

2.1 What we are

Do the following thought experiment. Imagine you have a kidney disease, and you receive a kidney transplant, are you still yourself?

Imagine you lose a leg and receive a prosthesis. Not the archaic models of nowadays, but a prosthesis that functions just as well as a genuine leg, and looks like one, too. Are you still yourself?

How about a machine heart, or an artificial 20/20 eye? Would you still feel yourself?

I guess, I would, and sooner or later, I would surely welcome some organs that do their duties better than my own. If the replacement parts were to work well, I would feel myself, or, if anything else, I would feel better, but nevertheless myself.

In our thought experiment, we can go on and on, until we reach the brain.

The brain is several things. The brainstem controls vital functions like heart rate and breathing frequency. A sophisticated computer could take over.

The cerebellum coordinates movement, also something that potentially could be outsourced to a computer in future days, without eliminating our selves.

But now it gets trickier. In the midbrain sit our emotions, and mostly in the outer brain, the cortex, are intellectual functions and memories.

Brain memories are not like saving computer data, because brain memories are not just data, but data associated with emotions. Here we get to the core of our selves, memories associated with emotions.

Saved data alone isn't it. Information saved on a hard disk does not have a personality, so no self. Even if one were to download all data

circulating on the Internet into one computer, it would still only be data, no self.

Likewise, emotions without memory are just reflexes, no self.

Again a thought experiment: imagine a person has zero memory capacity. He never knows what was in the previous second. He also does not know what happened in the previous one hundredth or one thousandth of a second. If that is the case, there is no personality, no self. There will be a scream upon pain, but how intensely is pain felt if it is already forgotten in the moment it happens?

So, our selves are memories associated with emotions, or emotions associated with memories.

Now think further. There is a disease, or several, that erode and erase our memories. Alzheimer's does a neat job on that, and other forms of dementia achieve it, too. Not so sure about illnesses that destroy feelings because feelings would not just be anger and love and appetite, sexual or for food, but also pain. Not just diabetic loss of pain in the extremities but nerve signals not arriving in the brain where they would be perceived.

Anesthetics, of course, interfere with feeling anything, including pain, and they take along with them any awareness. A coma has the same effect.

The details may a bit vague here. But the details may not be so important. A ideology needs a general idea only.

Neurons from anywhere in the body send signals to the midbrain, e.g. the thalamus. Neurons conduct signals electrically, but neurons are not directly connected to the thalamus and other nearby brain parts. Rather, at the synapses, transmission is switched to chemical neurotransmitters. All anesthetics interfere with the signal transmission by neurotransmitters, not only between peripheral neurons and the thalamus but all of the brain. The result is a total loss of feelings, of awareness, and of the storage of perception data.

So, here we are at the basics of what our selves are. A soup of neurochemicals in our brains that is responsible for about everything

that we feel and think. There aren't even terribly many neurotransmitters, just more than 100, with glutamate and GABA, the most common.

But you get the idea that our selves really just are a biochemical porridge, with chemicals connecting here and there upon electrical stimulation. Not very metaphysical really, and too down to earth to serve as foundation for religions. Our selves aren't much, just circulating chemicals that are so easily modified by medications. Nevertheless, pain, or torture, feel so much more meaningful than just a little bit of chemistry.

All of this is so senseless. Can I have a coma, please, or at least some opiates to tilt this brain soup into one that is more pleasurable? And then turn off the electricity, please.

And then deprive the brain of oxygen, so that it will be over and done.