A discussion of James Moor’s ‘sphere of consciousness’

When Moor writes about a ‘sphere of consciousness’ he means the awareness which we, as human beings, have of ourselves and our environment. It is debated whether this awareness includes our overall sense of identity as a person, or perhaps even as sub-personalities within one person. This debate is discussed by Moor and he reaches the conclusion that the sphere of consciousness is not exactly the same thing as a person or self. Moor’s discussion is based on research done with split-brain patients. He argues that these patients form a continuum or spectrum, and that essentially normal people also fall on the same spectrum although it may be less obvious. People at one end of the spectrum show a unified consciousness where both halves of the brain seem to function together and their spheres of consciousness are merged. On the opposite end are those split-brain patients who seem to have two separate spheres of consciousness happening at the same time, one for each side of the brain. However, Moor points out that in the latter case, one half of the brain is still dominant and the other half is ‘minor’ (p.95) or ‘silent’ (p. 97). For this reason the self or person should still be seen as one whole, rather than two completely separate spheres. In addition, the two spheres of consciousness or brain hemispheres are not at odds with each other in the way that two genuinely different individuals would be. They may not be as connected as they are in a normal person, but they are still not opposed to each other and therefore they have one overall identity.

In his discussion, Moor refers to three different arguments which claim that the two spheres of consciousness should be seen as two separate people. He refutes each one of these theories in turn, and in each case says that these two spheres of consciousness must be taken together as parts of one person. He does not deny that the two spheres may be functioning somewhat independently of each other in split-brain patients. Thus he implies that a sphere of consciousness is the abstract or mental phenomenon which arises from the functioning of a physical human brain. If the brain is completely intact then the sphere of consciousness will include both halves of the brain and all sections within it. If the brain has been split by surgery, there may be two somewhat separate spheres of consciousness (one for each half of the brain), but this is not the same thing as having two separate selves or two distinct people.

The arguments which Moor refers to suggest that the sphere of consciousness is ‘cognitively and socially sophisticated’ (p. 96). It also has intention plus ‘beliefs, preferences and desires’ (p. 100). Moor does not refute these points, but he does argue that all of these qualities form only one person rather than two, even in patients whose brain hemispheres seem to function somewhat separately from each other.

Reference:
Moor, James (1982). ‘Split Brains and Atomic Persons’; Philosophy of Science 49; 91-106. Philosophy of Science Association