

**PHI 231**

**Are we truly the same person we once were in our past?**

As time marches ever onward, we sometimes reflect back on our younger years and reminisce over the ways we have changed from long ago. But have you ever wondered, from those very far back memories, that you could truly be the same person that was once the very person in your memories or family pictures? I argue that you may be the same being that was once that person, but in reality you are not. You are physically the same person from when you were an infant, but as you grew and experienced various things in life, you fashioned a sense of self that is unique to you. In Chapter Six of *The Big Questions: A Short Introduction to Philosophy*, the text explains that all humans hold what is considered the inner or essential self. This concept is what's beneath the veneer of our social "masks", a "true" self that exists beyond the daily contexts of life. A true self goes deeper, something that causes us to feel or react in ways either contrary or compatible to who we truly are. As Solomon and Higgins describe,

*"For example...if we are forced to behave in an artificial way... We might well describe our experience in phrases such as "I couldn't be myself" or "I felt like a phony." (Solomon & Higgins, 2018, pg. 184).*

In the context of the question, when we are young, we are still learning about the world in ways that point to our development still being underway (such as confusion to more mature concepts). We are influenced by those we look up to, the institutions in our daily life that give us common sense, and the aspirations which we provide when asked, "What will you be when you grow up?" After all, one could not simply think that an infant who would become a great hero in the distant future would be that very man at such a young age in the present, everyone has to *grow* to reach who they will be. It is fundamental to say that all children require several factors to reach their potential, and are thus in this case, malleable. Yet, even so saying, can we truly say that we are the same person we were when we were so young?

I contend that we physically are, because we as humans have already identified that our body is composed of millions of cells which constitute our bodies rapidly live, die, and reproduce using our DNA and RNA as blueprints. But does this not mean that our bodies as we are now are but a “clone” of sorts from what we were originally? Perhaps, in a figurative sense, because we have changed, we do not have of course that same body we had as a child, yet in reality because of the *nature* of our body, we are constantly changing to the point that one can argue we are *never* the same at any given point. To consider that we are truly the same as who we once were long ago in a physical and mental sense is rather farfetched, both given the scenario of our bodies naturally changing due to the propensity of evolution as well as the development in the mind.

We can arguably never hope to return to that physical state of being because as we know it now, time will always march forward. In coupling that with our human bodies (of which continually changes) being tied to that factor, one could only so hope to do so should we have some bizarre method of going back in time (and even then, such a concept goes so far). But let us take an example from the text and consider a theory where a scientist creates a pod or chamber that allows the body to be rejuvenated “to the point” of where we were physically at any given age (i.e an 86 year old becomes a 36 year old). The scientist explains that the technology reverts the human body to the point it once was using those very same blueprints crafted from the DNA and RNA within the cells. Said subject is regressed to that point, appearing almost indistinguishable from photos that depicted them at that age, but the question resounds once more: Are they the same person they were long ago?

While we could contend that in the physical sense they are *now*, the mental sense of self is a much deeper, more complex frontier that requires a definite “no”. To better explain why, as

opposed to naturally agreeing to the physical sense when we use this *pod* theory, we can look at the body as a vehicle of sorts that, like others, have a depreciation rate and thus we know no car will look the same as it did when first bought. The same can thus be concluded from this theory, even if one were to enhance the car and refurbished it brand new, what does not change is the amount of miles it drove (assuming one hadn't changed the cluster or motor that accounts for these changes, of course) or the finer details harking to the experiences the vehicle had (a pair of fuzzy dice or a distinct scent for example). *Experiences* is the key word here, because even if we were to somehow regress ourselves to that point in time where we would be essentially no different to who we once were, it is those experiences and the development we went through growing up that impacts our sense of self and who we are.

This concurs with a similar argument in Locke's statement that the true self can be relegated not to the whole of the consciousness, but rather, the mind and the memories it holds (Solomon & Higgins, 2018, pg. 187). Even if the body should be changed to a radical degree, as per the example of using our friend being transformed into a frog, we would largely still recall those memories as a way to hold a sense of self and identity to know that despite our change, we are still the person we remember. In this manner, even should we be regressed to a childlike age, we would still arguably carry the same mind that we had at an older age, and thus, react and behave as though we were still that age. Even the authors acknowledge this to some degree,

*"...it takes very little alteration in a person's mental capacities for us to complain that he or she seems like a different person or that we don't know that person at all anymore."* (Solomon & Higgins, 2018, pg. 186).

So, what if our memories (and therefore the mind) are not there, but the body is, who or what would be the self in that scenario? To this end, the authors use the example of what is considered the *Mind-Body* problem to help articulate this:

*“Suppose Mr. Jones has an emergency operation in which his injured brain is replaced by the brain of Mrs. Smith (just deceased). The resulting person has the body, face, and general appearance of Mr. Jones, but the consciousness, memories, and knowledge of Mrs. Smith. Who is the resulting person?” (Solomon & Higgins, 2018, pg. 189).*

It would be reasonable to say in this scenario, the body may be of Mr. Jones, but because the mind is essentially Mrs. Smith, the “person” is thus Mrs. Smith but simply in a different body. One can see how this can become muddled when from an outer appearance, Mrs. Smith would thus be confused for the body’s previous owner when in fact the person in control of the body is someone completely different. I would thus reiterate Locke’s theory of memories being the core part of the self, because should Mrs. Smith be in control of the body when coming too, and thus, holding Mrs. Smith’s memories, then it would be rational to assert that the self is indeed Mrs. Smith despite the radical change.

But what if Mrs. Smith awoke with Mr. Jones’ memories? What if Mrs. Smith, with these foreign memories intact, believes herself to be Mr. Jones? Would “she” then still be Mrs. Smith, or in effect, completely Mr. Jones? In attempting to use Locke’s stance on memories to better coalesce an answer, I would thus consider that the self would be Mr. Jones, because while Mrs. Smith’s brain (in effect, her mind) is used and the body was of Mr. Jones, if the mind appears to reflect Mr. Jones as well as the body, it would be plausible to say that then the self is regarded as such rather than a change in the self’s identity beyond what brings the person to consciousness.

Consequently, this application of reasoning can be applied to the inquiry in whether or not we truly are the same person from long ago. In all likelihood we cannot be, because our minds have come so far that even if we were to try and compare the similarities between our forms, our selves would naturally be different due to the experiences that have led us up to that point. This leads to the point that while the self can be articulated through the experiences that it has went through in life, it would *also* be plausible to say that these experiences also happen to be traits that do not necessarily *make* the person, rather, it gives way to the person having the *choice* to become who they are. As Sartre puts it,

“*A person is always responsible for what one has made of him.*” (Solomon & Higgins, 2018, pg. 205).

A person is responsible for the choices that eventually create the person they are, and fittingly, this is apt in explaining that we can never truly be the same as the child we once were. As we grow older, we make conscious choices that allows us to form who we wish to be and who we *want* to be, something memories cannot always tell us in retrospect. Solomon and Higgins explain splendidly that: “*a person with an injury cannot wish away the injury, but he or she can make of it a badge of courage, a stigma of shame, a cocktail party curiosity...*” (Solomon & Higgins, pg. 205).

If we were to apply the contrary, we would thus be saying that a person who was born with an injury would thus always have that trait be part of their self-identity even as they grew older. This is exactly why Locke’s theory of the self being formed from one’s memories has some kernel of truth to it (i.e., using one’s memories in the form of experiences) but falls short in questioning whether we are one in the same with our past self because those memories are not

the only thing that defines us. Delving further, take for instance the scenario posed by the text in reference to Sartre's point of our choices being responsible for who we turn out to be,

*"...a student who had once been extremely ill as a child and now (in college) intends to be a doctor. The facts of his illness are simply true; he cannot now do anything to change them. But he is obviously using those facts to motivate and justify his decision for the future, to become a doctor to cure other children who are afflicted as he was."* (Solomon & Higgins, 2018, pg. 205).

We see clearly that while the college student was once an extremely sickly child, he made the point of his illness not his very self as one would think, but rather a motivation to move onwards with his life and become something far greater than he once was. This, by Sartre's point of view, is what's called transcendence, going beyond the facts about us, but rather,

*"...By what we make—and continue to make—of these facts... Because we can change our minds throughout our lives about what to make of these facts (even those that are true of us for the whole of our lives), the self—which is the outcome of these interpretations and the actions based on them—is an unfinished process until the end of our lives."* (Solomon & Higgins, 2018, pg. 205).

In effect, through Sartre's proposition, we form who we are, our self, through our various choices and actions that reflect what we make of the facts that are true to us. The college student, despite being frail and sickly in his youth, used that fact about himself to transcend beyond this simple trait to become something more. Perhaps in his youth, he believed that he was only just that: a sickly child with nothing else formed about his self but this very fact looming above his head. He is therefore, a work in progress both physically and mentally, changing and growing

into that very college student who had decided to become a doctor in order to help others who were once like him. Yet, the text goes on to theorize,

*“But suppose in his senior year he becomes caught up in local politics, finds that he enjoys this, and, furthermore, that he does quite well in his new activities. He postpones his plans to go to medical school and spends a year campaigning for a political ally. Then he runs for office himself and wins, postponing medical school for another four years. His political career flourishes. What happened to the importance of his childhood illness?”* (Solomon & Higgins, 2018, pg. 205).

The reality, in that scenario and in the context of the overall question, is that for the purpose of one’s life, when we transcend the facts given to us, they do not become important in our self because we make the choices necessary to rise above them. Yes, it *is true* that at one point the student was sickly, but now he has come beyond that mere fact, and it has become a simple fact *of* his life rather than his self-identity. In the same vein, we cannot merely claim that he is but the same as the child he once was because he has indeed transcended beyond his sickness in growing both mentally and physically, to do so would undermine the development he had went through.

Going forward the text theorizes,

*“Now suppose that at the age of forty-three he loses a critical election. His political career is finished, and, not surprisingly, he remembers his old ambition to become a doctor. The fact of his childhood illness is reinstated as a crucial fact about his life, and his projected self is once more a medical self, not because of the facts, but rather because of his renewed intentions.”* (Solomon & Higgins, 2018, pg. 205).



Just so, Solomon and Higgins interpret that despite a change in fate for the man, and once again he comes face to face with his previous self, he has still transcended from the sickly child he once was. That illness did not become his entire self at all, instead, he now uses that fact of his life to rejuvenate and move forward with his ambitions, therefore fulfilling a brand-new self that transcended his political career. Can we not acknowledge that at such a feat, he has done what most would consider unthinkable for such a background? To some, we would hold nothing but pity for this man who had come a long way from his beginnings, but in reality, those facts of his life gave him the opportunity needed to structure and reinforce the self-identity he chose for himself by opting to go to medical school and then dipping his toes into politics. The text does not imply that the man ever regrets his decisions, rather, he looks upon them simply as a memory or testament to where he has come from and a steppingstone to his present now.

Hence, this development becomes the crux of understanding that we are never truly the same person as our past self from our childhood to present simply because, we are always changing on a physical and mental sense. While we may have the same body as our younger self, the constant changes life throws at us as well as our own personal development grants us this very evidence that we are vastly different from who we once were because our self is constantly developing to the point where the past self would be a stranger.

In life, we go through a variety of transformations and growth to come to where we are presently, but it is always as we know it, a journey. I have come a long way from being a simple boy who did what he was told without much choice in what he wanted or who he wanted to be, growing dissatisfied with having the expectations of his family as to what defines his self-identity. So, I decided to take the fact that myself was not properly developed and instead put much emphasis in creating a persona for which I strove to become and maintain. I chose for

myself who I wanted to be, because I wanted to be someone that my younger self dreamed of being, and I find that as I go along this journey, I form new ambitions my child self would never think of aspiring to. Because I have changed to such a degree, and transcended that sheltered child's upbringing, it would be a fallacy to believe that the person I have become now, in all my years, would be the same person as the child I once was, because he is the foundation to the choices I have made to get where I am today.

We can never truly return to that person who we once were, whether on a physical or mental basis, but we can take faith in knowing that they will always be the steppingstone to our choices that make our future... As Sartre explains so aptly, "*a person is always responsible for what one has made of him.*" (Solomon & Higgins, 2018, pg. 205).

**Work Cited:**

Solomon, Robert C.; Higgins, Kathleen M.. *The Big Questions: A Short Introduction to Philosophy*. Cengage Learning. Kindle Edition.