

Thought Experiments

The ship Theseus

This is not what Ray North had bargained for. As an international master criminal he prided himself on being able to get the job done. His latest client had demanded that he steal the famous yacht Theseus, the vessel from which British newspaper magnate Lucas Grub had thrown himself to his death and which more recently had been the scene of the murder of LA rapper Daddy Iced Tea.

But here he was in the dry dock where the boat had just finished being repaired, confronted by two seemingly identical yachts. North turned to the security man, who was being held at gunpoint by one of his cronies.

'If you want to live, you'd better tell me which one of these is the real Theseus: demanded Ray.

'That kinda depends,' came the nervous reply. 'You see, when we started to repair the ship, we needed to replace lots of parts. Only, we kept all the old parts. But as the work progressed, we ended up replacing virtually everything. When we had finished, some of the guys thought it would be good to use all the old parts to reconstruct another version of the ship. So that's what we've got. On the left, the Theseus repaired with new parts and on the right, the Theseus restored from old parts.' 'But which one is the genuine Theseus?' demanded Ray. 'I've told you all I know!' screamed the guard, as the crony tightened his grip. Ray scratched his head and started to think about how he could get away with both...

Philosophy concerns itself with the questions that still remain unanswered once all the facts have been collected. In this scenario, Ray knows all the relevant facts about the two boats. Yet the answer to his question remains mysterious.

For some people, it is intuitively obvious which is the genuine Theseus. But which answer they give will depend on how you tell the story. If Ray were a detective looking to gather forensic evidence about the deaths of Lucas Grub and Daddy Iced Tea, it would seem pretty obvious that he would count the reconstructed Theseus as the genuine article. He might reach the same conclusion if he were a collector of objects with a historical significance. However, if there were an ownership dispute, the repaired Theseus would be counted as the original. That is the boat the owner is entitled to sail away. And if you were to have placed a time-delay camera in the dry dock and followed the progress of the works, you would have seen the boat that came in gradually being worked on with the repaired version as the end result, while the restored one would have only later started to emerge beside it. The repaired ship thus has a continuity of existence which the restored one does not.

You might then think that which is the 'genuine' Theseus is not a question with a single answer. It all depends on what your interest in the boat is. But this answer may have disturbing consequences. For are not people rather like Theseus? As we go through life, the cells in our body continually die and are replaced. Our thoughts too change, so that little of what was in our heads when we were ten years old remains when we are twenty, and these thoughts, memories, convictions and dispositions are in turn replaced as we grow older.

Are we then to say that there is no right answer as to whether we are the same people who we were many years ago and that it just depends on what our interest in ourselves is? If the identity of Theseus is not a factual matter, then can there be a fact about the identity of anything that gradually changes over time, human beings included?

from *The [Pig Who Wants to be Eaten](#)* by Juian Baggini (page 31)

Beam me up

For Stelios, the teletransporter is the only way to travel. Previously it took months to get from the Earth to Mars, confined to a cramped spacecraft with a far from perfect safety record. Stelios's TeletransportExpress changed all that. Now the trip takes just minutes, and so far it has been 100 per cent safe.

However, now he is facing a lawsuit from a disgruntled customer who is claiming the company actually killed him. His argument is simple: the teletransporter works by scanning your brain and body cell by cell, destroying them, beaming the information to Mars and reconstructing you there. Although the person on Mars looks, feels and thinks just like a person who has been sent to sleep and zapped across space, the claimant argues that what actually happens is that you are murdered and replaced by a clone.

To Stelios, this sounds absurd. After all, he has taken the teletransporter trip dozens of times, and he doesn't feel dead. Indeed, how can the claimant seriously believe that he has been killed by the process when he is clearly able to take the case to court?

Still, as Stelios entered the teletransporter booth once again and prepared to press the button that would begin to dismantle him, he did, for a second, wonder whether he was about to commit suicide...

On what does our continued survival depend? In normal circumstances, we would say the continued functioning of our body. But since there is no part of the body that couldn't conceivably be replaced by a synthetic substitute, perhaps this is not necessarily true. Isn't it rather that we continue to exist just as long as our consciousness continues? The day no one wakes up thinking he is me, with my memories, plans and personalities, is the day I have died.

The 'psychological continuity' theory of personal identity has an intuitive appeal. It is only because it seems to reflect our fundamental intuitions that we can make sense of stories such as Kafka's 'Metamorphosis', in which a man wakes up in the body of a beetle. We instantly recognise that the man is the beetle because his mind inhabits it. Mental, not physical continuity, marks him out as the same person.

But in the case of teletransportation, although we do have psychological continuity as complete as it is in ordinary life, it also seems beyond doubt that what has been created is a copy, a clone. A clone, however, is not the same individual as the person cloned. It is the same only in the sense that two statues cast from the same mould are the same: they are identical in every detail but they are distinct entities nonetheless. If you chip one, the other remains undamaged.

It is not as though Stelios doesn't know how his teletransporter works. He just doesn't see why the fact that, strictly speaking, the machine 'clones' him every time should matter. What matters to him is that, as far as he is concerned, he walks into the booth and wakes up on another planet. The physical mechanism is irrelevant.

If that sounds glib, consider for a moment the possibility that one night, a few years ago, you were kidnapped in your sleep, processed by the teletransporter, and the resulting person returned, unknowing, to your bed. Had this happened, you would have no way of

telling, because your conscious experience of your ongoing life as a continuing being would be exactly the same if it had not happened. The fact of teletransportation, in some sense, leaves your life and world exactly as it was. Perhaps then to ask whether Stelios is a clone or 'the same' person is the wrong question. Perhaps we should instead ask what matters about our past and future existence. And maybe the answer to that is psychological continuity, by whatever means necessary.

from The [Pig Who Wants to be Eaten](#) by Juian Baggini (page 4)

I am a brain

When Ceri Braum accepted the gift of eternal life, this was not quite what she had in mind. Sure, she knew that her brain would be removed from her body and kept alive in a vat. She also knew her only connection with the outside world would be via a camera, a microphone and a speaker. But at the time, living for ever like this seemed a pretty good deal, especially compared to living for not much longer in her second, deteriorating body. In retrospect, however, perhaps she had been convinced too easily that she was just her brain. When her first body had given out, surgeons had taken out her brain and put it into the body of someone whose own brain had failed. Waking up in the new body, she had no doubt that she was still the same person, Ceri Braum. And since it was only her brain that remained from her old self, it also seemed safe to conclude that she was, therefore, essentially her brain.

But life just as a brain strikes Ceri as extremely impoverished. How she longs for the fleshiness of a more complete existence. Nevertheless, since it is her, Ceri, now having these thoughts and doubts, is she nonetheless right to conclude that she is, in essence, nothing more or less than her brain?

Among all the talk about the mysteries of human consciousness - of which there are many - it can easily be forgotten that one fact is surely firmly established: thought is dependent on a healthy, functioning brain. The evidence that this is the case is overwhelming. Drugs, bumps on the head and degenerative diseases all affect our cognitive abilities. The mind cannot protect itself against attacks on the brain.

The evidence against is tiny. Anecdotal accounts of messages from the dead and departed can sound impressive, but the truth is that nothing even approaching strong evidence that they are genuine has yet been produced.

Given that we think we are the individuals who have our thoughts, feelings and memories, and that it is the brain that makes all these possible, would we then be right to conclude that we are our brains? Surely where our brains go, we go too? If my brain is successfully transplanted to your body and vice versa, then wouldn't I be living on in your body and you in mine? We should be careful before drawing this strong conclusion. We may well depend upon our brains for our existence, but this is very different from saying we are our brains. Compare the situation with a musical score. It can exist only in something physical: sheet music, a computer file, perhaps even the brain of a musician. But it would be wrong to conclude that a score therefore is any of these objects. The score is, in essence, a kind of code which needs to be inscribed somewhere to continue to exist. But it is the code, not the somewhere, which makes it what it is. Might this not also be true of the human self? The notes and keys that make up the individual personality could be the thoughts, memories and character traits that together define who we are. There is nowhere else for this score to be written but in the human brain. That does not, however, mean we are our brains.

If that is the case, it would explain why Ceri's new existence feels so thin. Just as a musical score that is never performed remains potential rather than actual, a human mind that cannot inhabit a human body is a diminished shadow of its true self. And yet it is possible to lose all feeling in one's body and to become effectively a mind imprisoned in an insensate body. Are not such people, who of course actually exist, living examples of brains

being kept alive by physical processes? And if so, doesn't that suggest we can be no more than our brains after all?

from The [Pig Who Wants to be Eaten](#) by Juian Baggini (page 112)

Living in a vat

Ever since the accident, Brian had lived in a vat. His body was crushed, but quick work by the surgeons had managed to salvage his brain. This procedure was now carried out whenever possible, so that the brain could be put back into a body once a suitable donor had been found.

But because fewer brains than bodies terminally fail, the waiting list for new bodies had got intolerably long. To destroy the brains, however, was deemed ethically unacceptable. The solution came in the form of a remarkable supercomputer from China, Mai Trikks. Through electrodes attached to the brain, the computer could feed the brain stimuli which gave it the illusion that it was in a living body, inhabiting the real world.

In Brian's case, that meant he woke up one day in a hospital bed to be told about the accident and the successful body transplant. He then went on to live a normal life. All the time, however, he was really no more than his old brain, kept alive in a vat, wired up to a computer. Brian had no more or less reason to think he was living in the real world than you or I. How could he - or we - ever know differently?

The possibility that we are brains in vats provided the premise for the hit science fiction movie *The Matrix*. In that film, the hero, Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, was spared the indignity of having no body, but his situation was essentially the same as Brian's. He thought he was living in the real world when, in fact, his brain was simply being fed information to present that illusion. Really, he was in a pod, immersed in a kind of amniotic fluid. The sceptical doubt that we might be victims of such a whole-scale illusion is much older. The allegory of Plato's cave is an early precursor, as are the systematic doubts of Descartes, who wondered if we could be dreaming or deceived by a powerful demon.

What is neat about the brain-in-a-vat idea, however, is its plausibility. It certainly seems to be scientifically possible, which makes it more credible than a spooky demon deceiver.

Indeed, a recent argument has even suggested that it is overwhelmingly probable that we are living in a virtual reality environment, not perhaps as brains in vats, but as artificially created intelligences. The argument is that, given time, we or another civilisation will almost certainly be able to create artificial intelligences and virtual-reality environments for them to live in. Further, because these simulated worlds do not require the huge amount of natural resources to keep them going that biological organisms do, there is almost no limit to how many such environments could be created. There could be the equivalent of an entire planet Earth 'living' in one desktop computer of the future. If all this is possible, we have only to do the maths to see that it is probable we are in one such simulation. Let us say that over the whole course of human history, for every human being that ever lives, there are another nine that are the creation of computer simulations. Both the simulations and the humans would believe that they are biological organisms. But 90 per cent of them would be wrong. And since we cannot know if we are simulations or real beings, there is a 90 per cent chance that we are wrong to think we are the latter. In other words, it is much more probable that we are living in something like the *Matrix* than it is that we are walking the real Earth.

Most people sense something fishy about the argument. But maybe that is simply because its conclusion is too startling. The question we need to ask is not whether it sounds incredible, but whether there is anything wrong with its logic. And identifying its flaws is a very difficult, if not impossible, task.

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Amoebaesque

The press had given him the nickname 'worm man; but his friends knew him as Derek. Scientists had manipulated his DNA to mimic one of the most amazing features of the common or garden worm: the ability to regenerate lost tissue. And it had worked. When they chopped off his hand to test him out, a new one had regrown within a month.

Then it all went wrong. His body was slowly deteriorating. To save his life they had to transplant his brain into a new body. However, a major mistake during the operation severed his brain in two.

Fortunately, both halves fully regenerated and both were successfully transplanted into new bodies. The only problem was that both the men who now had one of the brains believed they were Derek. What is more, both had Derek's memories, mental skills and personality. This created problems for Derek's boyfriend, who couldn't tell them apart. It also led to the Dereks getting entangled in a legal battle to claim Derek's assets. But which was the real Derek? They couldn't both be him, could they?

Like a good detective, before we start trying to account for what has happened, we should get the facts clear. Where once we had one Derek, now we have two. Call them right-Derek and left- Derek, after the hemispheres of the original brain they grew from. Which, if either, is Derek?

They can't both be Derek, because since the split they have been two people, not one. If right-Derek died, for example, and left-Derek lived on, would Derek be dead or alive? Since one person cannot be both dead and alive, Derek couldn't be both right- and left-Derek.

Perhaps neither right- nor left-Derek is Derek. But this seems a strange solution. If, for example, the left hemisphere had been destroyed in the operation and only the right had fully regenerated, we would surely say that right-Derek was Derek. If the left hemisphere had also regenerated, however, suddenly right-Derek isn't Derek at all, even though he is exactly the same in both circumstances. How can a difference in something external to right-Derek stop him being Derek?

The only remaining possibility is that one or other of right- and left-Derek, and one only, is Derek. But since they have an equal claim to his identity, why should we pick one rather than the other? An ascription of identity cannot be arbitrary. So all three possibilities – both, either or neither – seem wrong. But one must be right: there are no other options.

If none of the possible answers to a question is adequate, perhaps we're just asking the wrong question. It's like demanding an answer to 'When did you stop beating your wife?' when the beatings never started.

In the case of the worm man, the problem is that we are asking a question about identity over time – a one-to-one relation - when the thing in question has a one-to-many relation over time. The logic of identity just doesn't fit. We should talk instead about succession or continuation. So, both right- and left-Derek are continuers of Derek, but we should not ask which, if either, is Derek.

So perhaps the question we should ask is if Derek survived his ordeal. It looks as though he did. If that is true, it seems that Derek achieved personal survival without personal identity.

Of course, ordinary selves do not divide as Derek did. Nonetheless, his tale may still be instructive. For what it suggests is that what matters for our survival is not that identity over time is preserved, but that there is the right kind of continuity between us and our future selves. Then it becomes a question of what we want to see continue. Is it our bodies? Our brains? Our inner lives? Our souls?

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The experience machine

Robert had been sitting in front of the consent form for two hours and still he did not know whether to sign it or shred it. His choice was between two futures.

In one, his prospects were bleak and the chances of realising his dreams slim. In the other, he would be a famous rock star guaranteed to be kept permanently happy. Not much of a choice, you might think. But whereas the first life would be in the real world, the second would be entirely within the experience machine.

This device enables you to live the whole of your life in a virtual-reality environment. All your experiences are designed to make you happier and more satisfied. But crucially, once in the machine you have no idea that you are not in the real world, nor that what is happening to you has been designed to meet your needs. It seems you are living an ordinary life in the ordinary world: it is just that in this life, you are one of the winners for whom everything seems to go right.

Robert knows that once he is in the machine, life will be ~ great. But still, something about its phoniness makes him hesitate to sign the form that will take him to this paradise.

It's easy to see why Robert is holding back. Life in the machine would be bogus, inauthentic, unreal. But why should an authentic 'real' life, with its remorseless cycles of ups and downs, be preferable to a bogus happy one?

A sales agent for the happiness machine could offer some powerful arguments that it is not. First, consider what 'authenticity' and 'real' mean. An authentic person is who they really are, not what they pretend to be. But Robert will still be Robert in the machine. He can reveal his true personality there as easily as he can outside it.

Then you might say that in the real world, you become a rock star by merit, whereas in the machine it would not be his own efforts which were rewarded. To which it might be replied, have you heard most rock stars? Talent has little to do with it; luck and opportunity everything. Robert's fame in the machine will be no less deserved than the fame of the countless wannabes who make it up the slippery pole of pop. Indeed, that is the great recommendation of the experience machine. Success in life depends so much on luck: were you born in the right place, at the right time, to the right parents? Were you endowed with the abilities your society values and rewards? Did you have access to the people and places that could help you get ahead? To say it is better to leave yourself at the mercy of Lady Luck when you could choose to be happy is crazy.

As for the idea that you would be abandoning the real world, we might say: get real. The world you live in now is no more than the sum of your experiences: what you see, hear, feel, taste, touch, smell. If you think it is more real because it is caused by sub-atomic processes rather than silicon chips, perhaps you need to reconsider your notion of reality. After all, even our concept of the world of science beyond experiences is ultimately based on observations and experiments wholly within the world of experience. So in some sense, reality is just appearances.

And yet we still might not want to enter the machine, determined as we are that our futures should be as much a product of our own will and efforts as possible. If we persist with this refusal to enter the machine, then at least one thing must be true: when we consider what is in our own best interests, we care for more than just happiness. Otherwise, we would enter the machine like a shot.

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Total lack of recall

Arnold Conan had just made an unpleasant discovery: he wasn't Arnold Conan at all. Or rather, he used not to be. It was all rather confusing.

This is the best sense he could make of his unusual auto- biography. He was born Alan E. Wood. Wood was, by all accounts, a deeply unpleasant man: egotistical, selfish, cruel and ruthless. Two years ago, Wood had got into deep trouble with the State Bureau of Investigation. He was given a choice: spend the rest of his life in maximum security prison, where they would make sure he was victimised by the other inmates; or have his memory erased and replaced with that of an entirely fictitious creation of the spooks at the SBI. He chose the latter. And so it was that Alan E. Wood was put under a general anaesthetic, and when he woke up, he had forgotten all about his life to date. Instead, he remembered an entirely fictitious past, that of Arnold Conan, the man he now believed he was.

Conan had established that these were the facts. But he still did not know who he was: Wood or Conan?

As identity crises go, Conan/Wood's is about as bad as it gets. It seems he is either someone deeply unpleasant he knows nothing about or the fictitious creation of the security agencies. He is unlikely to want either possibility to be the truth.

Many people's initial intuition is that Conan is really Alan E. Wood. This is understandable. Our identity usually follows that of our brains and bodies. Since the life of the organism named Alan E. Wood at birth has continued uninterrupted, and there is no other person with a claim to his name walking the Earth, it would seem that Conan is Wood. After all, if he isn't Wood, where is Wood? Show us the corpse: no one has been killed.

The case may also be strengthened by the knowledge that Arnold Conan is a creation of agents and neurologists. Whatever he remembers of his childhood, for example, never really happened. Conan seems as unreal as Wood does real. So can there be any doubt that Conan is Wood, albeit mentally altered beyond all recognition?

In Conan/Wood's mind, certainly. For whatever the logic of our reasoning dictates, he feels like Conan, not Wood. He would not, for example, experience any desire to have his old self restored. Indeed, he might be horrified by the idea that he would once again become the amoral man he once was.

Before we say that he is simply in denial about the truth, consider that he has lived as Conan for two years; not all his past is fictitious. Consider also how people can suffer widespread amnesia. If you received a bump on the head and lost all memories of your past up until two years ago, you would certainly be changed by the experience, but you would not be transformed into someone else entirely.

So it is not hard to see how Conan/Wood could be seen as being Wood. It is just that Conan has existed only for a few years, and all his memories of before that time are false. The fact that he started out as an artificial creation does not negate the fact that he has lived for two years as a real human being.

If the case can be made both ways, how are we to decide which is most persuasive? If we ask different questions, we will get different answers. Do Wood's friends recognise him as the man they knew? Who does Conan's new wife think she has married? What would Wood's debtors claim? Who does Conan/Wood think he is? Rather than asking what the facts are, perhaps we should ask which of these questions matters the most, and so which answer is the one we should accept.

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Soul power

Faith had believed in reincarnation for as long as she could remember. But recently her interest in her past lives had reached a new level. Now that she was visiting the medium mystic Marjorie, for the first time she had information about what her past lives were really like.

Most of what Marjorie told her was about her previous incarnation as Zosime, a noblewoman who lived at the time of the siege of Troy. She heard about her daring escape first to Smyrna and then on to Knossos. She was apparently both brave and beautiful, and she fell in love with a Spartan commander, whom she lived with at Knossos for the rest of her life.

Faith didn't check the real history of Troy to try to verify Marjorie's story. She did not doubt that hers was the same soul that had lived in Zosime. She did, however, have a nagging concern about what this all meant. Much as she enjoyed the idea of being a Greek beauty, since she didn't remember anything of her life in Knossos or have any sense of being the person Marjorie told her about, she couldn't see how she and Zosime could be the same person. She had found out about her past life, but it didn't seem like her life at all.

Many people all over the world believe in various forms of re- incarnation or rebirth. There are plenty of reasons for thinking that they are mistaken to do so. Let us suppose, though, that we do have souls and these are reincarnated. What would follow from that? This is the question Faith is grappling with. Despite the somewhat suspicious nature of the story Marjorie told her – why is it our past lives always seem to be as interesting, powerful people with colourful lives? – Faith does not dispute its veracity. The question she asks is: if I do indeed have the same soul as Zosime, does that make me the same person as her?

Faith intuitively answers 'no'. She has no sense of being the same person as Zosime. This is not surprising. When we look back at ourselves in the past (rather than at our past selves), what gives us a sense that we are the same person is a certain degree of psychological connectedness and continuity. We remember being that person, doing the things she did, holding the beliefs she held and so on. We also have a sense of how our current selves grew from that person.

If our souls did inhabit other persons in previous lives, we have no such psychological connections with them. Marjorie needs to tell Faith what Zosime did and thought, as Faith does not remember being Zosime; nor has she any sense of having grown out of Zosime. Without these connections, how can it make sense to talk about Zosime and Faith being the same person, even if they do share the same soul?

If these thoughts are on the right track, then even if we have souls that survive bodily death, this does not necessarily mean that we will survive bodily death. The continued existence of the self seems to depend on psychological continuity, not some strange immaterial substance. The continued existence of the soul no more guarantees the continued existence of the self than the continued existence of a heart or other organ does.

But now consider what it is like to look at a photograph of yourself as an infant. To know what that person was like, you usually have to ask someone who was an adult at the time

and who remembers. 'What was I like?' you ask them, as Faith asks Marjorie, 'What was I like at Troy?' Your psychological links with that toddler may be so weak as to be almost non-existent. Does that mean you are, in a very real sense, no more the same person as your baby self than Faith is the same as Zosime?

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Zombies

Lucia lived in a town where the lights were on, but nobody was ever home. She lived among zombies.

This was not as scary as it might sound. These zombies were not the flesh-eating ghouls of horror films. They looked and behaved just like you and I. They even had exactly the same physiology as you and I. But there was one key difference: they had no minds. If you pricked them they would say 'ouch' and wince, but they felt no pain. If you 'upset' them they would cry or get angry, but there would be no inner turmoil. If you played them soothing music they would appear to enjoy it, but in their minds they would hear nothing. On the outside, they were ordinary humans, but on the inside, nothing was going on.

This made them easy to get along with. It was easy to forget that they didn't have inner lives as she did, since they spoke and behaved just like ordinary people and that included references to how they felt or what they thought. Visitors to the town would also fail to notice anything strange. Even when Lucia let them in on the secret, they refused to believe her. 'How do you know that they have no minds?' they would ask. 'How do you know that other people do?' would be Lucia's reply. That usually shut them up.

'How do you know?' is often a very good question. It is also, alas, one it is very hard to answer conclusively. We rarely, perhaps never, know beyond any doubt whatsoever. The best we can hope for is to have good reasons for what we believe. Better reasons, at least, than those for believing the contrary. That is why; we don't feel we need to worry about the possibility that we are living among zombies. Even if it is possible that we are, as long as we have more reasons to believe that we aren't, we can safely avoid fretting over improbable possibilities.

The reasons for thinking other people aren't zombies are principally ones of economy. If they walk like us, talk like us and have brains and bodies like us, then the chances are they are like us in all significant respects, including how things feel to them from the inside. It would be very odd if the nervous system which gives me consciousness didn't do the same for others.

This, however, is precisely the point at which the zombie possibility becomes interesting. For why should we think that physical similarities are indicative of mental ones? The problem of consciousness is precisely that it seems inexplicable that purely physical entities such as brains should give rise to subjective experiences. Why should a C-fibre firing in the brain feel like anything at all? What has that brain event got to do with the sensation of pain?

If these questions seem serious and without satisfactory answers, then it would follow from them that there is nothing logically contradictory in imagining brain events such as C-fibres firing without any concomitant sensation. In other words, the idea of zombies – people just like us in every physical respect, but who have no inner lives at all – is perfectly coherent. And so the possibility that other people are such zombies, however improbable, is a real one.

As in horror films, killing off the zombies is no easy task. In order to discount the possibility of their existence, you need to show why it is that a creature that has the same physiology as us must also have the same basic psychology. That means, for example, showing why C-fibre firing must feel like pain, rather than seeing the colour yellow, or nothing at all. It's a challenge that so far no one has been able to meet to the general satisfaction of philosophers. Until someone does, we cannot be sure that zombies do not walk the Earth.

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Memories are made of this

Alicia clearly remembers visiting the Parthenon in Athens, and how the sight of the crumbling ruin up close was less impressive than the view of it from a distance, perched majestically on the Acropolis. But Alicia had never been to Athens, so what she remembers is visiting the Parthenon, not her visiting the Parthenon.

It is not that Alicia is deluded. What she remembers is actually how it was. She has had a memory implant. Her friend Mayte had been to Greece for a holiday, and when she came back she went to the Kadok memory processing shop to have her holiday recollections downloaded onto a disc. Alicia had later taken this disc back to the same shop and had the memories uploaded to her brain. She now has a whole set of Mayte's holiday memories, which to her have the character of all her other memories: they are all recollections from the first person point of view.

The slightly disturbing thing, however, is that Mayte and Alicia have exchanged such memories so many times that it seems they have quite literally inhabited the same past. Although Alicia knows she should really say that she remembers Mayte's holiday to Greece, it feels more natural simply to say she remembers the holiday. But how can you remember what you never did?

Sometimes thought experiments stretch our existing concepts so far they just break. This may well seem to be the case here. It doesn't seem right to say Alicia remembers going to Greece, but at the same time what she does is more than remember that Mayte went. We seem to be imagining a form of recollection that is not quite memory, but pretty close.

Philosophers have called these kinds of recollections quasi- memories, or just q-memories. They may appear to be just an interesting piece of science fiction, but in fact their very possibility is philosophically significant. Here's why.

There is a theory in the philosophy of personal identity known as psychological reductionism. On this view, the continued existence of an individual person requires, not necessarily the survival of a particular brain or body (although as a matter of fact we at present do require both), but the continuation of our mental lives. Just as long as my 'stream of consciousness' continues, I continue.

Psychological continuity requires various things, including a certain continuity of belief, memory, personality and intention. All these things may change, but they do so gradually, not all at once. The self is merely the combination of these various factors: it is not a separate entity.

But surely the individual self cannot be 'made up of' things such as belief, memory, personality and intention? Rather, the self is what has these things, and in a sense must come first. For example, say that you remember climbing the Eiffel Tower. To remember this is to presuppose that you visited the tower. But if the concept of your continued survival is presupposed by the very idea of memory, then memories cannot be that on which your continued survival depends. The self must already 'be there' if we are to have memories at all, and so memories cannot be the building blocks of the self.

The idea of q-memory, however, challenges this. What q-memories show is that there is nothing in the idea of having first-person recall that presupposes personal identity. Alicia has q-memories of experiences which weren't hers. That means first-person recollections could be some of the building blocks of the self after all. The self would be partly made up of the right kind of first-person recollections: memories not q-memories. But, of course, if we are in a sense composed of our memories, what happens when our memories become confused with those of other people, such as is the case with Alicia? Or when our memories fade or trick us? Do the boundaries of the self begin to dissolve as the reliability of memory deteriorates? Our fear of dementia in old age suggests we sense that this is true, and perhaps adds weight to the claims of psychological reductionism.

from The [Pig Who Wants to be Eaten](#) by Juian Baggini (page 88)