There are several different accounts that we get from philosophy and physics on the nature of time,” he said, starting a substitute lecture in his colleague’s undergraduate class in metaphysics. Andy had just started a new position in the philosophy department at the University of Portland. His new colleague Wendy was out of the country at a conference in Australia and had asked him to take over a week’s worth of lectures. Though metaphysics was not his specialty, he wanted to make an impression on his new colleagues that he was a good faculty citizen. That, and he knew that since he traveled so much he would need someone to take over his classes in the future too, and so, anticipating a possible tit-for-tat, agreed to step into the breach for Wendy. Looking around the room, though, he was starting to have second thoughts. It was late in the day and the students seemed weary and not very attentive. Nonetheless, he pressed on: “But on almost any view of time there are several puzzles that arise concerning personal identity over time.”

Andy felt the fifty minutes left to go, well, really forty-two or so now since he had arrived a bit late and started the class off with some pleasantries and house-keeping of sorts. Essentially, though, he had a whole period to fill up, and as usual he was waiting for a story.

It was a strange method of teaching, so far as he knew, but it had evolved over the years and he had convinced himself that it worked well enough, while also providing a ready-made excuse to not overly prepare and write out formal lectures. Lectures. He hated the word. Sounding so much like a thing to be forced on someone rather than listened to with anything like attention. If you want people to listen to you, tell a story. And it had better be a good one.

The story method was developed early on in his career in ethics classes, to which he was rapidly realizing it might be uniquely suited. He had stumbled across it in his first tenure-track job in Wyoming. As a novice to
the teaching game, and in rooms full of students with whom he had little in common, the method snuck up on him. He couldn't remember the exact topic of the first lecture where he started doing it except that it had something to do with Aristotle's account of the virtues. In the middle of some exposition of courage or friendship or justice he found himself talking about himself, sharing some story that was entirely inappropriate for a 150-seat lecture hall in Laramie. But suddenly, as if he had finally pushed a sluggish revolving door on its axis, he was through to the other side and the students seemed to be actually listening, pens down, staring up at him from notebooks and looking with a mixture of astonishment, curiosity, and consternation. It wasn't all of them, to be sure, but there were more than he had seen in a while paying attention.

As he continued talking he then started moving, walking back and forth as he hit the rhythm of his story. He started talking with his hands, as he would with friends in a bar, and didn't for a moment consider avoiding an aside or digression. After that initial success he kept trying to recreate the same conditions. From then on, if the argument to be covered was a utilitarian account of individual welfare, he had a story about the happiness he experienced tormenting his younger brother when they were both children. If it was a duty-based approach to lying, he had a story about cheating on his taxes. And if the point was that the pursuit of understanding the good, the true, and the beautiful only resulted in an imperfect set of concepts that only approximated the world as it was lived by imperfect humans—like himself—he had many, many stories. Most of them involving Internet dating.

Though he sometimes repeated the same stories over the years, he never wrote them down in his lecture notes. A rather intense Israeli friend in graduate school had told him once that the best way to teach was simply to enter the classroom and “do philosophy” in front of the students. “Show them how hard it is to think through a problem on your feet.” He had tried that, but though effective for a few converts, most of the younger students didn't appreciate the picture that resulted. Although the culture of philosophy had been dominated for half a century by a tortured classroom style propagated by Wittgenstein and his followers, those on the outside mostly found it embarrassing to watch.

But still, there was something to novelty, to each class becoming a fresh occasion for new thoughts; and telling stories to get a point across could benefit from spontaneity as well. After all, when you go out with friends, the stories are best which come as a flash of associative insight. Rehearsed stories could be dry and boring, even to the storyteller. It’s like that
moment in I Heart Huckabees when the Jude Law character is confronted with evidence from the existential detectives, Lily Tomlin and Dustin Hoffman, that he is telling the same story about tricking a vegetarian pop star into eating chicken salad over and over and over. Horrified with how predictable he has become, the next time he is asked to repeat the story, in a meeting of his corporation’s board of directors, he vomits.

Andy’s stories had not failed him so far. He would walk into class and within a few minutes of beginning he would have more than enough stories to take up the period. But so far, in this class, metaphysics was proving resistant to the method. Maybe it was his lack of familiarity with the material, but the right story just wasn’t coming. Fortunately, his colleague Wendy had assigned some very good reading, a chapter on personal identity over time by Rutgers philosopher Ted Sider from a coauthored introductory text on metaphysics (Sider 2005). He spent the next twenty minutes going through the chapter with the class.

In a bit over ten pages Sider lays out the basics. He starts out with an example of a person put on trial for committing a murder five years ago. The defense, however, is unorthodox. The person claims to remember committing the murder, but argues that “the murderer is not the same person as me, for I have changed. That person’s favorite rock band was Led Zeppelin; I now prefer Todd Rundgren. That person had an appendix, but I do not; mine was removed last week. That person was 25 years old; I am 30. I am not the same person as that murderer of five years ago. Therefore you cannot punish me, for no one is guilty of a crime committed by someone else” (Sider 2005, 7). Certainly no court would buy such a defense, but it does raise the question of whether a person who changes over time, either physically or psychologically, remains the same person.

Such an observation allows a distinction between qualitative and numerical sameness. When a person changes in any way—such as a person yesterday before a haircut and a person today after the haircut, or a person yesterday before seeing the light and becoming a Buddhist and a person today wearing saffron robes—they are not the same person. They are qualitatively different. But in another sense, the sense that we walk around with every day which helps us to understand concepts like responsibility for our past actions or anticipation of future events that we will take part in, we are numerically the same. As Sider puts it (2005, 8), the closing arguments at the trial confuse the two kinds of sameness. Even if the murderer is qualitatively different since committing the crime, no one else murdered the victim. No one is numerically distinct from the murder.
After going through this opening example, a sharp-eyed young woman with dreadlocks in the third row raises her hand. "So, this is what philosophers mean when they are talking about personal identity, numerical identity over time?" Andy thinks, indeed sharp, but maybe not doing the reading.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

“Emily.”

“Well, yes Emily, that’s exactly as Sider puts it in the next paragraph. All of us change over time, from big changes—losing limbs, having babies—to little changes—clipping nails and the like. Since physical changes don’t seem to especially matter for our identity over time, the problem of personal identity is to figure out what does matter.”

From there he goes through the different options presented by Sider. One option is that we are the same over time because of the existence of a permanent, unchangeable soul. Another option is spatiotemporal continuity theory, claiming that the essence of personal identity is our continuous series of discrete locations in time and space. And finally, there is psychological continuity theory, which holds that a past person is numerically identical to a future person if the two share memories, character traits, and so on. Normally we don’t have to worry much about the problem of actually identifying persons. We can use simple observations to distinguish between one person and another in order to attribute responsibility, or anything else that we normally do in relation to attribution of identity. But this doesn’t solve the problem of which of these views is true, because there are cases that demonstrate the limitations of each school of thought.

The intuition pump that Sider identifies that helps people to sort out which view they prefer is the problem of duplication, derived from a range of hypothetical science-fiction examples. If we were to take a person and divide him in two, creating two identical entities, using some surgical procedure or an accident with a matter transporter of the sort found in a Star Trek episode, which of the two would count as the continuation of the original person? If personal identity is numerical sameness then the problem is that by either of the continuity theories we don’t know which twin continues the line of the original, if indeed either does, and hence we have a puzzle of two numerically indistinct persons. In another article Sider says that if he were divided in two, into Ed and Fred, then “The puzzle . . . is that we cannot say that I am identical to both Fred and Ed, for by the transitivity and symmetry of identity the absurdity that Fred = Ed would
follow. Nor can we identify me with exactly one of Fred or Ed, by the symmetry of their candidacy” (Sider 2000, 85).

Looking up from his notes after going through this material it appeared that those who had read the chapter were on board. The text is well written, highly accessible, and very engaging. Those who hadn’t read the chapter were lagging back. Looking up at the ceiling he muttered to himself and waited for an insight, something that would pull the rest of them in, or at least provide a ready excuse to release the class early.

“Um, Professor Bright.”

“Huh?” Looking down he sees a tall sandy-haired guy in the first row.

“What about fate?”

“What?” Andy recognizes the student from one of his classes last term as Bill. “What about fate?”

“Well, if I were to be split into two, say, ‘Bill 1’ and ‘Bill 2,’ what about all that stuff that is supposed to happen to me?”

“I’m not sure I’m following.”

“I understand this problem that if I am duplicated then it might be bad because I would cease to exist since I can’t be both Bill 1 and Bill 2. But Sider says this guy Parfait claims that personal identity goes along with psychological continuity. . .”

“Parfit.”

“Right, Parfit, sorry. Anyway, Parfit says being split isn’t bad, like dying, because though I might not exist I’ll just psychologically continue as both Bill 1 and Bill 2.”

“Correct. This is a big challenge to some of the premises we started off with, especially that personal identity is important because it is connected to anticipation, regret, and punishment, as Sider puts it at the end of this chapter. But I don’t get what this has to do with fate?”

“Well, just that if there are things that are supposed to happen to me as I go through life, but then there are two of me, will those things still happen or will they happen to only one of me, or what?”

Still puzzled, Andy asks: “Why would you think this is important?”

A bit exasperated that Andy does not see the point, Bill continues: “It’s like in that Gwyneth Paltrow movie Sliding Doors, I saw a rerun of it the other night on cable. She leaves her apartment in London one morning, goes to work, and then gets fired.”

“Right. I saw that film the other night too. She gets fired, and then . . .” Andy looks around and notices that those who had been dozing off are now paying attention. It’s not his story, but it is a story, and though he expects
that the discussion is going to stray from the topic it certainly is something that they can identify with. Why didn't he think of this before? In an instant he recalls loads of films that have to do with time and identity, or some combination of the two, which could have been used in today's class.

“Yea,” Bill continues, “she gets fired at the beginning of the film and then she goes into the subway and the film divides her in two. One time line has her making her train and she comes home to find her live-in boyfriend in their bed with his American ex-girlfriend.”

“Jeanne Tripplehorn.”

“Yea, she's hot. And the other time line has her miss the train, get bonked on the head, and arrive home later in the afternoon after Tripplehorn has left. The first Gwyneth Paltrow, Gwyneth 1, dumps the boyfriend, gets this really cool haircut, opens her own business, and then falls in love with this Scottish guy with a crazy accent.

“John Hannah.”

“He's hot!” says someone from the back of the class, followed by giggles all around.

“Uh, right, and then the second Gwyneth Paltrow, Gwyneth 2, has to support the boyfriend by getting two waitressing jobs and then winds up crushed when she eventually finds out about the American girlfriend.”

“And the point about fate?”

“At the end of the film, both Gwyneth 1 and 2 get hit by a car. I can't remember if it's the same car but it doesn't matter. Then both go to the same hospital and the time line of Gwyneth 1 sort of abruptly stops and Gwyneth 2—the one who was still with the creepy boyfriend—wakes up in the hospital and dumps him. Then, in the final scene, Gwyneth 2 walks out of the hospital and meets the same Scottish guy in an elevator that Gwyneth 1 had fallen in love with. And then, they have like this moment so we know that they are going to fall in love even though Gwyneth 2 has never noticed this guy before. So, in the film these problems about identity are kind of resolved because no matter what happens after you're duplicated what's going to happen to you is still going to happen to you. You might even say that love conquers all!”

Andy looks around and sees many heads nodding in agreement. It seems that many of these undergraduates believe in fate of this sort, or at least want to believe in it. He thinks briefly about telling a story about a recent blind date who asked him if he believes in fate but decides against it.

“Okay,” Andy continues, “that's an interesting example. But even though we might think of this as a case of duplication, similar to Run Lola Run, is it really?”
Emily, from earlier, raises her hand. “No,” she says.

“Why not?”

“Well, for one thing, these fission examples that Sider is talking about have the two duplicates continuing in the same frame of time and space. It’s like that Schwarzenegger film where Arnold, sorry, Governor Arnold, gets duplicated with some kind of clone who is an exact copy of him physically and mentally and then they end up working together to save the planet or something.”

“Right, go on.”

“And in this film what you have is Gwyneth 1 and 2 living in some kind of parallel universe or something, though it all gets resolved somehow in the end. They can’t actually meet each other in the same world and raise the same kind of problems that Sider is talking about in the chapter.”

“Good, that’s one important difference. There indeed are some interesting things about time and identity in Sliding Doors, but they might better help us to think through some puzzles that philosophers raise over the logic and metaphysics of possibility and actuality. Maybe what the film shows us is two very different possible scenarios, or possible worlds, for Paltrow’s character, and then asks us to think about the relations between the two, especially the problem of how one’s life could be very different depending on seemingly innocuous everyday events, like missing a train. Then we could think about what it means to talk about such possible scenarios. Is it to assert the actual existence of an alternative time line, like the film seems to portray, or would it be something else? Perhaps this film will be a better one to see later in the term when your regular professor gets back and she covers those issues in class.”

At that point Bill chimed in again. “But what about the fate thing? You still haven’t answered that question.”

“All right, why is this still an issue?” Silence. Bill seemed hesitant to go further but he clearly had a worried look on his face. From the back of the room someone shouts out, “Because it’s scary!”

“What’s scary?”

Bill again: “It’s scary because all this stuff about identity makes me worried about my future. I think everything happens for a reason. That’s what my mom always told me. And this stuff about continuity of identity and duplication and all that makes it seem like there’s too much chance in life. I mean, if I were split into two Bills, or Bobs, or whatever, I still don’t know if the right things will happen to me. I guess that’s why I like how this movie ends.”
“What do you mean?”

“At the end of the film Gwyneth Paltrow winds up with the Scottish guy she fell in love with in the time line that ended. Since we know that her original boyfriend was a jerk it’s, I don’t know, comforting that she found the guy she should have been with all along.”

Andy was the one taken aback now. Yeah, he thought to himself, metaphysics can be scary. But what’s worse is how some bits of popular culture which have a chance to raise some interesting, even profound questions, go for a cheap, happy ending and dissolve the potential lesson into absurdity. Maybe this is why he should have come up with his own story before coming to class. He could have controlled the moral. Then he remembered something from another class he had audited in grad school. There were, after all, more films than he had stories to tell.

“Any of you know where the plot line for Sliding Doors came from? No? It’s actually based on a film by the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski from the mid-1980s called Blind Chance. It’s set against the backdrop of Communist Poland before the transitions there. The main character is a medical student named Witek, who, like Paltrow’s character, runs after a train, and three alternative time lines follow from either catching or missing it. In the first one he catches the train, meets an aging member of the Communist Party who he admires, quits medical school, joins the party and the establishment, reconnects with an old girlfriend and falls in love with her. In the second time line he runs into a railway guard after missing the train, is arrested, gets sent to a labor camp where he meets a member of the opposition, quits medical school and becomes an anti-Communist militant. In this time line he also meets a sister of a friend he lost track of when he was ten and again falls in love. Both of these time lines, however, end in frustration as in both he loses his respective girlfriend, and in both is denied a passport to leave the country to go to Paris, which is something he has always wanted to do. In the third time line, though, he again misses the train, runs into a female colleague from medical school on the platform, settles down with her, has kids, and leads a peaceful life as a doctor unwilling to get mixed up in politics. So, what’s different between this film and Sliding Doors?”

“There’s no magic,” says Emily.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s like what Sider says about the soul. Some philosophers and religious thinkers hold that what makes for a real person over time, even though things change in us physically and psychologically, is that we haven an immortal soul. But Sider doesn’t spend much time on how positing the
existence of a soul could solve these problems because there’s just no proof that there is a soul. You can only have faith that there is one and hope that solves the problem. But how do you even argue with a position like that? Bill’s belief in fate is similar. How do we know that there is such a thing? This other film by this Polish guy doesn’t take the easy way out.”

Astonishing. Emily had just earned herself a recommendation letter for whatever graduate program she cared to apply. And thankfully, class was over.

On the way out, Bill lingered. Andy looked at him, and Bill asked: “There’s something that still bugs me about Emily’s answer. What about that Witek guy? I mean, in the final time line he meets the girl that he probably should have been with all along, and he goes on to have a happy life out of politics. This European film isn’t any better than Sliding Doors. Everything did turn out best, right?”

Andy sighed, “No, actually, in the last time line in Kieslowski’s film, after he meets the girl, gets married, and becomes a doctor, he finally gets to travel abroad to Paris and the plane he’s on explodes in midair shortly after takeoff. Then film the abruptly ends.”

“Scary,” said Bill.

“Yeah.”

References

