materialism

In one of the readings for today, Parfit contrasts reductionist and non-reductionist views of persons.

On a reductionist view, for you to consist over a period of time is for certain other, more basic facts to obtain.

Parfit gives the example of what it takes for a nation, or club, to continue to exist over time. Suppose we take a sports team — say, the Cincinnati Reds. And suppose we think that the Reds have been around since 1876. We could then ask the same question about the Reds that we have been asking about you and I: what does it take for this sports team to exist over time?

The reductionist would explain the existence of the team in terms of certain other, more basic facts. For example: overlapping groups of players; membership in the same league; occupying the same stadium; being sold from owner to owner; etc.

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By contrast, the non-reductionist about sports teams would say that the existence of the Reds since 1876 is to be explained in terms of the continued existence of a single entity, which cannot be explained in any more basic terms — a kind of persisting Reds-ness.

It is pretty clear that non-reductionism about sports teams is very implausible.

There is nothing to the Cincinnati Reds over and above the players, the coaches, the stadium, the uniforms, etc.

The question is whether what is true of sports teams is also true of us. Is our existence over time to be explained in terms of some more basic facts, or is it just a matter of some persisting entity?

We have already discussed the most popular version of nonreductionism: this is the view that we are immaterial souls.

Let's now consider what the options are for a reductionist view of persons.

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Here is a thought experiment. Suppose that you are an alien who has landed on earth for the first time. Suppose that the first creatures that you observe are squirrels. And suppose you were asked: what does the existence of a squirrel over time consist in?

The very natural view would be to think of the squirrel the same way that we think of sports teams. The existence of the squirrel over time just consists in the persistence of certain biological processes: a squirrel heart beating, the squirrel brain continuing to function, etc.

This is to go for a materialist theory of squirrels. This is a version of reductionism. For the the squirrel to continue to exist is for certain more basic facts — in particular, biological/physical facts — to obtain.

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Surely you would have the same view as you had of the squirrels. Human beings would appear to be animals of a certain kind. So it would be very natural to think that for a human being — a human animal — to continue to exist over time is just for certain biological/physical processes to continue.

Indeed, just as it would be overwhelmingly natural to take the squirrel to be nothing over and above its physical parts, so it would be overwhelmingly natural to take the human being to be nothing over and above its physical parts.

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Why might one be a materialist about human beings? We've already seen some of the main reasons.

- 1. Consider the alien. Isn't the natural view that our existence over time works in the same way as that of other organisms?
- 2. Remember the common sense argument against dualism. It is hard for the dualist to explain why it seems tempting to say that I have a certain height, and that I walk to class. But this is no problem for the materialist.
- 3. Similarly, it is hard for the dualist to explain causal interactions between the mind and the material world. But this is easy for the materialist, because the mind is just part of the material world.

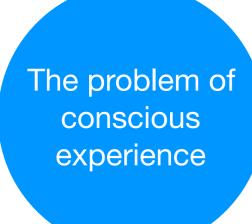
Today we are going to focus on four objections to this materialist view of human beings.

The problem of conscious experience

The problem of physical change

The problem of fission

The problem of existence without physical continuity



The first argument against physicalism tries to show that the view cannot make sense of conscious experience.

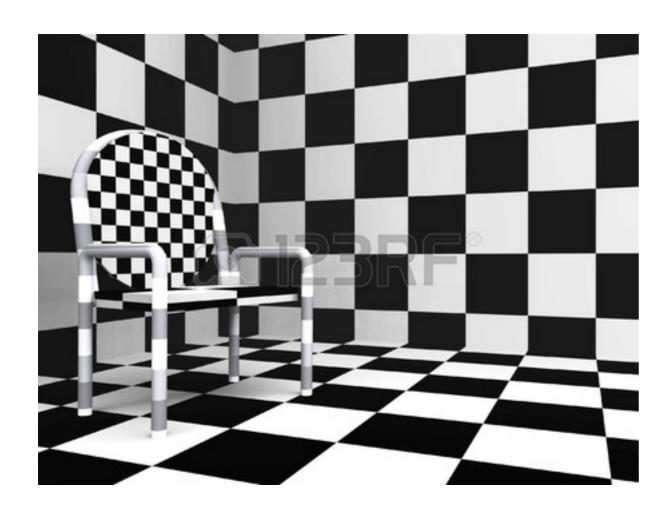
What does the physicalist say about conscious experiences?

"If a human person is a physical thing, any change whatever in a human person must be a purely physical change. If, for example, Tim becomes elated because of some news contained in a letter he has just received, this change in Tim, his becoming elated, must be the very same thing (or perhaps we should say the very same event) as some purely physical change."

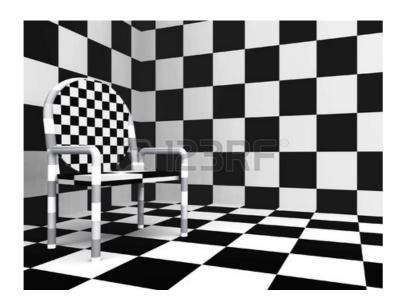
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This is the view that the philosopher Frank Jackson tried to refute with his example of Mary and the black-and-white room.



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She is so brilliant, in fact, that she has learned every fact that there is to learn about the physical world. In particular, she has learned all of the facts about the neurophysiology of color vision, and has studied extensively everything that happens to the brain when subjects are experiencing color.

One day, someone brings a new object into Mary's room:



Does Mary learn anything new when she sees the tomato?

Intuitively, yes: she learns what it is like to experience red things.



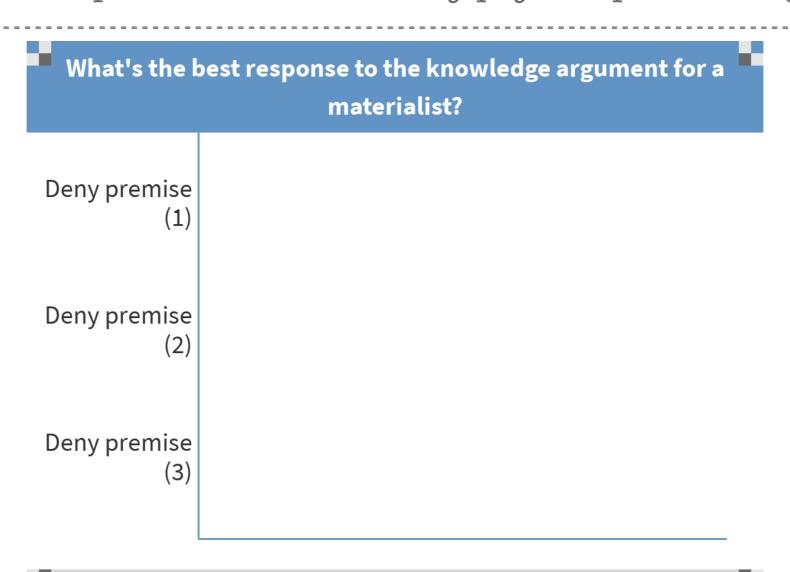
But this seems to show that conscious experience is not a wholly physical process.

Here is one way in which the argument, which is sometimes called the knowledge argument, can be laid out.

- 1. If conscious experiences are wholly physical processes, then all of the facts about conscious experiences are physical facts.
- 2. Before seeing the tomato, Mary knows all the physical facts about conscious experiences.
- 3. Upon seeing the tomato, Mary learns a new fact about conscious experiences.
- 4. There is at least one non-physical fact about conscious experience. (2,3)

C. Conscious experiences are not wholly physical processes. (1,4)

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One of the most popular response to the knowledge argument from materialists involves denying that (3) is true.

Here's one way to make this seem plausible. Consider Lois Lane. She knows that Superman can fly; and she knows who Clark Kent is. But she does not know that Clark Kent is Superman.

Suppose that one day she sees Clark don the Superman costume and fly away.

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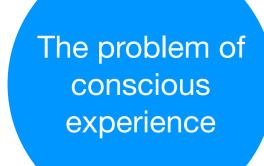
She is surprised — just like Mary is surprised.

If you asked her why she is surprised, she might say, "I did not know that Clark could fly!"

But of course in a way she did. She knew that Superman could fly. And Clark = Superman. So isn't the fact that Superman can fly just the same as the fact that Clark can fly?

It looks like Lois is surprised, not because there is some new fact that she learns, but because (in some sense) she learns a new way of thinking about a fact she already knew.

Could the materialist say that, similarly, Mary does not learn a new fact, but instead learns a new way of thinking about a physical fact she already knew?



The problem of physical change

The problem of fission

The problem of existence without physical continuity

Let's turn now to the problem of physical change.



The problem of physical change is simple. You are constantly gaining and losing physical parts, as, for example, small bits of skin are shed from your body. So it seems that the material being which you call 'my body' at one moment is distinct from the material being which you call 'my body' at the next moment.

But now suppose, as the materialist says, that you are identical to your body:

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Jeff Speaks at 12:25 = Jeff Speaks' body at 12:25.
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The fact that we are constantly gaining and losing parts seems to show that:

At 12:26, the material being which was Jeff Speaks' body at 12:25 no longer exists.

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At 12:26, the material being which was Jeff Speaks' body at 12:25 no longer exists.

At 12:26, the person which was Jeff Speaks at 12:25 no longer exists.

This looks bad, since we generally think that we are able to survive such events as haircuts, and hence can exist for more than a few moments.

We can formalize this argument as a reductio of materialism about human persons.

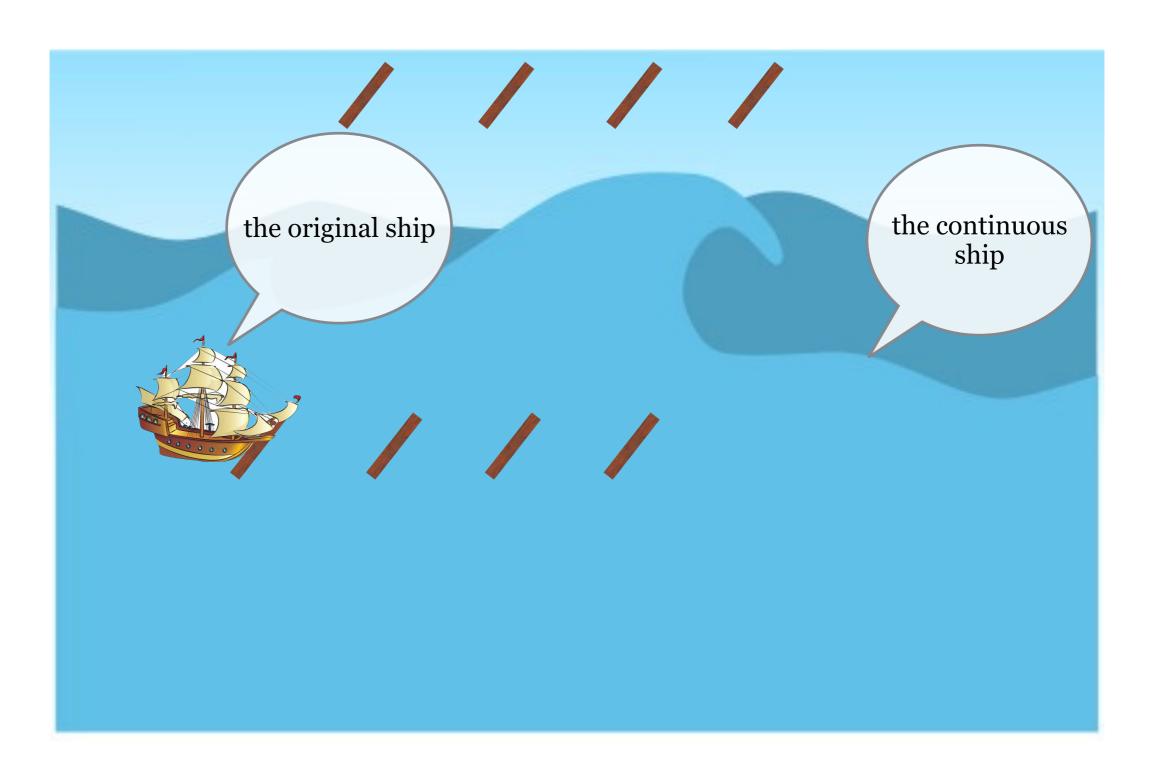
- 1. Human persons are identical to their bodies.
- 2. Human bodies gain and lose parts every few seconds.
- 3. If x and y are material things, and x and y have different parts, then $x\neq y$.
- 4. Human bodies only exist for a few seconds. (2,3)
- C. Human persons only exist for a few seconds. (1,4)

Suppose that you are a materialist. Which premise of the above argument should you reject?

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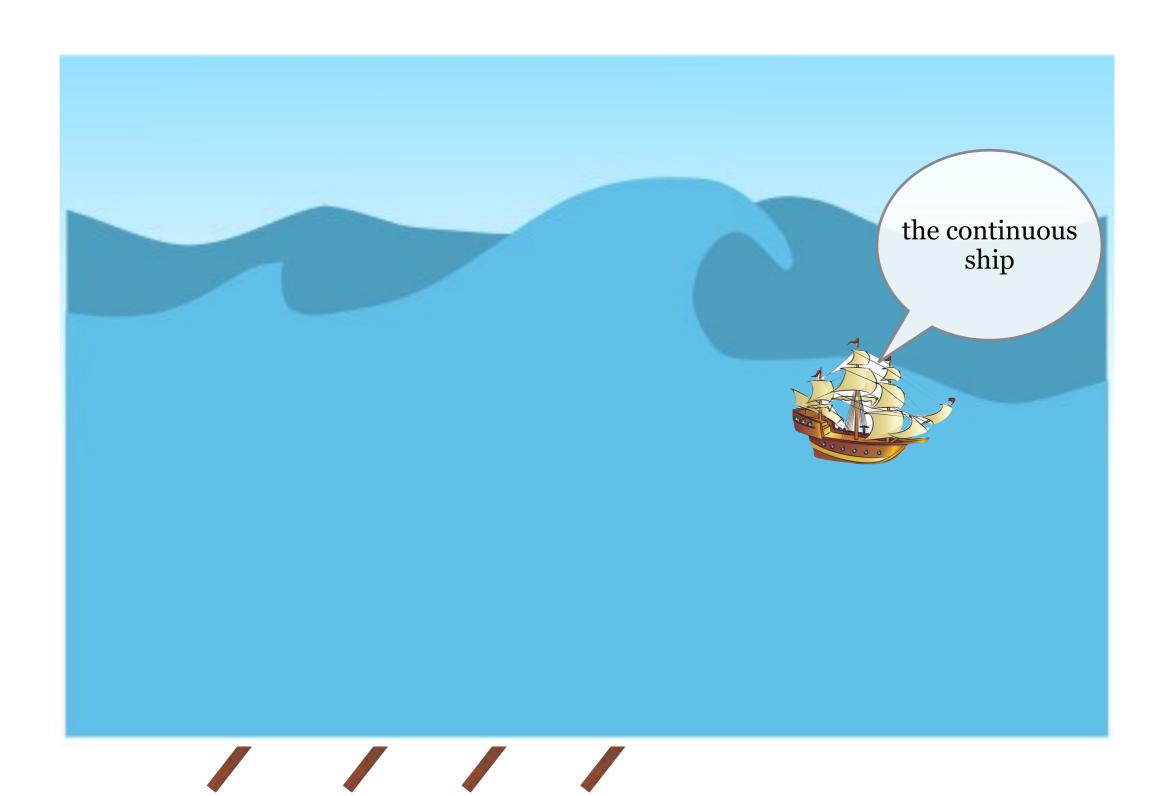
It is natural to reject premise (3). For surely we ordinarily think that, for example, a bowl can continue to exist over a period of days even if it is a material thing, and even if it is constantly gaining and losing atoms.

But the problem of physical change is not so easily disposed of. This can be shown by an ancient paradox, the puzzle of the Ship of Theseus, which is discussed in today's reading.



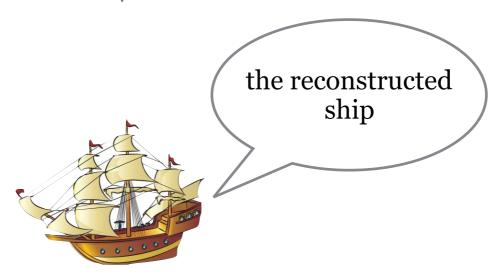
Our previous discussion strongly suggests that the following claim is true:

Original Ship = Continuous Ship



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But now imagine that some enterprising person gets the idea to rebuild the original Ship of Theseus from the wooden planks which have, over time, been replaced.



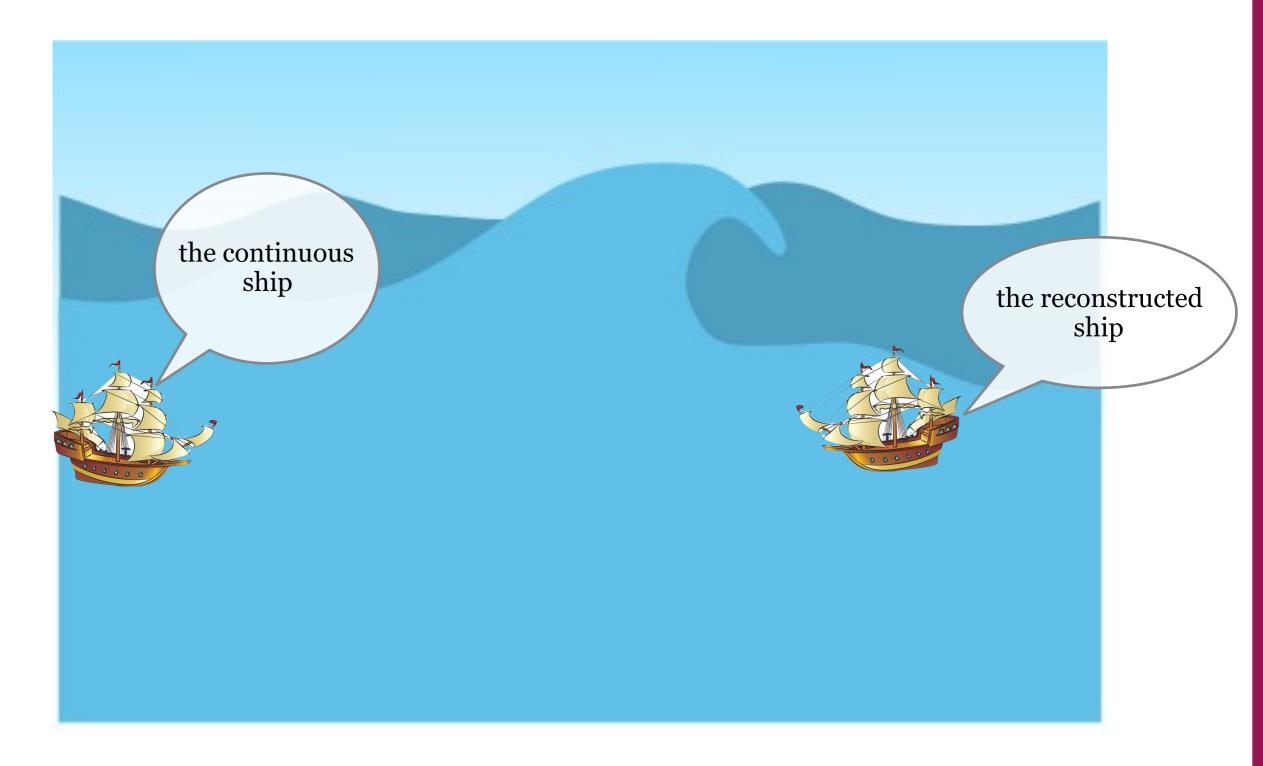
The following now seems plausible:

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Original Ship = Reconstructed Ship
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After all, Original Ship and Reconstructed Ship are made of exactly the same materials organized in exactly the same way!

Original Ship = Continuous Ship

Original Ship = Reconstructed Ship



But suppose that we take our reconstructed ship for a cruise.

Original Ship = Continuous Ship

Original Ship = Reconstructed Ship

This is not a story of a ship crashing into itself; so it seems fairly clear that:

Continuous Ship ≠ Reconstructed Ship

The problem, though, is that these three claims are inconsistent. This is due to the transitivity of identity: if A=B, and B=C, then A=C.

What's the best way out of this paradox?

Continuous Ship ≠ Reconstructed Ship

What's the best response to the paradox of the ship of Theseus?

deny that Original Ship = Continuous Ship

deny that Original Ship = Reconstructed Ship

deny that Continuous Ship ≠ Reconstructed Ship

What's the best way out of this paradox?

One natural thought is that we should reject the claim that Original Ship is the same as Reconstructed Ship. On this view, if you find all of the parts that composed some thing, and put them back together, that is not enough to reconstitute the thing. Rather, on this view, material objects survive via a series of causal connections over time, perhaps with the requirement that only relatively small changes at one time are possible.

This response to the Ship of Theseus connects in an immediate way to questions about the possibility of life after death.

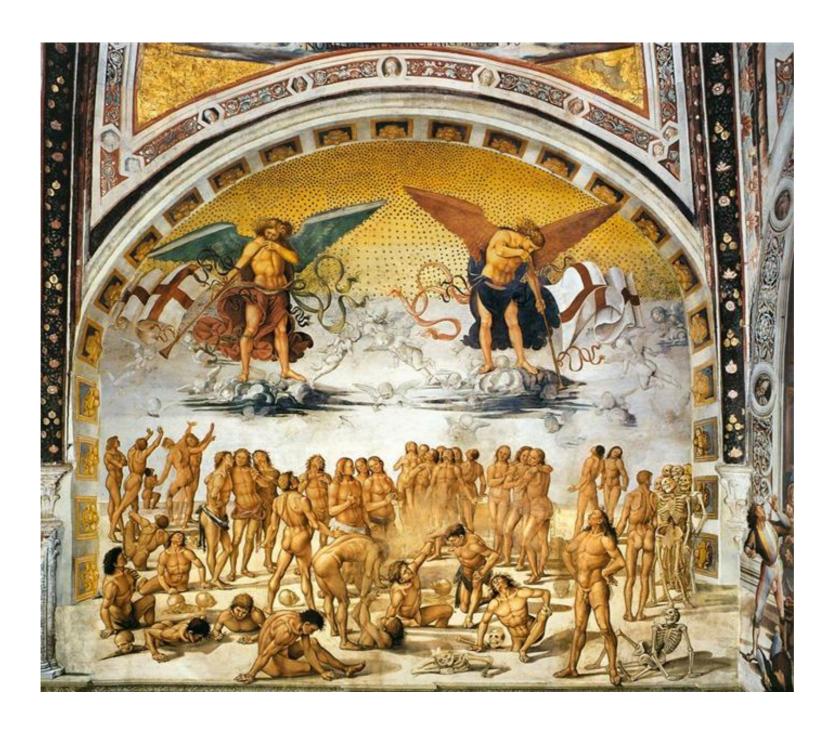
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One important question about materialism is whether it makes room for the possibility of life after death.

I think that most people today would be inclined to think that it does not, and that if life after death is possible, then something like the dualist theory of the self must be correct.

The interesting thing is that the Christian view of life after death is in some ways much closer to a materialist view than to the kind of dualist view we find in Descartes.

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Luca Signorelli, The Resurrection of the Dead (1501)

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If the traditional Christian view has this kind of materialist element, it becomes a pressing question for Christians how the body could survive death.

One natural answer would have been: God could collect all of the particles that composed you at the moment of your death, and then, when the dead are resurrected, re-arrange those particles in the way that they were arranged at the moment of your death.

But, if we give the response that we just considered to the Ship of Theseus, this does not look promising. If Reconstructed Ship ≠ Original Ship, then it looks like your reconstructed body ≠ your original body.

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So how could resurrection work?

One possibility is that my body just before death is connected to my resurrected body by a kind of non-local causation — a kind of causation that involves a temporal gap with no series of continuous causal processes during the gap. Some results from quantum mechanics suggest that either such gaps are possible, or that there is 'signaling' which involves movement faster than the speed of light. This may provide some reason to believe in non-local causation of this sort.

Something like this might explain how my resurrected body might stand in the right sorts of causal relations to my body just before my death, and hence how life after death might be possible even on a materialist view of persons.



Let's turn now to the problem of fission. This problem can be introduced by describing an ambitious new form of surgery.

We are all familiar with surgeries in which parts of one's body are removed. One might remove a tumor, or an organ, or a limb.

Let us suppose that in the future medical technology continues to improve. It is now possible to amputate half of a person's body.

Fortunately, prosthetics have also improved, so that it is now possible to make an exact duplicate of the half that has been removed, and attach that to the original half.



It seems as thought it should be, in principle, possible to survive this surgery. So the materialist, who thinks that you are identical to your body, must also say that it is possible for your body to survive this surgery.

So, it seems, they must endorse the following claim:

A body continues to exist even if 50% of that body's matter is removed.

But this assumption leads to trouble.

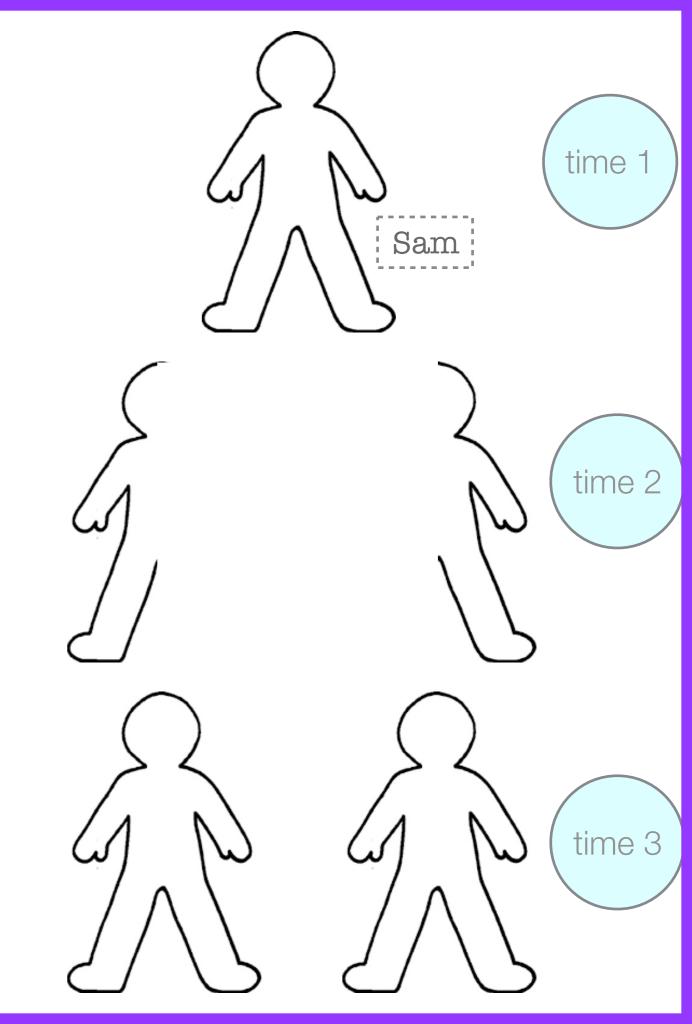


A body continues to exist even if 50% of that body's matter is removed.

Suppose that we take a healthy patient, Sam, and cut him in half.

We then, as in the previous surgery, make duplicates of the two halves, and join them to the two severed halves.

Call the two resulting individuals "Lefty" and "Righty."



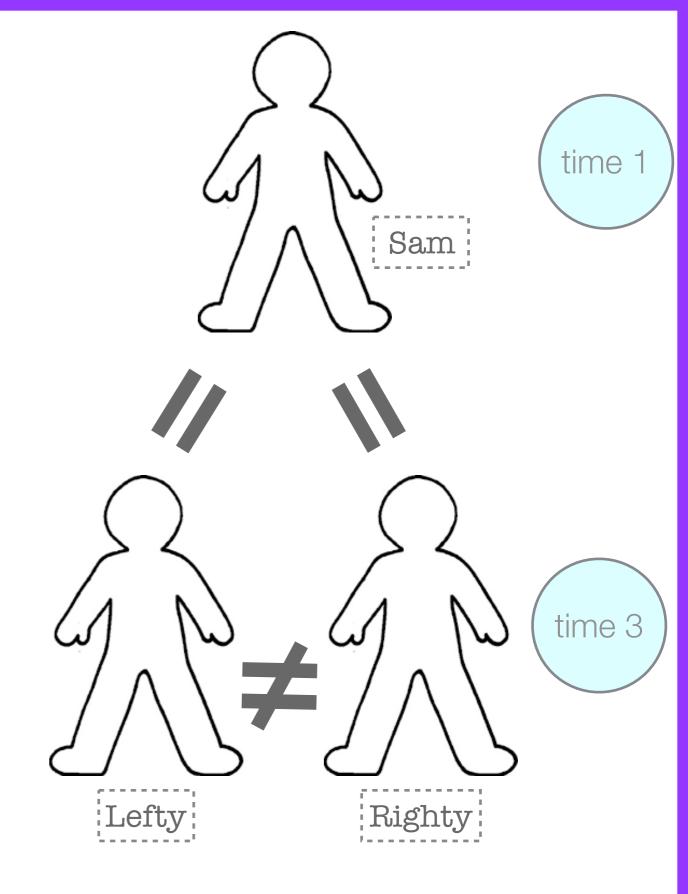
A body continues to exist even if 50% of that body's matter is removed.

The problem is that the materialist who endorses the above principle seems forced to say that Sam=Lefty and Sam=Righty.

But, obviously, Lefty ≠ Righty.

And this is a contradiction.

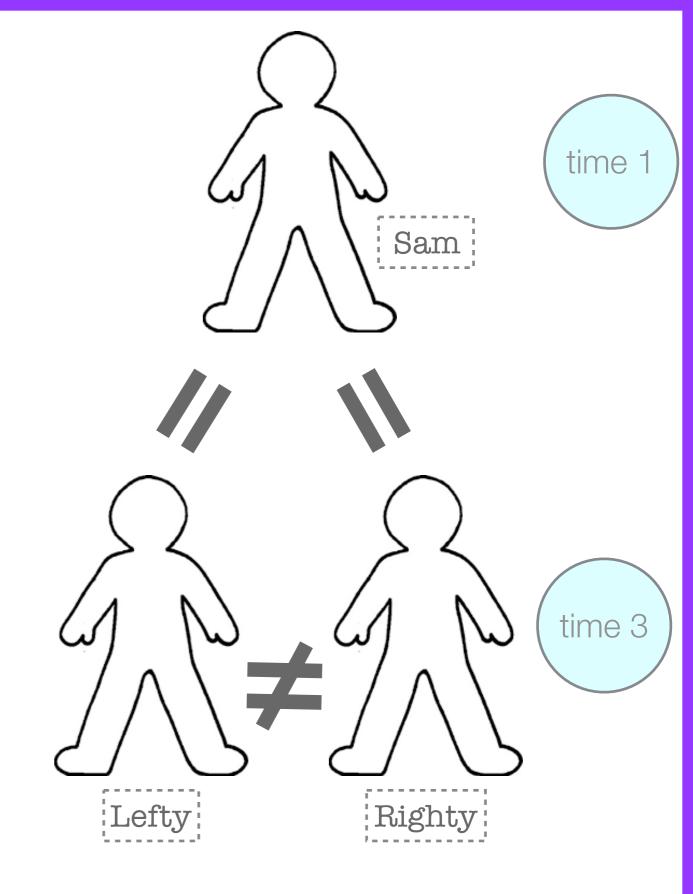
How should the materialist respond?



How should the materialist respond?

Is it plausible to say that 50.1% of the material of the body must be preserved?

Imagine that you had to undergo an extensive surgery of this kind, and that it was impossible to tell whether you had lost just over, or just less than 50% of your body. On this kind of proposal, you would then be unsure whether you were a new person with memories of someone else's actions, or the same person who went into the surgery. Would this be reasonable?





The problem of physical change

The problem of fission

The problem of existence without physical continuity

Let's now turn to our last problem for materialist theories: the problem of existence without physical continuity.



This argument is based on John Locke's example of the prince and the cobbler.

For should the Soul of a Prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the Prince's past Life, enter and inform the Body of a Cobler as soon as deserted by his own Soul, every one sees, he would be the same Person with the Prince, accountable only for the Prince's Actions

What sort of example is Locke imagining here?

This seems to be a problem for the simple materialist views of human persons introduced above. If Locke is right, and we can coherently imagine cases in which two persons "swap bodies", then it seems that we cannot be identical to our bodies.

Other variants on this sort of case are much more in the realm of possible future science than in the realm of Hollywood movies. An example is the possibility of uploading.

Suppose that there is a process by which, one by one, the neurons in your brain are replaced by silicon circuits that are functionally equivalent to the neurons they replace — that is, they do just the same things as those neurons in every situation.

It seems plausible that you would be psychologically just the same at each stage in the process. After all, at each step your brain would be functioning in just the way that it did at the preceding step.

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Further, this new entirely synthetic structure, which now is where your brain once was, could be removed from the rest of your biological body, and connected to a computing system, which might contain a kind of virtual reality world which you would inhabit.

If this would indeed be you, this makes problems for materialism. After all, it looks like the material object which (according to materialism) you were no longer exists.

Some have thought that this kind of case points in the direction of a third kind view of personal identity: the view that our existence over time does not require the continued existence of a soul or an immaterial thing, but rather the continued existence of our psychology.