

“Am I the Same Person?”  
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My father didn't marry Queenie. He married my mother. But what if he had married Queenie? My grandmother would not have been pleased. Queenie was a Catholic. But Grandma would have gotten over that eventually. What I'm wondering is, How would *I* have been different?

What comes to mind first is that I wouldn't have had summers in Connecticut, on my grandparents' farm – my mother's parents' farm. Without my grandfather's inspiration, I probably would not have had piano lessons, or violin lessons. Music would not have been such a big part of my life.

Would I have been brought up Catholic? Or Presbyterian? Or both? Or would they have sought a compromise? It wouldn't have been Unitarian.

Maybe the biggest difference would have been that I was born much earlier, say 1935, not 1942. World War II would be a real memory for me. I would have been too young to serve in Korea, but too old for Vietnam, part of that in-between generation that missed out on the opportunity to be warriors. Without the threat of being drafted and sent to Vietnam, I wouldn't have gone straight from college to law school. Who knows what I would have done with my life? Or with whom – I probably would never have met Kerry.

In short, we can't have the slightest idea what would have become of me.

Some of you no doubt are wondering why I've assumed that I would be the child of my father and Queenie rather than the child of my mother and Harold. Actually, I made Harold up. I have the letters that Queenie and a few other young women sent to my father, young women whom he disappointed, but I don't have any letters that suitors may have sent to my mother. And it never occurred to me to ask my mother about the men in her life before she met my father. She was 31 when they were married. She lived independently in Lansing, Michigan, working at the state labs. She must have had many opportunities.

You're probably way ahead of me. If this were a class there would be hands in the air. “Dave,” you're ready to say, “if your father had married Queenie, you wouldn't exist.” Herbert and Queenie might have had two children; they might have had two sons; they might have named their second son “Dave,” but I wouldn't be around.

So let's toughen up our thought experiment. Let's suppose that on the night of June 28, 1941, my parents had done something else, and as a result their second child, their second son,

had been born on March 29, 1942, instead of March 28. They named him “Dave.” Would that have been me? Or would that Dave have been someone else, and I wouldn’t exist.

Or let’s keep the night of conception on June 28 but imagine that the winning sperm was number 1047 rather than number 1046. Would I exist?

Some of you may be thinking, what a waste of time to major in philosophy in college, and worry about imaginary problems. Who cares? *My interest in this topic was originally stimulated by the late Bernard Williams, visiting professor of philosophy at Princeton, 1962-63. See his Problems of the Self (Cambridge University Press, 1973).*

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All right, here’s a real situation. From time to time I have the fantasy, I have the dream, that Kerry might have been my first and only wife, and that I might have been her first and only husband, that we might have gotten married some time in the late 1960s and had two children together and lived happily ever after.

One problem with that scenario is that I might not have been ready for marriage. I might have made a mess of it, and the marriage might not have lasted. But that’s not the problem that concerns me this morning. No, the problem is Amanda and David, my two wonderful stepchildren, and my three beautiful granddaughters and the fourth grandchild expected to arrive in July.

Wishing that I had married Kerry the first time appears to be the same as wishing that Amanda and David didn’t exist, and that I could never do.

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Let’s set aside that quandary and return to fantasy. Here’s a passage from Derek Parfit’s book, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984). ***hold it up***

I enter the Teletransporter. I have been to Mars before, but only by the old method, a space-ship journey taking several weeks. This machine will send me at the speed of light. I merely have to press the green button. Like others, I am nervous. Will it work? I remind myself what I have been told to expect. When I press the button, I shall lose consciousness, and then wake up at what seems a moment later. In fact I shall have been unconscious for about an hour. The Scanner here on Earth will destroy my brain and body, while recording the exact states of all of my cells. It will then transmit this information by radio. Traveling at the speed of light, the message will take three minutes to reach the Replicator on Mars. This will then create, out of new matter, a brain and body exactly like mine. It will be in this body that I shall wake up.

Though I believe that this is what will happen, I still hesitate. But then I remember seeing my wife grin when, at breakfast today, I revealed my nervousness. As

she reminded me, she has often been teletransported, and there is nothing wrong with *her*. I press the [green] button. As predicted, I lose and seem at once to regain consciousness, but in a different cubicle. Examining my new body, I find no change at all. Even the cut on my upper lip, from this morning's shave, is still there. [p. 199]

We can't travel by Teletransporter now. And my guess is that we will never have the technology to permit such a trip. This is the stuff of science fiction. But set that aside, and set aside the fear of malfunction. Would you be willing to travel this way?

I first read Parfit's book 15 years ago, and the Teletransporter problem is one I've thought about, worried about, often. My initial reaction was that if I submitted to the Teletransporter, I would be dead, and there would be a new Dave Hunter on Mars. The new Dave Hunter, I assume, would believe that he had just traveled from Earth to Mars, that he would feel that he is the same person as the Dave Hunter on earth. But as I've seen it, that fellow on Mars would be mistaken – the Dave Hunter that I know and love would be extinguished.

On the other hand, if I believed before the trip that the person at the other end would still be me, I would find that belief confirmed when I woke up at the other end. Is this a situation where reality is dependent on belief? It all seems very strange to me.

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Closer to home, the Queen has come to visit. Queen Elizabeth II was in the United States a couple of weeks ago. She traveled as far west as Kentucky. I think she would have enjoyed coming to Arkansas even more than Kentucky. A bicycle race is more fun to watch than a horse race, isn't it? She could have skipped the White House dinner, and we could have had a very nice potluck for her right here.

But here's the problem I've been thinking about. Maybe you have, too. What if someone switched my brain and hers – so that the Queen's brain, and all her memories, would be in this body, and the brain up here, what I think of as my brain, with all my memories, would be in that 80 year old British body? Which one of us would then be the Queen, and which one of us would be Dave Hunter? Would the Queen's subjects say "something terrible has happened to the Queen, she seems to have forgotten who she is and how to be Queen"? Or would they say "something very strange has happened to the Queen, she somehow has obtained a new body, and she looks like a 65-year man?"

My assumption is that I would have to learn how to be the Queen, that is, that I identify with my brain and memories, but that I would think that because I inhabit the Queen's body I must play the role of the Queen. I don't know how she would feel about all this.

Perhaps after a few years of playing the role of Queen I would identify as Queen, and think of events in the Queen's pre-2007 life as my events.

Of course, we don't have brain switches any more than we have Teletransporters taking us to Mars at the speed of light. But we do have Alzheimer's.

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My mother died in 1998, at the age of 93. Her last few years were difficult. Her mind gradually deserted her; she gradually lost touch with reality. She was living in Birmingham, Michigan, in the house we moved to in 1953, when I was ten. As she grew older, my brother and I would visit her more often. I remember on one visit balancing her check book for her. She hadn't done it in quite a while, and it was a mess, at least from my compulsive point of view. I got it fixed. All she had to do was maintain it from there. That wouldn't be hard. She didn't write many checks. But the next time I looked at her check book, a couple of months later, it was a mess again.

Soon my brother and I were writing all her checks for her. All she had to do was sign them. Then during one visit she had difficulty remembering how to sign her name.

Was she the same person that I had known when I was young? The person who could manage the household? – active in the church, in AAUW, taking French lessons, giving tours at the Detroit Institute of Arts, maintaining a beautiful garden, attending concerts and plays, taking granddaughters to Paris, interacting with a wide circle of friends?

Yes, she was the same person. She always knew who I was, though she was living in a world in which all times of her life seemed to be present simultaneously. Her personality never changed. She remained the warm, caring person she had always been.

But I know it could have been worse, much worse. She could have failed to recognize family entirely; her personality could have changed, she could have become demanding and unpleasant. Would I still have wanted to make frequent visits? Or would I have said, "that's no longer my mother"? Would I have cared for her, not out of love, but simply out of duty? Fortunately, I was not put to the test.

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A few minutes ago, I said that wishing that I had married Kerry the first time appears to be the same as wishing that Amanda and David didn't exist, and that I could never do. After this excursion to Mars and trading places with the Queen, and after these reflections on my mother and Alzheimer's, let's return to the problem of what if someone we love had not existed.

But let's look at it from the other side. How many people that we would have loved never existed? Does that question make sense? What if my parents had had a third child? What if Catherine and I – Catherine was my first wife – had had a child together? What if Kerry and I had had a child together? You can all make your own lists. The number of potential people is endless.

If my father had married Queenie rather than Harriette, then I would be among the uncountable numbers of people who never existed. Except, of course, to mention a particular nonexistent *I* is to imagine a kind of existence that goes too far. If my father and mother had conceived their second child under different circumstances, it makes no sense to ask whether that child would have been me – there would only be that child. It's a meaningless question.

We have this image – at least, I do – of nonexistent people waiting off stage for their cue to enter, and to become real, existent human beings. How sad for those who never get the call. But it's not like that.

How about travel by Teletransporter? Whether it's the same person at the other end or not, as I see it, once again is not an empirical question. I would consider it a matter of convention for that society. If it was regarded as travel, then it would be travel, and not death and reconstruction.

Likewise, the proper way to view the result of trading brains with the queen cannot be determined. We might end up with a third alternative, reflecting better the muddle that's involved, and rejecting the idea that either the brain or the body is the determining factor. It would not be an empirical question, but again a matter of convention.

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I would now like to find some lessons in these various thought experiments. But first, you may be wondering what the connection is between the recognition of new members, a few minutes ago, and this sermon. You've probably concluded that there's none.

Still, we might ask whether one is the same person after joining a Unitarian Universalist congregation that one was before, or whether one has in some sense been reborn. I think the answer is Yes, one is still the same person, but Yes, also, one has been reborn, if you're willing to stretch a metaphor.

We cannot leave our old selves behind. We are the sum of our experiences; we are the sum of the generations that have come before us. We are proud of much that is in our past. There are probably some other things of which we are less than proud – that's certainly the way it is for me. Going forward, we will build on our experience, we will build on what we have learned.

We are likely to be distrustful of sudden born again experiences. We suspect they're fake. We doubt that they'll last. I think of rebirth or transformation more as a lengthy, gradual experience. There's no one point where we can say it's happened, but looking back, a year, a decade, we sense that something is different.

For me, my Unitarian Universalist rebirth was the realization that I could be in church again. I didn't have to believe the things I couldn't believe, but I could be part of a congregation, I could sing hymns again.

For you, rebirth might be finding a safe place for your children to explore theological and ethical issues, in age appropriate ways, or it might be finding a place where the life and message of Jesus are taken seriously, or it might be finding a community of love and support.

In any event, if you're looking for transformation or rebirth, I hope you can find it here. But don't expect it to be instantaneous, and don't expect it to be easy.

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Having come this far, can I avoid talking about pregnancy terminations, fertility problems, stem cell research and other related questions? The sensible, prudent approach for me would be to steer clear, way clear, of such issues. I lack both personal experience and professional expertise. I know that these can be painful subjects. I'll try not to make it worse.

The principal issue is often thought to be, When does life begin? What kind of a question is that, When does life begin? I don't think it's a scientific or empirical question. In one sense, life is continuous. Your life is continuous with your parents', and their lives are continuous with their parents', and so on back. We evolved from earlier primates, and ultimately from single-celled creatures. The question is not, When does life begin? Rather, we should ask, At what point do our feelings become engaged? At what point do ethical principles apply? At what point should the rule of law guide our behavior? These questions don't have to have the same answer.

For a pregnancy to end, at any point, for whatever reason, to end without the birth of a healthy child, can be emotionally devastating for those involved, but individual responses can vary, depending on the circumstances. When the pregnancy is terminated by abortion, most likely conflicting emotions are present. Our response, for example, to the rape victim, is likely to be quite different from our response to the couple who want their first child to be a son.

For the state to impose rules based on a theology that many of us find flawed and that is accepted by only a minority of the population seems misguided to me. The question of abortion is not a simple one, but for the state to prohibit abortions does not, if you ask me, represent sound policy.

Likewise, prohibiting stem cell research, in my view, does not represent respect for life, but just the opposite. Stem cells show great promise for preserving and extending lives.

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The question, Am I the same person? is also relevant, I should think, to the question of survival after death. Can we imagine a form of existence after death that is plausible? If we can, how do we determine that such a form actually is how it works, and not simply wishful thinking? If there is life after death, how do we determine the identity between a post-death person and someone like us?

Traditional Christianity emphasizes the body – the resurrection of the dead is anticipated, some day. That raises all kinds of practical questions. If we're talking about the same body, it's not likely to be available. If we're talking about a new body, where does it come from?

Popular Christianity contemplates an immediate transfer to heaven, but what that will be like of necessity must remain a mystery.

Both approaches raise the questions, how long? and what then? Is eternal life really eternal? That's a very long time. Can we call it quits at some point?

Easier to understand, perhaps, is reincarnation. You come back right to this same world, not some unknown place in the sky, and not at some unknowable time in the mythical future. You don't know in advance, of course, whether the next time you'll be a frog, a human, or a dogwood. Indeed, you don't know what you were the last time, perhaps an ant, there are so many of them.

But now we're back to the problem of the Teletransporter, but the Teletransporter problem has been compounded. With the Teletransporter we lacked bodily continuity, but at least we had continuity of memory. With reincarnation, we lack both bodily continuity and memory continuity. How do we know that we're the same person?

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I will leave you this morning with two mysteries, or perhaps I should say, two challenges. We don't know why we're alive, but here we are. Let's make the experience worth while. We don't know much about death, except that it awaits us all. When our time comes, may we be able to look back with satisfaction, and to look forward without fear. Amen.