

Better Git It In Your Soul

Imagine an alien race has taken over our planet. They tell you that tonight, while you are asleep, they will obliterate you – by simply touching a screen, they will make your body cease to exist. You know they can do it, because they did the same with our armies when we tried to resist the invasion. But that is not all they will do. After leaving your bed empty for ten seconds, they will create an exact replica to take the place of your old body. It will be molecule-for-molecule the same as if you had just had an ordinary night's sleep.

If told this, an appropriate reaction would be terror. You have been placed on death-row. The fact that your body will be replaced is *some* consolation – perhaps a considerable one, depending on how altruistic you are – because your friends and family will have the replica. If you keep it a secret, they would never know the difference; and even if you do not, it will be hard for them to care much, since from their perspective, it will be as if nothing happened. The replica will look and act just as you would. And yet from your own, personal perspective, you are facing imminent death. Whether you are replaced with a replica or not, your future is just the same: about eight hours left before absolute nothingness hits in forever and ever. (Unless this will be the beginning of an afterlife – but even if you believe this, you will probably not want your afterlife to begin quite so soon!)

But note how your reaction changes if we alter the situation so that the aliens tell you about this *after* it has already happened. The obliteration happened last night and *you* are the

replica. Now your situation becomes like that of your friends and family: it is hard to care all that much, even if you think you should. You might even be glad of it – in a detached, intellectual way – on the grounds that had this not occurred, then you, the replica, would never have existed.

These are radically different reactions to basically the same event. And the reason for the difference is obvious enough, namely that it depends on who you are: the original person or the replica. The different reactions arise from personal, experiential perspectives on the world, but when we step back from them, to look at the situation objectively, the difference fades. This is where naturalist positions on personal identity go wrong. There are two principal kinds: physical continuity, according to which a person is a physical thing, and psychological continuity, according to which a person is a bundle of psychological traits tied together by memories. Let us consider them in turn.

On physical accounts, the obliteration scenario seems essentially trivial; so should hardly be a cause for terror. Suppose the Mona Lisa were obliterated and replaced with an exact replica. The new object will not have the same history – Leonardo never applied his brush to it. Yet it is physically the same, so it does not really matter; visitor numbers to the Louvre would not decline (in the short-term, they would increase). To capture the sense in which the obliteration might really matter to someone, and so justifiably elicit terror, we have to add the idea of *being* that object. You cannot be the Mona Lisa – it is an unconscious object – but you can be, or rather have, a physical body. Yet the whole notion of being something, and thereby having an experiential perspective on reality, is alien to naturalist world-views.

So what about a psychological continuity account? This is also an objective way of looking at things. Objectively, your psychology will not be affected by the obliteration; during the ten seconds you are not around you would have been asleep anyway. But although your psychological continuity, as viewed from the outside, will remain intact, from the inside there will be a radical and terminal disruption.

What is this terminal disruption that the person facing obliteration feels terror in the face of? The ceasing to exist of a subjective, experiential outlook upon the world; one in which your thoughts, feelings and the physical world all appear to you, and in which one physical thing, your body, is experientially central. This is something naturalism cannot account for and so pretends does not exist. We have an evocative word to capture this idea: *soul*. The word is associated with religious views about life after death, but also, thanks to twentieth century world culture, with a certain kind of depth of feeling – one rooted in the highs and lows of everyday experience, rather than disinterested reflection and theory. Charles Mingus used to emphasise that his composition, ‘Better Git It In Your Soul’, had no religious significance; and although he seems to have changed his mind at the end of his life (he added lyrics about Jesus), a secular conception of soul is perfectly possible – it is well-established, in fact. In every sense of the word, naturalism is soulless.