

Self

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What are you?

Perhaps the first answer one thinks of is a body (including brain). And the first objection to that answer is that all the cells in your body are replaced every 10 years or so, so you can't be a particular piece of matter. You may lose parts of your body; you may gain parts (prosthetics, transplants); but you are still you. Nonetheless, there is still some merit to this answer. There's a continuity, if not constancy, of the collection of cells that makes up your body; the changes are incremental. If you knock down a house and build a new house in its place, you would not say it's the same house; but if you repair and replace bits of a house over a long period of time, then even if all parts get replaced, you might say it's still the same house. So the material answer may be part of the answer. But it's not the whole answer.

Your body behaves a certain way. You have a personality that people recognize. You do things. What you say and do and the way you say and do them are a large part of what other people mean by "you". Like your body, your personality and actions have a continuity, though not a constancy. So that's another part of the answer. And there's more.

Your mind is the activity of your brain; it consists of thoughts and memories. Thinking and remembering are physical activities; they make you tired. Your thoughts and memories are the most precious part of you. Other people can see your body, and see what you do, but your thoughts and memories are internal and private. They are what you mean by "me".

That completes the answer. It may seem like there's more: that something nonphysical, a magical mysterious soul or spirit, inhabits a body. It may even seem that you know where it is: in your head. In a sense that's true. There's no extra substance, nothing nonphysical, but a mind is distinct from the brain that it inhabits, or takes place in. A mind, being the activity of a brain, cannot exist apart from a brain, but it can continue to exist even as new brain cells are generated (when you are young) and old brain cells die (when you are old). Sometimes, if a part of a brain is injured, the activities of that part can be relocated to another part. So a mind is distinct from the matter that hosts it, but it cannot exist apart from the matter that hosts it.

The reason you feel like your self (the essential you) is located in your head is not because your brain is located in your head. Most of us obtain most of our information through our eyes, and that's the location, not behind the eyes but the eyes themselves, where we feel our self is located. A blind person who can hear locates their self at their ears, which is still in the head. A person who can neither see nor hear gets most of their information through touching by hand, and locates their self in their hands. Here's an experiment that would be interesting, although it might be hard to find someone willing to perform it. You could attach a pair of cameras to the front of a belt that you wear around your waist, and display the images on a pair of small screens that you wear as eyeglasses, and block out all other light into your eyes. After a few weeks when you are completely used to this arrangement, you will locate your self at the front of your waist. You will feel like the part of you above your waist, including your head, and the part of you below your waist, is just your body, not the essential you, just as you now feel about your body below your head.

Being conscious means having an active brain; more active is more conscious. Some say being conscious is more than that: they say it means being aware of your surroundings, being aware of yourself in your surroundings, reacting to changes in your surroundings, and planning actions in response to possible changes in your surroundings or to change your surroundings. But I know that when I am thinking very hard about a mathematical problem, or any other

interesting difficult subject, I lose awareness of my surroundings, and lose awareness of my self, and I'm not planning a course of action. But I would like to say that I am still quite conscious. I can imagine someone who has lived a while and has a store of memories having each of their senses taken away, one by one, until they have no sensory input, yet they can still remember and think. So I say being conscious just means having an active brain. The level of brain activity required to control breathing and the beating of your heart is called "subconscious"; by "conscious" we mean more activity than that.

For millennia, people have said that animals (meaning non-human animals) do not think. They do things, but they don't know why they do them; they are not conscious. And, unlike humans, they have no souls. In the past 80 years there has been a lot of scientific study of animal behavior, and I think it is now completely clear, at least to these scientists, that animals plan, solve problems, have emotions, communicate with each other, dream, and do everything humans do that we call thinking. They are as conscious as we are. But they don't have souls. (Neither do we.)

The debate has now moved on to artificial intelligence. A robot can see, hear, think, and communicate. Does a robot have a mind? Is a robot conscious? I say yes, whenever its artificial brain is active. But robots don't have souls. (Neither do we.)

The human brain is a very complex object, and I know very little about it. Computers are also complex objects, and I know a lot about them. I think human brains work differently from computers. Perhaps neuroscience will sometime label a particular brain activity, taking place in a particular part of the brain, as "consciousness". By doing so, they will change the meaning of the word "conscious" from its current common meaning, and then I will have to withdraw my suggestion that it means having an active brain.

Some future technology may be able to read your mind, but at present, and for the foreseeable future, your thoughts are private to the extent that you choose to keep them private. But you can tell them to others, and share them, if you choose to. You can write your thoughts, so that other people, reading what you wrote, might have the same thoughts. You can make a music or video recording to transmit your musical and visual thoughts to others. When other people hear or read or see your thoughts and ideas, they may agree with you and now have the same thoughts as you. Or they may disagree, and learn only that you have those thoughts and ideas, though they don't think the same as you.

When other people have thoughts that you have transmitted to them, they are not remembering you. They might remember where these thoughts came from, or they might not. You can remember a doll and what it says when you pull the string (or push the button), but that's not sharing the doll's thoughts. When you transmit your thoughts to me and I agree with you, I can then think the same thoughts that you thought.

We can share a memory if the experience we remember happened to both of us. If the experience happened only to you, you can still tell me about it, and I will usually retain the fact that it is your memory, or at least that it is someone else's, not my memory. But occasionally you might transmit your memory so vividly that I might then have the same memory. I would then remember something, as though it happened to me, even though it didn't happen to me.

If you agree that your thoughts and memories are the most important part of being you, and that thoughts and memories are distinct from the matter that hosts them, and the same thoughts and memories can be hosted by different brains, then you are agreeing that the most important part of a person can reside in more than one body. If we want to, we could even go so far as to say that when someone thinks the same thoughts as someone else, they are, at least to the extent of those thoughts, the same person.

As you share your thoughts, you spread out, becoming part of other people. This happens while you are alive and communicating with other people, and, thanks to the human inventions of writing and recording, you can be nonexistent for a while, until someone reads what you

wrote, and then you exist again. You do not live on after the death of your body in the way religion says; there's no disembodied spirit or soul that goes to heaven where it continues to see and think and remember. However, to the extent that you have transmitted your thoughts and memories to others, you can say, in a sense, if you want to, that the most important part of you, your mind, lives on, at least in part, possibly intermittently, after the death of your body.

Normally, I say that a “self” is an attached set of regenerating cells including a functioning brain, acknowledging that several of those words are a bit fuzzy. Normally, when asked whether I believe in life after death, my answer is “no”. This essay is my attempt to relax that answer as much as possible.

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