, but the center of gravity doesn't move continuously to that location.
- **A Potential Response to Dennett's Response:** The only reason you're prepared to say this is that, really, you're a proponent of (4), the "No Self" view. The self doesn't really exist for you—it's just a "theorist's fiction"—so this whole issue is really a non-issue for you because there really is no self that can survive or not survive. Sure, perhaps the "narrative" can continue, and so it might *seem* as if there is a continuous self that persists through uploading. But our question is not whether it *seems* as if there is a continuous self that persists through uploading; it's whether there *really is* a continuous self that persists through uploading. That's a question that your sort of account simply isn't going to answer.
- **A Potential Response from Parfit:** This whole discussion presupposes a conception of survival that is bound to a conception of personal identity. You explicitly frame the question of survival as whether the upload will be a person who is numerically identical to me. But that's just the conception of survival that I'm objecting to!
  - Consider again the brain-splitting case. Here, we have good reason to think that one *does* survive (once again, how could a double success be a failure?), but we also have good reason to think that numerical identity *isn't* preserved through the splitting.
  - The case delayed destruction in uploading is exactly similar to the branch-line case in teletransportation, where the person on the Earth-side doesn't get immediately vaporized. Once again, that makes it clear that there's not a preservation of identity in this case, but, on my account, that's no reason to think that there isn't survival.

- **A Potential Response to Parfit's Response:** If you think about the branch-line teletransportation case, it's just clear that there is an answer to the question of who *I* will survive. I will survive as the one on Earth, since, after all, that was *me* just a moment ago, before I walked into the teletransporter. All that's happened to me is that I've had by brain scan. The person on the Moon is a *duplicate*—it's not *me*. Once I die here on Earth (for instance, from the damage done by the failed vaporizer), I'll be *dead*. The branch-line version of the uploading case is similar. Once we consider a case in which I survive slightly longer than when my information is scanned and digitally uploaded, it's clear that, once I (the biological one) die, I'm *dead*.
  - The brain splitting case is plausibly argued to be a case of survival, but note that here our main objection doesn't apply, since we have physical continuity. *My brain* is split and each half is carried over to another body into which it is transferred. We don't have the radical spatio-temporal discontinuity that we have in either the teletransporter case or the uploading case.
  - Schneider and Corabi suggest (in footnote 8) that Parfit is really more concerned with the potential non-survival benefits of duplication (digital or not):
 

“[I]f people care a great deal about preserving copies of their “memories,” character traits, and thought patterns, then uploading of this sort may be a feasible way to get them what they are looking for,” (138).

## 4 Other Kinds of Uploading

- **BIV Uploading:** Like Dennett's “Where Am I?” scenario, we can imagine a case in which one's brain is envatted, but rather than sending signals to and receiving signals from a remote physical body, it sends its outputs to and receives its inputs from a virtual body, interacting in a computer program.
  - This is plausibly the sort of thing that's happening with the living “tourist's” in San Junipero. Somehow, the device they attach to their heads is non-invasively switching the input/output interface from their physical bodies in the retirement home to their virtual bodies in San Junipero.
  - We can imagine a case in which, when one is about to die from bodily failure (but with a healthy brain), their brain is removed, envatted, and they continue to live on their life in a virtual world.
- **Gradual Uploading:** David Chalmers proposes the case of *gradual* uploading, where, every month, one percent of his brain is replaced by functionally isomorphic circuitry. He then uses a heap argument to argue that one should be able to survive this process.
  - The prospect of survival in this case seems no worse than it is in ordinary life, where our cells are always being gradually replaced by new ones.
  - There seems to be some confusion between Chalmers and Corabi and Schneider as to what, exactly, the scenario is supposed to be. It's not exactly clear when or how the actual *uploading* is supposed to go—that is, how to get you from being physically embodied (with a computer brain) to being virtually embodied (running solely on computer hardware).
    - \* One possibility is that, once your brain is completely computerized, the information is beamed over to another computer running a simulation program, but survival in that case doesn't seem any better than the standard case of immediate destructive uploading.
- **Combining BIV Uploading and Gradual Uploading:** If we combine the two cases, it seems we have a clear case in which one should survive uploading. This could go in two ways:
  - **Envatting then Gradual Replacing:** Your brain is envatted so that you live in a virtual world, and then the neurons are gradually replaced with silicon chips.

- **Gradual Replacing then Envatting:** The neurons in your brain are gradually replaced with silicon chips, and then, once the process is complete, your computer brain is “envatted” so that you live in a virtual world.

Both of these possibilities seem like reasonable ways to ensure survival, but rather clunky and arguably much further away, technologically speaking, than the standard case of mind-uploading.