What Makes You You?

December 12, 2014 By Tim Urban

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you say the word "me," you probably feel pretty clear about what that means. It's one of the you're clearest on in the whole world—something you've understood since you were a year old. ght be working on the question, "Who am I?" but what you're figuring out is the *who am* part of estion—the *I* part is obvious. It's just you. Easy.

en you stop and actually think about it for a minute—about what "me" really boils down to at its things start to get pretty weird. Let's give it a try.

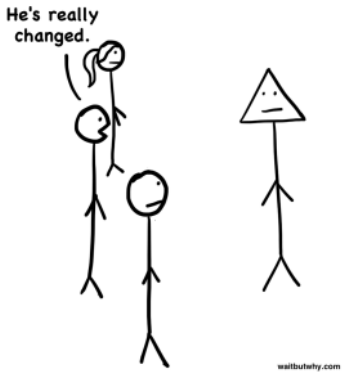
Body Theory

We'll start with the first thing most people equate with what a person is—the physical body itself. The Body Theory says that that's what makes you you. And that would make sense. It doesn't matter what's happening in your life—if your body stops working, you die. If Mark goes through something traumatic and his family says, "It really changed him—he's just not the same person anymore," they don't literally mean Mark isn't the same person—he's changed, but he's still Mark, because Mark's body *is* Mark, no matter what he's acting like. Humans believe they're so much more than a hunk of flesh and bone, but in the end, a physical ant *is* the ant, a squirrel's body *is* the squirrel, and a human is its body. This is the Body Theory—let's test it:

So what happens when you cut your fingernails? You're changing your body, severing some of its atoms from the whole. Does that mean you're not you anymore? Definitely not—you're still you.

How about if you get a liver transplant? Bigger deal, but definitely still you, right?

What if you get a terrible disease and need to replace your liver, kidney, heart, lungs, blood, and facial tissue with synthetic parts, but after all the surgery, you're fine and can live your life normally. Would your family say that you had died because most of your physical body was gone? No, they wouldn't. You'd still be you. None of that is needed for you to be you.



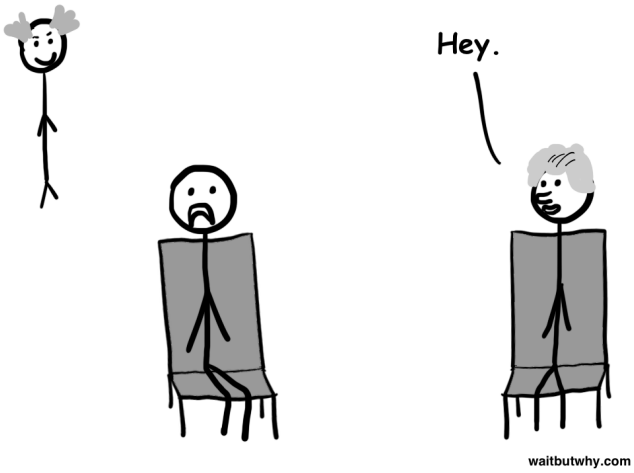
Well maybe it's your DNA? Maybe *that's* the core thing that makes you you, and none of these organ transplants matter because your remaining cells all still contain your DNA, and they're what maintains "you." One major problem—identical twins have identical DNA, and they're not the same person. You are you, and your identical twin is most certainly *not* you. DNA isn't the answer.

So far, the Body Theory isn't looking too good. We keep changing major parts of the body, and you keep being you.

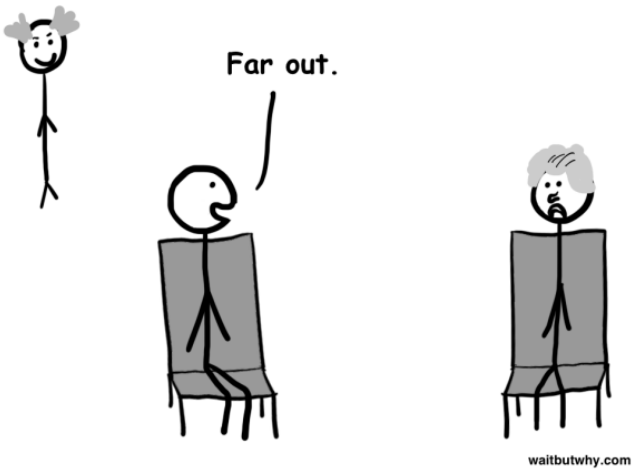
But how about your brain?

The Brain Theory

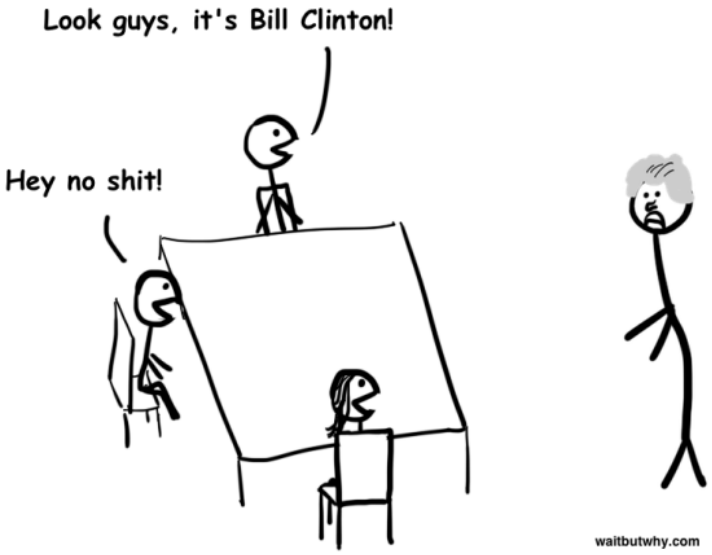
Let's say a mad scientist captures both you and Bill Clinton and locks the two of you up in a room.



The scientist then performs an operation on both of you, whereby he safely removes each of your brains and switches them into the other's head. Then he seals up your skulls and wakes you both up. You look down and you're in a totally different body—Bill Clinton's body. And across the room, you see your body—with Bill Clinton's personality.



Now, are you still you? Well, my intuition says that you're you—you still have your exact personality and all your memories—you're just in Bill Clinton's body now. You'd go find your family to explain what happened:



So unlike your other organs, which could be transplanted without changing your identity, when you swapped brains, it wasn't a brain transplant—*it was a body transplant*. You'd still feel like you, just with a different body. Meanwhile, your old body would *not* be you—it would be Bill Clinton. So what makes you you must be your *brain.* The Brain Theory says that wherever the brain goes, you go—even if it goes into someone else's skull.

The Data Theory

Consider this—

What if the mad scientist, after capturing you and Bill Clinton, instead of swapping your physical *brains*, just hooks up a computer to each of your brains, copies every single bit of data in each one, then wipes both of your brains completely clean, and then copies each of your brain data onto the *other person's physical brain*? So you both wake up, both with your own physical brains in your head, but *you're* not in your body—you're in Bill Clinton's body. After all, Bill Clinton's brain now has all of your thoughts, memories, fears, hopes, dreams, emotions, and personality. The body and brain of Bill Clinton would still run out and go freak out about this to your family. And again, after a significant amount of convincing, they would indeed accept that you were alive, just in Bill Clinton's body.

Philosopher John Locke's memory theory of personal identity suggests that what makes you you is your memory of your experiences. Under Locke's definition of you, the new Bill Clinton in this latest example *is* you, despite not containing any part of your physical body, *not even your brain.*

This suggests a new theory we'll call The Data Theory, which says that you're not your physical body at all. Maybe what makes you you is your brain's *data*—your memories and your personality.

We seem to be homing in on something, but the best way to get to concrete answers is by testing these theories in hypothetical scenarios. Here's an interesting one, conceived by British philosopher Bernard Williams:

The Torture Test

Situation 1: The mad scientist kidnaps you and Clinton, switches your brain data with Clinton's, as in the latest example, wakes you both up, and then walks over to the body of Clinton, where you supposedly reside, and says, "I'm now going to horribly torture one of you—which one should I torture?"

What's your instinct? Mine is to point at my old body, where I no longer reside, and say, "*Him*." And if I believe in the Data Theory, then I've made a good choice. My brain data is in Clinton's body, so *I'm* now in Clinton's body, so who cares about my body anymore? Sure, it sucks for anyone to be tortured, but if it's between me and Bill Clinton, I'm choosing him.

Situation 2: The mad scientist captures you and Clinton, except he doesn't do anything to your brains yet. He comes over to you—normal you with your normal brain and body—and asks you a series of questions. Here's how I think it would play out:

Mad Scientist: Okay so here's what's happening. I'm gonna torture one of you. Who should I torture?

You: [pointing at Clinton] *Him*.

MS: Okay but there's something else—before I torture whoever I torture, I'm going to wipe both of your brains of all memories, so when the torture is happening, neither of you will remember who you were before this. Does that change your choice?

You: Nope. Torture him.

MS: One more thing—before the torture happens, not only am I going to wipe your brains clean, I'm going to build new circuitry into your brain that will convince you that you're Bill Clinton. By the time I'm done, you'll think you're Bill Clinton and you'll have all of his memories and his full personality and anything else that he thinks or feels or knows. I'll do the same thing to him, convincing him he's you. Does that change your choice?

You: Um, no. Regardless of any delusion I'm going through and no matter who I *think* I am, I don't want to go through the horrible pain of being tortured. Insane people still feel pain. Torture him.

So in the first situation, I think you'd choose to have your *own* body tortured. But in the second, I think you'd choose Bill Clinton's body—at least I would. But the thing is—*they're the exact same example.* In both cases, before any torture happens, Clinton's brain ends up with all of your data and your brain has his—the difference is just at which point in the process you were asked to decide. In both cases, your goal is for *you* to not be tortured, but in the first situation, you felt that after the brain data swap, *you* were in Clinton's body, with all of your personality and memories there with you—while in the second situation, if you're like me, you didn't care what was going to happen with the two brains' data, you believed that *you* would remain with your physical brain, and body, either way.

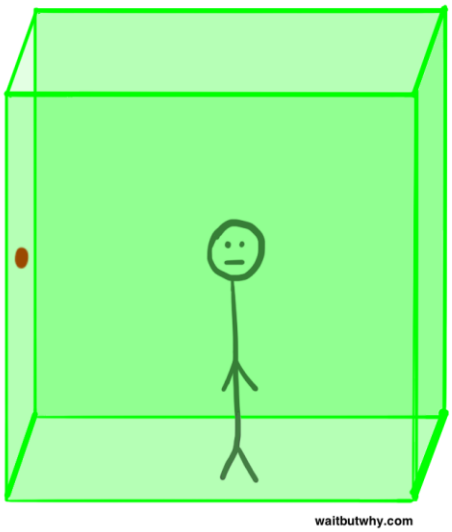
Choosing your body to be the one tortured in the first situation is an argument for the Data Theory—you believe that where your *data* goes, *you* go. Choosing Clinton's body to be tortured in the second situation is an argument for the Brain Theory, because you believe that regardless of what he does with your brain's data, you will continue to be in your own body, because that's where your physical brain is. Some might even take it a step further, and if the mad scientist told you he was even going to switch your *physical* brains, you'd *still* choose Clinton's body, with your brain in it, to be tortured. Those that would torture a body with their own brain in it over torturing their own body believe in the Body Theory.

Not sure about you, but I'm finishing this experiment still divided. Let's try another. Here's my version of modern philosopher Derek Parfit's *teletransporter* thought experiment, which he first described in his book Reasons and Persons—

The Teletransporter Thought Experiment

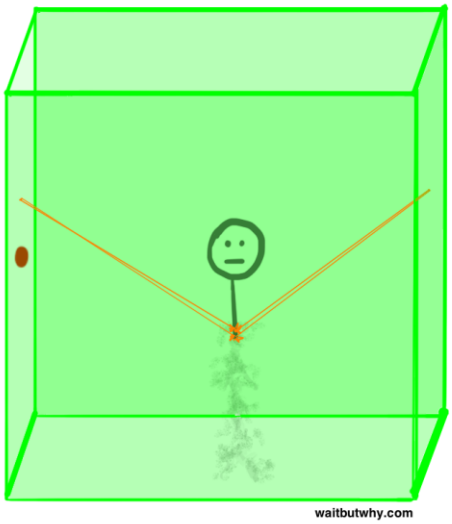
It's the year 2700. The human race has invented all kinds of technology unimaginable in today's world. One of these technologies is teleportation—the ability to transport yourself to distant places at the speed of light. Here's how it works—

You go into a Departure Chamber—a little room the size of a small cubicle.



You set your location—let's say you're in Boston and your destination is London—and when you're ready to go, you press the button on the wall. The chamber walls then scan your entire body, uploading

the exact molecular makeup of your body—every atom that makes up every part of you and its precise location—and as it scans, it destroys, so every cell in your body is destroyed by the scanner as it goes.

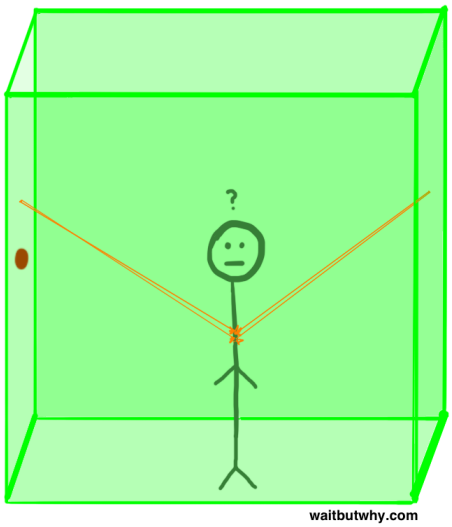


When it's finished (the Departure Chamber is now empty after destroying all of your cells), it beams your body's information to an Arrival Chamber in London, which has all the necessary atoms waiting there ready to go. The Arrival Chamber uses the data to re-form your entire body with its storage of atoms, and when it's finished you walk out of the chamber in London looking and feeling exactly how you did back in Boston—you're in the same mood, you're hungry just like you were before, you even have the same paper cut on your thumb you got that morning.

The whole process, from the time you hit the button in the Departure Chamber to when you walk out of the Arrival Chamber in London, takes five minutes—but to you it feels instantaneous. You hit the button, things go black for a blink, and now you're standing in London. Cool, right?

In 2700, this is common technology. Everyone you know travels by teleportation. In addition to the convenience of speed, it's incredibly safe—no one has ever gotten hurt doing it.

But then one day, you head into the Departure Chamber in Boston for your normal morning commute to your job in London, you press the big button on the wall, and you hear the scanner turn on, but it doesn't work.



The normal split-second blackout never happens, and when you walk out of the chamber, sure enough, you're still in Boston. You head to the check-in counter and tell the woman working there that the Departure Chamber is broken, and you ask her if there's another one you can use, since you have an early meeting and don't want to be late.

She looks down at her records and says, “Hm—it looks like the scanner worked and collected its data just fine, but the cell destroyer that usually works in conjunction with the scanner has malfunctioned.”

“No,” you explain, “it couldn’t have worked, because I’m still here. And I’m late for this meeting—can you please set me up with a new Departure Chamber?”

She pulls up a video screen and says, “No, it did work—see? There you are in London—it looks like you’re gonna be right on time for your meeting.” She shows you the screen, and you see yourself walking on the street in London.

“But that *can’t* be me,” you say, “because I’m still *here*.”

At that point, her supervisor comes into the room and explains that she’s correct—the scanner worked as normal and you’re in London as planned. The only thing that didn’t work was the cell destroyer in the Departure Chamber here in Boston. “It’s not a problem, though,” he tells you, “we can just set you up in another chamber and activate its cell destroyer and finish the job.”

And even though this isn’t anything that wasn’t going to happen before—in fact, you have your cells destroyed twice every day—suddenly, you’re *horrified* at the prospect.

“Wait—no—I don’t want to do that—I’ll *die*.”

The supervisor explains, “You won’t die sir. You just saw yourself in London—you’re alive and well.”

“But that’s not *me*. That’s a *replica* of me—an *imposter*. *I’m* the real me—you *can’t* destroy my cells!”

The supervisor and the woman glance awkwardly at each other. “I’m really sorry sir—but we’re obligated by law to destroy your cells. We’re not allowed to form the body of a person in an Arrival Chamber without destroying the body’s cells in a Departure Chamber.”

You stare at them in disbelief and then run for the door. Two security guards come out and grab you. They drag you toward a chamber that will destroy your cells, as you kick and scream…

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If you’re like me, in the first part of that story, you were pretty into the idea of teletransportation, and by the end, you were *not*.

The question the story poses is, “Is teletransportation, as described in this experiment, a form of traveling? Or a form of *dying*?

This question might have been ambiguous when I first described it—it might have even felt like a perfectly safe way of traveling—but by the end, it felt much more like a form of dying. Which means that every day when you commute to work from Boston to London, you’re killed by the cell destroyer, and a *replica* of you is created.[1] To the people who know you, you survive teletransportation just fine, the same way your wife seems just fine when she arrives home to you after her own teletransportation, talking about her day and discussing plans for next week. But is it possible that your wife was actually *killed* that day, and the person you’re kissing now was just created a few minutes ago?

Well again, it depends on what *you* are. Someone who believes in the Data Theory would posit that London you is you as much as Boston you, and that teletransportation is perfectly survivable. But we all related to Boston you’s terror at the end there—could anyone really believe that he should be fine with being obliterated just because his data is safe and alive over in London? Further, if the teletransporter could beam your data to London for reassembly, couldn’t it also beam it to 50 other cities and create 50 new versions of you? You’d be hard-pressed to argue that those were all *you*. To me, the teletransporter experiment is a big strike against the Data Theory.

Similarly, if there were an Ego Theory that suggests that you are simply your ego, the teletransporter does away nicely with that. Thinking about London Tim, I realize that “Tim Urban” surviving means nothing to me. The fact that my replica in London will stay friends with my friends, keep Wait But Why going with his Tuesday-ish posts, and live out the whole life I was planning for myself—the fact that no one will miss me or even realize that I’m dead, the same way in the story you never felt like you lost your wife—does almost *nothing* for me. I don’t *care* about Tim Urban surviving. I care about *me* surviving.

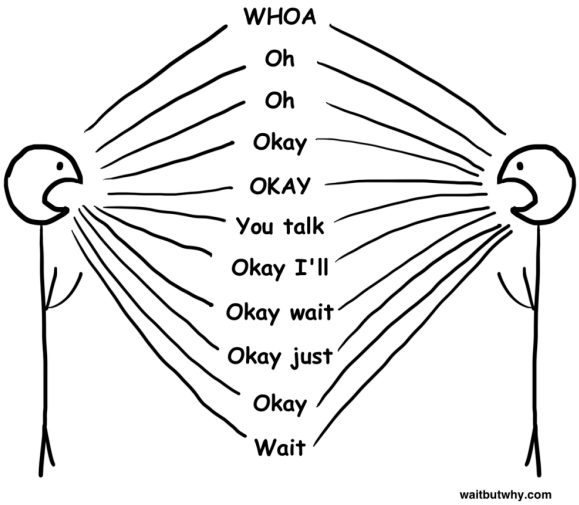
All of this seems like very good news for Body Theory and Brain Theory. But let’s not judge things yet. Here’s another experiment:

The Split Brain Experiment

A cool fact about the human brain is that the left and right hemispheres function as their own little worlds, each with their own things to worry about, but if you remove one half of someone’s brain, they

can sometimes not only survive, but their remaining brain half can learn to do many of the other half's previous jobs, allowing the person to live a normal life. That's right—you could lose half of your brain and potentially function normally.

So say you have an identical twin sibling named Bob who develops a fatal brain defect. You decide to save him by giving him half of your brain. Doctors operate on both of you, discarding his brain and replacing it with half of yours. When you wake up, you feel normal and like yourself. Your twin (who already has your identical DNA because you're twins) wakes up with your exact personality and memories.



When you realize this, you panic for a minute that your twin now knows all of your innermost thoughts and feelings on absolutely everything, and you're about to make him promise not to tell anyone, when it hits you that you of course don't have to tell him. He's not your twin—he's *you*. He's just as intent on your privacy as you are, because it's his privacy too.

As you look over at the guy who used to be Bob and watch him freak out that he's in Bob's body now instead of his own, you wonder, "Why did I stay in my body and not wake up in Bob's? Both brain halves are me, so why am I distinctly in my body and not seeing and thinking in dual split-screen right now, from both of our points of view? And whatever part of me is in Bob's head, why did I lose touch with it? Who is the me in Bob's head, and how did he end up over there while I stayed here?"

Brain Theory is shitting his pants right now—it makes no sense. If people are supposed to go wherever their brains go, *what happens when a brain is in two places at once?* Data Theory, who was badly embarrassed by the teletransporter experiment, is doing no better in this one.

But Body Theory—who was shot down at the very beginning of the post—is suddenly all smug and thrilled with himself. Body Theory says "Of *course* you woke up in your own body—your body is what makes you *you*. Your brain is just the tool your body uses to think. Bob isn't you—he's Bob. He's just now a Bob who has your thoughts and personality. There's nothing Bob's body can ever do to not be Bob." This would help explain why you stayed in your body.

So a nice boost for Body Theory, but let's take a look at a couple more things—

What we learned in the teletransporter experiment is that if your brain data is transferred to someone else's brain, even if that person is molecularly identical to you, all it does is create a *replica* of you—a total stranger who happens to be just like you. There's something distinct about Boston you that was *important*. When you were recreated out of different atoms in London, *something critical was lost*—something that made you you.

Body Theory (and Brain Theory) would point out that the only difference between Boston you and London you was that London you was made out of different atoms. London you's body was *like* your body, but it was still made of different material. So is that it? Could Body Theory explain this too?

Let's put it through two tests:

The Cell Replacement Test

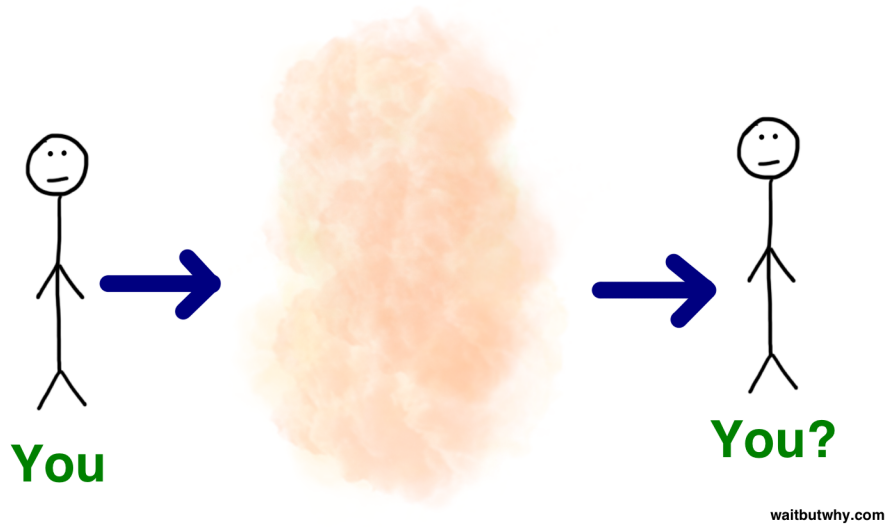
Imagine I replace a cell in your arm with an identical, but foreign, replica cell. Are you not you anymore? Of course you are. But how about if, one at a time, I replace 1% of your cells with replicas? How about 10%? 30%? 60%? The London you was composed of 100% replacement cells, and we decided that that

was *not* you—so when does the "crossover" happen? How many of your cells do we need to swap out for replicas before you "die" and what's remaining becomes your replica?

Something feels off with this, right? Considering that the cells we're replacing are molecularly identical to those we're removing, and someone watching this all happen wouldn't even notice anything change about you, it seems implausible that you'd ever die during this process, even if we eventually replaced 100% of your cells with replicas. But if your cells are eventually all replicas, how are you any different from London you?

The Body Scattering Test

Imagine going into an Atom Scattering Chamber that completely disassembles your body's atoms so that all that's left in the room is a light gas of floating atoms—and then a few minutes later, it perfectly reassembles the atoms into you, and you walk out feeling totally normal.



Is that still you? Or did you die when you were disassembled and what has been reassembled is a replica of you? It doesn't really make sense that this reassembled you would be the real you and London you would be a replica, when the only difference between the two cases is that the scattering room preserves your exact atoms and the London chamber assembles you out of different atoms. At their most basic level, atoms are identical—a hydrogen atom from your body is identical in every way to a hydrogen atom in London. Given that, I'd say that if we're deciding London you is not you, then reassembled you is probably not you either.

The first thing these two tests illustrate is that the key distinction between Boston you and London you isn't about the presence or absence of your actual, physical cells. The Cell Replacement Test suggests that you can gradually replace much or all of your body with replica material and still be you, and the Body Scattering Test suggests that you can go through a scatter and a reassembly, even with all of your original physical material, and be no more you than the you in London. Not looking great for Body Theory anymore.

The second thing these tests reveal is that the difference between Boston and London you might not be the nature of the particular atoms or cells involved, but about *continuity.* The Cell Replacement Test might have left you intact because it changed you *gradually*, one cell at a time. And if the Body Scattering Test were the end of you, maybe it's because it happened all at the same time, breaking the *continuity* of you. This could also explain why the teletransporter might be a murder machine—London you has no continuity with your previous life.

So could it be that we've been off the whole time pitting the brain, the body, and the personality and memories against each other? Could it be that anytime you relocate your brain, or disassemble your atoms all at once, transfer your brain data onto a new brain, etc., you lose *you* because maybe, you're not defined by any of these things on their own, but rather by a long and unbroken string of *continuous* existence?

Continuity

A few years ago, my late grandfather, in his 90s and suffering from dementia, pointed at a picture on the wall of himself as a six-year-old. "That's me!" he explained.

He was right. But *come on*. It seems ridiculous that the six-year-old in the picture and the extremely old man standing next to me could be the same person. Those two people had *nothing* in common. Physically, they were vastly different—almost every cell in the six-year-old's body died decades ago. As far as their personalities—we can agree that they wouldn't have been friends. And they shared almost no common brain data at all. Any 90-year-old man on the street is much more similar to my grandfather than that six-year-old.

But remember—maybe it's not about similarity, but about *continuity*. If similarity were enough to define you, Boston you and London you, who are *identical*, would be the same person. The thing that my grandfather shared with the six-year-old in the picture is something he shared with no one else on Earth—they were connected to each other by a long, unbroken string of continuous existence. As an old man, he may not know anything about that six-year-old boy, but he knows something about himself as an 89-year-old, and that 89-year-old might know a bunch about himself as an 85-year-old. As a 50-year-old, he knew a ton about him as a 43-year-old, and when he was seven, he was a *pro* on himself as a 6-year-old. It's a long chain of overlapping memories, personality traits, and physical characteristics.

It's like having an old wooden boat. You may have repaired it hundreds of times over the years, replacing wood chip after wood chip, until one day, you realize that not one piece of material from the original boat is still part of it. So is that still your boat? If you named your boat Polly the day you bought it, would you change the name now? It would still be Polly, right?

In this way, what *you* are is not really a *thing* as much as a *story,* or a *progression*, or one particular *theme* of person. You're a bit like a room with a bunch of things in it—some old, some new, some you're aware of, some you aren't—but the room is always changing, never exactly the same from week to week.

Likewise, you're not a set of brain data, you're a particular data*base* whose contents are constantly changing, growing, and being updated. And you're not a physical body of atoms, you're a set of instructions on how to deal with and organize the atoms that bump into you.

People always say the word *soul* and I never really know what they're talking about. To me, the word soul has always seemed like a poetic euphemism for a part of the brain that feels very inner to us; or an attempt to give humans more dignity than just being primal biological organisms; or a way to declare that we're eternal. But maybe when people say the word soul what they're talking about is whatever it is that connects my 90-year-old grandfather to the boy in the picture. As his cells and memories come and go, as every wood chip in his canoe changes again and again, maybe the single common thread that ties it all together is his soul. After examining a human from every physical and mental angle throughout the post, maybe the answer this whole time has been the much less tangible Soul Theory.

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It would have been pleasant to end the post there, but I just can't do it, because I can't quite believe in souls.

The way I actually feel right now is completely off-balance. Spending a week thinking about clones of yourself, imagining sharing your brain or merging yours with someone else's, and wondering whether you secretly die every time you sleep and wake up as a replica will do that to you. If you're looking for a satisfying conclusion, I'll direct you to the sources below since I don't even know who I am right now.

The only thing I'll say is that I told someone about the topic I was posting on for this week, and their question was, "That's cool, but what's the point of trying to figure this out?" While researching, I came across this quote by Parfit: "The early Buddhist view is that much or most of the misery of human life resulted from the false view of self." I think that's probably very true, and that's the point of thinking about this topic.

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Related Wait But Why Posts

– Here's how I'm working on this false view of self thing.

– And things could get even more confusing soon when we have to figure out if Artificial Superintelligence is conscious or not.

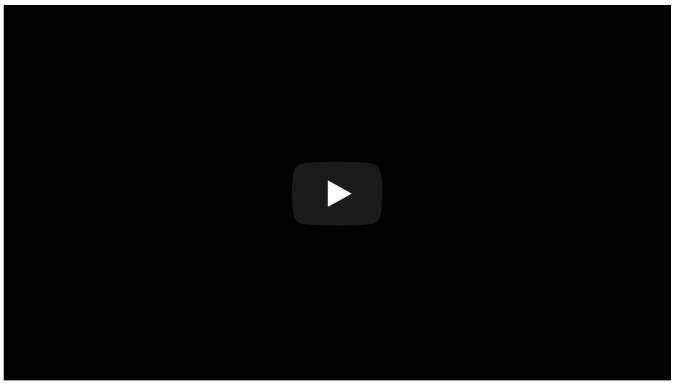
Sources

Very few of the ideas or thought experiments in this post are my original thinking. I read and listened to a bunch of personal identity philosophy this week and gathered my favorite parts together for the post. The two sources I drew from the most were philosopher Derek Parfit's book Reasons and Persons and Yale professor Shelly Kagan's fascinating philosophy course on death—the lectures are all watchable online for free.

Other Sources:
David Hume: Hume on Identity Over Time and Persons
Derek Parfit: We Are Not Human Beings
Peter Van Inwagen: Materialism and the Psychological-Continuity Account of Personal Identity
Bernard Williams: The Self and the Future
John Locke: An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (Chapter: Of Identity and Diversity)
Douglas Hofstadter: Gödel, Escher, Bach
Patrick Bailey: Concerning Theories of Personal Identity

And a fascinating and related video

For a while now, my favorite YouTube channel has been Kurzgesagt. They make one amazing five-minute animated video a month on the exact kinds of topics I love to write about. I highly recommend subscribing. Anyway, I've spoken to them and we liked the idea of tag-teaming a similar topic at the same time, and since this one was on both of our lists, we did that this week. I focused on what the self is, they explored what life itself is. Check it out:



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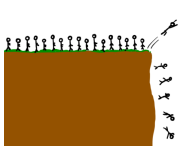
Neuralink and the Brain's Magical Future



Why Cryonics Makes Sense

Everything You Should Know About Sound

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Name

Katherine • 10 days ago

Disclaimer: I do not yet have a clear stance on most of these matters and have not done any in depth research or fact-checking but it is always nice to be probed to consider new aspects as a way to examine current schemas and beliefs.

Now I may be out of my depth here but considering how much we don't know about consciousness, can the Soul theory not be considered wherein "soul" is the part that connects the two? Or if "soul" has too much baggage/connotations associated with it, let's just call it the "blob" theory: the undiscovered aspect that connects each consciousness with the physical host that the blob inhabits and drives.

And just to throw this out there: what about Dissociative Identity Disorder (what people imagine when they think multiple personalities)? It's been known that certain identities may even have different allergies or other physical differences (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.go....

If you want your mind blown open a bit more, I highly suggest reading this article recently published in June 2018: https://blogs.scientificame...

Excerpt 1 from that article: "doctors performed functional brain scans on both DID patients and actors simulating DID. The scans of the actual patients displayed clear differences when compared to those of the actors, showing that dissociation has an identifiable neural activity fingerprint."

see more

Reply • Share ›

Bogdan Radu • 24 days ago

I'm not sure the twin experiment works in the way it's described. Indeed the brain adapts but you're losing physical brain cells and their "contents" and functionality. While functionality can be dealt with (or at least attempted to) the "contents" are gone. The brain has specific centers.

Reply • Share ›

Mike Doubintchik • a month ago

This sci-fi book analyzes the emotional implications of the teletransporter scenario interestingly: https://www.amazon.com/Punc...

Reply • Share ›

Harald ➚ Mike Doubintchik • 7 days ago

I think another great example of a sci-fi book analyzing exactly this topic is the commonwealth saga by Peter F. Hamilton: https://www.amazon.com/Pand...

Reply • Share ›

pekapa • a month ago

Hey Tim,
Great post!

About the brain transplant segment, wouldn't the brothers be who they are by what those around them believe? I mean, if the twin (Bob) convince the rest that his actually you as well (after all, he has all your memories and the continuity of the history, he just changed bodies at some point), wouldn't there actually be two yous? (Obviously, each one believing they are the right one!)
It's just the same about the teleporter, we have copied the data and the history for each is complete and can be considered continuous (if we don't consider those 5 minutes continuous enough, how would we treat moments when we pass out, or are asleep, or in a comma?).

Back to the brains, have you thought about actually keeping half of Bob's brain and adding half of yours to it? Who would survive at the end? I guess that if everyone thinks it's Bob, it doesn't really matters how his personality develops with two halves of personalities.

1 Reply • Share ›

Paulo Becker • a month ago

I obviously have no evidence to back what I'm saying, but I suspect what defines our "self" has its roots in quantum mechanics which we don't fully understand yet. It has been suggested (although not proved) by several scientists that quantum phenomena happens in our brains and could be key to explaining consciousness. If that's the case, then Heinseberg's uncertainty principle suggests that a perfect deconstruction followed by the reassembly of our body is likely impossible, because we cannot do it with the precision required to maintain absolutely the same quantum states everywhere inside us.

Reply • Share ›

Angryguitarist • a month ago

HI Tim,

I believe that what makes you you is soul indeed and each & every soul is unique. Maybe we are unable to physically detect or visualize or define soul as it is made up of " dark matter" or " dark energy"?

Reply • Share ›

Nick • 2 months ago

"We seem to be honing in on something"
Homing in*

Reply • Share ›

Lester ➚ Nick • a month ago

?
https://www.google.com/sear...

Reply • Share ›

Nick ➚ Lester • a month ago

It would appear that you didn't read the page you sent me, the below quote is from your source.
While it's true that it's starting to be common to use hone it - it's inaccurate:

"Most usage commentators consider hone in to be a mistake for home in. The use may have arisen from home in by the weakening of the \m\ sound to \ or it may have developed simply because of the influence of hone, with perhaps an underlying sense that "honing" figuratively involves a narrowing or sharpening of focus. Whatever the explanation of its origins, it has established itself in American English and has begun to make a few inroads into British English as well. Even so, your use of it especially in writing is likely to be called a mistake."

Reply • Share ›

billcollings • 2 months ago

An incredible follow up after your Neuralink article which I pondered upon for awhile without making up my mind what and how I felt about it. Now again an excellent well written detailed article which will remember and contemplate upon often in the future. At my present age, living life in what I've nicknamed "the tunnel of death" with 4 more years to go before I get through it, I am thinking about such "the meaning of life" , "who am I?" and death thoughts for the first time since my 20s. Thank you for helping to widen my imagination and contemplation.

Reply • Share ›

Hadari • 2 months ago

If on the regular basis in the teleporter you get a blink of nothing and then wake back up, why is it that suddenly when you aren't disintegrated you don't have any connection to your "clone." You should be experiencing both bodies. If you aren't, chances are you already died the first time you ever used the teleporter, and Boston you would be a clone too. So if you don't share consciousness with the clone, that just makes the teleporter would merely just murder machine.

1 Reply • Share ›

Pragmatic • 2 months ago

Look up the self image. In reality, your brain creates the notion of a "self" in the first place. So therefore, logically, since your brain creates your "self", "you" are your brain. In your argument about the teletransporter, what you would end up with is two of "you" but both would feel like the other was an impostor. From a completely objective standpoint, there is no difference between the two, but your brain just gives you the sense that you are "you". The self image was something created by our brain so that we can understand the world around us. So can we stop worrying about what makes us us and just accept that we exist?

Reply • Share ›

Inkerflargn ➚ Pragmatic • a month ago

I think the Cell Replacement thing was the reason given for why the brain theory doesn't work, but the teletransporter scenerio agreed with the brain theory.

I think the author would agree with you that in the teletransporter scenario both people would think they were 'you' and both would think the other was an impostor. But that if you had started out in the first place as the person in Boston, then, from your subjective experience standpoint, you would not travel to London. The person who was created in London will still be 'you' from their own subjective standpoint, but since you can't subjectivally be both people at the same time or experience the same things without your brains being connected the original and the copy will be different people from each other.

Reply • Share ›

SLD • 2 months ago

I just can't go for any of these except for the brain theory.

While all great in theory we're completely ignoring logical fact:

- bodies die/or parts get removed, but plenty of people can survive with a percentage of their body destroyed, I think if you have a torso with a working heart, cauterized wounds and a head with a working

brain then you're still you - although I have no idea how long you'll live for
- people can't upload their thoughts to a USB - even if computers can think and pass all the Turing tests they're not human because we cannot replicate human processes as we don't understand them, that's still just a computer fooling humans because we are not data
- you can't wipe brains
- you can't transport people. And if it's a Westworld build-a-bear idea then the London version would be a new being with fake memories. It may well be an entity with rights but it isn't you. Boston you might not be you either - that process has either copied you or killed you
- you can't give half of your brain to someone - if you could their brain would cover it in their memories/soul/thoughts - just because we can lose half of our physical brain matter goo doesn't mean we lose half of our brain - the brain is he firing synapses through the available physical matter
- you can't body scatter and put yourself back together, humans aren't lego

see more

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Galron • 2 months ago

Our current knowledge isn't sufficient to make a decision on this subject. We simply don't have all the parts of the equation. We don't know what consciousness really is or how quantum mechanics does or doesn't interact with our bodies. We don't even know if our ability to perceive is sufficient to know.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Sebastian Stetkiewicz • 5 months ago

Hi there is logical mistake with twins since it would mean memories duplicated in both sides of brain. Brain can move memories very fast over to one side but i think it Would be impossible to have two same halfs. Anyway i wanted to write my expierience from few years ago, when i woke up with no memory at all- not even my name. I woke up that day in very good mood but whem wanted to start day i realised i dont know what to do, my job where i am- nothing. I wasnt scared i just started to think and after few hours i reminded myself everything. I was happy because i got over that day my preavious relationship after long time of suffering. I started to look at people behaviour differently and was shocked how ignorant selfish and cruel society is how science is really a church with dogmats and other things. I stopeed watching tv or any movie because i could see just how its destroing people. I become stressed, couldnt understand myself for many years and had terrible pain on one side from stress. I forgot about that event until couple of months ago suddenly it hit me. That day was my first day of life. I woke up in adult body with memories- and because i thought memories are me couldnt realised that. But memories aren't me. I am an emotion which is created from expieriencing event and which will determine my reaction in next expierience. Since then i dont have pain and im almost free from stress. I woke up with memories but had no emotional connection with them thays why i felt something is wrong. I thought my story can put another peespective on subject in your text.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Zack Light • 6 months ago

You've made a mistake in the torture test because of a false assumption. The body and the brain are inter related and affect each other's behavior. If you're brain were transplanted into Bill Clinton's body, at first you would keep the same exact personality, but over time certain aspects would change, especially things like eating habits and libido. You addressed this earlier in the post with the comments about Mark, but in combination with the body transplant it becomes less clear. Now imagine that you only transfer part of the brain, say, the neo-cortex. Now, you believe that you're you, and with a few minutes of convincing so does your family; when given high-order thinking problems you respond the same way you would have; but you have a different set of procedural memories (maybe better at baseball or dance) different tastes in music, different emotional responses. It's impossible to ignore that you are so fundamentally different from what you used to be.

This sheds light on why the torture test failed. You aren't just the information in your brain, the information of your body is also part of you. The mad scientist is torturing part of you either way.

5 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Nate Cavanaugh • 6 months ago

> I can't quite believe in souls

Is this because it's not easily quantifiableas a thing or because your worldview precludes the supernatural?

I guess I would say that there could be some other quality, that we don't even know how to start measuring, that defines personhood.

Random guesses aren't answers, but I think intuitively that we all understand that none of the above (save for the continuity argument) truly answer much on this question.

IMHO, the early Buddhist answer is as trite as a creationist answering a creation statement with "God did it".

We all, for the most part, agree on a concept of individual autonomy, even cultures and religions that preach full on collectivism, all recognize something unique, in some way about people.

I will say, the continuity argument is one of the better ones I've read, but then you introduce the problem of time.
What's the right amount of time between cell transitions for it to be considered continuous?
How many cells can you swap out and still have continuity, and for how long?

Lastly, the other big question: is self just an illusion?
If so, are there any ways we can determine that?

2 • Reply • Share ›

lkelemen • 8 months ago

The transportation machine should work this way and then there is no problem: There has to be a connection between you and your copy so you have to experience that you are in two places at the same time. Then the two copy are the "one" you. One of the copies can be killed but you still survive in the other half. So it is all about the connection maintained between your conscious parts.

1 • Reply • Share ›

money money man ↗ lkelemen • 6 months ago

What is the connection between you and your copy?

1 • Reply • Share ›

lkelemen ↗ money money man • 6 months ago

Wireless direct brain to brain interface. In some form it is existing already:

http://www.iflscience.com/b...

• Reply • Share ›

captain obvious • 8 months ago

The main question that determines where the self resides (particularly in the torture experiment) is who feels pain (or pleasure or fear) now? If London guy gets a paper cut at his morning meeting and Boston guy does not feel it then he chooses that London guy gets tortured because the self resides in Boston guy's brain. After they are merged into one body he will have memory of the paper cut but doesn't experience it in the present.

• Reply • Share ›

Robert N • 8 months ago

Well memory is part of what you have done. But thinking and I read it somewhere (hear)and my imagination makes me how I am. You can lose all your memory, but your are still you, but you don't remember it... Its easy to say, but u must not understand everything, and when u understand how little "you" I know the more I can try to understand and lern. Many people are afraid ask. You can sitt quiet and stay dumb. Or ask and lern. But what do I know!

• Reply • Share ›

David Morgan • 8 months ago

If I wake up tomorrow but my memory is destroyed, I won't feel like the 'me' from today.

If I get frozen for a hundred years -- no continuity -- and resume, I will feel like 'me'.

If I'm duplicated 100 times, all copies will feel like 'me' because they have the same memories.

Consciousness is instantaneous, a property of the current moment only. It's continually recreated, an ongoing pattern, not a thing. It has no identity, so all consciousnesses -- me tomorrow, you in a year, me after being teleported -- are just as much 'me'.

Memory creates the illusion of continuity and identity. It's needed to make consciousness useful, but not to make consciousness.

4 • Reply • Share ›

JupiterJaeden • 9 months ago

I believe the data theory can somewhat survive the hypothetical teletransporter experiment. However, I believe it can be slightly modified to make more sense.

"Someone who believes in the Data Theory would posit that London you is you as much as Boston you, and that teletransportation is perfectly survivable. But we all related to Boston you's terror at the end there—could anyone really believe that he should be fine with being obliterated just because his data is safe and alive over in London? Further, if the teletransporter could beam your data to London for reassembly, couldn't it also beam it to 50 other cities and create 50 new versions of you? You'd be hard-pressed to argue that those were all you."

Every time you enter that machine, you are dying and a replica of you is being born. I would say that all of the 50 new versions of "you" were just that- new versions. They're replicas.

For me, I believe that not only does a person's memories and personality define them, but also their continuous stream of thought, If you enter that tele transporter, you die. You stop thinking. You never wake up in London. Therefore, you die. Your stream of thought ends there, and so do you.

The same could be said for the mad scientist portion. When they switch *brains,* it makes sense. But when they switch minds, there are a few words that mean you died.

"...then wipes both of your brains completely clean."

In this case, you die. Your stream of thought stops and a new replica of you is born. It believes it is you, it

has all your memories. In a sense, it is a new you. A second you. But you still die.

The replica will not realize it, but their stream of thought begins at their creation when your data is loaded onto their brain. A new life is being born. A second you.

3 • Reply • Share ›

DB • 10 months ago

You say you don't believe in the soul theory but then i give you one example: pain. It's as simple as that. Any doctor can explain the way nerves pick up stimuli from environment and sends them to the brain which kind of interprets the stimuli and if is strong enough it will result in what we call pain. But, if you take a step back and think who or what is feeling that pain? The nerve? - no, nerves are only transmitters of information. The brain? - no, the brain in itself does not feel pain, it has no pain receptors at all. The rest of the body? the cells that make the body? - well, no because if you remove all the nerves then the body does not feel pain. Or if you cut the spinal cord then again the body does not feel pain even if all nerves are intact. Then again the question - who or what is feeling the actual pain? It can't be only information, because information would not normally hurt, right? Like eyesight is also information, or hearing .. and they don't hurt at all. But pain hurts like hell... so why is that?
This kind of points to the fact that there is something or someone else who is taking the hurt in pain and maybe that could be the soul, or another being connected to our body through the brain or some part of the brain...

• Reply • Share ›

Zack Light ➚ DB • 6 months ago

When you feel pain, it's a combination of all the steps you mentioned. Your perception of feeling pain is done in the brain based on information from the nerves. Pain isn't it's own thing, it's the interpretation of real world things. The mind is what the brain does; not a product, but a process.

1 • Reply • Share ›

Robert N ➚ DB • 8 months ago

So you can feel your soul? Amazing! Do you say damn I hit my soul in the table? Pain is something else, the brain and all the nerves. Very very simple and I do believe that someone else can explain better then I. But you are free to feel the way you do, isn'tit wonderful.....

• Reply • Share ›

Paul Kent • a year ago

I believe that the stickiest element of the "What makes you you" question is the fact that it is completely irrelevant to any person but you. From my perspective, I believe that I am conscious, but I have no way to prove that to you. As far as you know, I could just be a Philosophical Zombie that biologically acts just like a human but has no consciousness. Therefore, even if your consciousness dies while leaving your personality intact as in the Teletransporter thought experiment, the only one who cares is you. Every other person in the world still has a you to interact with: the you that was created in the Arrival Chamber.

That said... this question (along with a few others such as that of AI consciousness) may yet reshape the entire human concept of ethics. If acting morally is about making other consciousnesses happy and healthy, what are you to do when it is impossible to prove an entity's consciousness?

3 • Reply • Share ›

William ➚ Paul Kent • 7 months ago

This is exactly how I look at it. We do not yet fully understand the nature of consciousness, and where it derives from at its most basic metaphysical level. We speculate that it is related to the cortex, but it's really not clear.

Until we know this, it's impossible to know whether multiple bodies can share a single consciousness (medical science data suggests they cannot), or a consciousness can be transferred in any way other than complete (and otherwise untouched) brain transplant, or whether some unknown phenomenon ties a consciousness to a particular arrangement of atoms in a "quantum entanglement" sort of manner which can be duplicated but will never be the same consciousness.

Additionally, the example of Bob the Twin - which half of the brain? Or are you taking and implanting half of your actual atoms, in identical arrangement but equally from all parts of the brain and ending up with two half-size brains in each body? This is a crucial detail, because different parts of the brain do different things, and you'd have two VERY different people if you put your left half in one body and the right half in the other. Probably neither one functional or very much recognizable as the old you.

• Reply • Share ›

MeMe • a year ago

Great article. I think similarly to you ... I think we do have a "soul" ...
Also the teleportation thing seems far-fetched because even in distant future, if it is possible, it may not look like this (assembly and destruction). Even if it did, just gathering random atoms together would probably just make a dead "you". Another "you" cannot just spring into existence that easily and be a living being, you took so long to be born and it is a special process.

• Reply • Share ›

Gabrielle Gauthier-Beauvais • a year ago

Well, I get what you're saying, but I have a different theory. I call it the birth theory.

If birth you is reassembled based on the atoms you were born with, it is still you. But if you use different atoms, it is no longer you.

I believe continuity is very close to this because birth you has this continuous notion. However, I don't believe that continuity makes you still you if you replace all your atoms one by one because you are not the original birth you.

It's not important if you replace some of you as long as the majority of birth you is intact. You can still say you are you but with a percentage of not you added (replacing arms would be like 90% you).
This theory combines the body, brain, and data, continuity theories because the birth you still has the original body, brain and continuity, plus the data is affected by how your DNA reacts to events in life.

Reply • Share ›

Ricardo Miraballes ➚ Gabrielle Gauthier-Beauvais • a year ago

Problem is, throughout your life, you are constantly replacing your atoms, because you are constantly rebuilding yourself with atoms that you take from the environment (and this is because you are constantly degrading yourself into atoms you leave in the environment)

So you see, unless you are a small kid, you have already replaced the vast majority of your atoms with atoms that came from what you ate, drank and breathed, atoms that were once a bird, an oak or a triceratops (i mean, the atoms you had when just born were also "recycled" ones)

I started thinking of living beings in terms of ocean waves, that are at the same time something you can distinguish from the rest of the ocean, without being anything but ocean.

4 Reply • Share ›

Ujjwal Kumar Aich • a year ago

Ujjwal Kumar Aich
Yes, the 90 years old is the same person as was in 16. It is said that all the cells of 16 years old get died and replaced by new ones.This is not true. The brain cells (Neurons) are not replaced. They only continue to die since birth and what remains at 90 are certainly of 16 having more data stored in (experiences).So, the Self, at 90, is certainly the same , as of 16.

3 Reply • Share ›

Zack Light ➚ Ujjwal Kumar Aich • 6 months ago

The neurons aren't "replaced" but just about every atom in them is. It takes roughly a decade for all the atoms in your body to be replaced by others from from food, drink, and breath.

Reply • Share ›

hillz ➚ Ujjwal Kumar Aich • a year ago

i totally agree with you kumar. the brain cells live throughout a persons life time. this is an up vote for data theory.

Reply • Share ›

Mehmood Siddiqui ➚ hillz • a year ago

I ve a question, how come an individual physical cell in brain can survive 90 years...and the data stored in it?

Reply • Share ›

Karl • a year ago

Reminds me of Trigger's brush from British comedy Only Fools and Horses. He had the same brush (broom) for years but had replaced 17 new brush heads and 14 new handles!
It's a fairly common theme in sci-fi type stories. A quick Wiki P search suggests Theseus paradox is the thing to read up on...

Reply • Share ›

Grace Fisher • a year ago

I also think that if you re-create someone after annihilating him at the first location it's not a teleportation.

Reply • Share ›

Melayahm ➚ Grace Fisher • a month ago

Yeah, there's no comments thus far about a teleportation device that disassembles your atoms and sends them at light speed through a wormhole to the place you want to go and reassembles them. That wouldn't kill the original. Probably a more difficult version to make though. And has anyone seen The Prestige?

Reply • Share ›

flarn2006 • a year ago

Why would they be obligated by law to destroy the original once a copy is made? What if I wanted a copy of myself, like to do things more efficiently? If that technology existed you could bet that would be a common use of it. And when it happened by accident, destruction of the original certainly wouldn't be required by law —why would it be?

I get the purpose was to illustrate the point about how destruction would suddenly be a bad thing, but still, it seems like an arbitrary and far-fetched excuse.

Reply • Share ›

Ujjwal Kumar Aich ➚ flarn2006 • a year ago

Just like we cannot see two different things with two eyes or cannot hear two different sound with two ears, we will not be able to feel two YOUs whether one is destructed or not. You will feel walking either on London road or on Boston road, may also be interchanging the feeling moment to moment.

Reply • Share ›

Melayahm ➚ Ujjwal Kumar Aich • a month ago

But if two you's existed simultaneously, you'd start to have different experiences and become different people, both of whom would feel that they had a right to existance and life.Perhaps this would be why there would be a law about one being destroyed. Who owns the house and the bank account?

Reply • Share ›

flarn2006 ➚ Ujjwal Kumar Aich • a year ago

Okay? Why does that mean one would need to be destroyed by law?

1 Reply • Share ›

HideAndSeekLOGIC ➚ flarn2006 • 9 months ago

It's just a hypothetical scenario to force you into thinking about your original body's death. It's not meant to be accurate. Stop whinging about the small shit.

30 Reply • Share ›

Chris Moran • a year ago

I don't necessarily agree with the teleportation example. Yes, the Boston you is "you" and the continuity aspect plays a large role. But wouldn't the London you also demand that they were "you"? And given that this wasn't your first teleportation experience, was the Boston you even "you" to begin with?

For example, lets modify the experiment a bit. Let's say that you had never teleported before and you are part of an experiment. A doctor sedates you so that you are unconscious. The doctor then teleports you into another room that looks exactly like the room you were sedated in. It is not possible for you to tell the difference between the two rooms while located in either one of them. The doctor does not destroy the original "you". The doctor then wakes up both "yous" simultaneously. Would both "yous" not insist that they were "you"? Is the original "you" more you because of the body and brain? How then, is the new "you" any less "you"?

In this case, "you" both have the same continuity, so wouldn't that point us back to data? Or even a hybrid of data and continuity? I think it may be a logical error to discount the idea of a soul(which I see as related to data) simply because it is associated with religious thought. It is one of those ideas that is consistent with almost every religion. Where there is smoke, there may be fire. Atheism can fall into the dogmatic trap as well. (On a side note, if we are all just living in a computer simulation, which is very possible, the soul is the model, the mind is the controller, and the view is the body. Experience is the user. That is intelligent design

see more

2 Reply • Share ›

JohnAdams_1796 • a year ago

"But then one day, you head into the Departure Chamber in Boston for your normal morning commute to your job in London, you press the big button on the wall, and you hear the scanner turn on, but it doesn't work.

The normal split-second blackout never happens, and when you walk out of the chamber, sure enough, you're still in Boston."

That's where the teleporter narrative goes wrong. The scanner does indeed work. As the teleportation proceeds, what will happen in this scenario is that your conscious experience will transform into being both in Boston and London, sort of like watching "Downton Abbey" and "Good Will Hunting" projected onto the same movie screen at the same time. But our brains can adapt to that, just like our brains adapted to fused binocular vision. With two organisms providing sensory data from both London and Boston, we'll just fuse the two experiences and find it 'normal', probably with some sort of bonus ability, just like binocular fusion gives us depth perception.

Additionally, the split-second blackout never occurs, but rather your experience morphs from being in Boston to being in London or -- in this case -- it morphs into being both in Boston and in London.

An extension of this notion: imagine you had thousands or millions of organisms spread around the world feeding you sensory data. In time, you'd find that all that means is that you have a fused awareness of what is going on near your organisms.

Reply • Share ›

captain obvious ➚ JohnAdams_1796 • 8 months ago

The way this is written does not have him simultaneously experiencing Boston and London. He is in

Boston only freaking out about the prospect of his legally mandated death.

Reply • Share ›

Unanimus • a year ago

thought out a few wild things....not very smart musing. read at your own peril.

1. What is the difference in brain pattern or neural connection between two scenarios - one that kind of feels apathy, smug or nonchalance at the thought of torture to be administered to others versus the anxiety at the suggestion to be administered to "me"? There is a code of "me" involved there between the two patterns?

2. How about there is nothing tangible about "me"? Is “me” - just a super set of all your memories and preferences made right from the time you were a baby and started with a clean slate of memory? ..some kind of neural connections unique in each of our brain, the set of connections having stiffened and the neural pathways memorized so well (thus unique) based on our several past experiences of responding to choices of joy or harm etc. to our "me"? - for data theory

More wild...

3. We are able to dream our own death, and “see” our body lying down, kind of our “me” looking down from above. I have had such a dream once and I figure many of you might have as well?
If we can find a way to trigger such a dream (for test purpose) and figure out the brain patterns or neural connections that is responsible for the “me” that is looking down at your body.....to rule out body theory and for brain

4. What if the "me" is a unique chemical compound makeup in each of us based on one of the above that is not yet discovered - sort of chemical theory?

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Sandy Chase

Thank you for exploring this and articulating all of these ideas. I have one comment. I think some logic broke down in the teletransporter section. The London "you" experiences life as a continuous flow from getting into the machine in Boston. So does the undestroyed Boston "original." Why must there be only one "real" you? You're restricting your thinking to the idea that there can only be a single self-identified "me." But a perfect copy of you will feel and think and remember exactly as the original you does. (That doesn't mean you are experiencing his life, of course. Your consciousnesses ... See More

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Ildar Galiev

You didn't understand the article. What is meant by continuity here is not a perceived continuity of your memory, but an actual, physical continuity of electric impulses firing in your brain. Since teletransporter reconstructs these electric impulses from scratch, there's no continuity. The second body is born at the moment of teleportation, even if its artificially recreated memories make it believe otherwise.
There indeed can be only one real "you", as "you" can have only one point of reality perception. You can make identical copies of yourself that believe they are "you", but the will eith... See More

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Sandy Chase

Ildar Galiev I appreciate your explanation, but I still think there's a limitation of imagination to restrict the feeling or reality of "you" to a single individual. Continuity of electrical impulses is a crutch, since as a thought experiment, you could freeze all bioelectrical activity and restart it, making the experience of the teletransported individul and the "original" identical. We just aren't comfortable with the idea that there could be more than one "me," each with a firm and totally separate self-identification of "me-ness." In a purely materialist interpretation, if every atom is identical, then each individual copy will think and feel that it is the "real" one.

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Ben Edwards

Thanks fo adding on Sandy Chase, Ildar Galiev I think you may have mistinterpretted this a bit. I think this part says it clearly: "In this way, what you are is not really a thing as much as a story, or a progression, or one particular theme of person." In this example, both Boston and London "yous" have a continued story—even if it branches at some point into multiple stories.

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Kolos Kantor

This article, while is started out quite good and with a lot of potential, declined rapidly.
The Clinton experiment has a very fundamental flaw in it and just simply ignores a huge part of what I have a problem with: In the first situation, the memory of the event remains, in the second it does not but the “you” that is “you” currently in the present time would still feel the pain if you followed the Data Theory. This is nonsense. The two situations are incomparable. And btw, I would still choose the options the author picked and I don’t think one supports the Data Theory and the other the B... See More

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Harvinder Kaur Nanda

Yeah Exactly! I agree with you on almost all things and I too think data theory is the closest to the answer of "What makes you you." But I disagree with you on last one where you plainly refused the idea that human cannot survive with half a brain.
Turns out they can and yes although the link in this post about the article is broken, you can simply google search it and you'll find cases(not that many but still) where this has happened.
Infact I even just read one case where a person survived without Whole of a brain! i.e he only had brain stem which allowed him to stay alive as breathing, heartbeat are performed by brain stem.
And he lived for 12 years!!
But that being said these cases are not eligible for purpose of this post, mainly because he wasnt even conscious like other people.
Also I've a feeling that if Tim were to write this post again it would be quite different.

Like · Reply · 23w

Kolos Kantor

Harvinder Kaur Nanda Ok, I see why my last point may be misleading. So allow me to rephrase: YOU cannot survive with half of your brain. There will be some form of a lifeform left in your body, but it won't be you. It will be a ghost of what you used to be. Parts of your personality will be altered or gone altogether. Your example of the "person" who lived for 12 years is a perfect example. Would you call that a person? I wouldn't. Just because the flesh and blood body is active and the heart is beating, does not mean it is an individual. You need brain function, and a high one of that to clai... See More

Like · Reply · 23w

Jess Matharu

This is so well written and incredibly interesting. I thought "you" WAS the brain before i read this, now i'm going through an existential crisis.

Like · Reply · 5 · 44w

Jaeden Amiri-Owens

I believe the data theory can somewhat survive the hypothetical teletransporter experiment. However, I believe it can be slightly modified to make more sense.

"Someone who believes in the Data Theory would posit that London you is you as much as Boston you, and that teletransportation is perfectly survivable. But we all related to Boston you’s terror at the end there—could anyone really believe that he should be fine with being obliterated just because his data is safe and alive over in London? Further, if the teletransporter could beam your data to London for reassembly, couldn’t it also bea... See More

also bea... See More

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Sandra Hamilton Ford

We're all so stuck on the physical universe. It has to be felt, measured, seen. If we were souls, like a static - no wavelength, no position in time or space, etc., stuck in a body (awful fate, but hey, you'd be immortal - and that would be unfortunate cuz there's no way out) how would we know? The body regenerates every 7 to 10 years, they say. How come you're still you? Anyway, you're still you when you lose an arm or a leg. Actually, physics has answered this question many years ago. One can detect a non-physical something as an energy source (among other things) in physics. PHYSICS. That's science. That should be acceptable to even mainstream. And memories? Well, make a picture of a cat. How'd you do that? Who's looking at it? One can't be the picture and also be looking at it. I think it's a matter of degrees of awareness.

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Ievgen Goichuk

Aren't you a combination of your body, brain and data (continuous life experience)? If you replace any component you stop being you. Body is important because it's a source of a unique footprint of biochemical stimulators to your brain. IMHO makes no sense to speculate what your brain would identify itself in other body, it will never be possible. If assume it's possible to simulate brain activity on a computer, and make a copy of your brain neural network, being connected to a different sensory data it will constitute a different intelligent being, not even human I think.

Like · Reply · 1 · 35w

Lukáš Hošala

Let's just asssume that brain transplat would never be possible (altough I am not aware of any evidence that would support this, actually there are many experiments yet to be carried out related to brain transplantation and I believe they will be successful), but to make a point theoretically situation is presented when all of your data are being transfered to a computer. When the computer YOU (which might not be "human by definition" at this stage) is presented with decision whether to kill and delete itself or rather kill your old body (still with all of your memories and data) you would b... See More

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Alexander Wu

Um, the No-Cloning Theorem? (This supports the data theory.)

I think what defines conciousness is the fact that you're experiencing something. For each of these senarios, you need to actually know if the past you feels like you died or kept living. Not future you, past you.

Unfortunately, only the one experiencing it would know. Other people could never tell if a present you is past you. So doing experiments won't really work, unless every person in the world tried it. But what you can do is work on the theory.

So step one: figure out why we experience stuff. So, um, let's use Schrödinger's... See More

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Bruno Mailly

Nice, but some more points :

• What we think we are and actually are can be very different.
Those who believed the brain was just a cooler would have had bad surprises with surgery.

• What we think we are is mostly a matter of education.
Many believe in afterlife, be it disembodied or materialistic.
Some rate afterlife as a biger part of self than life.
Some would gladly die for afterlife.... See More

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Rudi Richard Hoffman

I love Tim Urban's clear communication style. He has not come to any major conclusions about the "nature of the self". And, this is not even adding the possibility that part of us may indeed be something like the Universe. This "pantheism" is a belief system I went through some 30 years ago. While I consider myself more an "atheist" now, I am increasingly aware that...well...part of me may be...you. We are the self of the world. I think doing the right drugs under the right settings may remind me of this. Which would seem to be smarter than meditating for 30 years to achieve this "non-ordinary state of consciousness."

Like · Reply · 1 · 49w

Alberto Toribiez Beizco

You started a reasonable travel in the huge space of knowledge. With the BFRocket of the human intelligence. Travelling during million years with your space ship towards the limits of the observable universe. Then, finally, like in "The Truman Show" you hit an invisible wall in the black space. You get down from your spaceship, and touch the wall. You make a hole in the wall and, as you look outside, you figure it out: the wall is made of bone matter. Suddenly you feel the headache. As It is just your own skull. Its our final wall. And we can't go beyond this. You have reached the (universe) brain limits: understanding its own existence.

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