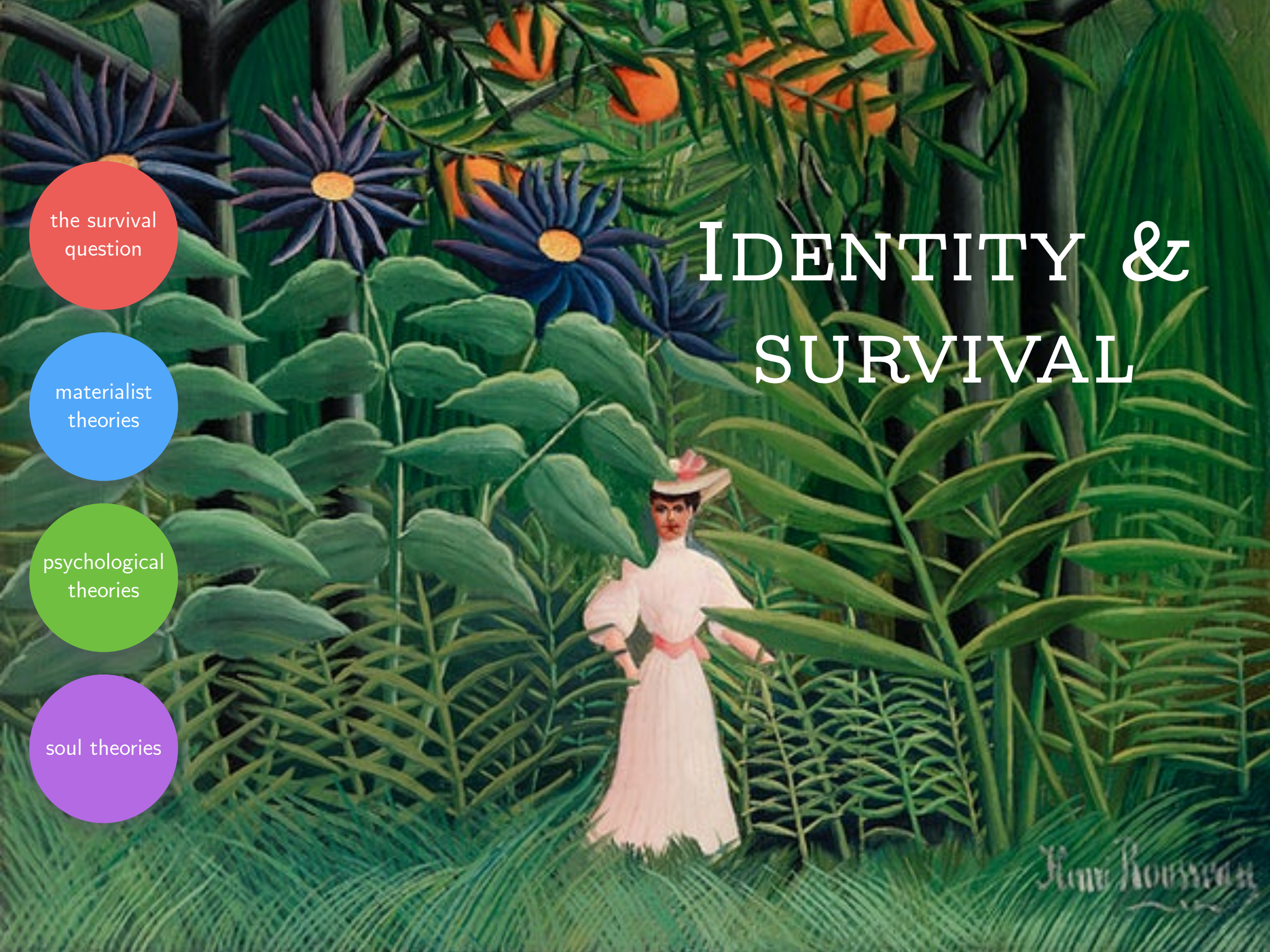
Identity & survival

the survival question

materialist theories

psychological theories

soul theories



Today we turn to our third big question. This question can be introduced by thinking about a simple example.

Suppose that in the year 2070 the surviving members of this Introduction to Philosophy class decided to have an Intro to Philosophy reunion, and all gathered in this room. Suppose that they decided to get a group picture taken.

Now imagine that, via some sort of time travel device, I now have that photo, and show it to you. You might ask: Am I one of those people? Which one am I?

It is very natural to assume that these questions must have determinate answers. There must be some fact of the matter about whether one of the people in the photo is you. And, if one is you, there must be some fact of the matter about which one is you.

Let's suppose that this is true: there must be a fact about whether you survive to be in this picture, and must be a fact about which of the survivors you are.

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Then we can ask a question about these facts:

The survival question: What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

This might seem like kind of a weird question. It also might seem to be a really easy question; you might think that it would just be the person who looks like you, or who has a driver's license with your name on it.

It turns out that this is not such an easy question. One way to see this is by thinking about some harder cases where this question arises.

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Many people believe in the possibility of life after death. To believe in life after death is to believe that in the afterlife, some time after your death, some person will be you. But what would it take for some person in heaven (say) to be you?

Surely you are not confident that people in heaven will look like people on earth, or carry driver's licenses. So our seemingly easy answers to the survival question don't help us here.

If we want to know whether life after death is possible, it looks like we need a better answer to the survival question.

The survival question: What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

Here is another question about the future.

Given advances in computing, it may well be possible in your life time for you to enhance your cognitive powers by replacing parts of your brain with computing devices. It may even be possible for your cognitive apparatus to be, in some sense, uploaded to a computer.

The resulting thing would be, wholly or in part, a synthetic device. Would that thing still be you?

Again, the easy answers don't help. It looks like we need an answer to the survival question.

The survival question: What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

A different question concerns the past.

At some time roughly 20 years ago, there was an embryo in some woman's uterus from which you grew. Was that embryo you?

Again, the easy answers are no help. But the question seems to matter; it seems relevant to the question of whether, and when, abortion is morally permissible.

The survival question: What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

To introduce our main answers to the survival question, it will be useful to think about a simple, uncontroversial example of survival.

All of you believe that you will wake up tomorrow in your bed. To put the same point another way, all of you believe that the person now sitting in your seat is the same person as — identical to — the person who will wake up in your bed tomorrow morning.

What do we mean when we say that you are identical to that person?

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What do we mean when we say that you are identical to that person?

Here it is important to get clear at the outset on one distinction which, if not attended to, can make these questions more confusing than they have to be. This is the distinction between **numerical** and **qualitative** identity.

To say that x and y are numerically identical is to say that they are literally the same thing — they are one, not two.

To say that x and y are qualitatively identical is to say that they are exactly resembling — they have just the same properties.

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Here are some examples to help you see the distinction.

Suppose that I have a pair of golf balls that are just the same in every respect — they have the same things printed on them, and they are the same shape and color. They are therefore qualitatively identical. But are they numerically identical? No. They are two, not one.

Now consider a different golf ball. Suppose that tomorrow you paint the golf ball green. Now think about the golf ball today, and the golf ball tomorrow. Are they qualitatively identical? No — one is white, and the other is green. But are they numerically identical? It seems like they are — it is one and the same golf ball that was white today, and is green tomorrow.

When we say that you are identical to the person who will get out of your bed tomorrow morning, we are not of course saying that you are qualitatively identical to that person. Their hair will be messed up, and they will be wearing different clothes.

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When we say that you are identical to the person who will get out of your bed tomorrow morning, we are not of course saying that you are qualitatively identical to that person. Their hair will be messed up, and they will be wearing different clothes.

Rather, we mean that you are numerically identical to that person: there is just **one** person who is today in this class, and is tomorrow morning in that bed.

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But then we can ask the survival question: what makes you numerically the same person as the person who will wake up in that bed?

This focus on numerical identity is not just an arbitrary choice. Intuitively, this is the question we care about. When we ask about whether life after death is possible, we are not asking whether after your death someone will exist who has the same properties as you. We are asking whether **you** — this very individual — will exist. And to ask this is to ask whether someone numerically identical to you could then exist.

In a moment we will begin looking at some answers to the survival question. But first let's ask a question: given some different answers to the survival question, how can we tell which one is correct?

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The main answer to this question is what we might call the **method of cases**. We look at particular examples, and ask whether the theory in question yields the correct result about whether the person in the example survives or not. We do, after all, often have pretty clear ideas about whether or not an individual survives some event. If a theory implied that the person who sat down in that seat at the beginning of lecture was distinct from the person sitting there now, that theory would be pretty clearly false.

As you will see, when employing this method we sometimes look at actual examples — examples of things that really happened. But sometimes we look at possible examples — examples of things which could happen, but have not actually happened. Why do we do this?

As you will see, when employing this method we sometimes look at actual examples — examples of things that really happened. But sometimes we look at possible examples — examples of things which could happen, but have not actually happened. Why do we do this?

There are two reasons. First, when we ask the survival question we are interested in whether survival in certain circumstances is possible. For example: is it possible to survive the death and decay of my body?

Second, we are asking what survival **is**. And questions about the nature of some thing should explain what is and is not possible regarding that thing.

Here's an example. Suppose that someone proposed the theory that for an action to be right is for it to make the agent happy.

One might argue against this via an example. Imagine that you are walking around the lakes, and see a child drowning in the shallow water. As it happens, getting your pants wet makes you quite unhappy. And yet it seems obvious that the right action is saving the child.

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This looks like a pretty good argument against our theory. Does it matter that this is just a possible example, and never really happened?

It doesn't seem to matter. A theory about what right action is should apply to actions which could happen but haven't as well as actions which have actually happened. The same goes for answers to the survival question.

Let's look at some answers to the survival question.

There are three main answers to that question (though, we will see, they can also be combined in interesting ways).

materialist survival

Our first answer is also the simplest one. This says that you are the same person as the person who will wake up in that bed tomorrow because you are the same material thing as that person.

On one natural version of this view, you are an organism — a member of the species homo sapiens. The explanation of the fact that you are identical to the person waking up in your bed tomorrow is fundamentally the same as the explanation of the fact that my dog is the same dog as the one who will wake up in his crate tomorrow morning. It the same as the explanation of why a tree that has lost its leaves is the same tree as the one that had leaves in the summer.

But then we can ask the survival question: in virtue of what are you numerical the same person as the person who will wake up in that bed?

materialist survival

But this is not the only answer to our question. It is a widely held view that we are not simply material beings, but also have immaterial souls.

If one believes in immaterial souls, then it is natural to think that one's survival is closely linked to the continued existence of one's immaterial soul.

soul survival

This suggests an alternative theory of survival. On this view, the person who wakes up in that bed tomorrow is you because they are, or have, the same immaterial soul.

psycho-logical survival

But these are not the only possible views here. One might also hold that you are that person not because of any physical connections, and not because of anything involving immaterial souls, but rather because of **psychological connections** between you and that person.

Our big question in this section of the class is different than the ones posed in our first two sections of the class. There we wondered whether God exists and whether free will exists.

Here we are taking for granted the fact that people occasionally survive from one moment to the next. That is, we are assuming that the answer to the question 'Do people ever survive? is 'Yes.'

What we're asking is, 'What does it take for someone to survive from one moment to the next?'

Now that we have three answers to this question on the table, we can also see that various 'combination views' are possible. For example, you might think that you are a combination of a material thing and an immaterial soul, and that your survival requires that **both** that material thing and that soul survive, and be combined in the right way.

materialist survival

But before considering combination views of this kind, let's start by getting clear on what our three simple views mean, and how they differ from each other.

Let's start with the materialist theory. This theory gives rise to two immediate questions.

What does it take for a material thing to continue to exist from one moment to the next?

For me to survive, which material thing has to continue to exist?

Both of these questions might seem pretty easy. But they aren't. (Note also that these questions are important not just for the pure materialist theory, but also for theories which say that survival requires the survival of **both** a material thing and something else, like an immaterial soul.)

materialist survival

What does it take for a material thing to continue to exist from one moment to the next?

Here's one natural answer:

The same parts view
X is the same material object as Y just in case X and Y have the same parts arranged in the same way.

But this is not a promising answer from the point of view of someone who thinks that there is a material component to survival. Can you see why?

How should a materialist respond?

It is very natural to respond by denying that the survival of a material thing requires that **all** of its parts continue to exist and be combined in the right way. Instead one might go for something like the following view of the survival of material things:

The small changes view
X is the same material object as Y just in case X is causally connected to Y by a series of small physical changes over time.

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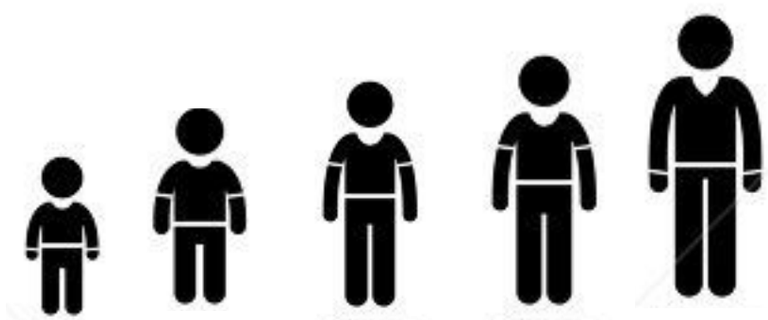
Consider, for example, your body when you were 5 years old and your body now. These two bodies are clearly not qualitatively identical. But if the small changes view is correct, they might still be numerically identical.



This is because these two moments in the life of your body are connected by many, many others. And from one moment to the next, one stage of your body is caused but the previous stage, and at each such step only small changes take place.

For me to survive, which material thing has to continue to exist?

Let's turn to our second question for materialist theories. **Which** material object must survive for me to survive?

As we saw above, it is very natural for the materialist to say that I am am organism. So, it would be natural for the materialist to say that my survival requires the survival of the human organism which I am. Let's call this **the organism view**.

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Here's an example, due to Derek Parfit, which seems to make trouble for this view:

"Suppose first that I am one of a pair of identical twins, and that both my body and my twin's brain have been fatally injured. Because of advances in neuro-surgery, it is not inevitable that these injuries will cause us both to die. We have between us one healthy brain and one healthy body. Surgeons can put these together.

If all of my brain continues both to exist and to be the brain of one living person, who is psychologically continuous with me, I continue to exist. This is true whatever happens to the rest of my body. ..."

In this example — which we will call **Brain Transplant** — your brain survives a car crash undamaged, while your body is destroyed, and your brain is transplanted into the healthy body of a passenger, whose brain was destroyed in the crash.

Parfit's view is that the person who would survive this surgery is you. Is he right about that?

The problem is that the human organism which you were does not survive — only one of its organs does. So we appear to have a case in which I survive even though the organism with which I was associated does not. And that seems to rule out the idea that my survival requires the survival of an organism.

Does that rule out materialist theories?

Does that rule out materialist theories?

Not quite. Someone who thinks that survival requires material continuity could simply say that the material thing which must survive is not the organism, but the brain. Call this **the brain view**.

This could be fit into various combination theories of survival. For example, if you think that survival requires the survival of a material thing and an immaterial soul, you could say that the relevant material thing is the brain.

The brain view is not challenged by the case of Brain Transplant. But it does have some somewhat odd consequences. For example, if you adopt the brain view of survival, it is at least somewhat tempting to adopt the view that I am a brain (rather than an organism). But then it looks like it should be true for me to say things like 'I weigh less than 5 pounds' - after all, my brain does!

This is enough to get a grip on what a materialist theory might look like. Let's turn now to our third theory (we'll come back to the soul theory in a bit).

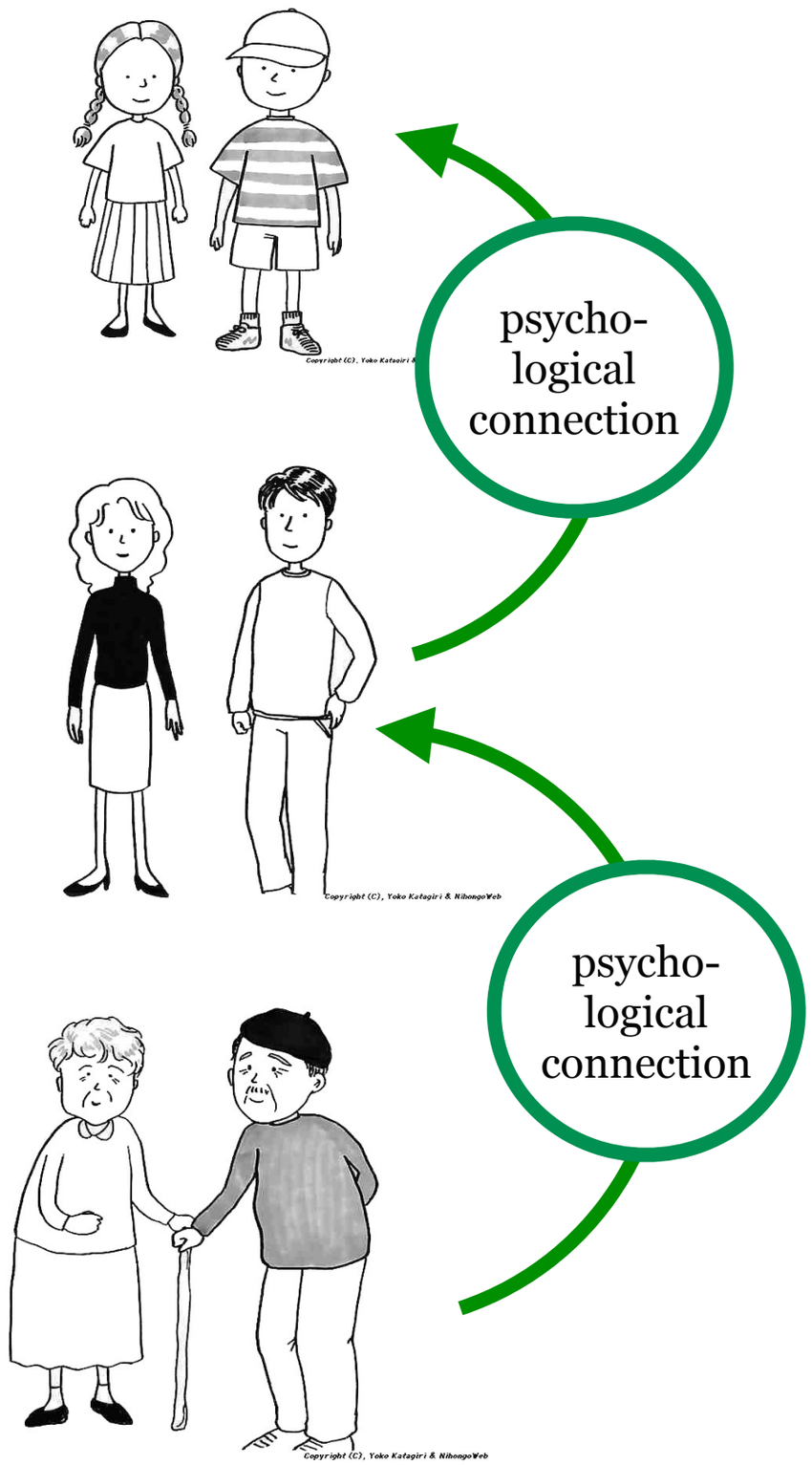
Why do we think that you can survive Brain Transplant? Arguably because the person who leaves the surgery would be **psychologically continuous** with you.

psycho-logical survival

On this view, your survival requires that something exists which has the right psychological connections to you.

This view also gives rise to an immediate question:

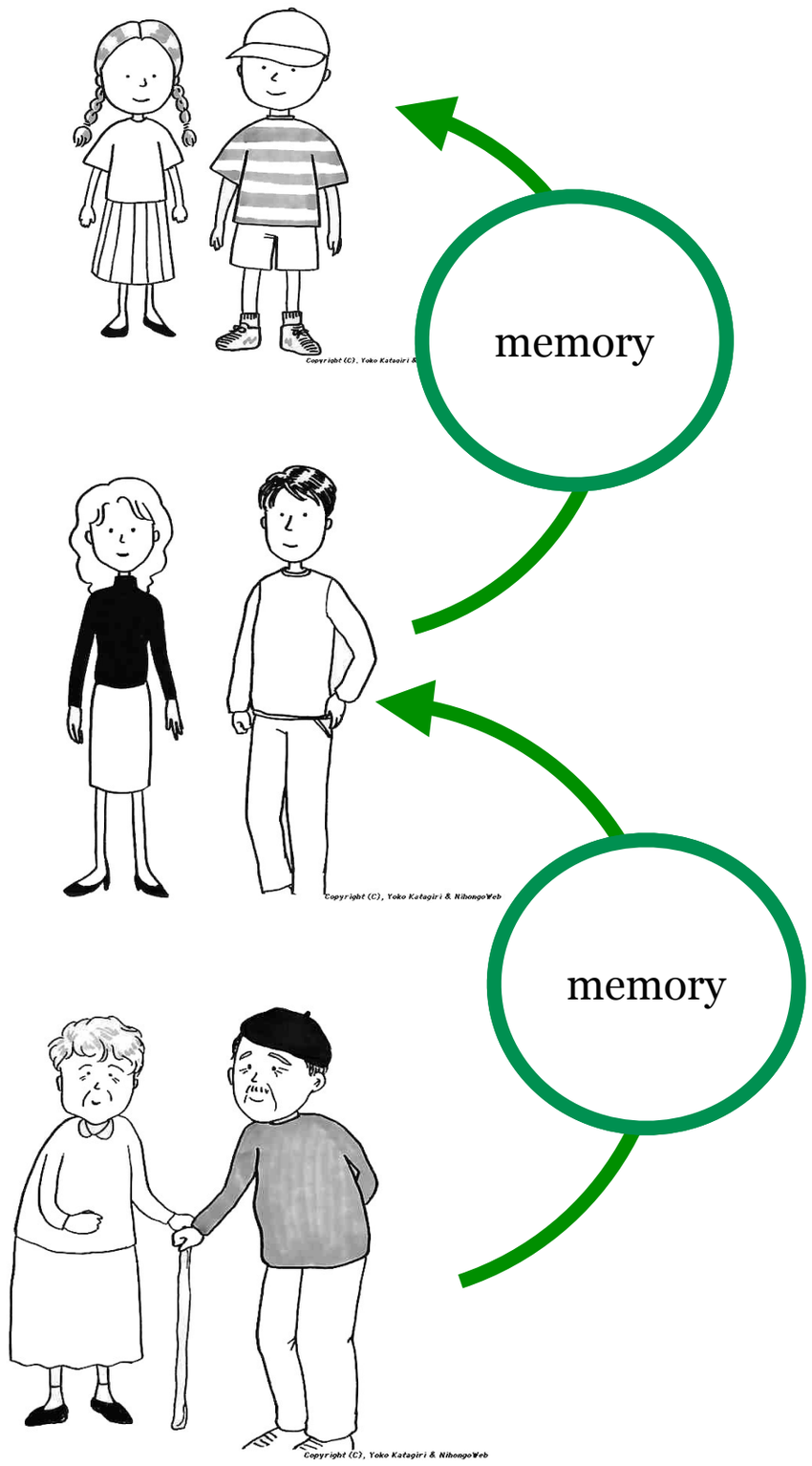
What psychological connections are needed for survival?



psycho-logical survival

John Locke gave one answer to this question. His view of personhood can be illustrated by considering a few different stages in the lives of some people.

What makes the child, the adult, and the elderly person stages of the same person? The materialist says: because they are the same material thing. Locke thought: it is because of psychological connections between the individuals.



But what are the relevant psychological relations?

Locke's answer was: relations of memory.

Of course there are plenty of other psychological connections between people at one time and those people at a later time. Different versions of the psychological theory of survival focus on different sorts of psychological connections.

But let's stick with Locke's theory for now. Let's call this the **memory theory** of survival.

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Can we think of cases in which the memory theory and our materialist theories will say different things?

One such case would seem to be a case of **complete amnesia**. Here it looks like the memory theory will say that the individual whose memories were lost does not survive. By contrast, a materialist theory might well say that individual does survive.

Here's a second scenario, also due to Locke.

> "Should ... the consciousness of the prince's past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler ... everyone sees, he would be the same person with the prince, accountable only for the prince's actions."

Locke is imagining a scenario now familiar from various movies and TV shows: the idea that we can imagine one person waking up one morning in someone else's body.

Imagine that 'you' wake up in the body of the cobbler. The psychological theory of survival can say that this really is you. The materialist, it seems, will say that it is still the cobbler — but with some surprising new memories.

We can turn this into an argument against materialist theories.

I can clearly imagine a scenario in which I wake up in a different body.

If I can clearly imagine something being the case, then it is possible for it to be the case.

It is possible that I wake up in a different body.

If it is possible that I wake up in a different body. then materialist theories of survival are false.

Materialist theories of survival are false.

THE BODY-SWAPPING ARGUMENT

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1. I can clearly imagine a scenario in
   which I wake up in a different body.
2. If I can clearly imagine something
   being the case, then it is possible
   for it to be the case.
3. It is possible that I wake up in a
   different body. (1,2)
4. If it is possible that I wake up in
   a different body, then materialist
   theories of survival are false.
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C. Materialist theories of survival are
   false. (3,4)
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Again, note that this is also a problem for views which require the survival of a material thing **plus** something else, like an immaterial soul.

Next class we'll think about some ways in which a materialist might respond.

Let's turn to our last theory: the theory that our survival requires only the survival of an immaterial soul.

Is this the same as the psychological theory? In ordinary language, 'soul' is sometimes used as a synonym for 'mind.' But here it has a more specialized meaning. A soul is an **immaterial thing** which is closely connected to your identity.

What does it mean to be an immaterial thing? A standard view is that material things are by definition things which occupy space. So an immaterial soul would, it seems, be something which exists outside of space. It would not be composed of quarks and electrons, as the things in this room are.

Souls in this sense are not brains. Brains are, of course, material things. Souls are not.

To endorse the soul theory, you have to think that, in addition the various material things we find in the world, there are host of immaterial things.

This makes it clear that the soul theory is radically different than the psychological theory. After all, one could endorse the psychological theory while denying that there are such things as immaterial souls.

On views which give souls a role to play in answering the survival question, the idea is that each soul stands in a very close relation to a certain body over the course of that body's life.

On views which give souls a role to play in answering the survival question, the idea is that each soul stands in a very close relation to a certain body over the course of that body's life.

Then, at death, the soul stops standing in that very close relation to the body. On some views of the afterlife, the soul is then reconnected with that body at a later date.

So it appears that there must be some conditions under which a soul stays connected with a certain body. Let's call these **soul connection conditions**.

Later we'll come back to the question of what these soul connection conditions might be. But let's first present a simple argument against the existence of immaterial souls.

Let us say that a belief is **self-evident** just in case we can be certain, just by thinking about it, rule out the possibility that it is false.

It is not self-evident that there are immaterial souls.

But the following also seem, for all we have said, quite plausible:

We have no sensory experience of immaterial souls.

We have no good argument for the existence of immaterial souls.

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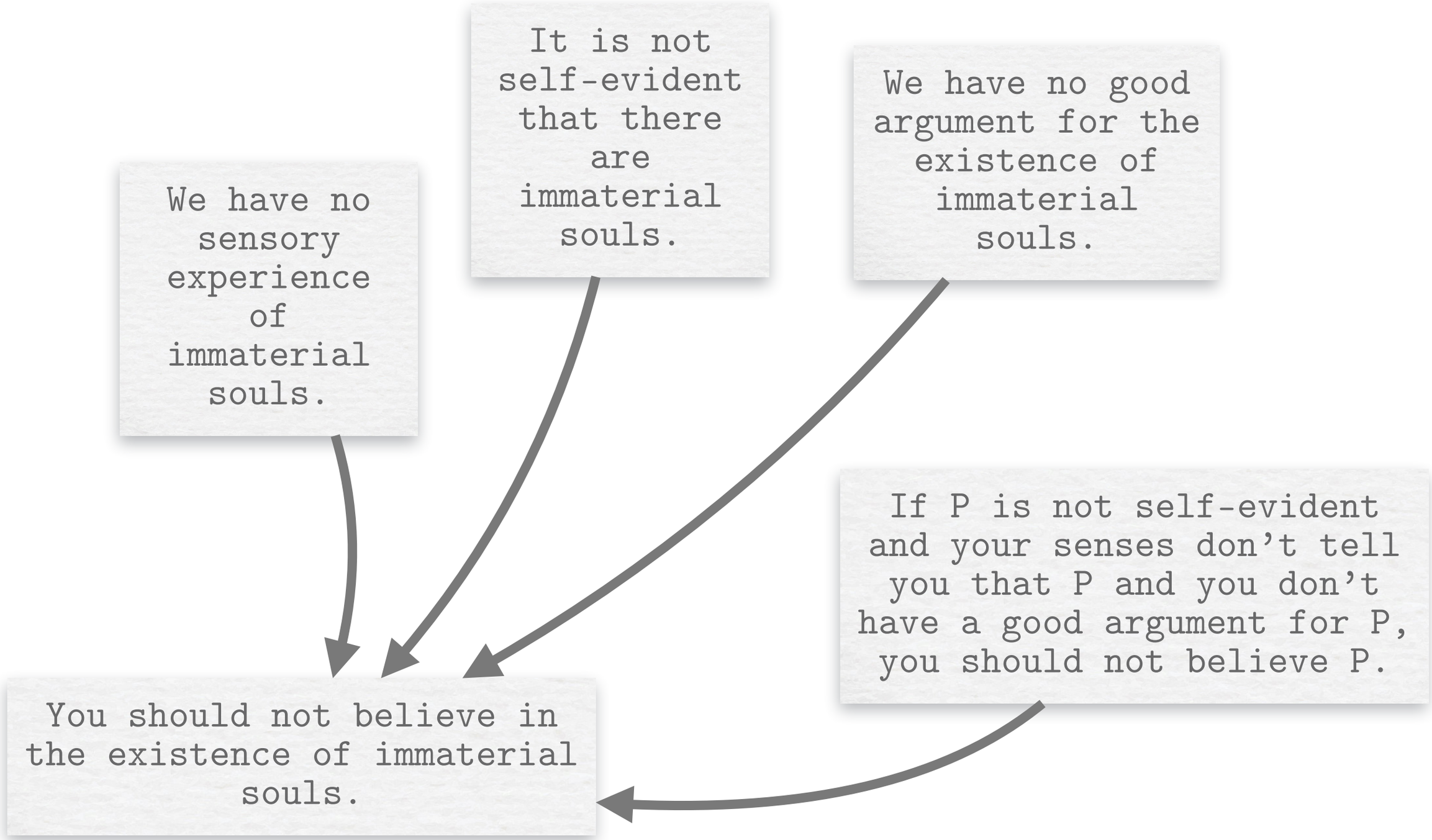
It is not self-evident that there are immaterial souls.

We have no good argument for the existence of immaterial souls.

But the following principle looks plausible:

If P is not self-evident and your senses don't tell you that P and you don't have a good argument for P, you should not believe P.

Consider, for example, the belief that fairies are real. This is not a belief you should have. But why not? Arguably, not because there is some great disproof of fairies, but rather because there is no good reason to believe that they exist.


We have no sensory experience of immaterial souls.
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If P is not self-evident and your senses don't tell you that P and you don't have a good argument for P, you should not believe P.
You should not believe in the existence of immaterial souls.

THE EVIDENTIALIST ARGUMENT AGAINST BELIEF IN IMMATERIAL SOULS

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1. We have no sensory experience
   of immaterial souls.
2. It is not self-evident that
   there are immaterial souls.
3. We have no good argument for
   the existence of immaterial
   souls.
4. If P is not self-evident and
   your senses don't tell you that
   P and you don't have a good
   argument for P, you should not
   believe P.
-------------------------
You should not believe in the
   existence of immaterial souls.
   (1,2,3,4)
```

This might be called the 'evidentialist' argument against belief in immaterial souls, since it is based on the idea that we have no **evidence** for the existence of immaterial souls.

When we turn to the question of how we should determine what to believe, we'll ask whether 'rules of belief' like premise (4) are true. But the premise looks at least initially plausible; so it puts some pressure on the believer in immaterial souls to respond to the argument by rejecting premise (3).

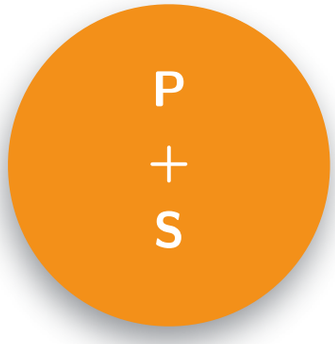
But then we need an argument for the existence of immaterial souls.

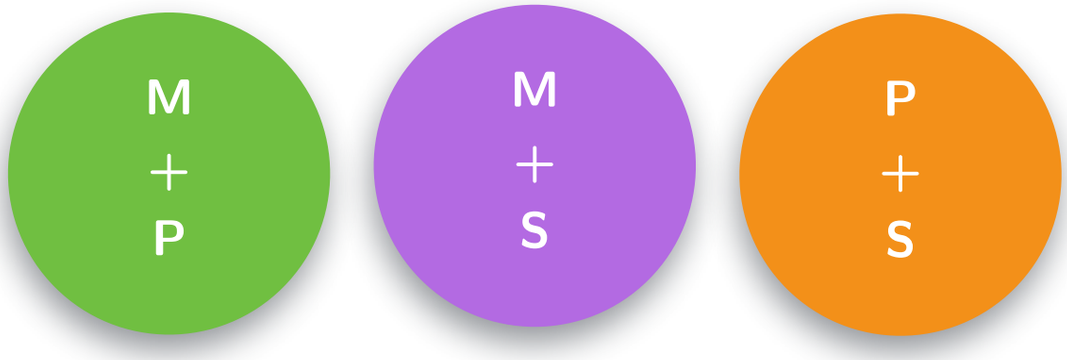
We'll come back to the question of whether there is any such argument next time.

Once we have our three 'pure' theories on the table, it is clear that we can combine them in various ways. For example, one common view is that we are not just a material thing and not just an immaterial soul, but a kind of combination of the two.

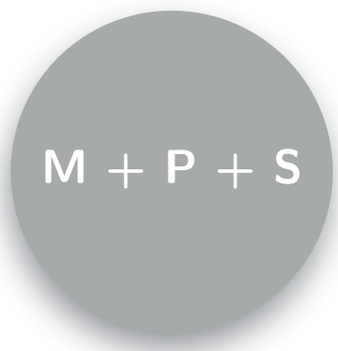
Someone with this view might think that, because we are a combination of a body and soul, our continued existence requires the continued existence of both parts of that combination. We might calll this 'M+S', since it is the view that survival requires **both** materialist survival and soul survival.

Similarly, we could require both material and psychological continuity — M+P — or require both psychological connections and the continued existence of a soul — P + S.





For completeness, we can also consider the maximally demanding view that survival requires all three of material, psychological, and soul continuity:



Your aim in this section of the class is to determine which of these seven views you think is most likely to be true, and why.