



Questions of personal identity fall firmly within the branch of philosophy known as metaphysics. Metaphysical questions deal with topics related to the nature of being, the ways that we understand the world in terms of time, existence, and what sorts of things can be said to exist. Other topics traditional considered within metaphysics are those about ultimate causes, the existence (or not) of a god (or gods), and if we humans actually can have free will.

The following pieces all share an interest in questions of personal identity. What does it mean for a thing to be itself? What makes something one thing rather than another? Is there a boundary for the amount of changes a thing or person can incur before becoming something (or somebody) new? While these may seem esoteric, consider that we do not treat identical twins as the same person—though they have the same DNA. Or, wonder about if someone retains her identity after surgery to remove a gallbladder. Perhaps you can think about other sorts of bodily changes: do piercings and tattoos change one's identity? There is always the odd statement "I am not myself today" to puzzle over as well.

## Adventures with the Wonderful Mr. Potato Head

By Stephanie Costa



I pass out name tags to a group of about 20 kids ranging in age from 8 to about 10. These nametags carry a dual purpose, first they serve as my introduction to my lesson on personal identity and second they're a tool to help me remember my class's name. This is only the second time I've had a chance to be with these kids from New City Charter School, but I am learning already what amazing philosophers they truly are.

I ask them to answer the following question "What makes you, who you are?" And I clarify the question by saying "what makes you different from anyone else?" A volley of answers comes back at me and I patiently write them all on the board. "What you wear" says Imani from the front of the class. "What your skin color is" says Renee. "No, it's your personality!" shouts Kyla. "Your family" says Eric. After a dozen or so more answers the kids look satisfied with their work and the board is filled with answers.

I tell the class that now I have a special guest to introduce to them who is going to help us answer our question for the day. Out comes my trusty Mr. Potato Head and we begin our journey to challenge the kids perceptions on personal identity. I start by removing any of the clothing/accessories from Mr. Potato-Head and ask the kids if he is the same spud. The kids quickly agree that he is the same person and it's not the clothes that make who Mr. Potato Head is. So I proceed to start dismembering Mr. Potato-Head, and enter into a discussion about disabled people. Are people who are missing a limb still the same person? The kids think about this and unanimously come to the conclusion that disabled people are still the same people.

I continue to remove all the body parts of Mr. Potato Head until he is a bare spud and then I re-questioned the kids. This time, however, the kid's think he is no longer Mr. Potato Head. "There's nothing left of him", says Cassidy "he's nothing but a plain potato now". What if this plain potato had a brain? Would he still be Mr. Potato-Head? I throw these questions out at my class to see what they come up with. Opinions have changed; a spud with a brain has now become a Mr. Potato Head again.

I then define amnesia and give poor Mr. Potato a bad case of it. Is Mr. Potato Head still Mr. Potato Head even though he can't remember who he is? The kids chew on this and we start some discussion, but overwhelmingly they come up with a consensus. As Owen puts it, "even if he doesn't remember who he is, he still is Mr. Potato-Head." I then define another term, "brain transplant" and tell them that Mr. Potato Head and I have switched brains. So who is the teacher and who is the spud? More lively discussion, and the class splits between the "body=person" and the "mind=person" groups. A consensus is not reached so after the discussion calmed down, I asked the kids to journal for me the answer to the original question I posted on the board.

## Ageless Questions

Carolyn Kabelitz



There are questions that every human asks themselves at each stage in life. Who are you? What is death and what does it mean? What is love? Though they may express it differently, four year olds and ninety four year olds alike ponder these questions. Children battle over attention struggling to find who they are in relation to their siblings. Elders create bucket lists to help find who they are as they question what death means. And love. Love seems to permeate every fiber of life.

Questioning high schoolers gathered in an English classroom at Millikan High School in Long Beach, California wondering who this guest speaker was with all the cardboard boxes. I arrived a bit out of breath from trying in vain to balance all my props. This was my first of a series of speaking engagements with Loretta George's freshman English class to discuss philosophy. Personal identity was the topic for the first week's lesson. It worked wonderfully as both an introduction to the type of logic that these philosophy lessons require and also as an introduction of me to the students and visa versa.

The lesson was designed to be very introspective. Each student was given a blank piece of paper and was told they were going to draw a self portrait. Only this self portrait would be a little different than those in art class. In order to communicate the complexity of the individual, I had five categories each with a cardboard box and illustration. I would present the category and illustration then ask the students to draw a representation of something they can relate to in that category. The categories were personal appearance, fears, goals, values, and actions. Personal appearance changes over time so I showed a picture of me in kindergarten and asked if I was the same person. Fears can control how we act either by avoiding or debilitating. As the illustration, I opened my second box to pull out my friend's ball python. That definitely got a reaction! Next was goals. Here people told me their goals and dreams. Many said particular affluent careers or listed off possessions they hoped to have. So I asked for someone to give me a large bill. I took it, dipped it in a clear liquid which they assumed to be water as I explained that when we value something we often take precautions to ensure its safety, but accidents happen. I lit it on fire. I had soaked it in rubbing alcohol which is very flammable. The fire burned quickly and at just the right moment, I dunked it in water, leaving the bill intact with only the alcohol burned. The values box had a Bible. The actions box had my homework.

Once the flashy illustrations were done and their portraits complete, I had them turn their pages over to write the answer to the question "What makes you who you are?" The response was wonderful, and slightly overwhelming. I had intended for them to be as personal as they wanted, and some really opened up. Many got things out of the lesson that I never addressed. One student wrote, "I learned a lot about myself today. I expressed my feelings and I also found closure on some things." Another, "I found out that I value my mom and I care more about her than anyone. Also that I listen to her more than anyone." Lastly, "It's hard for me to talk about who I am because I think I am still learning about myself everyday." It's so rewarding to see the different personal connections that students make based off of an introspective, philosophical lesson. Because this is designed to be so interactive and applicational, I did the lesson with college senior and also with second graders. Each time was better than the last. All ages responded to the cry to define ourselves and loved the illustrations.