



Work-life imbalance

Description

Severance is a dark scifi comedy-drama about a high-tech company capable of splitting the memory life of its office workers in two. As soon as a worker comes into the office she/he loses all recollection of what happened on the outside. When she leaves the office she immediately forgets what happened at work as she resumes her outside mental life.

For these severed individuals, work is just one continuous conscious experience. Outside life is similarly contiguous. That's when the workers sleep, have meaningful social relationships, experience the world as usual and wonder what they get up to at work. The workers in their working lives are captive to this arrangement as long as their outside selves (outies) consent to this severed life.

Occasionally the outie might communicate with his or her innie self, as in the case of Bert's retirement. Bert's outie delivers a poignant recorded video message at his innie self's retirement party.

Though today is my last day with you, I'm certain you will remain with me in spirit, buried in some deep yet completely unaccessible corner of my mind. The impression you've left on me is indelible. Though I'm unaware of it on a conscious level, I will never forget any of you, even though sitting here right now I have no recollection of ever meeting you, I have no idea of your names, or any of your physical characteristics, or even how many of you there are. Anyway, I just want to say thank you all, and Bert.

Episode 7, series 1, Defiant Jazz, Severance, Dir. Ben Stiller

The plot of the series explores why someone would willingly subject themselves to this severed cognitive existence, their mysterious work tasks, and their ultimate unhappiness.

Two brains

The severance scenario develops on the philosophical conundrums posed by philosophers such as Daniel Dennett. In his famous thought experiment (‘‘Where am I?’’) Dennett imagines a future scenario where his brain is surgically separated from his body; his brain is placed in a high-tech life-support vat connected to his body via elaborate radio links. Where is he in fact, and where does he think he is: with his body or with his brain?

Eventually Dennett’s body deteriorates from radiation poisoning and is replaced by a new one. The technicians also create an electronic replica of his brain. Dennett then has a new body and two brains, and can switch between the two brain-versions of himself. This produces two personas that each have their own independent memories, like Bert in *Severance*. Amongst several dilemmas in Dennett’s scenario,

‘‘the two brains drifted apart, and of course once the process started, it snowballed, for I was in a slightly different receptive state for the input we both received, a difference that was soon magnified. In no time at all the illusion that I was in control of my body—our body—was completely dissipated’’ (7).

It is easy to characterise both scenarios (Dennett’s and *Severance*) as unlikely if not impossible. They also reinforce rather than resolve versions of the mind-body Cartesian split. That said, I think most of us can identify with this kind of disconnect and discontinuity in human experience. Independent of its techno-fictional Cartesianism, it’s a state with which most of us can identify.

We are all severed

Recently, I had to provide a detailed record with accurate dates of employment and places of residence while working and living outside of the UK. The process involved some detailed investigation as I sifted through old correspondence, documents, diaries, appointment calendars, address books, and photographs, most of it pre-digital, aided of course by my own recollections, a few conversations with others, lining up personal memories with news events and mental imagery: e.g. trying to imagine myself studying for an exam while living in a shared house arrangement.

The process of reconstructing a past reminded me of severances in my own ‘‘conscious experience.’’ There are the sequential disconnections. Is that uncomfortable adolescent self struggling with an itchy school uniform the same self as the adult stretching across an architect’s drawing board? Then there’s the experience of parallel lives, not just the disconnect between work and non-work life, but habits of mind and practice that partition work from home, holidays abroad from home time, Internet browsing from hill walking, cooking from church-going, with leakages across worlds, either managed or accidental.

There are also unacknowledged parallel existences as suggested in Bert’s retirement speech, that take place in the deep ‘‘unaccessible corner of my mind’’ buried beneath consciousness, and other Freudian schemes to connect multiple selves. See post: [Architectural unconscious](#).

Bibliography

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<https://www.lehigh.edu/~mhb0/Dennett-WhereAml.pdf>

Note

- Full retirement speech. Bert is played by Christopher Walken.

Hello. This is kind of strange, but a lot of things about this job are. You all know that better than me I'm guessing. Of course, I don't really know any of you, but the man standing there with you now does. He's worked with you for nearly seven years and I hope they've been good years. I don't know what they've been like, or what exactly I or he has been doing with you, but I do know how I feel. Every day when I come from being with you, I come home feeling tired, but fulfilled. I feel satisfied. I must like you very much. Though today is my last day with you, I'm certain you will remain with me in spirit, buried in some deep yet completely unaccessible corner of my mind. The impression you've left on me is indelible. Though I'm unaware of it on a conscious level, I will never forget any of you, even though sitting here right now I have no recollection of ever meeting you, I have no idea of your names, or any of your physical characteristics, or even how many of you there are. Anyway, I just want to say thank you all, and Bert. I see you. Congratulations. Good job buddy. Bon Voyage.

Episode 7, series 1, "Defiant Jazz," Severance, Dir. Ben Stiller

- On the subject of irreconcilable recollections, one official record showed that I started my masters degree at the same time that I was living in a shared house. Everyone in the house had a job and I couldn't picture myself talking with the others about my life as a full time student. The resolution was that I had started the degree by undertaking just one course part time while still working a recollection that took some work to construct.

Category

1. Techno-utopias

Tags

1. AI
2. brain
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