



Knock, Knock

by Cynthia Levinson

Who's there? You? Who are you?

Look at a picture of yourself as a baby; then look in the mirror. Do you look the same? Do you even *remember* being that baby?

Your skin might look similar but it has actually replaced itself every 27 days since the photo was taken. A dimple in your chin may now be hidden by a scar from a skateboard accident. Even your insides have changed. Your brain is three to four times heavier now than it was then.

So, is the baby in the photograph you or a different, previous you? If the baby is a former self, where did the person who used to be you go? How many of you have there been — and how many more will there

be? A computer-generated projection of you in 50 years would seem like the picture of a stranger.

Philosophers have struggled with questions of identity for over 2,500 years. Some say that science is finally beginning to answer them. Others say that science only makes the questions more complicated.

The River You

In the fifth century B.C., the Greek philosopher Heraclitus compared the self to a river, which over its

course can vary from rampaging white water to quiet pools, but is always a single, continuous entity. He believed there is only one you, no matter how much you change.

David Hume, an 18th-century English philosopher, thought this view of the continuous self was *balderdash*. “Our minds,” he wrote, are “nothing but a collection of different perceptions which succeed each other in a perpetual flux.” Hume would say that a painting (since cameras didn’t exist then) of Baby David would show a person similar, but not identical, to grown-up Philosopher David.

How many of you have there been -- and how many more will there be?



Why does it matter if Hume and Heraclitus disagree about how many identities we have? Let's say you promise your parents you'll go to clown school, as they've always dreamed, instead of medical school, as you had hoped. If Hume is right — that you'll be a different person ten years from now — should the future-you have to keep the promise that the now-you makes? If not, should an elderly woman who committed a crime in her youth and escaped capture be punished when she is finally tracked down fifty years later?

You will change over time in many ways. Some changes will occur naturally as you grow up. Others you might choose, such as cosmetic surgery to remove a mole or to reshape your nose. A doctor might prescribe anti-depressants or stimulants — or replace your heart, lungs, and kidneys. Medical procedures and prescription drugs can

increasingly alter your appearance, mood, and behavior. How much of you must change before you no longer recognize yourself or before your best friend says, "I don't know who you are anymore?"

Philosophers like to imagine fictional situations that raise real-life issues. The contemporary Oxford philosopher, Derek Parfit, proposed a radical medical procedure. If his brain were split in two and transplanted into two other bodies identical to his, both of these people would awake from surgery believing "I am Derek." Derek, however, can't be two separate people; he also can't be just one of them because they are identical. Therefore, he is neither of them. Parfit points out that "nothing is missing," and yet he does not exist. So, he concludes, "personal identity is not what matters."

Mind or Matter?

So what *does* matter for our identity — our minds or our physical bodies? Four centuries ago, the French philosopher René Descartes said he could imagine himself continuing to exist with a different heart — a situation as impossible then as transplanted brains are now. Descartes believed that the mind is a non-material **entity** that somehow communicates with the brain through the **pineal gland**. Since he needed his mind to imagine he could exist with a different body, or even with no body, he concluded that he must be his mind. That's why he said, "I think, therefore I am."

Patricia Churchland of the University of California disagrees with Descartes. "The mind *is* the brain," she says, and brains are physical. Our thoughts and beliefs, such as about religion and morality, are

Entity — Something that exists

Pineal gland — A small, cone-shaped organ in the brain of most vertebrates that secretes the hormone melatonin



nothing more than electrical impulses and chemical interactions. Neuroscientists, not philosophers, she argues, will one day solve the mind-body problem.

Will You or Can't You?

In the meantime, you have lots of decisions to make — whether or not to eat dessert, whether to study violin or guitar, which college to attend. Believe it or not, these are philosophical and scientific problems, too. The question is: Do you really make decisions — do you have “free will” — or is everything you do **predetermined**?

Immanuel Kant, an 18th-century Prussian philosopher, said that people must have free will. Otherwise, our actions could not be judged moral or immoral.

But in the 1970s, the American physiologist Benjamin Libet discov-

ered that our brain signals fire half a second before we think we are making a decision. What seems like a conscious decision is actually just a reaction to an earlier electrical impulse.

This discovery makes your choice between clown school and medical school seem less difficult; you can relax while your brain chemistry decides for you. If we don't really make choices, though, if physical laws govern everything, do we have any control over ourselves? If not, how much can we shape our own identity?

Daniel Dennett, who is both a philosopher and a **cognitive scientist** at Tufts University, says, basically, don't worry. “We have the power to veto our urges and then to veto our vetoes. We have the power of imagination, to see and imagine futures.” With these abilities, we can plan who our future selves will be.

Who, Me?

This means that you could wake up one day thinking, “I just don't feel like my old self today.” And maybe that will be because you've decided to be a new you with a new answer to the old joke —

“Knock, Knock.”

“Who's there?”

“Me.”

“Me, who?” 🐾

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ACTIVITY TO DISCOVER

Your Secret Spy Name

If someone asks, “Who are you?” you usually tell them your name. You don't hold up your fingerprints or point at the shape of your ears. But very few names are unique. (How many John Smiths do you think there are in the United States? Answer: about 50,000!) Haven't you always wanted your own secret identity? Even if you already have several, you could always use one more. You can have it if you follow these steps.

1. Think of your favorite color.
2. Now, think of the name of an animal that starts with the same letter as your name.
3. Write down your birthday. For example, write February 18th as 02-18.
4. Rearrange the numbers so they are in ascending order, like 0128.
5. Take only the last two digits of the number, and write them after the color and animal. You should get something like this: Red Koala 28.

Congratulations! You now have a secret identity. *Kathryn Hulick*

Predetermined — Decided in advance by forces beyond your control

Cognitive scientist — One who studies the mental process of knowing, including the aspects of awareness, perception, reason, and judgment