

Teaching Philosophy and Literature With *On Being Me*

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On Being Me invites the reader to reflect on several philosophical problems from the first-person point of view. The book is not about being me the author, David Velleman; it's about being a creature that can think of itself in the first person, as "me". That first-personal self-awareness is the source of many central problems in philosophy, and it is the stage on which I rehearse the meditations that make up this short book.

In teaching these problems to undergraduates, I have assigned works of fiction to provide illustrations for lectures and prompts for discussions and assignments. Here I recommend some possible selections, as well as some short and accessible works of philosophy that expand on the topics in the book.

1. Being Glad I Was Born

On Being Me begins with 100-or-so words on whether it makes sense to regard life itself as a gift. An especially brave instructor might use this chapter as background for a discussion of abortion, but I don't recommend it. Alternatively, instructors might have students read some of my own work on the ethics of donor conception.¹ But I don't recommend that, either. Better to leave these 100 words as an *amuse-bouche* for the subsequent chapters.

2. Wanting to Go On

Franz Kafka's novella² *The Metamorphosis* begins: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." Gregor's family assumes that the gigantic insect occupying Gregor's room is in fact Gregor himself, and Kafka tells us that they are right. But why do they think it's Gregor, and how does Kafka persuade us to agree? What narrative devices enable us to believe that a gigantic insect is the person who went to bed eight hours ago as a human being? And why, having come to believe in chapter 1 that the insect *is* Gregor, do we come to believe it has ceased to be Gregor at the end of chapter 3?

¹ An accessible example is: <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/11/deadbeat-donors.html>

² Franz Kafka. *The Metamorphosis: A New Translation* by Susan Bernofsky. W. W. Norton & Company (2014). ISBN: 0393347095.

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These questions are not merely the stuff of science fiction. The human organism undergoes profound transformations from birth to old age and death. What of the infant survives in the Alzheimer's patient 90 years later? What, in fact, does an 18-year-old mean in saying, in reference to the photo of an infant, "That was me"?

The first substantive chapter of *On Being Me* explores this first-personal version of the philosophical problem of personal identity. It asks: What does it take for me to go on being me? What changes would have the result of my no longer being me — or, in other words, of my no longer *being*?

A helpful contrast to Gregor Samsa in this regard is the story of Jason Bourne in Robert Ludlum's novels, the first of which poses the question in its title, *The Bourne Identity*.³ Who is Jason Bourne? Is there any sense in which he can think, in reference to the former marine and foreign service officer, David Webb, "That was me"?

For an introduction to the range of philosophical theories on this question, students can read John Perry's readable and entertaining *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*.⁴

3. The nature of time

The narrative of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* begins:⁵

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.

The time-travelling protagonist of Vonnegut's masterpiece travels through space as well, to the planet Tralfamadore, where he learns the truth about the nature of time:

The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just that way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever

This view of time is also the conclusion of my first-personal reflections in Chapter 3 of *On Being Me*. The passage of time, I conclude, is an illusion: time doesn't really "go by".

³ Bantam Books (mass-market edition, 2010). ISBN: 0553593544

⁴ Hackett Publishing Company (1978). ISBN: 0915144530

⁵ Modern Library (re-issue edition 1999). ISBN: 0812988523

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My lecture “So It Goes,” delivered to undergraduates as the first Amherst Lecture in Philosophy,⁶ explains the theoretical background of this conclusion in accessible form. Undergraduates may also enjoy Craig Callender’s *Introducing Time: A Graphic Guide*, which explains both the physics and the philosophy in the style of a graphic novel.

When I discuss *Slaughterhouse Five* with undergraduates, I ask them, “What makes this an anti-war novel?” Published during the Vietnam war, the book presents itself as an argument for pacifism, and yet the narrative includes no scenes of combat and not a single killing. Indeed, a main theme of the book, repeated throughout, is that death is not bad. When someone dies, Billy Pilgrim’s response is a three-word shrug: “So it goes.”

How does Vonnegut manage to turn that quietist refrain into a protest against the insanity of war? I don’t pretend to know the answer, but I do know that it has something to do with the Tralfamadorian theory of time, as brought to life in the temporal dislocations of the narrative. I speculate that Vonnegut’s pacifism is closely related to the pacifism of Buddhism, which also teaches that time doesn’t pass. In this connection, students may be interested in an introduction to Buddhism such as Shunryu Suzuki’s *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*.⁷

4. Two Kinds of Regret

In Chapter 4 of *On Being Me*, I indulge in a bit of autobiography to illustrate my conviction that it is a mistake to regret what might have been. David Velleman might have had a very different life than mine if only he had fulfilled my childhood ambition to become a dancer, but that merely possible David Velleman is not me in any meaningful sense. To think that I might have been him is incoherent, and so it makes no sense to entertain any regret on that score.

There is a different kind of regret that does make sense: regret about things that I did in the past. I can coherently regret failing to insist on taking dance lessons when my parents discouraged me, because the child who didn’t insist was me, though the adult he would have become is not.

⁶ <http://www.amherstlecture.org/velleman2006/>

⁷ Shambhala Publications (2011). ISBN: 1590302672

These two kinds of regret are illustrated, on the one hand, by Edith Wharton's character Newland Archer, in *The Age of Innocence*,⁸ who suffers from the conviction of being married to the wrong woman; and, on the other hand, by Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, who reflects on his deathbed that he has lived his life "all wrong".⁹ One character regrets what might have been; the other regrets what he has done. The contrast between these characters can serve as the basis for a discussion of regret — an emotion that undergraduates have on their minds as they aim to avoid it in planning their futures.

5. Authoring One's Life

Chapter 5 of *On Being Me* asks "Am I making up the story of my life, or am I simply watch a pre-determined plot unfold?" This question is never voiced in *Slaughterhouse Five*, and yet Billy Pilgrim seems to sleep-walk through his life, as if following a script that he had no hand in composing. And no wonder (the reader thinks) given that Billy has already "paid random visits" to all of the events in his life.

When Billy visits a past or future event, he doesn't arrive as an observer; he *relives* a past event or *pre-lives* a future event, experiencing it as himself, the same self who lived or will live through it at the time. So does he already know what he is going to do? Vonnegut doesn't clearly say, but suppose that the answer is Yes: when Billy decided to ask Valencia Merble to marry him, for example, he had already known for years that he was going to. Does that mean he wasn't in a position to decide at all? Was it no longer up to him?

Chapter 5 of *On Being Me* suggests that the answer to this question is No: knowing what I'm going to do does not deprive me of the opportunity to decide to do it.

5. Making Things Happen

There are at least two problems of free will. One is this problem just described, of whether I can truly be the author of my life. The other is the problem of whether I can be the cause of anything that happens.

We usually think of causes and their effects as events. The bolt of lightning causes the crack of thunder; the impact of the cue ball causes the 8-ball to rebound. We can identify events that cause my arm to rise: muscle contractions, nerve impulses, computations carried

⁸ *The Age of Innocence* (Norton, 2002). ISBN: 9780393967944.

⁹ *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (Vintage Classics, 2012). ISBN: 0307951332

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out by neurons in my brain. How, then, can I claim to have raised my arm, as if *I* am the cause of its rising? I am a person, not an event.

Agent causation, as it's called, appears in fiction every time a character acts, but in those cases it's a matter of course: it doesn't appear as a philosophical conundrum. Agent causation appears as a conundrum rather when it is absent, because a character does something that is described as not entirely his or her doing. Here is an example:

He had not a minute more to lose. He pulled the axe quite out, swung it with both arms, scarcely conscious of himself, and almost without effort, almost mechanically, brought the blunt side down on her head. He seemed not to use his own strength in this. But as soon as he had once brought the axe down, his strength returned to him.

This is Dostoevski's anti-hero Raskolnikov, at the moment of bringing his hatchet down on the skull of his victim.¹⁰ Raskolnikov does so “almost without effort, almost mechanically,” as if the strength behind the blow was not even his. But if the strength wasn't his, whose — or what — was it?

The idea that an action can fail to be attributable to its ostensible agent is explored by the philosopher Harry Frankfurt in his classic paper “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,”¹¹ and it is the topic of Chapter 5 of *On Being Me*.

6. Wanting to Be Loved

This chapter is no more than a brief suggestion to the effect that there is a relation between wanting to be loved and wanting to be good. For a more extended treatment of the topic, students might read my paper “Sociality and Solitude.”¹² They might also be interested in Chapter 2 of the same open-access volume, which is about the philosophy of virtual worlds such as “Second Life”.¹³

¹⁰ *Crime and Punishment*. Vintage Classics (2008). ISBN 9780099981909

¹¹ *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971); accessible on JSTOR at <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/stable/2024717>.

¹² Published online at <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/reader/416#page/114/mode/2up>.

¹³ <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/reader/416#page/18/mode/2up>