

Who do we *think* we are?

Identity (the Self) is an intersection of “what” and “who.” The fact we inhabit a unique, distinct, incrementally changing body, mostly answers the “what” part of the question. We can appreciate this when looking at photos of ourselves at successive stages of life.

The “who” part—our memories, dispositions, aspirations, and all the revisable, private and public, autobiographical stories we construct about ourselves—is more difficult to pin down. It seems that we construe who we are. Our waking experience is anticipatory. We distill fragments of past memories and imagine what's next?

Co-authored?

We are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please. In life... we are always under certain constraints. We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others.

Macintyre, Alisdair (1984) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Second Edition. Notre Dame, Indiana. University of Notre Dame Press.

The Ship Of Theseus

The *Ship of Theseus* is a famous philosophical thought experiment. The ancient historian, Plutarch asked whether a ship that had been restored over a period of time, by replacing every single plank and mast, remained the same ship. The idea has some bearing on how we think about embodiment and the permanence of identity.

We know that life changes to stay the same. Most cells in the body are younger than the individual. We get a new stomach lining every few days,

a new liver every couple of years and a whole new skeleton about every ten years. The *Ship of Theseus* analogy breaks down somewhat when we consider recent evidence that, with notable exceptions like the hippocampus, most neurons of the cerebral cortex are not replaced. (It seems that heart muscle cells are also unusual in mostly not being replaced.)

However, the *Ship of Theseus* problem returns when we note that the hippocampus is critical for long-term and spatial memory. Also, zooming in further to the sub-cellular level—*all* cells are constantly recycling worn out macromolecules and organelles.

Reference: *Retrospective Birth Dating of Cells in Humans*. Spalding et al. *Cell*: 122, 133-143, 15 July 2005.

Proust's Remembrance of Things Past

When from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

And once again I had recognized the taste of the crumb of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-flowers which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long postpone the discovery of why this memory made me so happy), immediately the old gray house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like the scenery of a theater.

Marcel Proust (1913): *À la recherche du temps perdu. In Search of Lost Time* (alternative translation: *Remembrance of Things Past*). Vol I: *Swann's Way*.