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THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

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"TURNABOUT INTRUDER" TURNED ABOUT OR WHAT BECAME OF JAMES KIRK AND JANICE LESTER?

Donald Wayne Viney

When James Kirk and Janice Lester trade bodies in "Turnabout Intruder," the final episode of the original Star Trek television series, one has the impression that the limits to where one could go, where no one had gone before, have been reached. For this is not a journey in space or time, but a journey out of body. Of course, other Star Trek episodes also involve the concept of mind transfer and possession--"Return to Tomorrow," "Is There in Truth No Beauty," and "Metamorphosis." However, none of these episodes involve an exchange of bodies or raise the question of personal identity so compellingly. Of special interest is that the exchange of bodies is between a male and a female. Questions of both personal and sexual identity can be explored through this imaginative thought experiment. In this paper I propose that "Turnabout Intruder" is best understood if one dispenses with the assumption that Kirk and Lester trade bodies. The interpretation I defend tends to escape notice because of uncritical acceptance of questionable ideas about personal and sexual identity.

It will be useful to have before us the synopsis of the episode as found in *The Star Trek Compendium*.

Stardate 5298.5: Dr. Janice Lester, once romantically involved with James Kirk, hates the captain because she was unable (and unfit) to become a starship commander. She lures Kirk to planet Cannus II, where she has discovered an alien mechanism capable of transferring minds between bodies. Using the device, Dr. Lester transfers her consciousness into Captain Kirk's body, trapping his mind in hers. Dr. Coleman, Janice's current lover and partner, makes sure that Kirk's mind is kept sedated. Janice, using Kirk's body, initiates court-martial proceedings against Spock and all who believe that the captain's mind is not where it belongs. But she is unable to control her emotions and during the proceedings loses her temper, arousing the suspicions of other crew members. When "Kirk" charges McCoy and Scotty with mutiny and imposes the death penalty, the entire crew knows something is seriously wrong. Fortunately, Kirk, with Spock's telepathic assistance, is able to reverse the effects of the mind transfer. Janice, trapped again in her

own body, is unable to bear her frustration and collapses (Asherman 134).

For clarity I will call the individual with Lester's personality "Kirk/L" and use the expression "Lester/K" to refer to the individual with Kirk's personality. A detail not mentioned in the synopsis is that Dr. McCoy's most sophisticated tests provide no evidence that Kirk/L is an impostor.

The creators of the story, Gene Roddenberry and Arthur H. Singer, clearly intend that the device Lester discovers on Cannus II is able to remove a non-physical entity from a person's body and place it in someone else's body. The synopsis speaks of "an alien mechanism capable of transferring minds between bodies." The entity in question is the essence of one's personal identity. Something more than a mere organ transplant has taken place. Various descriptions of what it is that gets transferred are used. Spock speaks of a life-entity, Lester/K speaks of "whatever it is that makes James Kirk something special to himself." The entity is non-physical but real. Spock's mind meld technique can detect it, but it is invisible to McCoy's instrumentation. Whether the mind has a sexual identity is a question to which I will turn in my closing remarks.

Those familiar with the history of philosophy will recognize these ideas as a version of mind/body dualism that was dear to the hearts of Plato (423-348 BCE) and Descartes (1596-1650). When the differences between their views are set aside there remains agreement on three things: (1) Persons are minds housed in bodies. Plato's version of Socrates' last hours portrays the old philosopher as poking fun at his friends for believing that the death of his body means the end of his personality. (2) Minds are nonphysical. Descartes is clearest on this point. Minds, he argued, are thinking-but-nonextended substances. (3) Minds are capable of an existence apart from the body. Plato thought of the body as a place where a mind is held captive until, at death, it is either set free or reincarnated. Plato and Descartes could have found much to admire in "Turnabout Intruder."

The thrust of the episode is that, despite the implausibility of a mind transference, the crew members come to believe that it has taken place. Viewers of the episode are also invited to believe this. Unlike most of the characters in the story, viewers are privy to the "transference" from the beginning. Ghostly images of Kirk and Lester are shown exiting their bodies and merging with the other's body. Thus, mind/body dualism is

suggested from the outset. For several years I have shown "Turnabout Intruder" to students in my Basic Philosophy courses. When asked to describe what the machine does, they have, without exception, said that the machine transfers minds (or souls, life-entities, etc.).

It does not occur to most viewers that the idea of mind transference is not the only way of understanding what happens to Kirk and Lester. The machine is presented as a mind transferring device. However, it could be a sophisticated personality confusion machine. Perhaps the machine artificially produces a temporary psychosis, characterized by extreme paranoia, complete with systematic delusions and feelings of persecution. We may suppose that the machine can scan the beliefs, memories, knowledge, emotional patterns, and attitudes imprinted in a brain and artificially reproduce or impose them in another brain. The result is that a person who has been attached to the machine is convinced that he or she is someone else. Because the personality that the machine recreates is "copied" from another person, the delusion is convincing not only to the deluded individuals but to others as well.

Understanding the machine as a personality confusion device rather than a mind transference device involves no change in the story but

it does involve a change in how one interprets events in the story. The most obvious change is that Kirk and Lester never leave their bodies; they become profoundly confused about who they are. James Kirk believes that he is Janice Lester and has successfully appropriated Kirk's body. Janice Lester believes that she is James Kirk trapped in Lester's body. Another change is that Lester and Coleman are, from the beginning, misled about what the machine can do. Since neither character is particularly clearheaded, this is not difficult to accept. Lester is blinded by jealousy, and Coleman is an incompetent physician. The other characters are eventually lured into the delusion. Spock, using telepathy, believes that Kirk's mind is in Lester's body. McCoy and Scotty rely on less esoteric evidence. They appeal to Spock's authority and to the obvious behavioral changes in Kirk and Lester.

Another aspect of the story that must be reinterpreted is the ghostly images that proceed from the bodies of Kirk and Lester. In the opening scene, when the "transference" takes place, one must suppose that the images are merely cinematic representations of the profound changes that the machine works within Lester and Kirk. In other words, the images would not be visible to the naked eye. The invisibility of the images is

born out by the closing sequence in which Lester and Kirk "return" to their bodies, but none of the characters gives evidence of having seen the images.

The ghostly images are easily reconciled with the interpretation of the machine as a personality confusion device. However, the final scenes present another problem. Recall that Lester/K is in the brig with the other officers awaiting execution and Kirk/L is on the bridge trying to control a mutinous crew. With Spock's help, the "transference" is weakened and finally broken. For a brief moment, Lester/K finds himself on the bridge and Kirk/L finds herself in the brig with the prisoners. Kirk/L seeks out Dr. Coleman and convinces him that unless Lester/K is killed the transference will be reversed. The prediction is fulfilled when Coleman and Kirk/L go to the brig to kill Lester/K, a struggle ensues, and the "transfer" is broken once and for all. The question is how these facts of the story can be understood if the machine is merely a personality confusion device. How could Lester/K momentarily be on the bridge and Kirk/L be in the brig unless their minds temporarily returned to their bodies? Why should the death of Lester/K insure the permanence of the machine's effects unless there had really been an exchange of minds?

The simplest way to understand these facts of the story is to suppose that the effects of the machine are indeed temporary. However, the idea that Kirk or Lester must die to insure a permanent transference must be considered part of the delusion. This is not unreasonable. For the story is premised on Lester's desire to kill Kirk and to take his place. The belief that Kirk must die fits well with her perverted desires and could thus be part of the delusion. These delusory beliefs would have been imprinted on Kirk's brain by the machine.

The apparent presence of Lester/K on the bridge and Kirk/L in the brig has two possible explanations. One possibility is that Spock's telepathic powers help to form a temporary psychic link between Kirk and Lester which manifests itself in this unusual way. Another possibility is that Spock's intervention accelerates the process whereby the real personalities of Kirk and Lester resurface. However, the delusion, not yet gone, causes each person to have a brief but vivid hallucination of having been elsewhere on the ship as the other person. The contents of the hallucinations would be based on the knowledge that each individual had of the other's whereabouts. Thus, Kirk/L briefly realizes who he is; but as the delusion reasserts its power he has a hallucination of having been in

the brig while his real personality was re-emerging. Lester/K has a similar experience. The coincidental timing of these events could be accounted for either by Spock's intervention or by supposing that the effects of the machine were beginning to wear off at a uniform rate (or a combination of these factors).

The above speculations suffice to keep the facts of the story consistent with the idea that the machine is a personality confusion device. The basic difference in interpretations is this: according to the mind transfer view, Lester/K is Kirk and Kirk/L is Lester; according to the personality confusion view, Lester/K is Lester and Kirk/L is Kirk. The question that remains is whether there are reasons to prefer one interpretation over the other. Is it better to suppose, with the creators of the episode and most viewers, that the machine is a device for transferring minds? Or is it better to suppose that the machine confuses Kirk and Lester about who they are by inducing powerful paranoid delusions?

Two common arguments offered by my students for retaining the mind transfer view can, I think, be dismissed. First, there is the authority of Spock and his mind meld. Spock does not usually allow emotion to cloud his judgment, so he would not believe the mind transfer theory

unless the evidence were solid. Scotty, in his conversation with McCoy, uses this reasoning. There are two problems with the argument: (1) the possibility of personality confusion is not raised in the episode, so it is difficult to know what Spock would say about it. During the court-martial proceedings Spock says that the only issue is whether life-entity transfer is possible. But this is not the only issue. One must also ask whether profound personality confusion of the sort I have been discussing is possible. (2) Spock is eminently rational, but he is not infallible. Spock's telepathic abilities may give him special access to the mental states of others, but there is no reason to suppose that telepathy is an infallible source of information. Spock himself notes that evidence from a mind meld is not "objective." To rely on Spock's authority is to beg the question against the personality confusion interpretation.

Another common argument for retaining the mind transfer theory is that it is simpler to imagine a machine that could transfer minds than one that could so profoundly confuse people about who they are. This argument betrays a failure to appreciate that Star Trek is, after all, fiction. Roddenberry and Singer could just as easily have set out to write a story about a device that confuses people about who they are. In any case, this

argument can be turned to my advantage. The only phenomena that might shed light on the possibility of mind transfer are such things as spirit possession, channeling, out-of-body experiences, and putative cases of remembered past lives. The evidential credentials of these phenomena are dubious, to say the least. Paranoia, on the other hand, is a well-accepted category in psychology and psychiatry. These facts should lead us to say that it is easier to imagine a personality confusion machine than a mind transfer machine.

A more sophisticated argument for the mind transfer view is that a person's identity through time cannot be analyzed in terms of bodily continuity. Physical attributes such as height, weight, complexion, physical health, and even sex are not essential features of one's identity. Nothing is easier, it seems, than to imagine having different physical attributes and hence a different body. The philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) argued forcefully for this view. If some morning you found a totally different face staring back at you in the mirror you would be shocked, frightened, and disoriented but you would still be the same person. To insure that you had not lost your mind you could check your memories of what had happened to you before the change. Are the clothes you recall

laying out the night before where they should be? Is the book you remember reading before retiring still on the table? Is your recollection of having made a breakfast appointment with a friend correct? There would be numerous ways to check your sanity that have nothing to do with the body. In such an unusual case, personal identity would be vouchsafed by your own consciousness, and in particular, the memories it possesses.

This is a better argument for the mind transfer view, but it is not really convincing. The argument fails to distinguish what philosophers sometimes call real memories and apparent memories. One has a real memory of experiencing something only if one actually experienced it. One has an apparent memory of experiencing something if one did not experience it. Suppose, to elaborate on the above example, you are able to verify all your memories--the clothes, the book, the breakfast appointment, and so on. But now you discover that there is someone else with memories identical to yours. Presumably, at most one of you really remembers what happened. The other person only seems to remember. Having memories, even memories that one can "check out" in this rough-and-ready fashion, is not enough to establish one's personal identity. Under normal circumstances, an appeal to memory is sufficient to establish one's identity.

However, the sorts of cases under consideration are extraordinary, for the reliability of memory is in question.

Let us return to the idea of bodily continuity as a criterion for personal identity. The first thing to notice is that bodily continuity is not the same as strict physical identity. One's body is constantly changing throughout life. Thus, to speak of someone's identity through time is not to imply that there is a strict physical equality among the various temporal slices of their existence. There can be no doubt that one can remain the same person through changes of height, weight, complexion, physical health, and even sex. However, this is not to say that one could remain the same person with a different body, a body not continuous with the one that one is born with.

The fact is that the criterion commonly used to judge personal identity is bodily continuity. In simplest terms, we use the rule, "same body, same person." This rule is routinely used in cases of people who forget who they are (as in extreme psychogenic amnesia) and of people who believe they are someone else (as in some cases of paranoia). To bring out the strength of the criterion of bodily continuity, I will use a thought

experiment and expand it to cover different cases until we come to something like the case in "Turnabout Intruder."

Imagine a machine about the size of a closet with two doors in front and two in back. The doors are labeled "Enter" and "Exit" respectively. We can easily watch someone walk through the machine, as it is made of a transparent material. We discover that persons who walk through the machine are profoundly changed, not bodily, but in terms of their personalities. First, suppose that a man named Max walks into the machine alone. He emerges behaving very strangely. He claims to be Sherlock Holmes and seems to be quite knowledgeable of all of Holmes' cases. Suppose further that Max has never heard of Sherlock Holmes and, in any event, never showed the slightest interest in sleuthing. How should we describe what the machine has done? We should not say that Max is now Sherlock Holmes. The reasons are simple. It is Max's body that we saw walk through the machine. Moreover, Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character, a particularly interesting figment of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's imagination. The machine has somehow given Max information about Holmes and his cases and has caused Max to believe that he is himself the famous detective. The machine has confused Max about who he is.

Now suppose that another person, Ann, walks through the machine. She emerges claiming to be Amelia Earheart, the famous aviatrix. Like Max, she has extensive information concerning the person she claims to be. Here again, we would say that the machine had confused Ann about who she was. The reasons are similar. We watched Ann walk through the machine. Furthermore, Amelia Earheart, though not a fictional character, is now dead. Were Earheart still alive we would have even more reason to deny that Ann had become Amelia Earheart. We should not say that there are two Amelia Earhearts; rather, Ann mistakenly believes that she is Amelia Earheart.

Let us give Ann and Max back their old personalities. Now, let Ann walk through the machine again. This time she emerges believing she is Max. She has adopted Max's mannerisms and seems to possess memories about Max's past that he has shared with no one. Indeed, she would pass for Max except for one thing. Max is present and we know that she is not him. Even were Max to keel over dead or completely vanish as she emerged from the machine, we should still not say that she had become Max. Like the previous cases we should say that Ann is confused about

who she is, not that she has become a different person. The criterion implicit in our judgments is, "same body, same person."

Finally, let us imagine Ann and Max entering the machine together and emerging believing that each is the other person. This scenario is analogous to "Turnabout Intruder" in all relevant respects. The same reasons we had, in the previous example, for saying that Ann is confused about who she is, we now have for saying that both Ann and Max are confused about who they are. We watched them walk through the machine; and the person they claim to be is still present. The special circumstances of the case give rise to the illusion that there has been a transfer of minds. The person that each of them claims to be, although present with them in the room, also claims to be them. The same illusion is created in "Turnabout Intruder." Thus, our considered judgment should be that Kirk and Lester are confused about who they are, not that there has been an exchange of minds.

This conclusion is further supported by considering the concept of sexual identity. The episode vacillates between portraying sexuality as an attribute of the mind or of the body. Shortly after the "transfer," Kirk/L speaks of the "indignity of being a woman" and says that it is "better to be

dead than to live alone in the body of a woman." The shift from "being a woman" to "living in the body of a woman" is conspicuous. Is the person who lived in the woman's body, Janice Lester, not a woman? The same confusion is evident in Kirk's final remorseful reflection that "her life could have been as rich as any woman's, if only, if only . . ." The viewer must complete the thought. Significantly he says "any woman" rather than "anyone." This implies that being a woman is something she is, whether she is in the body of a woman or a man. In the written version of the story Spock has the final word, "If only she had ever been able to take any pride in being a woman" (Blish 627).

One could argue that Lester's dissatisfaction stems not from a hatred of her womanhood but from the unjust treatment of women by Starfleet. Clearly, she is envious of the power and prestige attached to the Captain's office. Kirk/L remarks to Coleman, "I love the life he led--the power of the Starship commander." But this is not available to her because she is a woman. She says to Kirk in the opening scene, "your world of Starship captains doesn't admit women." Lester might have found Romanian society more to her liking. In "The Enterprise Incident" the unnamed commander of the Romanian starship is female. Even here,

however, there is a strong suggestion that a woman is not qualified to command a starship. The cloaking device is stolen from her ship and her romantic involvement with Spock is her undoing.

Let us grant that Lester covets Kirk's office. It is true nevertheless that we are able to believe not simply that an exchange of minds has occurred but that a man's mind has been placed in a woman's body and vice versa. The person retains his or her sexual identity even in the body of the opposite sex. Since it is not sex in a biological sense that is transferred, the mind itself, considered apart from the body, must be male or female. During the court-martial Lester/K claims that Lester's intense hatred of her own womanhood made life with her impossible. She attempts to escape her womanhood with the help of the machine on Cannus II. But we are supposed to believe that she no more ceases to be a woman by being in a man's body than Kirk ceases to be a man by being in a woman's body. Scotty says to McCoy that he had seen the Captain "boiling mad" but never "red faced with hysteria." The choice of words is instructive. Hysteria derives from the Greek word for womb and was traditionally believed to be a specifically female malady. The sexual

identity of both parties is never in doubt, either by themselves or by viewers.

In portraying the mind itself as being male or female, "Turnabout Intruder" strays somewhat from traditional mind/body dualism. Descartes apparently viewed sex as a matter of biological plumbing and ascribed no sex to the mind. Plato's view is more complex. He believed that the soul has a tripartite structure of reason, spirit (in the sense of passion), and appetite (or desire). He deemed the rational part most perfect and therefore most fit to govern the soul. In themselves, these ideas say nothing about sexuality. However, Plato also believed in reincarnation. Like others who held this view in the ancient world, he understood the goal of the process to be escape from the cycle of rebirth. In his view, this is accomplished when the rational part of the soul predominates. He held that we all begin on equal footing in men's bodies. We are reborn as women if we allow the appetitive part of the soul to rule our lives. Although the soul itself is neither male nor female, the "lower," appetitive part of the soul is associated with femaleness while the "higher," rational part is associated with maleness.

These Platonic ideas about rationality and malesness are definitely echoed in "Turnabout Intruder." But the episode goes further than Plato by inviting one to think of the mind itself as being either male or female. Janice Lester is a woman. Her mind, which is to say her identity as Janice Lester, inhabits Kirk's body. Thus, we are led to believe that a woman inhabits a man's body. The same reasoning holds *mutatis mutandis* for Kirk--a man inhabits a woman's body.

The confusion about sexuality contributes to the illusion that the machine is a mind transfer device. By encouraging viewers to think of the mind, as well as the body, as something that is either male or female, it becomes easier to believe that a man could be in a woman's body and a woman in a man's body. The alternate view, that Kirk and Lester are confused about who they are, gives a simpler account of their sexuality. Just as they are confused about their personal identity, so they are confused about their sexual identity. There is no need to posit the existence of a non-physical entity, a mind, that retains its sex when considered apart from a body.

I have argued that the machine that Dr. Lester finds on Canus II does not transfer minds between bodies but only confuses people about who

they are. At the outset I said that the mind transfer view presupposes mind/body dualism. We have also seen that the episode diverges slightly from traditional dualism in its implication that the mind has a sexual identity. It is only fair to ask what sort of mind/body view is presupposed by the interpretation of the machine as a personality confusion device. Interestingly, outside of the falsity of Platonic or Cartesian dualism, very little is presupposed. If any one of the three tenets of dualism is false, my interpretation of what the machine does will work. Thus, the machine is a personality confusion device if (1) persons are not simply minds, or (2) minds are not immaterial, or (3) minds are incapable of existence apart from bodies. There is a great deal of flexibility concerning mind/body views in the position I espouse. This flexibility serves as an auxiliary argument in favor of the view that the machine confuses Kirk and Lester about themselves.

"Turnabout Intruder" would ordinarily be classified as science fiction. I prefer to think of it as philosophic fiction. For the questions it suggests are properly beyond the competence of science. Are persons (at least human ones) minds which happen to be housed in bodies? Or, are persons inseparable from their bodies? Is personal identity determined by

consciousness or by bodily continuity? Is the mind, considered apart from the body, a sexual being? Or, is sexuality the exclusive property of things with bodies? Consideration of these questions and others like them is the stuff of the world's great philosophical works. My position is that the creators and most viewers of the episode, in saying that Kirk and Lester were temporarily reincarnated rather than confused, not only misinterpret the story but also give the wrong answers to the philosophical questions. My disagreement, however, is mixed with a sense of gratitude to the creators of this episode in particular and to the phenomenon of Star Trek in general for having kept these and other perennial issues alive.

Bibliographical Note:

The sources for "Turnabout Intruder" were the video tape of the episode, Allan Asherman's *The Star Trek Compendium* (New York: Pocket Books, 1989) and *Star Trek, The Classic Episodes* 3, adapted by James Blish (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).

Plato's discussions of dualism can be found in his dialogues, particularly *Phaedo*, Book IV of the *Republic*, and the *Timaeus* (41-42). The *locus classicus* of Descartes' dualism is his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. A briefer discussion can be found in opening passages of his *Principles of Philosophy*. Locke's discussion of personal identity is in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, chapter 27.