

Possible Worlds



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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Hāngai o Hīkato

Day 5

TOPICS

- *Personal Identity*
 - ❖ *Locke on Personal Identity*
 - ❖ *Personal Identity as Psychological Continuity*
 - ❖ *Parfit: Nihilism about Personal Identity*
 - ❖ *Williams: The Self and the Future*
 - ❖ *Personal Identity and Indexicality*
- *Final Reflection*

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Warm-up exercise: (groups 3-4)

1) Are you **the same person** you were *two years ago*?

Are you **the same person** you were *at age 3*?

Consider these questions regarding both **qualitative** AND **quantitative** identity.

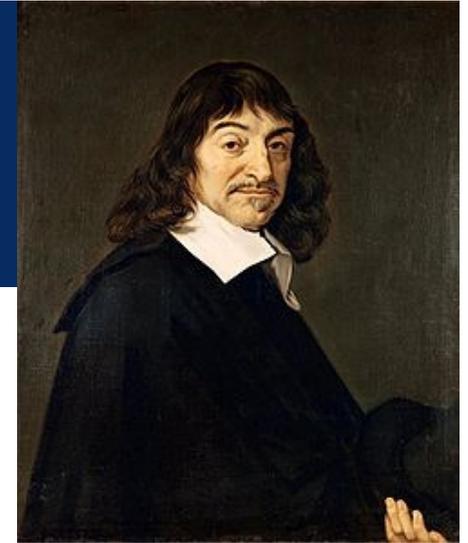
2) What makes you the same person, or not in the **quantitative** sense? In other words, do you have any **essential properties**? For example, would you still be you if you changed:

- your appearance?
- your gender?
- your life history?
- your parents?
- your DNA...?



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The issue of personal identity we are most interested in is **quantitative** identity of persons.

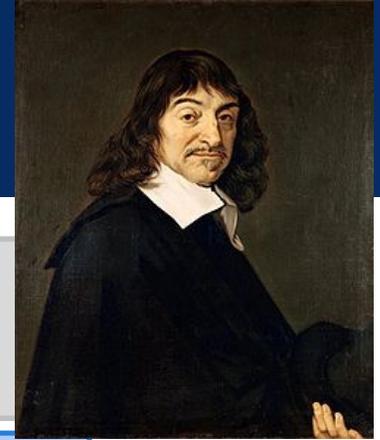
Descartes: Meditation Two

Rene Descartes made a claim about what is his most essential self which has had profound influence on thought about this question.

- In his *Meditations*, he asks – **What am I?**
- He says: ***He is not his body.***
- Why not? He claims his body is 'separable' from him.
- How is it separable? Surely not physically?
- It is 'separable in thought'.
- For instance, he might *doubt* that he has a body. By doing this, he is taking for granted that he can imagine not having the body he thinks he has, and still being him.
- Analogously: ***He is not his sense-perceptions.***
- Why not?....Once again, he can imagine himself separate from them, having different sense-perceptions than he in fact has, and still being him.

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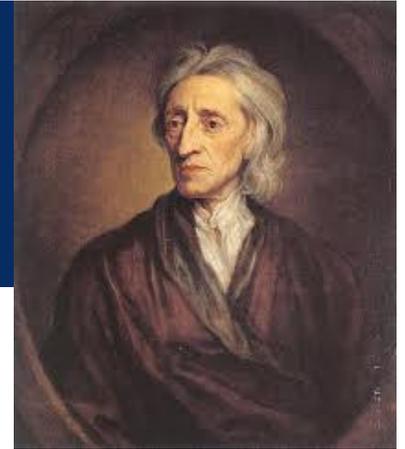
"I am, then, in the strict sense, only a thing that thinks..."

Question: *If one is only a thing that thinks, what properties might this thinking thing have?*

- This 'disembodiment of the self' is an extremely influential moment in modern Western philosophy. It is the basis of a so-called "**Cartesian dualism**", which sees the mind and the body as different **substances**.
- The idea then flows into the philosophy of John Locke, despite Locke's official philosophy being not dualist but **materialist** (Locke is not always consistent).

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Locke on Personal Identity

Locke claims that when it comes to living things, the issue of identity is interesting because you can't give the same answer for a living thing as for, say, a chair.

A chair is the same chair if it is made of the same matter
(`substance')

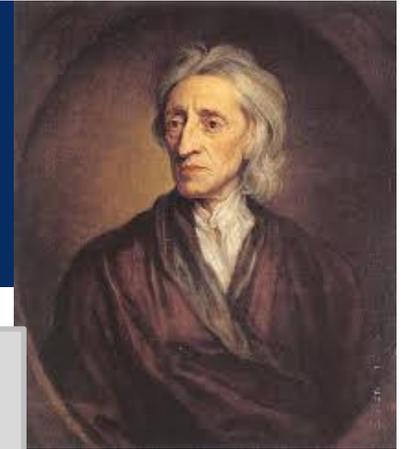
But a tree can be the same tree even if it is not made of the same matter.

Why not? What makes a tree the same tree?



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“...something is one plant if it has an organization of parts in one cohering body partaking of one common life.”

We can call this a **functional** definition of ‘being the same plant’. It is not about the specific ingredients (‘substances’) making up the plant. It is how they are put together, and how the whole *functions*.

However in fact Locke makes a **3-way** distinction:

- **the same substance** (i.e. same matter)
- **the same man** (i.e. the same living organism: functional definition)

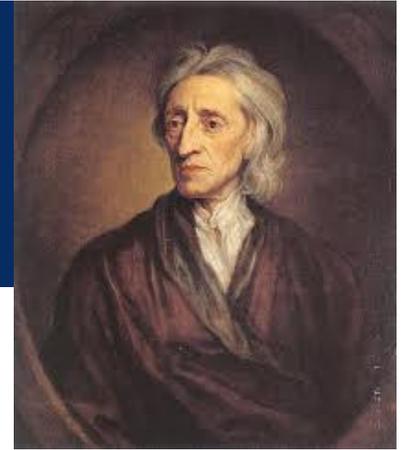
But then he makes a further distinction between these two and:

- **the same person**

Question: *Why does he do this?*

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He claims that a person is:

“a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing at different times and places”

So it is at least **conceivable** (and thus **logically possible in at least some naive common-sense usage of that term**) that the identity of this kind of consciousness, and the identity of the living organism in which it ‘resides’ might come apart.

In order to show this, Locke puts forward a thought experiment. He describes a possible world where.....

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The Prince and the Cobbler.

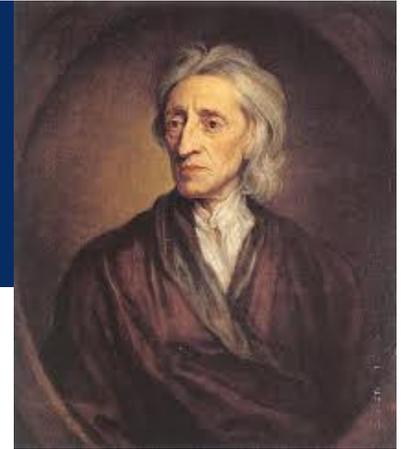
Imagine that one day a prince wakes up in a cobbler's body (and vice versa), with each having all their memories replaced by those of the other. If it is discovered that the prince committed a murder 2 years ago, who should be punished? Which body should be put in jail? The prince's body with the cobbler's memories? Or the cobbler's body with the prince's memories?

See also [*this recent example of the same story*](#)



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The fact that we can imagine these possible worlds might seem to suggest that we have a concept of personal identity which purely tracks psychological continuity, not bodily continuity.

- Otherwise these stories would not even make sense, wouldn't they? The Freaky Friday story would just be incomprehensible nonsense. (Why is that mother suddenly behaving like her daughter did, and saying she wants to get out of her body and she doesn't want to marry the man she is engaged to - ?? This is not a story about body-swapping, this is just a story about two people who are totally insane!)

*- Or maybe there is something more complex going on? E.g. there is some kind of **tension** in our culture's concept of personal identity, and this is why we find these stories interesting...*

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Personal Identity as Psychological Continuity

We can say the key criterion for personal identity *for Locke* is **psychological continuity**.

Locke defines psychological continuity in terms of continuity of **memory**:

“As far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person”

We could summarise this in more modern terms:

Person A at t_1 = Person B at t_2 iff B at t_2 can remember experiences had by A at t_1 .

What objections to Locke's account of personal identity can you think of?

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The movie Memento provides a brilliant aid to philosophical reflection on these questions (watch 1:10–6:05)

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Popular objections:

1) “According to this theory of personal identity, I am not identical with me at 2 years old, because I can’t remember anything that happened to me at 2 years old. And that is a result we don’t want.”

Locke’s reply: **Bite the bullet.** You are not the same *person* that you were when you were 2, although you might be the same ‘*man*’ (i.e. organism):

“It may be objected: ‘Suppose I wholly lose the memory of some parts of my life beyond any possibility of retrieving them, so that I shall never be conscious of them again; aren’t I still the same person who did those actions, had those thoughts that I once was conscious of, even though I have now forgotten them?’ To this I answer that we must be careful about what the word ‘I’ is applied to. This objector is thinking of sameness of the man, and calls it ‘I’ because he assumes that the same man is the same person. But the assumption isn’t necessarily correct... “

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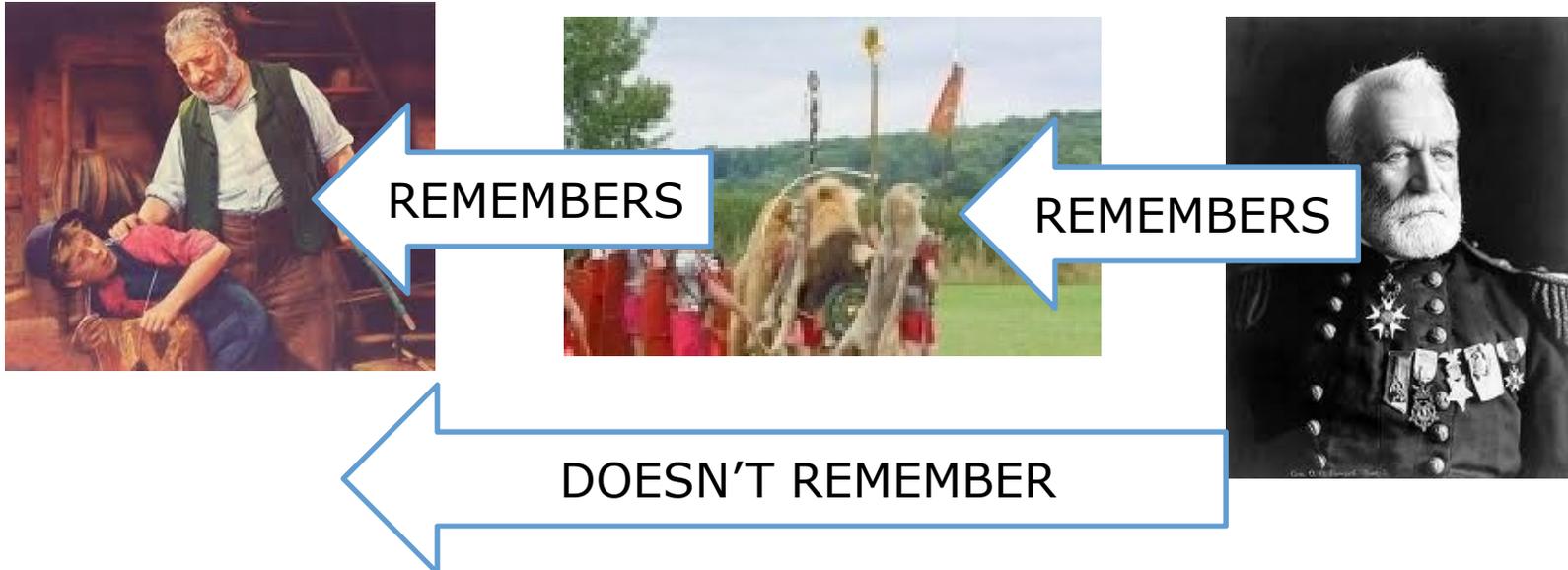
But **Thomas Reid** uses this concession to drive Locke's view into contradiction. He points out that memories can **overlap** from different periods of your life, yet not be **continuous** through it:

"Suppose a brave officer to have been flogged when a boy at school for robbing an orchard, to have taken a standard from the enemy in his first campaign, and to have been made a general in advanced life; suppose, also... that, when he took the standard, he was conscious of his having been flogged at school, and that, when made a general, he was conscious of his taking the standard, but had absolutely lost the consciousness of his flogging...it follows... that he who was flogged at school is the same person who took the standard, and that he who took the standard is the same person who was made a general. Whence it follows, **if there be any truth in logic*, that the general is the same person with him who was flogged at school. But the general's consciousness does not reach so far back as his flogging; therefore... he is not the person who was flogged. Therefore the general is, and at the same time is not, the same person with him who was flogged at school."**

***N.B.!** 😊

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Question: Why is this situation incoherent?
What is it about *the identity relation* that renders this situation incoherent?

Answer: Identity is *transitive*. If $a=b$ and $b=c$, then $a=c$.

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Branching Objection: A further issue with the memory theory: Couldn't there be more than one entity who is psychologically continuous with me, who has my memories? And if so, doesn't Locke have to say that personhood could *branch*? (I.e. **qualitative** but not **quantitative** identity). And isn't that too weird?

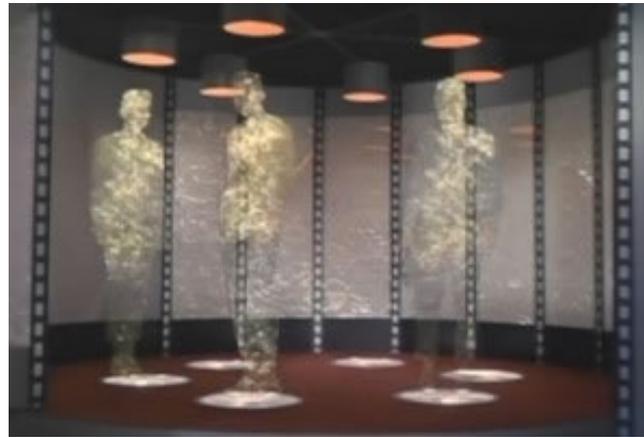
Locke's reply: Once again, **bite the bullet**. Personhood *can* branch, at least in the following sense:

"If one man could have distinct disconnected consciousnesses at different times, that same man would certainly make different persons at different times. That this is what people in general think can be seen in the most solemn declaration of their opinions: human laws don't punish the madman for the sane man's actions, or the sane man for what the madman did, because they treat them as two persons. This is reflected in common speech when we say that someone is 'not himself' or is 'beside himself'.."

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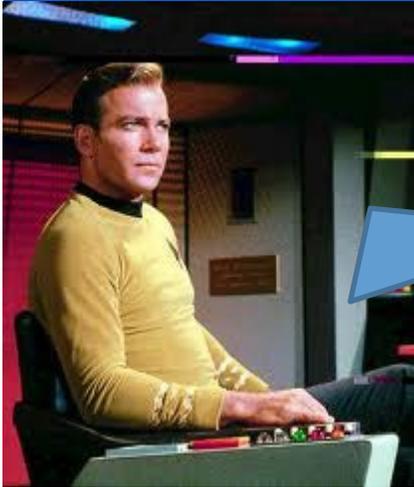
Branching Objection: Branching scenarios have been explored in science fiction stories concerning the idea of **teletransportation**.



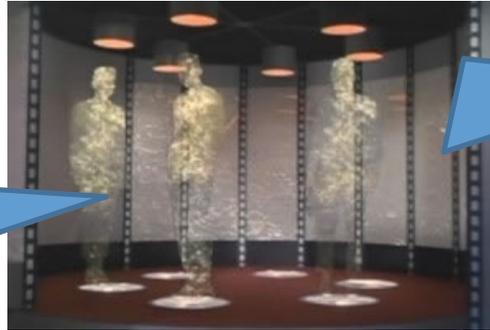
We all know that this process is supposed to work by copying your structure and reassembling **a new 'you'** at the desired destination atom-for-atom (which it is *assumed* will reproduce all of your memories), and throwing away the old one. But what if **the old you** were not thrown away?

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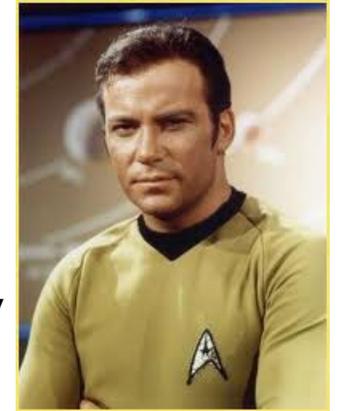
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A: Captain Kirk at t1



B at t2: far away



C at t2: still here

What are we going to say about the personal identity of **Captain Kirk** now?

A is identical to B but not C?

A is identical to C but not B?

A is identical to neither?

We cannot say that A is identical to both (Why?)

- our transitivity problem again

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Parfit: Nihilism about Personal Identity

For reasons such as this, in more recent times (~1970s) **Derek Parfit** continues with the Lockean idea that psychological continuity is what matters in determining personhood, but makes the following proposal:

Replace talk of personal ***identity*** (which is all or nothing) with talk of ***survival*** (which can be more or less)

He claims the question of personal identity is ***not a substantive question***. Just like the question of 'country identity' is not a substantive question:

Is New Zealand the same country in 1990 as it was in 1830? Well yes and no – it depends what you mean by 'country'. It is the same land-mass, but it has a very different political system, all its population are different...Disputes about this surely turn on **semantics only**, not **fact**.

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Parfit: Nihilism about Personal Identity

Parfit offers us two relations which we can use to define 'personal survival':

Psychological Connectedness: If **P1** **q-remembers** most of **P2's** life, the two of them are psychologically connected.

Psychological Continuity: There is a chain of psychological connectedness from **P1** to **P2**. (*This relation is transitive.*)

Question: What do *you* think would be the best way to use these relations to capture our intuitions about personal survival?

q-memory stands for 'quasi-memory'. It means it is *just as if P1* has memories of **P2's** life. This is introduced to avoid begging certain questions

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How Nihilism about Personal Identity can make the World a Better Place

Why do we do the things we do? **Parfit**: only 2 reasons

1) 'Biased rationality' (self-interest). Do what will get you what you want.

2) Impartiality. Do what is in the best interests of everyone.

-But **1)** only makes sense if there exists a 'self' to look after.

-Parfit says it really doesn't. Instead we have a series of relationships of greater or less connectedness with potentially many other entities in our future and past.

- But that is kind of like what we have with our fellow humans anyway!

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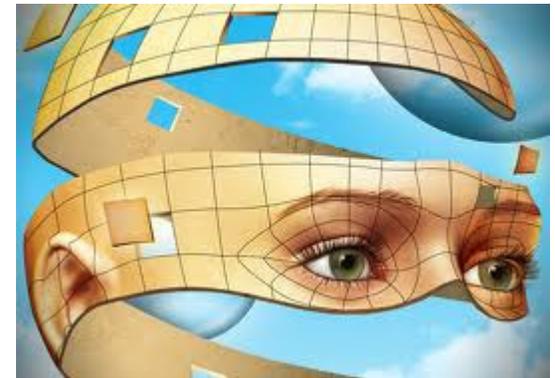
How Nihilism about Personal Identity can make the World a Better Place

- How much psychological continuity is there between **you now** and **you at 65**? - maybe **15%**?

- How much psychological continuity is there between **you now** and **your sister**? - maybe **30%**?

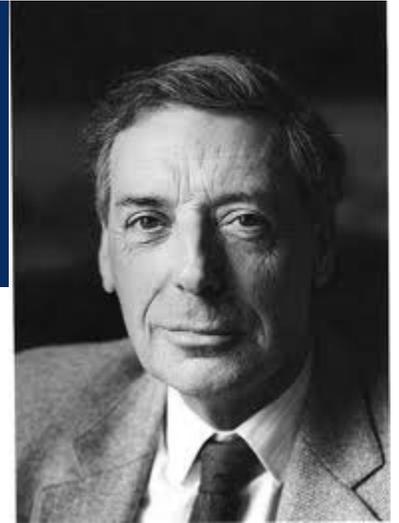
So you should care twice as much about what happens to your sister (now) as you do about what happens to you at 65.

Parfit claims that this is what religions such as Buddhism have been trying to teach everyone for 2000 years.



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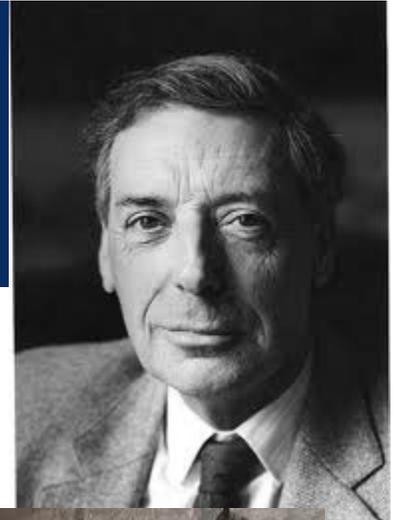


Meanwhile, however, **Bernard Williams** has crafted a brilliant thought-experiment which calls into question ***the whole idea that the key determinant of personhood*** (whether identity or survival) ***is psychological continuity, not bodily continuity.***

This goes back to the original Prince and Cobbler / Freaky Friday thought experiment, and adds a twist...

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Possible World: Through the wonders of advanced neurophysiology, two people: **A** and **B**. are to **change bodies**. The body of **A** will be given the **memories and the personality** of **B** and *vice versa*.

Imagine that you are **A**.

You are told that you have to make a choice – after the switch:

one person *is going to be tortured*
the other *is going to receive \$10 000*.

You get to choose which person gets what.

Who will you choose to receive the money rather than the torture?

- i) **A's body with B's mind**
- ii) **B's body with A's mind?**

Discuss it with your neighbour(s) and make a decision



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Williams notes that there is one way of describing this situation which supports the idea that personal identity depends only on psychological continuity.

Imagine that before the switch, A chooses A's body with B's mind to get the torture, and B's body with A's mind to get the \$10 000. Then the switch happens, and the torture and the money are distributed.

B's body with A's mind will say things like: "I remember making this choice and I'm very pleased with the outcome."

A's body with B's mind will say things like: "I didn't want this! Why did the other guy get to choose what would happen to me?" ...

So it does seem as though 2 persons have swapped bodies.

But is this the best way of describing the situation?

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Williams notes there is another way of describing the situation...

“Someone in whose power I am tells me that I am going to be tortured tomorrow. I am frightened and look forward to tomorrow in great apprehension. He adds that when the time comes, I shall not remember being told that this was going to happen to me, since shortly before the torture something else will be done to me which will make me forget the announcement. This certainly will not cheer me up, since I know perfectly well that I can forget things...He then adds that my forgetting will be only part of a larger process: when the moment of torture comes, I shall not remember any of the things I am now in a position to remember. This does not cheer me up either, since I can readily conceive of being involved in an accident, for instance, as a result of which I wake up in a completely amnesiac state and also in great pain; that could certainly happen to me, I should not like it to happen to me, nor to know that it was going to happen to me.”

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How does it sound so far? He continues...

“He now adds further that at the moment of torture I shall not only not remember the things I am now in a position to remember, but will have a different set of impressions of my past, quite different from the memories I now have. I do not think that this would cheer me up, either. For I can at least conceive the possibility, if not the concrete reality, of going completely mad, and thinking perhaps that I am George IV or somebody; and being told that something like that was going to happen to me...would merely compound the horror. Nor do I see why I should be put into any better frame of mind by the person in charge adding lastly that the impressions of my past with which I shall be equipped on the eve of torture will exactly fit the past of another person now living, and that indeed I shall acquire these impressions by (for instance) information now in his brain being copied into mine. Fear, surely, would still be the proper reaction...”

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Question:

Which way of describing the situation is the right way?

The "body swap" description? Or what Williams says above?

(Could the distinction between qualitative and quantitative identity help here?)

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Personhood and Indexicality

At the beginning of the course I asked you the question:

1) What makes now now?

We saw that one possible answer to this question is, “**Nothing, except that I utter the word at this time point**”. This gives us a *purely indexical* analysis of nowness, and, metaphysically, it gives us a 4-dimensional ‘block’ universe.

We have now examined the analogous questions:

2) What makes here here?

- here the purely indexical view seems obvious.

3) What makes the actual actual?

-here a purely indexical view was strenuously resisted by the audience.

Analogously, we now ask:

4) What makes me me?

Is question 4 just like question 2? If so, what would be the implications of that? If not, why not? Could consideration of questions 1 and 3 help with question 4?

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(small groups)

- i)** What question from this course have you most enjoyed thinking about? Why did you enjoy it?
- ii)** Is there anything this course has made you change your mind about which you think is worth commenting on? If so, what?
- iii)** Can imagining other possible worlds teach you about reality? If so, how does that work??

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FURTHER READING:

Philosophy:

Rene Descartes, "Meditation 2", *Meditations on First Philosophy*

http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/f_descarte.html

John Locke, "On Personal Identity", *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, ch. 27,

http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/f_locke.html

Daniel Dennett, "Where Am I?", *Brainstorms* (Bradford, 1978).

(<http://www.scribd.com/doc/2080952/Where-Am-I->)

Derek Parfit, "Personal Identity", *Philosophical Review* **80 1** (1971), pp. 3-27.

Bernard Williams, "The Self and the Future", in *Personal Identity*, ed J.

Perry (Berkeley, 1975), pp. 179-98. <http://mind.ucsd.edu/syllabi/07-08/Phil-87/williams.pdf>

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Fiction:

William Gibson: "Fragments of a Hologram Rose", *Burning Chrome* (numerous editions) http://lib.ru/GIBSON/frag_rose.txt

[Technology now allows entire sense-experiences to be recorded and 'played back'. The narrator, who works in the industry, reflects on his own life, and a relationship he has lost]

William Gibson: "The Winter Market", *Burning Chrome* (many edn.s) <http://people.cs.uct.ac.za/~bfry/dseaward/insidestuff/wintermarket.html>

[If someone ditched their body and maintained psychological continuity digitally, would it still 'be them'? Brilliant story - very sad.]

Peter Hamilton: *Pandora's Star*, *Judas Unchained* **[Cloning humans is now possible. Your DNA is stored with your doctor so if you ever 'suffer bodyloss' they will make a new you with 'backed up' memories - as long as you've paid your insurance premiums lately...]**

Memento (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2000) **[Tests the Locke / Parfit view of personal identity in so many great ways]**

The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (dir. Michel Gondry, 2004) **[Again the role of memory in human life and relationships...]**

The Prestige (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2006) **[another amazing one from Mr Nolan. "The rivalry between two magicians is exacerbated when one of them performs the ultimate illusion" – from IMDB.com]**