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# Will You Survive a Trip to ReKall, Inc.?

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# Will You Survive a Trip to ReKall, Inc.?

G.C. GODDU

What would you do for ninety-two million dollars? In the movie *Paycheck* (based on the Philip K. Dick story of the same name), Michael Jennings agrees to give up three full years of his life—kind of. He loses three years of his mental life.

To ensure confidentiality for his current client, the Rethrick Corporation, Jennings agrees to have all his memories of the three years he will work for the company removed. In return, Jennings will receive a large quantity of company stock options worth approximately \$92 million.

A good deal? Maybe, but I suspect most of us would be extremely nervous about trading three years of our mental lives for any sum of money. Why be nervous? Because our mental lives are a fundamental part of who we are. As Dr. Rachel Porter puts it to Jennings, "All we are is the sum of our experiences." To willingly give up our joys, and even our sorrows; to remove our recollections of what we did and why; to lose all our experiences is to commit mental suicide.

## Follow the Psyche

Just how fundamental are our mental lives, our psyches, to our continued existence? Many of Dick's stories suggest we do not need much else. In "Rautavaara's Case," the alien Proxima Centaurians save the severely damaged human Agneta Rautavaara by using the rest of her irreparable body as a nutrient source to sustain her brain. The humans who learn how Rautavaara has been saved are horrified. Misconstruing

the source of the horror, the Centaurians ask: "Was it not right to save her brain? After all, the psyche is located in the brain, the personality."

In one of Dick's early short stories, "Mr. Spaceship," Professor Michael Thomas, who is dying, agrees to donate his brain to be the control center of an experimental spaceship. The designers plan to use Thomas's unconscious brain "working on reflex only." But Thomas gets the builders to make a few wiring alterations. As a result, shortly into the test flight, Thomas's brain regains consciousness and Thomas takes over control of the ship.

Rautavaara and Thomas both survive even though they lack most of their original bodies. Rautavaara survives as just her brain—fed on a nutrient bath derived from her former body. Thomas survives as just his brain and gains a spaceship as his new body. So the stories suggest that, in the right circumstances, a person could survive as long as his or her brain survives. But perhaps even the brain is not necessary for personal survival.

In Dick's first published work, "Beyond Lies the Wub," Captain Franco is determined to eat the strange pig-like wub acquired on Mars. The wub, in the most polite way, tries to convince Franco to refrain. Franco will not be deterred. Reasoned argument having failed, the wub at least convinces the captain to look him in the eyes before pulling the trigger. The wub's body gets eaten, but the wub survives by transferring his consciousness into Franco.

In another Dick story, "Human Is," Jill Herrick faces a challenging decision. Her cold and abusive husband has returned from Rexor IV a changed man—so changed that the authorities believe Lester Herrick's consciousness has been removed and replaced with that of a (warm and caring) alien Rexorian. The authorities assure Jill that her husband is still alive, his consciousness stored in suspension somewhere on Rexor. She merely needs to testify to the radical change in personality, so a judge will give them permission to "vibro-fry" the Rexorian consciousness. Then, once Lester's consciousness is found and reintegrated, the authorities are confident that "he'll be back with you. Safe and sound. Just like before."

John Locke, a seventeenth-century English philosopher, provides yet another example in his *Essay Concerning Human*

*Understanding.* Locke writes: "Should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince's past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler, as soon as deserted by his own soul, everyone sees he would be the same person with the prince, accountable only for the prince's actions." According to Locke, the person now in the cobbler's body is the prince. Of course, the prince may have a tough time convincing everyone of his true-identity. In current science-fiction movies this convincing usually involves lots of guns, at least one kick-ass chase, and some really cool unexplained technology.

So do we need our bodies or our brains to survive? According to Locke, and many other philosophers, these sort of body-swapping examples show that we do not. (Locke also asks us to imagine our little finger separated from the rest of our body, while our consciousness inhabits the little finger. "It is evident the little finger would be the person, the same person; and self would have nothing to do with the rest of the body.") Locke concludes that "consciousness makes personal identity." If Locke is right, our psyche constitutes ourselves as persons. The prince, the Rexorian, Lester Herrick, and the wub (alas, we do not know what became of poor Captain Franco), all survive because, even though they leave their bodies behind, their consciousness survives.

We can summarize our thoughts in these various cases using the following rough and ready rule of thumb:

**Psyche Continuity Rule:** If you want to keep track of the person, follow the psyche.

Notice that even the cases of Rautavaara and Thomas conform to the Psyche Rule. In both cases the brain is only important as a vessel for the psyche. Without the resumption of Thomas's mental life, we would say he merely donated an organ to be part of the ship. But because his mental life resumes we say he survived to take control of the ship. If Thomas's psyche could have been transferred to take over the ship without his brain, he still would have survived. The brain may be a convenient storage device for the psyche, but it is the psyche that is ultimately crucial to our survival.

So far so good, but Dick isn't finished messing with our minds yet.

## The Perils of Recall, Inc.

If psychological continuity is necessary for you to survive, what are we to make of the radically disjointed mental lives depicted in *A Scanner Darkly* or *Total Recall*? In the previous chapter, Richard Feist took us through the strange divisions and (dis-?) continuities of Bob/Fred/Bruce in *A Scanner Darkly*, so I'll focus on *Total Recall*.

There are several possibilities for tracing the life of "Douglas Quaid." The moviemakers deliberately keep us in the dark as to which possibility is accurate. Here is the most complicated one: Hauser and Vilos Coahaagen, the tyrannical governor of Mars, are very good friends. Together they hatch an intricate plot to infiltrate and eliminate the heart of the Martian resistance. Hauser pretends to have a falling-out with Coahaagen and defects to the resistance. He is a member for a short time, but to avoid having his mind read by the telepathic mutant leaders of the resistance, Hauser gets himself 'captured' by Coahaagen. Coahaagen then has Hauser's memories of being Hauser replaced with the personality of mild-mannered Terran construction worker Douglas Quaid.

Quaid, now on Earth, is obsessed with Mars and so visits Recall, Inc. to buy a virtual trip to Mars, complete with fake memories. While preparing for the insertion of these fake memories, the Recall technicians discover that Quaid has already undergone significant memory erasure and implantation. They erase Quaid's memories of having come to Recall and send him home. But the trip to Recall prompts Coahaagen's agents (who were posing as Quaid's wife and closest friend and were not told all the intricacies of Coahaagen's plan) to try to kill him.

Quaid escapes (with the aid of Hauser's abilities, which apparently had not been removed) and gets himself to Mars. On Mars, Quaid gets enough of Hauser's memories re-implanted to make Quaid believe that he has really defected and that he now contains, buried in the recesses of his mind, information crucial to the resistance. The original Hauser memories are never re-implanted.

In another version of Quaid's life, Hauser really is a defector with information crucial to the resistance, but erases and replaces his memories in an effort to protect himself from Coahaagen. In this version, Coahaagen's tale that Quaid did not

get all of Hauser's memories back is merely a trick. The so-called 'memories' of Hauser installing false memories of being a defector are fictions, just like Rekall's fake memory trips. In yet a third version of his life, construction worker Quaid is the real person, and everything from his trip to Rekall, Inc. forward is actually a part of the fake memories implanted by Rekall to give his virtual trip to Mars more spice.

Ultimately which version is accurate does not matter, because all three cause problems for the Psyche Rule. All three versions are supposed to describe what happens (or could happen in the case of the third version) to one person. But no single psyche is linking Hauser/Quaid from one part of his life to the next. Instead what is continuous through all the various changes is not his psyche, but his body.

So, to make sense of *Total Recall* being about the trials and tribulations of one person, we need to use something like the following rule:

**Body Continuity Rule:** If you want to keep track of the person, follow the body.

For all of us in our everyday lives, whether we use the Psyche Rule or the Body Rule does not matter. The two rules march in lockstep with each other and give the same answer. But the various circumstances of Dick's stories show that the rules could give conflicting advice. To make sense of some of Dick's stories we have to use the Psyche Rule, while to make sense of others we need to use the Body Rule.

So what are we—our bodies or our psyches? Is there no way to give a unified explanation of what happens to Douglas Quaid and the wub? Perhaps we need a more complicated rule that combines both the Psyche Rule and the Body Rule, such as:

**Combined Psyche or Body Rule:** If you want to keep track of the person, then in the case of a unified mental life, follow the psyche; but in the case of a sufficiently disjointed mental life, follow the body.

According to the Combined Rule, the wub, since his mental life is unified, goes where his psyche goes. Hauser, on the other hand, since his mental life is so disjointed, goes where his body goes.

One potential problem with the Combined Rule, however, is trying to decide, in at least some cases, whether a mental life is unified or sufficiently disjointed. Recall Michael Jennings's voluntary memory removal in *Paycheck*. Is Jennings's mental life disjointed or unified? If something splits Jennings's body from his psyche in the future, which should we follow? In the short story version, Dick has Jennings start referring to his earlier self in the third person. Does that mean Dick thinks Jennings's mental life is disjointed enough that we need to follow his body to keep track of him? But if Jennings now has his consciousness stolen by the Rexorians, should he not worry since "he" goes with his body?

The problem of determining whether a mental life is unified enough or too disjointed has vexed philosophers for centuries. But perhaps we can sidestep the problem. Maybe personal survival depends on something completely different from the body or the psyche.

### Gotta Have Soul?

Locke's body-switching example involved the prince's soul moving into the cobbler's body. Perhaps it is the persistence of the soul that explains personal survival. Here's the rule:

**Soul Continuity Rule:** If you want to keep track of the person, follow the soul.

If the Soul Rule is correct, then the wub survives because he transfers his soul to Captain Franco. Hauser survives not because his body is constant, but rather because his soul is constant. Hauser's soul has the original Hauser memories removed, the Quaid memories implanted, and then some of the original Hauser memories put back.

Even though Locke uses the soul as the vehicle for transferring the consciousness of the prince to the cobbler, he denies that it is the soul that is the person. Gottfried Leibniz, a German philosopher also writing in the seventeenth century, agrees. Leibniz, in his *Discourse on Metaphysics*, asks us to suppose that we (our body and soul) could become the King of China on the condition that we forget all of who we were, as if we had been born anew. (This is just an extreme version of the

bargain between Jennings and the Rethrick Corporation.) Though the King of China was the richest man in the world, Leibniz rejects this offer. Why? Because, Leibniz answers, even if the body and soul were made the King of China, accepting the offer would be the same “as if he were to be annihilated and a King of China to be created at his place.”

Likewise, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant, an eighteenth-century German philosopher, asks us to imagine a group of souls transferring a single mental life from one to another. How many people are there? Kant claims just one—the single mental life that is transferred from soul to soul.

Put simply, just as we can imagine switching bodies, we can imagine my consciousness being switched to another soul (Kant’s case), or being left behind (Leibniz’s case). According to the Soul Rule, I stay with my original soul, but our intuitions tell us that I follow my consciousness.

There is also the practical problem of applying the Soul Rule—how do we follow the soul? We know the wub survives in the captain’s body because the wub continues a private conversation that crewmember Rollins and the wub were having before the captain barged in to shoot the wub. The wub expresses his opinions and beliefs. We see and hear evidence of his mental life. But what evidence do we have that the wub’s soul transferred or whether the wub even has a soul? How could we tell that Hauser has a single soul that is having various psyches implanted and removed from it, rather than having different souls placed in his body and removed?

The Soul Rule has significant problems of its own, so perhaps we need to switch back to some sort of Combined Rule. But yet another one of Dick’s stories suggests that the Combined Rule won’t work either.

## **Future Selves and Imposters**

In the movie *Imposter* (based on the short story of the same name), Spencer Olham is accused of being an android replica created for nefarious purposes by enemy aliens. Without revealing whether Olham actually is such a replica (in either the movie or the story), let us suppose that he is—the real Olham had his memories transferred to the android and was then killed by the enemy aliens.



Now consider an alternative story without the aliens. Because Olham is dying he chooses to have his consciousness downloaded into an android replica (a merging of "Mr. Spaceship" and "Beyond Lies the Wub"). He also chooses to omit any memory of the deliberation or decision to download. As a result, after downloading, Olham merely thinks he has recovered from his illness rather than transferred himself to another body.

Finally, suppose that the process used to transfer Olham's mental life is identical in both the alien story and the illness story. The stories have the same degree of bodily and mental continuity. In both, Olham's mental life is transferred from the old organic body to the new android body. Yet in the alternate story the android is Olham's means of survival, whereas in the original story, the android is an imposter. So Olham survives in one story but dies in the other. Since the stories have the same degree of bodily and mental continuity, according to the Combined Rule, Olham should either survive in both or die in both. Hence, the Combined Rule won't work in all cases.

Of course, in the latter scenario Olham chose to survive as an android, whereas in the former he did not. Could this very choice explain or be a part of what is required for one's own continued existence?

"Aha! The soul to the rescue," say advocates of the Soul Rule. The soul, such advocates might claim, goes where we intend it to go. That explains why the aliens' android is an imposter, but the dying Olham's android is Olham's future self.

But now consider a slight variation on the alternative story. Suppose Olham does not want to be transferred to the android, but is considered so important by the government that they insist he survive. Against his will Olham is forced to undergo the transfer procedure. Olham regains consciousness in a healthy android body and, looking at the lifeless remains of his old organic body, says: "Curses! They moved me against my will!" But if the soul goes where Olham wants it to go, then his soul will still be in the organic body across the room and he should say "Curses! I am dead over there across the room!" which is absurd.

If the process by which Olham is transferred is the same in all cases, then either the soul, assuming there is one, is transferred in all cases or it is not. Either way, we cannot account for

the thought that the alien's android is an imposter and Olham's android is his future self. Hence, the Soul Rule will not work here either.

### **Selfless?**

None of the Rules accommodates all the various bizarre transformations that occur in Dick's stories. Should we conclude that Dick had an incoherent conception of personal identity? No more than any of the rest of us. Are we just our bodies? Do we have souls? Is our mental life separable from our bodies or our souls? Philosophers, theologians, and the intellectually curious have been wrestling with the conflicting answers to these questions of personal identity for centuries. The power of Dick's stories is how easily he brings our conflicting intuitions to light. We easily follow the wub into Captain Franco, but equally easily (okay, not so easily) follow Douglas Quaid's search for his true memories and his true identity.

The pessimist worries that Dick's explorations show how easily we can split our very selves asunder. The optimist hopes that Dick's explorations reveal how, with suitable technological advances, we might expand the very possibility of what we can be. But the skeptic doubts that there is anything to be either optimistic or pessimistic about. If we are not bodies or psyches or souls or even combinations, what are we? There are no other options left, so that must mean we are nothing at all!

Are we really forced to the conclusion that there are no enduring persons at all? Can we give an answer to this skeptical doubt?

### **Is It Live or Is It Memorex?**

The problem may not be that all these intuitions about psyches, bodies, and souls are incoherent. The problem might be that we're missing some very crucial details in each of these cases.

How exactly is the alleged transfer of Olham's psyche from one physical object, his body, to another, the android replica, taking place? Suppose the scientists (or the aliens) take a 'snapshot' of Olham's brain—they record all the current states of his neurons, synapses, and so forth. Assume these details

capture all there is to capture about Olham's psyche. Then they imprint all these details on the android brain. Did Olham get transferred? No. He got copied. The snapshot, we can suppose, does nothing to Olham's brain but record its current state. Imprinting the details on the android brain does nothing to Olham's brain or psyche. So Olham's psyche is still in his brain. But suppose that the process of taking the snapshot fries Olham's brain. Does he get transferred in that situation? No. He gets destroyed and, at best, a copy of his psyche gets made.

If Olham wants himself to survive, he needs to get transferred and not just copied. Nor should we confuse transferring and copying. Our banks will let us transfer our money from one account to another, but would object strenuously if we tried to copy our money from one account to another. Transferring the contents of one bookshelf to another requires one set of books. Copying the contents of one bookshelf on another requires two distinct sets of books. (If you still think copying is good enough for surviving, then ask yourself what happens to Olham if the government imprints his psyche on two separate androids. Does one person somehow survive as two separate people?)

Similar concerns arise for Douglas Quaid. If Coahaagen merely copied Hauser's original memories, and then replaced them with the memories and personality of Douglas Quaid, then Hauser's mental life is not merely disjointed—his friend Coahaagen destroyed it. But if Hauser transfers his psyche out of his body and stores it elsewhere, then again his mental life is not disjointed—he merely leaves his body behind. (Safer, but not foolproof, for Hauser would be to store all his original memories in his brain, but make them inaccessible, until properly unlocked, to the newly implanted Quaid personality. This possibility would bring the movie closer in line with Dick's original short story.)

Once we fill in the possible details of what is happening to Olham's or Hauser's mental life, the Psyche Rule once again seems the most plausible. Fill in the details one way and it looks like the characters die and get copied (which would account for the aliens' android being an imposter). Fill in the details another way and the characters survive, but leave their bodies behind (which would account for Olham's android being a future self).

What Olham and Hauser need in order to survive is a way to transfer, and not just copy, their psyches. But is that even possible? I don't know, since I don't know how our psyches are realized within us. Are they merely composed of arrangements of our neurons? Our entire brains? Or something else entirely?

Much of the past seventy years of research in psychology and the philosophy of mind has been devoted to trying to understand exactly how this encoding of memories and psyches in human beings actually works. Progress is being made. Much more still needs to be figured out. Until we do, I wouldn't visit your local Recall franchise for that virtual trip to Mars.