

Comment on Erdinc Sayan’s “Why am I not Someone Else?”

by Craig Skinner

Answer: Because You are Necessarily Who You Are, although you might not know Who That Is.

In his informed, thought-provoking and entertaining piece, Sayan grapples with his title question, skirts around suggested solutions without endorsing any, and concludes that it may be one of the universe’s “grand mysteries”.

He focuses the discussion by postulating or referencing a number of scenarios in which he has an identical twin – a natural one, or a duplicate (clone in this world), or an indiscernible counterpart in an exact duplicate parallel universe – in each case asking why he doesn’t have his twin’s body while the twin has his.

I agree that his scenarios are not just conceivable but possible. As regards the duplicate and the counterpart, a few remarks are in order. A duplicate, such as a clone, being atom-for-atom identical, shares all intrinsic properties with the original, but not all extrinsic (relational) ones e.g. it may be nearer the door than the original. An indiscernible counterpart, by contrast, also shares all relational properties. But, if we are to count the original and the counterpart as two, what then of the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles? Here, we have a choice. Either we say the Principle is false, or we retain it by holding that although original and counterpart share all intrinsic and extrinsic properties, they differ in that each has a unique non-qualitative property, that of being the very thing it is (thisness or haecceity). I prefer the latter. After all, we agree that in the parallel universe scenario, there are two Sayans (as well as two of all else). Indeed, this may actually be so, not just in a thought experiment, if the universe is infinitely big or one of an infinite number within a multiverse. At any rate we agree that there is *this* Sayan, whose article I critique on *this* computer, and *that* Sayan whose article my counterpart critiques on *that* computer, *this* Sayan who wonders why he isn’t *that* one, and vice versa. Finally, we agree that duplication is mental as well as physical i.e. zombies may be conceivable but are not possible. In short, I have no quarrel with Sayan’s methodology or background philosophical assumptions.

Let us turn now to the puzzle. I must say that his posing it as “Why don’t I have my twin brother’s body while he has mine?” suggests that Sayan thinks of “I” as separate from his body, in substance dualistic fashion. Indeed I suspect the puzzle is only coherent if we think of an “I” as some sort of entity that happens to be in *this* body but might have been in *that* body. We might go on to suggest that a solution to the puzzle is that the twins have different souls. But as Sayan points out, we are then left with the

question as to why the body-soul pairings happened in the way they did rather than the other way round, so we are no further on, unless we hold that God willed it so and that's that.

I feel the solution is to banish all thoughts of the soul or self as a transferable entity, and regard a self as a construction by each of us as part of a normal human's development. The self is then necessarily that of the individual concerned. Sayan has his self, *that* Sayan has his own, separate self, albeit it is indistinguishable, except by its haecceity, and it makes no sense to ask why Sayan has the self he does rather than the other one. Each necessarily has the self he does. Indeed, in his paper, Sayan refers to the constructed self (“physicalism requires that our selves are *causal outcomes* of our bodily functions” (his italics)), acknowledges this as a possible solution, but rejects it. In doing so he suggests that the puzzle is deeper, and presents a thought experiment in support. Two identical humans are built from raw materials, both coming into existence for the first time. One of them is me, but why am I not the other one? I don't feel this helps the rejection of the constructed-self view. For we can simply say that each clone has its own self, albeit these were constructed in one fell swoop during the manufacturing process rather than piecemeal in the course of normal living.

Sayan refers to Kripke's necessity-of-origin thesis (I am necessarily the child of my actual parents, a child born to any other couple could not be me), but finds it “hardly illuminating”. I rather agree it is a side issue in the present context. For, irrespective of the necessity, or the manner, of my coming into existence as a human, I will have or will construct a self which is necessarily mine. Parenthetically though, I think the thesis correct, and it reveals a wondrous mix of contingency and necessity in my existence that never ceases to amaze me. Thus, on the one hand, my existence is a fantastically improbable fluke. Had a single one of my millions of forbears died before reproducing (one of my myriad fishy ancestors, say, eaten by a bigger fish before laying eggs), I wouldn't be here. So from a perspective three billion years ago, the chance of my future existence was almost zero. Yet, given that I am here, I am necessarily the child of my actual parents, they of theirs, and so on, in a chain of iron necessity stretching back as long as you wish.

A brief digression. Sayan's text rather implies that the constructed-self view requires belief in physicalism. But this is not quite right. I am not myself a physicalist. I think that the emergence problem for physicalism is as intractable as the interaction problem is for dualism. I feel that panpsychism is the solution to the mind-body problem, and it is entirely consistent with the constructed-self view

Finally, to come to the last clause of my title, how could Sayan possibly not know who he is?

I will try to show, with two thought experiments, not only that he might not know who he is, but also that he might even be *that* rather than *this* Sayan which all of us, himself included, take him to be.

First, Sayan is to be cloned. The procedure can be uncomfortable, explains the Cloner, and so the subject is put to sleep. The sleeping Sayan is duly cloned, the old and new Sayans awake in separate rooms. The Cloner enters one of the rooms and asks the bleary-eyed occupant who he is. Of course the occupant doesn't know whether he is the old or the new Sayan. And if the Cloner had been dead drunk at work and can't recall which is which, nobody can ever know.

Secondly, we call on the even more accomplished firm of transgalactic warpdrive hauliers, Prince and Pauper. They simultaneously (pace relativity theory) transport the sleeping Sayan to *that* Sayan's bed and vice versa. Each awakes in the other's bed, but of course sees nothing amiss, then or ever. If this be granted as a possibility, then it may have already happened, and our Sayan right now might actually *be* his counterpart.

Suggested reading

For some thoughts on the self as a construction see my article:

The Dalai Lama gathers his thoughts: Self as a construction. Philosophy Pathways Issue 221 (March 2018)

<https://philosophypathways.com/newsletter/issue221.html>

A good account of haecceity is the online Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy article:

Medieval Theories of Haecceity (2014)

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/medieval-haecceity>

A defence of panpsychism as the solution to the mind-body problem is given in my dialogue:

All Minds Great and Small: a Defence of Panpsychism which follows the present article in this journal issue

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Email: ingridandcraigskinner@btinternet.com