

## Will I Ever Retire?

### Personal Identity

Imagine a ship – Theseus’ ship – sailing around at sea, over a period of years. As the planks rot, they get replaced with fresh planks. Eventually, not a single plank remains of the original ship. Is it still the same ship?

Or think about *The Sugarbabes*. They formed with three members. After a few years, one member was replaced. A few years later, a second member was replaced. And finally, the last member was replaced. Is it still the same band?

These questions might seem like silly games, or perhaps just like purely verbal questions (well, if you want to use the words *this way...*). But what if the same question arises for people?

At this moment in time, you have certain physical and mental features. You have a physical body, including your brain, constituted by certain atoms, in a very particular arrangement. And you have beliefs, desires, emotions, a personality, and so on. All of these things change over time. The atoms that make up your body get replaced over time, including those in your brain. And your mind also changes over time: by the end of this talk, you’ll have different memories, beliefs, and so on.

Let’s presume that fifty years in the future, by all normal standards, “you” will still be alive: there will be someone wandering around with your name, your passport, your National insurance number, and so on. Call that person at that time *The Pensioner*. And call you as you are now *Present You*.

Now we can ask: Will The Pensioner have any physical or mental features in common with Present You? It seems entirely possible that the answer might well be no. The Pensioner will have a body and brain made of completely different atoms, different beliefs, desires, and may have lost most of the memories that you currently have. So The Pensioner might have very little in common with Present You. In fact, compare The Pensioner with other people existing at that point in time in the future. Those other people might have more in common with Present You than The Pensioner does!

The obvious question: Is it really true that Present You and The Pensioner are the same person? Obviously, you’ll share a name, and be treated as the same person by the law, and so on, but these facts seem irrelevant. We can certainly agree that many people will *think* that The Pensioner and Present You are the same person. But the question is whether or not they are correct when they think this.

This issue is one about *personal identity*. What, if anything, makes you the same person as bore your name ten years ago, and the same person as will bear your name in fifty years time? Answering this question doesn’t seem like a game, or like a purely verbal question that we can settle just by stipulation. I care whether investing in my pension will benefit me when I’m older, or will instead benefit someone else who happens to share my name!

Here's one proposal: Present You and The Pensioner are the same person even though they have nothing in common because Present You has a lot in common with someone, who has a lot in common with someone, who has a lot in common with someone... ..who has a lot in common with The Pensioner. That is, if we changed everything at once, then The Pensioner would be a different person from Present You. But the speed of change makes a difference: because the change of these features happens only gradually, The Pensioner is the same person as Present You.

Is this suggestion plausible, or is the speed of change too arbitrary to really make such a big difference?

### Mind and Body

So far, we've been thinking about cases where *all* of your features change. What happens if some features change quickly and others change slowly?

For example, imagine that someone is going to take your brain out of your body, my brain out of my body, and put each back in the "wrong" body. But before they do this, they give you a choice: After the operation, they'll make one resulting person clean the toilets, and give the other resulting person £1000. To which body/brain combination would you assign which prize?

In that case, we imagine that your lower body is being split from *both* your mind and your brain, which get to stay together. But what if those two come apart? Consider two more "thought experiments":

1) Through some combination of brainwashing, psychological conditioning, and so on, we change the vast majority of my beliefs, desires, character, memories, and so on. The resulting person will have a body almost exactly like mine (perhaps relatively minor differences in the positions of brain cells), but nothing remotely like my mind. Do I survive the operation?

2) We destroy my body (including brain), and then build a new body (including brain), from scratch, putting it together atom by atom, and make sure that we put the atoms in the new brain together in exactly the same configuration as the atoms in my old brain, so that it should have beliefs, desires, character, and so on just like mine. The resulting person will have a mind exactly like mine, but a different body. Do I survive the operation?

What if we do both operations at once?

# Philosophy

## What is Philosophy?

Philosophy involves reasoning about difficult questions to understand ourselves, the universe, and the relationship between the two. We do this by employing rational arguments that establish the truth of certain conclusions (equivalently: we do this by finding inconsistencies in our beliefs and eliminating them).

Or, more neatly: “Philosophers ask the questions that come naturally to children using methods that come naturally to lawyers.”

Slightly more precisely, philosophy is the study of:

Reality	e.g. Is everything that exists physical?
The Mind	e.g. What is the relationship between the mind and the brain?
Language	e.g. What is it for a word to have a meaning?
Value	e.g. Are there objective moral truths?
Knowledge	e.g. Could <i>all</i> of the information you get from your senses be mistaken?

(If you wanted to hear a bit more about philosophy, “What does it all mean?”, a short book by Thomas Nagel, is a good introduction to the subject.)

## What’s the point?

Philosophy is worthwhile in its own right because it’s important to understand what reality is like and what place we have in it.

Philosophy is instrumentally worthwhile because it helps us to address related subject matters, such as politics, psychology, and physics.

Philosophy also has more direct importance in numerous and varied places, such as the rise of democracy, the rise of atheism in the enlightenment, the invention of the computer, prison reform, and the formation of new laws.

## What’s the point for you?

A degree in philosophy is highly useful for the skills it gives you: to recognise problems and solve them methodically; to soundly evaluate claims and theories; to express ideas in a clear, precise and persuasive manner, and so on.

When choosing a degree, it is important to choose something you find interesting, not just whatever has the best employability statistics (which can mislead in various ways). But having said that, philosophy graduates are definitely employable.

Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for 2006 showed that starting salaries for Philosophy graduates in non-graduate employment averaged £15,312. This is comparable with other Arts and Humanities graduates, e.g. Classics £16,078; History £14,636; and English £14,263. For Philosophy graduates entering graduate employment their average salary of £21,466 compares favourably with Classics £19,422; History £19,418 and English £18,484.

## Reading

### Philosophy at Reading

The philosophy department at Reading is very reputable for both teaching and research. In the National Student Survey 2011, Reading's Philosophy Department had an overall satisfaction rating of 90%, with 'Teaching on my course' scoring 92%. In the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise, the government ranked the department third in the UK for research.

Reading University is set on its own campus a short distance from Reading town centre, and has an active student body, a good library, good computing facilities, a good sports centre, good student union, modern halls of residence, and so on. But the best way to appreciate these things is to come for an open day.

Our next open day will be on Saturday 22nd October. Further details are available at: [www.reading.ac.uk/opendays](http://www.reading.ac.uk/opendays)

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