

# **Rationality & ... The Meaning of Life**

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*Are Humans Rational?*

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# Sources/Targets ...

- SEP entry:
  - <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning>
  - Camus: *The Myth of Sisyphus*; *Ecclesiastes*
- Kahneman Chapter 38: “*Thinking About Life*”
- Seligman Chapter 14: “*Meaning & Purpose*”
- *The Brain & the Meaning of Life* by Thagard, reviewed by Bringsjord & Bringsjord
- Nozick, and his argument (only the infinite will do; *Philosophical Investigations*, Chapter 6: “Philosophy and the Meaning of Life”)
- The Meaning of Life in the news ...

# The Question (SEP)

Q

What, if anything, makes a (human) life meaningful?

Q\*



What, if anything, makes a (human) life meaningful  
— *despite the fact that we all shortly die?*

## **Conceptual Constraint on the Investigation**

If there is something that does indeed make life meaningful, in light of what The Experience Machine tells us, it's conceptually distinct from happiness, from pleasure, from moral rightness, and from worth-living.

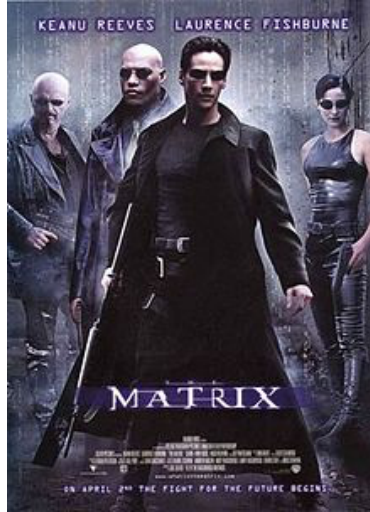
# The “Experience Machine”



entails

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# The “Experience Machine”



entails

## Conceptual Constraint on the Investigation

If there is something that does indeed make life meaningful, it's conceptually distinct from happiness, from pleasure, from moral rightness, and from worth-living.

# Claim 1

Only steadfastly *rational* thinking (in Selmer's sense of rational) about **Q/Q\*** could yield an answer.

# Claim 2

But then on Kahneman's view/PT, if Claim 1 is true, we can't find an answer — unless he and his friends help us (& they haven't been of much help so far).

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# Kahneman:

## We're not rational in *that* sense.

○○○

Thinking, Fast and Slow

Besides, this is wrong: You don't need to adhere to any rules of logic to have consistent beliefs.

ues. The word *rational* conveys an image of greater deliberation, more calculation, and less warmth, but in common language a rational person is certainly reasonable. For economists and decision theorists, the adjective has an altogether different meaning. The only test of rationality is not whether a person's beliefs and preferences are reasonable, but whether they are internally consistent. A rational person can believe in ghosts so long as all her other beliefs are consistent with the existence of ghosts. A rational person can prefer being hated over being loved, so long as his preferences are consistent. Rationality is logical coherence—reasonable or not. Econs are rational by this definition, but there is overwhelming evidence that Humans cannot be. An Econ would not be susceptible to priming, WYSIATI, narrow framing, the inside view, or preference reversals, which Humans cannot consistently avoid.

The definition of rationality as coherence is impossibly restrictive; it demands adherence to rules of logic that a finite mind is not able to implement. Reasonable people cannot be rational by that definition, but they should not be branded as irrational for that reason. *Irrational* is a strong word, which connotes impulsivity, emotionality, and a stubborn resistance to reasonable argument. I often cringe when my work with Amos is credited with demonstrating that human choices are irrational, when in fact our research only showed that Humans are not well described by the rational-agent model.

Although Humans are not irrational, they often need help to make more accurate judgments and better decisions, and in some cases policies and institutions can provide that help. These claims may seem innocuous, but they are in fact quite controversial. As interpreted by the important Chicago

Says who?

This is a silly definition of rationality.

So, people aren't irrational<sub>k</sub>, but they need help making more rational judgments and decisions. Hmm. So people need help in trying to answer  $Q/Q^*$  — and you're going to provide that?



position: elderly people who did not save enough for retirement get little more sympathy than someone who complains about the bill after consuming a large meal at a restaurant. Therefore, the issue is not just the bill, but the freedom of choice is therefore at stake in the debate.

These guys:

The Chicago school and the behavioral economists, who reject the extreme form of the rational-agent model. Freedom is not a contested value; all the participants in the debate are in favor of it. But life is more complex for behavioral economists than for true believers in human rationality. No behavioral economist favors a state that will force its citizens to eat a balanced diet and to watch only television programs that are good for the soul. For behavioral economists, however, freedom has a cost, which is borne by individuals who make bad choices, and by a society that feels obligated to help them. The decision of whether or not to protect individuals against their mistakes therefore presents a dilemma for behavioral economists. The economists of the Chicago school do not face that problem,

because rational agents do not make mistakes. For adherents of this school, freedom is free of charge.

In 2008 the economist Richard Thaler and the jurist Cass Sunstein teamed up to write a book, *Nudge*, which quickly became an international bestseller and the bible of behavioral economics. Their book introduced several new words into the language, including Econs and Humans. It also presented a set of solutions to the dilemma of how to help people make good decisions without curtailing their freedom. Thaler and Sunstein advocate a position of libertarian paternalism, in which the state and other institutions are allowed to *nudge* people to make decisions that serve their own long-term interests. The designation of joining a pension plan as the default option is an example of a nudge. It is difficult to argue that anyone's freedom is diminished by being automatically enrolled in the plan, when they merely have to check a box to opt out. As we saw earlier, the framing of the

individual's decision—Thaler and Sunstein call it choice architecture—has a huge effect on the outcome. The nudge is based on sound psychology, which I described earlier. The default option is naturally perceived as the normal choice. Deviating from the normal choice is an act of commission, which requires more effortful deliberation, takes on more responsibility, and is more likely to evoke regret than doing nothing. These are powerful forces that may guide the decision of someone who is otherwise unsure of what to do.

Humans, more than Econs, also need protection from others who deliberately exploit their weaknesses—and especially the quirks of System 1 and the laziness of System 2. Rational agents are assumed to make important decisions carefully, and to use all the information that is provided to them. An Econ will read and understand the fine print of a contract before signing it, but Humans usually do not. An unscrupulous firm that designs contracts that customers will

routinely sign without reading has considerable legal leeway in hiding important information in plain sight. A pernicious implication of the rational-agent model in its extreme form is that customers are assumed to need no protection beyond ensuring that the relevant information is disclosed. The size of the print and the complexity of the language in the disclosure are not considered relevant—an Econ knows how to deal with small print when it matters. In contrast, the recommendations of *Nudge* require firms to offer contracts that are sufficiently simple to be read and understood by Human customers. It is a good sign that some of these recommendations have encountered significant opposition from firms whose profits might suffer if their customers were better informed. A world in which firms compete by offering better products is preferable to one in which the winner is the firm that is best at obfuscation.

A remarkable feature of libertarian paternalism is its appeal across a broad political spec-

trum. The flagship example of behavioral policy, called Save More Tomorrow, was sponsored in Congress by an unusual coalition that included extreme conservatives as well as liberals. Save More Tomorrow is a financial plan that firms can offer their employees. Those who sign on allow the employer to increase their contribution to their saving plan by a fixed proportion whenever they receive a raise. The increased saving rate is implemented automatically until the employee gives notice that she wants to opt out of it. This brilliant innovation, pro-

Richard Thaler and Shlomo Benartzi it now improved the savings rate and brightened the future prospects of millions of workers. It is soundly based in the psychological principles that readers of this book will recognize. It avoids the resistance to an immediate loss by requiring no immediate change; by tying increased saving to pay raises, it turns losses into foregone gains, which are much easier to bear; and the feature of automaticity aligns the laziness of System 2 with

the long-term interests of the workers. All this, of course, without compelling anyone to do anything he does not wish to do and without any misdirection or artifice.

The appeal of libertarian paternalism has been recognized in many countries, including the UK and South Korea, and by politicians of many stripes, including Tories and the Democratic administration of President Obama. Indeed, Britain's government has created a new small unit whose mission is to apply the principles of

## How about the Rationality Spreading Team?

group is the Behavioural Insight Team, but it is known both in and out of government simply as the Nudge Unit. Thaler is an adviser to this team.

In a storybook sequel to the writing of *Nudge*, Sunstein was invited by President Obama to serve as administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, a position that gave him considerable opportunity to encourage the

Using the New Positive  
Psychology to Realize Your  
Potential for Lasting  
Fulfillment

# Authentic Happiness

"At last, psychology  
gets serious about glee,  
fun, and happiness.  
Martin Seligman  
has given us a gift."  
—Daniel Goleman, author  
of *Emotional Intelligence*

Martin E. P. Seligman, Ph.D.  
Bestselling author of *Learned Optimism*



in turn invite Mandy's parents. This promise seems rash at the moment, as it is making a serious dent into our savings account. The Lyford Cay Club is a private estate that occupies the entire northwest corner of the island of New Providence, Bahamas. It sports a milelong beach of ivory-colored velvet sand, croquet courts, liveried servants speaking in hushed Caribbean-British accents, and stunning palatial homes owned by movie stars, European royalty, and billionaires from all over the world, with everyone enjoying the lenient Bahamian tax structure. It is to this incongruous setting that I have come to put forward my ideas about finding meaning in life.

The occasion is a conclave of ten scientists, philosophers, and theologians gathered to discuss whether evolution has a purpose and a direction. A few years ago, this question would have struck me as a nonstarter, a makeover of the fundamentalist objections to Darwin's casting down of the human race from the pinnacle of

creation. But an advance copy of a book, *NonZero*, has landed on my desk, and it is so startlingly original and tightly rooted in science that it has become the springboard to my thinking about how to find meaning and purpose. One reason I have come to Lyford Cay is the chance to get to know its author, Bob Wright. His underlying idea speaks exactly to my concern that a science of positive emotion, positive character, and positive institutions will merely float on the waves of self-improvement fashions unless it is anchored by deeper premises. Positive Psychology must be tethered from below to a positive biology, and from above to a positive philosophy, even perhaps a positive theology. I want to hear Bob Wright expound further on his ideas in the *NonZero* manuscript, and I want to present my speculations that can ground meaning and purpose in both ordinary and extraordinary human lives. A further reason is to visit John Templeton, our host, in his own Garden of Eden.

We convene the next morning in a teal-cur-

could not co-opt the foundation.

So as I try to swallow my giggles at Mike's caustic wit, I cannot help but be certain that I know what Sir John wants, and it is not at all what David and Mike suspect he wants. For the last two decades, Sir John has been on a very personal quest. He is not remotely dogmatic about the Christian tradition he comes from; in fact, he is dissatisfied with the theology that has emerged. It has failed to keep pace, he thinks, with science, and it has failed to adjust to the volcanic changes in the landscape of reality that empirical discovery has wrought.

Sir John shares many of the same metaphysical doubts that David Sloan Wilson and Mike and I have. He has just turned eighty-seven, and he wants to know what awaits him. He wants to know this not just for urgent personal reasons, but in the service of a better human future. Like the royal patrons of the past, he has the luxury of not having to ponder the great questions alone;

he can gather a group of extraordinary thinkers to help him. Nor does he want to hear the tired verities of the day repeated and confirmed, since he can turn on Sunday morning television for that. What he really wants is to elicit the deepest, most candid, and most original vision we can muster to the eternal questions of "Why are we here?" and "Where are we going?" Strangely, for the very first time in my life, I believe I have something original to say about these knotty questions, and what I want to say is inspired by Wright's ideas. Should my idea about meaning make sense, it would provide the weightiest of anchors for Positive Psychology.

Robert Wright sidles up to the lectern. He is an unusual figure on this high plateau of academe. Physically, he is gaunt and sallow, but somehow larger than life. When he speaks, his lips pucker as if he is sucking on a lemon—when he answers a question he does not like, a very sour lemon. His voice is soft, tending toward a low monotone, and it has the traces of a Texas

that positive emotion and win-win games are intertwined makes sense to him. "I thought you were a nonbeliever."

"I am. At least I was. I've never been able to choke down the idea of a supernatural God who stands outside of time, a God who designs and creates the universe. As much as I wanted to, I never been able to believe there was any meaning in life beyond the meaning we choose to adopt for ourselves. But now I'm beginning to think I was wrong, or partly wrong. What I have to say is not relevant to people of faith, people who already believe in a Creator who is the ground of personal meaning. They already are leading lives they believe to be meaningful, and by my notion *are* meaningful. But I hope it is relevant for how to lead a meaningful life to the nonreligious community, the skeptical, evidence-minded community that believes only in nature."

I tread much more cautiously now. I don't

read the theology literature, and when I come across the theological speculations written by aging scientists, I suspect the loss of gray cells. I have wavered between the comfortable certainty of atheism and the gnawing doubts of agnosticism my entire life, but reading Bob's manuscript has changed this. I feel, for the very first time, the intimations of something vastly larger than I am or that human beings are. I have intimations of a God that those of us who are long on evidence and short on revelation (and long on hope, but short on faith) can believe in.

"Bob, do you remember a story by Isaac Asimov from the 1950s called 'The Last Question'?" As he shakes his head, muttering something about not being born then, I paraphrase the plot.

The story opens in 2061, with the solar system cooling down. Scientists ask a giant computer, "Can entropy be reversed?" and the computer answers, "Not enough data for a meaningful answer." In the next scene, Earth's inhabitants

is this property, essential to theism, that makes God so hard to swallow for the scientifically minded person. The Creator is supernatural, an intelligent and designing being who exists before time and who is not subject to natural laws. Let the mystery of creation be consigned to the branch of physics called cosmology. I say, 'Good riddance.'

"This leaves us with the idea of a God who had nothing whatever to do with creation, but who is omnipotent, omniscient, and righteous. The grand question is, 'Does this God exist?' Such a God cannot exist now, because we would be stuck once again with two of the same conundrums: How can there be evil in the world now if an existing God is omnipotent and righteous, and how can humans have free will if an existing God is omnipotent and omniscient? So there was no such God, and there is no such God now. But, again, in the very longest run, where is the principle of win-win headed? Toward a God who is not supernatural, a God who ultimately acquires

omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness through the natural progress of win-win. Perhaps, just perhaps, God comes at the end."

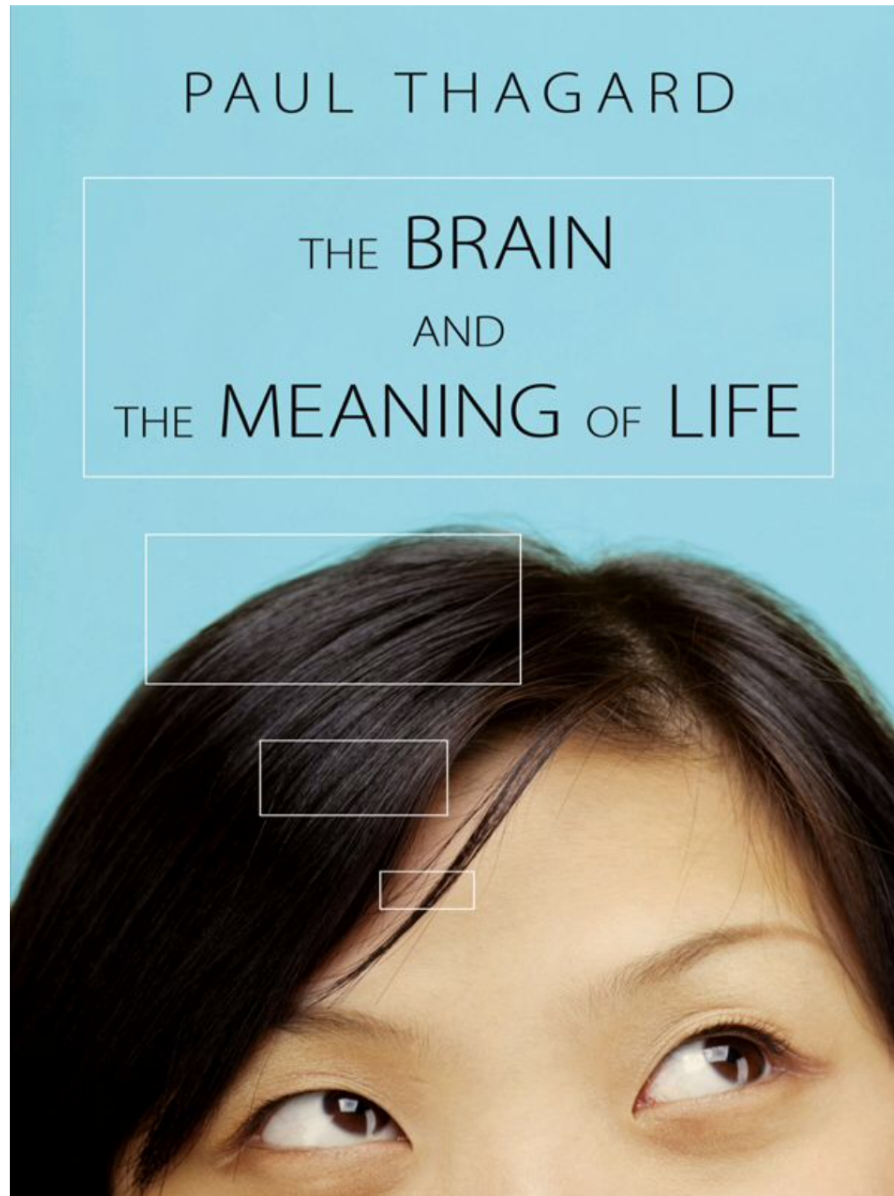
I now see a sign of recognition, mingled with uncertainty, on Bob's face—but no lip movements.

A process that continually selects for more complexity is ultimately aimed at nothing less than omniscience, omnipotence, and goodness. This is not, of course, a fulfillment that will be achieved in our lifetimes, or even in the lifetime of our species. The best we can do as individuals is to choose to be a small part of furthering this progress. This is the door through which meaning that transcends us can enter our lives. A meaningful life is one that joins with something larger than we are—and the larger that something is, the more meaning our lives have. Partaking in a process that has the bringing of a God who is endowed with omniscience, omnipotence, and goodness as its ultimate end



# Claim 3

Our lives today are hardly made meaningful by the possibility that a future generation of beings descended from us have some god-like properties.



# Claim 4

While work, love, and play can be very enjoyable (no one disputes that!), this simple fact in no way (recall the conceptual constraint & the moral of The Experience Machine: it's easy enough to work, love, and play after taking the blue pill!) entails that they make life meaningful (as opposed to enjoyable and worth-living).

Bringsjord, S. (2014) Review of P.Thagard's *The Brain and the Meaning of Life in Religion & Theology* **21**: 421–425. A preprint is available at

[http://kryten.mm.rpi.edu/SBringsjord\\_review\\_PThagard\\_TBTMOL.pdf](http://kryten.mm.rpi.edu/SBringsjord_review_PThagard_TBTMOL.pdf)

# Nozick:

“There seems to be no limit to the flimsiness of what philosophers will grasp at to disarm the fact of death.” (*PE*, 580)

# E.g. Victor Frankl:

“What would our lives be like if they were not finite in time, but infinite? If we were immortal, we could legitimately postpone every action forever. It would be of no consequence whether or not we did a thing now; every act might just as well be done tomorrow or the day after or a year from now or ten years hence. But in the face of death as absolute *finis* to our future and boundary to our possibility, we are under the imperative of utilizing our lifetimes to the utmost, not letting the singular opportunities—whose ‘finite’ sum constitutes the whole of life—pass by unused.”

Uh, actually, I'd like to do an infinite number of things, each of which takes a finite amount of time.

# Rationality & The Meaning of Life in the News ...

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## Dying: Still Terrible—But Not as Bad as You Think

Eternal life might be unbearable, allowing for the crushing accumulation of bitter memories of slights, failures and betrayals

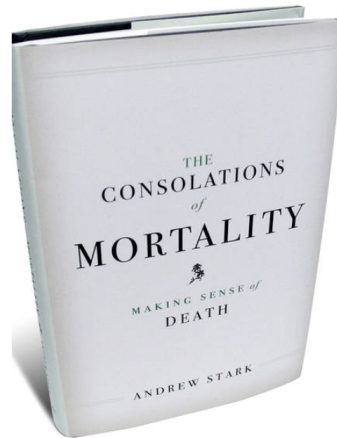
BOOKSHELF

By Colin McGinn

Given the absence of an afterlife, we need to be consoled about death—unlike animals that are spared our lifelong anticipation of it. We need a story about our mortality that makes it look like less of a tragedy. In his chipper and charming “The Consolations of Mortality: Making Sense of Death,” Andrew Stark, a professor of management and political science at the University of Toronto, considers four stories about why death might not be as bad as we tend to suppose.

First, death is actually quite benign. Second, immortality would give us no more goods than mortality can provide. Third, immortality itself would be intolerable. Fourth, life already contains all the bad things that death entails.

The first and third options



are the most promising with the other two open to obvious objection. The second option insists that if we have done something worthwhile in life we have lived enough life, but that doesn't take into account other precious aspects of life, such as love, pleasure and fascination.

The fourth option points out that life is full of loss, so that death gives us more of the same, but that ignores that in death we also lose ourselves. So let's concentrate on the other two.

Epicurus famously said that, so long as we are alive death is not with us and in death, there is no self to endure deprivation—so we have nothing to worry about. The logical point is correct but, as Mr. Stark observes, this is not much help psychologically, because we still have to face the fact that this thing we love—life—will some day be snuffed out. It is the fact that I will be no more that bothers me, not the confused fear that I will be unhappy when dead.

The existentialists try to make a virtue of necessity by claiming that death is the great motivator: It galvanizes us by its presence, forcing us to make something of our life—to become

a real authentic self. One sees the point of this reflection—imagine the procrastinations of immortality!—but it is surely not true that only death can motivate us to achievement and selfhood (what about vanity and rivalry, or the desire to do good?).

Then we have the Buddhists: once we come to see that the self is unreal we will recognize that there is no self to die—no real entity goes out of existence when death overtakes us. In Western philosophy we have the views of David Hume and Derek Parfit, to the effect that persons are collections of connected mental states with no underlying ego; so long as mental states continue in other people, nothing substantial has been lost when a particular individual dies. Again, the logic sounds reasonable, but how about our actual psychology— isn't this view a lot like saying that I never existed to begin

# Rationality & The Meaning of Life in the News ...

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with, so why worry about my impending nonexistence? And why is it wrong to want my mental states to continue? That is what the fear of death is.

So we get to the perils of immortality, and whether they might be as harrowing as those of death, and here reach a point of at least partial comfort. I found this part of “The Consolations of Mortality” the most rewarding, building as it does on the important work of the late Bernard Williams. Williams’s argument takes the form of a dilemma: Either immortality would lead inevitably to excruciating boredom, or it would lead to the perpetual reinvention of the self, in which case it is tantamount to repeated death. It would seem to inevitably lead to boredom because eternity is an awfully long time to keep repeating the same old pleasures and passions. In a tiny fraction of eternity, everything of the world will have been learned with nothing new to pique one’s interest. Even a delicious plate of oysters will pall after the

billionth dozen. Won’t one’s own self come to seem as dull as ditchwater?

There is also the point, mentioned by Mr. Stark, that as one ages one will be prone to painful nostalgia for the time of one’s youth, a million years ago; and how will one relate to people much younger? I would add that immortality allows for a crushing accumulation of bitter memories of slights, failures and betrayals. Memory is already cruel enough in our limited lifespans, but it would be more cruel if it could store up pain and grievance over endless aeons.

True, we might well feel that a few hundred extra years of life would be nice—we don’t live long enough given our psychology—but to live forever is a very big commitment. We could avoid such pitfalls by creating new selves every thousand years or so—selves without the baggage of memory to weigh them down—but then we have traded immortality for something that looks like mortality. Maybe the ideal would be to live as long as one

felt like living and then put an end to the tedium when it became too much.

So there is some consolation to be found, Mr. Stark shows us, but it is of a distressingly indirect kind: Yes, death is bad, very bad, but it is not as bad as the impossibility of death. We may prefer mortality to immortality, if we follow Bernard Williams’s argument, but that is like preferring to be whipped than electrocuted—neither is remotely acceptable. From the fact that A is worse than B it doesn’t follow that B is any less bad than we supposed.

My own view is that consolation is more available from reflections about the nature of personal identity, particularly the impermanence of the self over the course of a single biological life. Isn’t it true that my childhood self no longer exists, having been replaced by my very different adult self? And wasn’t that earlier death not as terrible as I suppose my adult death to be? Maybe we can be consoled by the thought that an

ordinary human life consists of a series of deaths of successive selves, the last death merely being the one that puts an end to the series.

*Mr. McGinn is a philosopher. His books include “Philosophy of Language: The Classics Explained” and “Prehension: The Hand and the Emergence of Humanity.”*