

## Why am I not Someone Else?

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**Abstract** *“Why am I not someone else?” and its kindred questions, “Why wasn’t I born, say, in the 7th century or in the 30th century?”, “Why was I born in this country and not another one?”, “Was it necessary that I be born to these parents and not to some other parents?” are formidable philosophical questions, which are not only difficult to answer but also difficult to even comprehend. My aim in this paper is to propose a way of understanding what “Why am I not someone else?” may or should be asking, and expose a mystery about personal identity with which my interpretation of this question leaves us. We are best initiated into approaching this question if we ask it thus: (Assuming I have an identical twin brother) why didn’t I end up with my twin brother’s body while him with mine? We need not ask that question under a presumption of dualism.*

**Keywords** dualism, physicalism, self, first-person perspective, third-person perspective, Kripke

Many of us ponder at one time or another, “Why am I not Bill Gates?” or “Why am I not Einstein?” or “Why am I not Shakira?”. We usually ask such questions when we are not happy with our financial situation or when we wish we were much brighter or had a much more attractive physical appearance, or complain about some such deficiency that we feel we have, but wish we didn’t. On those occasions what we really mean by such questions is “Why am I not as rich as Bill Gates?” or “Why am I not as bright as Einstein?” or “Why am I not as good looking and talented as Shakira?” Usually we already have some causal explanation of our deplorable situation, our gloom subsides, and we go back to our business as usual, without turning those questions into philosophical bewilderment.

But if we ask those kinds of questions not with the intention to mean “Why am I not as rich as Bill Gates?” but with the intention to mean “Why am I not really, literally, Bill Gates?”, our perplexity makes a quantum jump. It suddenly becomes a formidable philosophical question, which is not only difficult to find an answer for but also difficult to even comprehend. My aim in this paper is to offer an interpretation of what this question may or should be asking, and expose a mystery about the phenomenon of personal identity with which my interpretation of this question leaves us.

A similar sense of puzzlement accompanies another, a kindred, family of questions: “Why wasn’t I born, say, in the 13th century or in the 25th century?”, “Why was I born in this country and not another one?”, “Was it necessary that I be born to these parents and not to some other parents?”. Many of us ask such questions in our more reflective moments.<sup>1</sup> The general pattern to such questions appear to be: “Why am I not someone else?”, or alternatively, “Could I have been someone else?”.

This is not only a popular intrigue, but has the nature of a deep philosophical issue. But a common philosophical reaction is to dismiss it as a “wrong question.” It is not clear what exactly is “wrong” with it, however. One reason why many philosophers dismiss it as a wrong or illegitimate question may be that they feel that it is of the same rank as questions like, “Why is this table not that table?” or “Why is number 2 not number 3?” or even “Why is my car not the planet Uranus?”. Of course there *is* something wrong—and silly—with those latter questions. Number 2 is not (identical with) number 3, because the two numbers have different sets of properties, which differentiate them. Similarly with my car and the planet Uranus, and so on. When I ask “Why am I not Bill Gates?”, I certainly don’t mean to question why I am not (identical with) Bill Gates. The answer is too obvious: I and Bill Gates have many different properties, hence the two of us couldn’t be identical.

It may be that some of the “wrong question” advocates are reasoning as follows. If I had *been* Bill Gates, then there would have been no *me* around. That is, if I had literally been (or have somehow become) Bill Gates, then *I* would have been nonexistent (or have ceased to exist), while Bill Gates would have continued to enjoy his existence unaffected. So, under such construal of the question “Why am I not Bill Gates?”, the answer is that it is impossible for me to be Bill Gates on pain of me going out of existence.<sup>2</sup> This is not the way I want to construe the question “Why am I not someone else?” at all.

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<sup>1</sup> Larz Hertzberg puts this nicely:

Most of us, at one time or another, will have been struck by a thought that we might wish to express in the following words: “I could have been born in a different time and place, my position in life and all my personal characteristics could have been completely different from what they are; how amazing then that it should have fallen to my lot to live my life, the only life I shall ever live, as this particular individual rather than any other.” [What t]his thought ... expresses ... may be the sense that there is something gratuitous or contingent about one’s being any particular individual at all. (Hertzberg, “Imagination,” 143)

<sup>2</sup> A similar point was made by Leibniz: “Leibniz ... said to one who expressed the wish that he were the King of China, that all he wanted was that he should cease to exist and there should be a King in China.” (Williams, *Problems*, 42-43)

## I

That question becomes highly intriguing, while at the same time more intelligible and accessible, when we ask it as follows: Why am I not my brother, or even, my sister? This approach to the question can best be motivated if we assume that I have an identical twin brother and asked it thus: Why don't I have my twin brother's body while he has mine? Let me explain this. Imagine you had an identical-twin sibling.<sup>3</sup> You are the twin standing on the right and she is the twin standing on the left right now. Now, what explains the fact that you have ended up with the body on the right (which let's say is slightly shorter than your twin's), and she has ended up with the body on the left, *rather than the other way around*? What decided or determined it? At the time the relevant fertilized egg divided into two very similar zygotes *A* and *B*, what determined that it was *A* that was eventually going to become you and *B* was going to become your sibling?

In view of this new reading of the question “Why am I not someone else?”, let me transform some of the earlier questions we asked into the following: Why did the zygote that eventually became Bill Gates—call that zygote *G*—not become me, instead? In other words, why did I develop from zygote *S* and not from zygote *G*? Again, why did I develop from zygote *S* and not from some zygote *X* that got fertilized in some other place and/or time?

My putting the matter in terms of twin siblings is in order to make the question more graspable and stimulating intuitively. The intuitive pull comes from the fact that the zygotes *A* and *B* and the conditions surrounding them are highly similar. Thus we get the feeling that something must have somehow *determined* it that zygote *A*, rather than *B*, will become you, and zygote *B* will become your twin sibling. In other words, we feel that there must be an explanation of why it happened that way, rather than the other way around. We may think of invoking something like Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason here. To use Leibniz's terms, what I am asking is, What is the “sufficient reason” that explains that you had to have the slightly shorter body instead of your twin's slightly taller one?

We can render our problem even more enigmatic with the following thought experiment, which is an extension of the identical-twin example. Suppose that a baby was born in the year 1288, which, by sheer coincidence, had exactly the same genetic material as mine. Let us even imagine that at the time it was born, this baby was an atom-by-atom, even quantum-statewise, exact copy of me at the time *I* was born. Now the question: Why am I the person who was born in 1955 (my year of birth) and not the person who was born in 1288? Clearly, that 13th century person wasn't me; the

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<sup>3</sup> Or imagine you are one of a pair (or triple, quadruple, etc.) of individuals biotechnologically cloned.

two of us were each other's identical duplicates at the respective times we were born. But then what dictated that I turn out to be the person born in 1955 rather than the person born in 1288? After all, the two of us had exactly matching material constitution at our respective times of birth.

Some people might fancy that, according to this scenario, both the 13th century person and the 20th century person are the same persons or same selves—which would be to say that I lived twice, once in the 13th century and now in our time! To dispel any presumptions of reincarnation regarding this case, let me modify the scenario a little. Suppose that my atom-by-atom-likeness-at-birth is being born *at this moment*, in some corner of the world, when I am already well advanced in life. So this newborn baby cannot possibly be another me (as this doesn't make sense) or my reincarnation (as I am alive and kicking). All we can say is that its body right now is just an identical duplicate of my body at the time I was born. The disquieting mystery, once again, is why am I the one writing this paper, rather than the one being born at this moment?

## II

Some people might be tempted to think that what decides it must be a random or probabilistic process: “some coin was tossed”, as it were, to decide which twin gets which body. So my chances of getting the slightly shorter body was fifty-fifty, and it just turned out that I got that body. Now, if it was a matter of coin tossing, it's got to be one mysterious coin tossing... We should love to find out more about the mechanism of that curious probabilistic process. The idea of such a probabilistic determination of who gets which body leads to many other questions: Was there a coin tossing in the allocation of bodies to my *nontwin* brother (or sister) and myself too? Was there some coin tossing process which decided whether my nontwin brother or I was to be born first? Was there a coin tossing which decided in which country or in which century I was going to be born? And so on.

The coin tossing idea has no appeal to me personally. It seems a pretty prosaic solution to the problem. One might propose some other quick solutions also. We might say, for example, that it was God's decision that I end up with the shorter body and my twin with the taller one. This solution would not be attractive to atheists, of course; they would first demand a solid reason to believe the existence of God.

## III

Dualism also seems handy as a candidate to solve our problem. On the dualist proposal, I just am a soul who somehow (perhaps by the hand of God) was “chained”,

à la St. Augustine, to the shorter body and my twin brother to the taller one. We might never know, the dualist would contend, how and why exactly it happened that way rather than vice versa, but some things may just have to remain out of the reach of our knowledge and understanding.

An interesting dualistic answer to our question is defended by Kenneth Einar Himma.<sup>4</sup> He devises a thought experiment which raises a puzzle which is in some ways similar to the puzzle I illustrated with my identical-twin example. His thought experiment involves a twin planet of the earth somewhere in our universe. There is complete physical isomorphism between the earth and its twin; the two planets are like the mirror images of each other in terms of material constitution and the events happening in them. The twin planet contains your identical duplicate, whose physique and mental life are always perfect parallels of your own:

**Your bodies are thus always in perfectly *isomorphic* states... all the way down to the sub-atomic level.**

**Likewise, you and your twin's mental states and characteristics track each other at every moment in your lives. You and your twin are exposed to exactly similar... sensory input at all times, and your brains respond to this input in qualitatively indistinguishable ways.<sup>5</sup>**

But, despite all this perfect mental and physical resemblance down to even the level of subatomic particles and events, there is one critical distinction between the earth and its twin: the earth contains you and the twin earth does not. Your duplicate in the other planet is *another* person. According to Himma, the only plausible explanation of the divergence between the two planets has to refer to something nonphysical: souls.<sup>6</sup> So, Himma's answer to "Why am I not the person in the other planet?" is "Because my twin in the other planet and I have *different souls*."

A question to raise here is this. Let's say that in the earth, your soul got chained to your body, and in the twin earth, your duplicate's soul got chained to your duplicate's body. Now, just as in the case of the twin siblings, we can ask: Why didn't your soul get your duplicate's body, and your duplicate's soul get your body, instead? What was the sufficient reason that the body-soul pairings happened in the way they did, rather than the other way around? One might take resort to God's decision here<sup>7</sup>:

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<sup>4</sup> Himma, "Explaining why."

<sup>5</sup> Himma, "Explaining why," 435.

<sup>6</sup> Himma calls his view "classical substance dualism."

<sup>7</sup> Himma himself apparently would; see, "Explaining why," 496, n.2.

God willed that it was going to be this way and not the other way around. And it is not ours to understand why God willed so, and that's the end of the matter.

Himma's central concern is different, however. He argues that, given the perfect material and mental isomorphism between the twin planets, physicalism is helpless in explaining the divergence between the two planets with the tools available to it (i.e. neurophysiology, physics, etc.). He says that physicalism,

**... must address an issue first raised by Thomas Nagel [in *The View from Nowhere*], namely to explain why a particular mass of atoms that comprise my body gives rise to me *qua* conscious subject, rather than someone else.<sup>8</sup>**

**Since the two bodies are physically and nomologically indistinguishable at every relevant level of description, it is completely arbitrary from the standpoint of physicalism that one of these human bodies is *yours* and the other is someone else's.<sup>9</sup>**

Like Nagel, Himma contends that first-person perspectives are out of the reach of physicalist scientists with their third-person perspectives. No matter how carefully they study the properties of the twin planets and how closely they investigate each twin's neurophysiological history and the more global circumstances that they have lived in, the scientists will not be able to capture any unparallelness between the twin planets. For Himma, on the other hand, the distinctness of your and your twin's first-person perspectives is what marks the difference between the two planets.

I am not inclined to accept Himma's dualistic solution. I don't think his twin-earth thought experiment *compels* us to posit existence of substantival souls. It is true that those who look at the two planets from third-person perspectives (like non-reductive or supervenience physicalists, according to Himma) will detect no difference between them. So where is the difference to be found? It seems that the only difference is *from your point of view*. From your point of view one of the first-person perspectives is *your* first-person perspective and this makes you unique in the universe, and by extension, it makes your home planet unique. This answer to Himma's challenge would of course not be unwelcome by him—in fact it is the answer he would give. But the fact that the earth is different from its twin planet from your standpoint does not seem to me to entail your having a soul. There is no reason to suppose that *existence of a first-person perspective entails existence of a substantival soul*. First-person perspectives could well be part of the physical world even though we *currently* have difficulty understanding how—just as many of us feel

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<sup>8</sup> Himma, "Explaining why," 431.

<sup>9</sup> Himma, "Explaining why," 443.



that the fact that the explanatory gap problem in philosophy of mind currently lacks a totally satisfactory solution need not turn us into dualists. Hence Himma's dualism lacks sufficient warrant.

#### IV

Physicalistic proposals to answer our question “Why am I not someone else?” would also be forthcoming. A reductionist materialist about selves would claim that I am nothing but a bunch of material items like atoms, molecules and electromagnetic and other kinds of fields: “What you are is this collection of atoms and molecules, and that collection happened to develop out of zygote *A*, and not out of zygote *B*, and that's all there is to it—there is no ‘whys’ about it!” But I'd say, first, that to assert that there are no “whys” about it seems to fly in the face of Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason. Secondly, with a similar kind of a reductionist attitude, we might as well make the standard explanatory gap problem disappear too: Brain process *R* just *is* sensation of red colour and brain process *G* just *is* sensation of green colour, and that's all there is to it—there is no “whys” about it! Of course hardly anyone would accept such a “solution” to the explanatory gap puzzle. Moreover, I would say this reductionist proposal begs the question. It says that if we trace the history of that collection back in time, we arrive at zygote *A* and a similar tracing back of the history of my twin takes us back to zygote *B*. That's why zygote *A* ended up as me and zygote *B* ended up as my twin, rather than the other way around. But it's no news that zygote *A* and not zygote *B* has ended up as me. I am not asking *which* zygote led to me—that's easy to find out in principle—I am asking why *it* did instead of the other equally good candidate, zygote *B*.

A more articulate physicalist-reductionist proposal may be the following. As I said, when I ask “Why am I not my twin brother (or Bill Gates, or Napoleon, etc.)?” I mean to ask “Why didn't I end up with his body (including his brain), and he with mine?” Now, in a physicalistic framework, what we call *I* or *self* (and its first-person stance) is a complex unity of innumerable mental states, psychological traits, dispositions and the like that are causally produced or constituted by environmental and internal (i.e. deriving from our body) input.<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that physicalism already has an explanation of or can successfully reduce *I* or *self* to the elements in the physical world. All I am saying is that physicalism requires that our selves are *causal outcomes* of our bodily functions. So the question “Why am I not Someone Else?” in the sense I ask it comes down to asking “Why is my *self* not caused by somebody else's, such as my twin brother's or Bill Gates's, body and his environment?” This question sounds similar to asking “Why is my twin's shadow not my shadow?” or “Why are my twin's ears not my ears?” It is not my shadow and they are not my ears,

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<sup>10</sup> I don't aim to present here a full-fledged, rigorous account of the notions of *I* and *self*.

because his shadow and his ears are causally connected to his body, not mine. No stage of my ears could have been causally produced (normally) by someone else's body. Similarly, my *self* is causally connected or produced by *my* body and not by my twin's. So the answer to the question “Why am I not someone else?” is: because I (my self) has been caused, since the time I was a zygote, by this particular body together with its environment, and not by some other body. It follows that I couldn't have been born as a different person, or in a different place and time, or as a woman, or as an animal, etc., for these would require other bodies than the actual one I have.

One could still be dissatisfied by this proposal and insist that there is a sense in which why I am not someone else is a deeper puzzle than that. The physicalist might respond that the reason for such a dissatisfaction may be lying in our unconscious dualistic inclinations. We tend to think of *self* as an *independent* entity—almost like an immaterial soul—with certain contingent properties, such as having such and such a body, having such and such personal traits, being born in such and so time and place. And then we wonder whether this self could have had some other properties instead, such as having another body, being born to some other parents, or in some other place and time.<sup>11</sup> Thus we feel that there is some “me”, which, much like “my soul”, could have attached to the baby born to some foreign couple instead of my actual parents. But what we need to realize is that our self is a *dependent* entity, causally produced by our body together with the surrounding circumstances throughout our life. So, on this physicalistic account, the explanation of why the question “Why am I not someone else?” (in the sense I am asking it) puzzles and challenges us is because of our strong, but nevertheless mistaken, dualistic intuitions.

## V

Philosophers like Thomas Nagel<sup>12</sup>, Colin McGinn<sup>13</sup> and Geoffrey Madell<sup>14</sup> accuse reductionist views of trying to eliminate subjectivity or the first-person point of view entirely, in favour of an exclusively third-person point of view of selves. My puzzle clearly presupposes a first-person point of view of selves, where a self normally has direct access to her own inner life. Thus even though third-person parties

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<sup>11</sup> To give a fanciful example: Imagine a table which one day becomes self-conscious and intelligent, thanks to some miraculous *causal changes* inside it. It starts asking “Why am I this table and not some other table?” Our situation is no different according to the physicalistic view we are considering.

<sup>12</sup> Nagel, *View*, 1986.

<sup>13</sup> In various writings.

<sup>14</sup> Madell, “Personal Identity,” 1991.



may have no way of distinguishing me from my clone, I myself have no difficulty making the distinction.<sup>15</sup>

The thought experiment I will present next aims to help us better appreciate the depth of our puzzle and poses a challenge to third-person reductionist views. This thought experiment, admittedly a far-fetched one (though perhaps not as far-fetched as Himma's), involves two exactly identical sets of conditions which causally lead to two identical individuals. Suppose an ultra-high-tech factory of a very distant future simultaneously produces two identical human clones from some blueprint. The clones are built from raw materials (atoms, molecules) in two production chambers *A* and *B* of the factory. Both clones, though artificially manufactured, are indistinguishable from natural persons. Suppose one of the clones, say the one that came out of chamber *A*, turns out to be *you*, who come to life for the first time (that is, you had not existed before). Once again, the question is, Why did you turn out to be the one manufactured in chamber *A* and not in chamber *B*? What mechanism determined it and how? After all, both individuals were produced by exactly identical material conditions in the two chambers. The second physicalist proposal I discussed above (the one I referred to as the “more articulate” one) starts by recognizing that such and such is your body, and then claims that your self couldn't be caused by any other body. But this last thought experiment aims to pose the question of what determines which body is going to be yours, i.e. which one of the identical (down to the minutest physical detail) bodies is going to be the one embodying *your* first-person point of view. After all, exactly the same kinds of atoms were utilized in chamber *B*, but somehow only the atoms used in chamber *A* constituted you.

Could what makes you be extremely sensitive to which particular set of atoms went into building you, so that only the atomic material in chamber *A* could constitute you but not the exactly matching material in chamber *B*? This suggestion is not helpful of course. For we can now ask, What is so special about this bunch of particular atoms such that *they* constituted you but that other bunch constituted your twin produced in chamber *B*? We are back to square one. Moreover, suppose that after you came out of chamber *A*, your atoms were replaced one by one by the corresponding atoms from your atom-by-atom twin that came out of chamber *B*. Would you *become* your twin, after the replacements, and acquire your twin's first-person perspective? Presumably not—it would still be you.<sup>16</sup> So, your self and first-person perspective don't seem to strictly depend on which particular set of atoms

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<sup>15</sup> As David Cockburn remarks, “there are important truths about the identity of people which can only be grasped from the first person point of view.” (Cockburn, “Counterfactuals,” 380) There is a difference between a world with me in it and a world without me in it—from my perspective. There is a fact of the matter about it from a first person point of view.

<sup>16</sup> It is known that all or most of the atoms in human body get naturally replaced by similar atoms over every several years. Despite this constant renewal of our bodies, we retain our personal identity and remain the same selves.

make up your body. But then, to repeat our question, Why did you turn out to be the person assembled in chamber *A*, rather than the one assembled in chamber *B*?

## VI

Kripke has a famous claim called the “necessity of origin” thesis. As far as living things like humans are concerned, the thesis states that their parental origin is a necessary property of them. This means that being born of their actual parents is essential to a person; the person could not have originated from a different set of sperm and egg. The thesis makes a similar claim about inanimate material things: “*If a material object [such as a table] has its origin from a certain hunk of matter, it could not have had its origin in any other matter.*”<sup>17</sup> Applied to our example of two artificially manufactured persons one of whom is you, the thesis would seem to imply that you could not have originated from any other material and processes than the material and processes that actually went into the production of you in chamber *A*. Therefore, as a matter of necessity, you couldn’t have been produced in chamber *B*. That is what determined that you turn out to be this clone and not the other one. The same goes, presumably, for the twin siblings case: I had to develop from the zygote I did and could not possibly have developed from the other zygote—so I could not have been my twin brother.

I find this very strong, essentialist answer to our question “Why am I not someone else?” hardly illuminating. For, after ascertaining that you originated in chamber *A*, it attributes, *ex post facto*, necessity to that actual origin. But we want to know what made you originate in chamber *A* rather than chamber *B* in the first place. Why was it necessary that you were created in chamber *A* and not in chamber *B*? The Kripkean answer doesn’t help any matters here.

## VII

Assuredly there is an air of mystery surrounding the question “Why am I not someone else?”. Does the question of what caused my self to develop from a certain one of the identical candidates (as in the human-manufacturing plant example) or very similar ones (as in the identical twins example<sup>18</sup>) demand an explanation? I certainly think it does. But given the difficulty, even the apparent hopelessness, of finding such

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<sup>17</sup> Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 114, n.56; italics in the original.

<sup>18</sup> Obviously the conditions in which the two zygotes develop in the uterus are not exactly identical, unlike the two chambers in the manufactured clones example. Then the question becomes what differences between the zygotes and their respective surroundings account for which one of them will become me and which one will become my twin brother.

an explanation, we may be facing one of the “grand mysteries” of the universe. I have been concerned to bring out the depth of the mystery, rather than attempt or pretend to provide a solution for it. The puzzle in our hand can be considered as another species of the explanatory gap problem: the problem of how to explain why zygote *A* developed into me and zygote *B* developed into my twin rather than the other way around. This new explanatory gap problem seems at least as difficult to solve as the old explanatory gap problem, if not much more so.

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