

Brain Transplants and Other Misadventures

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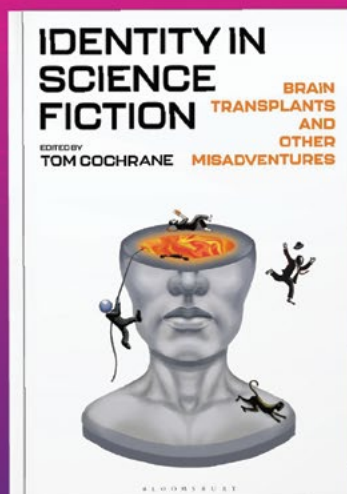
In Identity in Science Fiction: Brain Transplants and Other Misadventures, philosophy and science fiction come together in a collection of short stories centred around the philosophy of identity. Are you a brain, an animal, or information? Is the self an illusion? Who are you? What better way to unpack these questions than with short stories about brain transplants, teleportation, and amnesia?

Approaching philosophy as you would a subject like statistics is like walking up to the girl in the red dress while scratching your backside and picking your nose – clumsy, oafish, and embarrassing. But then, just how should you approach philosophy? After all, questions like ‘Who am I?’ or ‘What is art?’ are hardly ice-breaker material. The answer lies in fiction; short stories, to be precise.

The beating heart of philosophy is stirred with thought experiments. ‘Who am I?’ might seem like an obtuse query; however, reframing the question can lead to more enticing answers. If you were to replace your

brain with a machine, would you still be the same person you are now? Suddenly, the discussion has a sense of direction; is it my brain that makes me who I am? What if I moved my brain to a different body instead? Or what if I removed half of it? Which part of my brain makes me, me?

Gently, we are moving away from Socrates and Descartes to Spock and Darth Vader. But science fiction and philosophy make better bedfellows than you might expect, particularly when it comes to the philosophy of identity. Are you the same person without your memories? What about teleportation? Specifically, if you are copied from one place and rebuilt in another, which one ➤



Identity in Science Fiction: Brain Transplants and Other Misadventures edited by Tom Cochrane was published by Bloomsbury in 2025.

is the real you? What if everyone has the same body and thinks in the same way; is that one person or many? Sci-fi short stories let us stretch and stress-test philosophical concepts within the setting of the not-so-distant future.

WHAT IS THE BOOK?

Identity in Science Fiction: Brain Transplants and Other Misadventures is an excellent collection of 12 science fiction short stories, each of which deals with a particular aspect of the philosophy of identity. The stories themselves are worth reading in their own right; however, Tom Cochrane (Anthology Editor) takes the collection a step further by including a series of comments after each story which tackle the main themes. I also appreciate how Cochrane clarifies in his commentaries when an opinion is entirely his own, rather than being presented as a given. The book itself stems from one of Cochrane's undergraduate classes. Students would read one story prior to each two-hour seminar, and then an open discussion would follow on the merits and metaphysical concepts presented in that story.

While regrettably, I have not been to one of Cochrane's lectures, this kind of approach elevates philosophy into something you can really sink your teeth into. The inclusion of Appendices A and B ('A Guide for Teachers and Literature' and 'Films on Identity', respectively) facilitates the book's use as an effective teaching tool.

The collection tackles a number of themes found in both metaphysics and the philosophy of identity: social identity, the soul, group minds, and diachronic identity. Personally, I found the stories that tackle numerical identity, memory, and brain transplants particularly compelling. However, for this review, I will only briefly tackle numerical identity and memory.

THE BARBIE MURDERS

With numerical identity, we are asking what makes me one thing, rather than two or three. It is one of the main themes John Varley tackles in his short story, *The Barbie Murders*. But before jumping into the story itself, let us shift our attention to Mattel Inc.'s *Barbie*. Each Barbie doll looks identical, sure, but then you have a Malibu Beach

House Barbie, a horse rider Barbie, and even a *Star Trek* Barbie – is each Barbie its own person, or is it just one doll cosplaying in different outfits? John Varley's short story does not deal with our plastic puppet, but rather a religious cult in which converts radically modify their appearance to look identical to one another. Qualities such as race, height, shape, and gender are surgically removed to achieve a single standard, to become Barbies. But while each Barbie views herself as a single individual, shunning the use of 'I' in favour of 'our', the law takes a different view when one Barbie commits a murder. The Barbies have no issue giving up one of their own; however, the detective in our story is determined to figure out which Barbie – which specific body – was responsible.

The story itself serves as an excellent introduction to some of the key concepts in the philosophy of identity. For example, we might intuitively argue that it is my qualities that make me who I am. After all, we would view it as a great affront to our sense of self if someone were to



deny our sexuality or race. But these qualities are hardly essential to who I am. Were I to undergo a sex change, I would still be the same person. Given that the Barbies share the same physical qualities, then it should not matter which 'body' is convicted. If it does matter, then we can argue that there is more to identity than our physical qualities. The story itself could act as a strong basis for distinguishing between substance and qualities, Leibniz's *Identity of Indiscernibles*, or causal theories of reference vs the descriptivist theory of names.

LIFE SENTENCE

Moving on to Matthew Baker's *Life Sentence*, the State has devised a radical new means of rehabilitating convicts. Rather than having convicts whittle away the remainder of their lives behind bars, they have their memories wiped. Specifically, all of their episodic memories – their personal experiences. Semantic memories, such as general knowledge, facts, and birthdays, remain intact, as do procedural memories, such as knowing how to ride a bike or play guitar. So while you would

know what a restaurant is, you would have no memory of ever going to a restaurant. This procedure allows convicts to re-integrate as functional members of society. What makes this story particularly interesting is the radical change in personality after treatment. Our protagonist's wife remarks, 'I tried to pretend that you're the same but you're not, you're the same body, you move the same, you smell the same, you talk the same, you taste the same, but the rest of you is gone.' After undergoing this radical procedure, are you the same person?

If I were to replace my arm with a bionic replacement, I would still be the same person. If I were to convert from one faith to another, I would also still be the same person. Even after a radical change in my personality, perhaps from some traumatic event, I feel that I am still the same person. However, the complete removal of my episodic memories gives me pause. Without my memories, am I not just a shell of my former self? And when writing new memories on this blank slate, am I not effectively creating a new identity? *Life Sentence*,

as well as Cochrane's commentaries, was certainly, to my mind, the most memorable entry and provides fertile ground for further discussion.

Whether you are a student or a teacher of philosophy, *Identity in Science Fiction* undoubtedly merits a place on your shelf. The short story format ensures that the topic is accessible, even to someone with just a budding interest in philosophy. I will admit that I am more of a fantasy reader than a science fiction one; however, I still found the majority of the stories to be exceptionally enjoyable and thought-provoking. I say the majority, as I personally did not care for the two extracts from longer novels. While the themes they presented were interesting enough, an extract from a novel cannot provide the emotional closure that a self-contained, short story can. With the right supplementary material, the text could easily form the basis for an engaging undergraduate study unit on the philosophy of identity. The stories themselves are an excellent entry point into the philosophy of identity, and they are certainly an unforgettable way to approach the girl in the red dress. **T**