Consciousness of the Cosmos: A Thought Experiment Through Philosophy and Science Fiction

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I will use both philosophical and Science Fiction thought experiments as they help me to investigate the notion of "consciousness" in relation to the search for an absolute truth and/or good in the world, the doubt of an external world and of phenomena. General questions like, what is being conscious, what is being in the world, or better, what is being conscious in the world, will be narrowed down to the concept of self-consciousness. The awakening through such consciousness will take us to the concept of "absurdity" which I believe will pave the way to the understanding of our "consciousness of the cosmos." What is the relationship of consciousness with our experiences of the external world? Does our existence make any difference in the universe? If our existence is not necessary for the existence of the world, if the cosmos is indifferent to our existence, is our existence just absurd as Sartre, Camus and Nagel have suggested through different insights? I will investigate these questions through the demonstration of thought experiments coming from both philosophy and science fiction and elaborate on the absurdity of our existence within the cosmos, whether it is our own inner experience regardless of the cosmos or is it the result of our embracement of the cosmos with a specific kind of consciousness. This will inevitably place the wondering about the meaning of life at the core of this investigation. I will conclude that, the absurdity of our existence in the cosmos which arises from the clash between the view from the inside and the view from the outside could be resolved with the embracement of the cosmos with a specific kind of consciousness.

Aristotle says that it is in our nature as human beings to seek for knowledge and we all began by wondering. We started to wonder about simple things that we have

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difficulties in understanding such as why something is as it is and "advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and of stars, and about the genesis of the universe."[1]

Although 'what human nature is' is also the subject matter of our wondering and we might doubt whether wondering and seeking knowledge is in fact in human nature, here, following Aristotle, we will say that wondering and seeking knowledge is within the nature of human beings. Thus wondering is not specifically the realm of philosophers, but of all human beings. As in his *Theatetus* Plato also places wondering as the foundation of philosophy, to be precise the sole foundation of philosophy, Farah Mendlesohn locates 'the sense of wonder' as "the emotional heart of"[2] science fiction. Of course philosophical wonder applies a different method for analyzing knowledge of the subject matter of its wonderings and constructing a theory to explain it, the wonderings of science fiction quite often overlap those of philosophy. Both wonder on the nature of the human being, the nature of knowledge, the nature of reality, the nature of the universe and the meaning of life.

Not only is the subject matter of their wonderings the same, but also they use a common tool to visualize, conceptualize and investigate it; that is thought experiments. Thought experiments have often been used by philosophers for many purposes. They are commonly used for conceptual analysis, to clarify concepts or to demonstrate something through our mind's eye, to construct and/or test a theory, to illustrate a theory and to support or attack a theory or view.

Some thought experiments deal with situations that can be demonstrated and even be tested. Some are concerned with situations that one cannot experiment with in real life. Like, Avicenna's (Ibn-Sînâ 980–1037) "Floating Man" where you are encouraged to imagine yourself suspended in the air isolated from all sensations including your own body parts. Hilary Putnam's (1926) "Twin Earth" thought experiment, where you are invited to imagine that there is a planet somewhere in the universe that is exactly like the Earth. Plato's "Cave Allegory" where you have to imagine people that have only ever seen the shadows of objects and have never seen the sun. The famous "brain-in-a-vat" thought experiment, with its varied uses; you are requested to imagine that your brain rests in a vat while your body wanders around. Descartes' "evil demon" thought experiment requires the supposition of an evil demon that has the ability to deceive us about all our perceptions about the world that we think of as real.

One can say that science fiction thought experiments are merely for entertainment but I think they share many common features with philosophy's thought experiments, at least the same wondering and 'what ifs'. The thought experiments that are concerned with the situations that one cannot run in real life are also widely

[1] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *Aristotle's Collection*, trans. Frederick G. Kenyon (Kindle Edition), loc.13432.

[2] Farah Mendlesohn. "Introduction: reading science fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* ed. Edward James and Farah Mendleson (Cambridge University Press, Kindle edition, 2003), p. 3. Farah Mendlesohn is Senior Lecturer in American Studies at Middlesex University and she was the Chair of Science Fiction Foundation in 2003.

used in science fiction (SF). SF writers have used most of the thought experiments mentioned above when they have dealt with issues such as what reality actually is, what it is like to be a human being, the possibilities of alternate universes and our relationship with the world. For example, Locke's idea of personal identity and his famous body swap thought experiment about a prince and a cobbler became the SF theme in Philip K. Dick's short story "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale" which was later adapted as the movie *Total Recall*. Both "brain-in-a-vat" and "Twin Earth" thought experiments are used as a theme of many SF books and movies. SF writer Neal Stephenson in his 2008 novel *Anathem* supposes another planet that is almost identical to Earth in many aspects and he also elaborates on Tomas Nagel's question of "what is it like to be a bat?" in the book.

I will use both philosophical and SF thought experiments in this paper as they help me to investigate the notion of "consciousness" in relation to the search for an absolute truth and/or good in the world, the doubt of an external world and of phenomena. General questions like, what is being conscious, what is being in the world, or better, what is being conscious in the world, will be narrowed down to the concept of self-consciousness. The awakening through such consciousness will take us to the concept of "absurdity" which I believe will pave the way to the understanding of our "consciousness of the cosmos." What is the relationship of consciousness with our experiences of the external world? How can we relate our inner experiences to our experiences of the world? What is being conscious in the world? Is this consciousness something that we search for as the justification for our existence? Does our existence make any difference in the universe? If our existence is not necessary for the existence of the world, if the cosmos is indifferent to our existence, is our existence just absurd as Sartre, Camus and Nagel have suggested with different insights? I will investigate these questions through thought experiments that come from both philosophy and science fiction and elaborate on the absurdity of our existence within the cosmos, whether it is our own inner experience regardless of the cosmos or is it the result of our embracement of the cosmos with a specific kind of consciousness. This will inevitably place the wondering about the meaning of life at the core of this investigation.

What Do We Know About the External World? Descartes and Plato in the *Matrix*

To question what our place is in the cosmos is not a simple question in itself but it further complicated by far more implied questions. It takes us directly to the question of the meaning of life, which is a central problem of philosophy. What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of the cosmos? A seemingly very simple moral question about the meaning of life is related to most of the grand philosophical questions. In order to provide an answer we should check what we know about the cosmos and about ourselves. To do this first of all we must ask what we really know about the external world and how we could justify this knowledge. Do the trees outside my window really exist or am I dreaming?

At this point, we can elaborate on some of the thought experiments provided both by philosophy and science fiction. I will consider three very well-known philosophical thought experiments on this topic of which two are provided by Descartes, the 'dream' and the 'evil demon' arguments, and Plato's 'Cave Allegory'. These thought experiments attempt to illustrate what we can know and questions whether our senses are reliable sources in our quest to understand the world. Are the things that appear to us real? Everything that we claim that we know could be mere illusion. On the science fiction side, Andy and Larry Wachowski's 1999 film *The Matrix* is a famous and fine exemplar of how Plato's and Descartes' thought experiments became the wonder of science fiction.

Plato, in The Republic, wants us to imagine a cave like under-ground chamber where prisoners have been kept since their childhood; they are tied up so that they cannot move their heads and only look straight ahead. Behind the prisoners there is road and beyond the road is a fire so they can only see the shadows on the wall which are the images of the objects that people are carrying while they pass on the road between the fire and the prisoners. Plato claims that in such conditions the prisoners would believe that these shadows were "the whole truth." If we trust our sense experiences, depending on our condition, we will believe that what we see is the whole truth.

In the film *The Matrix*, the protagonist Neo is not aware that what he thinks he is experiencing through his senses is a production of a computer generated matrix which he believes to be "the whole truth." It is almost the same as the shadows the prisoners are exposed to. Morpheus who wants to awaken Neo tries to tell him that what he sees is just the shadows and tells Neo that "It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth." "What truth?" asks Neo, Morpheus replies: "That you are a slave like everyone else, you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind." Neo is puzzled and lost with the idea that what he thought of as real throughout his life are mere shadows, obviously it is not easy to accept.

Neo's puzzlement and loss would not surprise Plato, he tells us that if a prisoner was released from his bonds and manages to look towards the fire and told that the things that he used to see were only shadows, not real, he would be at a loss and think that what he is told to be shadows are more real to him. Plato says that "if he were made to look directly at the light of the fire, it would hurt his eyes and he would turn back and retreat to the things which he could see properly, which he would think really clearer than the things being shown him."[3]

That is exactly what Morpheus worries about and he warns Neo that: "After this there is no turning point. You take the blue pill the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill you stay in wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes." Yet, Neo takes the red pill, since as Plato suggests ignorance would be enslavement, and he is taken to a new world which he is told is real. They want to show him how the matrix works and when he is put into a simulator he reacts like what Plato tells us the prisoner would

[3] Plato, *The Republic,* trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 515e, p. 257.

react if he had been made to look directly into the light of the fire and wants to run back to his cave "Let me out! I want out!" shouts Neo, "I don't believe it."

Plato's story continues with the adaptation of the prisoner who looked into the light and his acceptance of the fact that what he used to think of as real was not. At this point the prisoner, with his newly acquired knowledge, felt sorry for his fellow-prisoners and wanted to release them. So does Neo. When he asks Morpheus why they do not unplug the others from the system Morpheus' answer is "… most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inert so hopelessly dependent on the system that they will fight to protect it." Plato could have answered Neo's question in almost be the same way as Morpheus', he says: "anyone who tried to release them and lead them up, they would kill him if they could lay hands on him."[4]

As stated by Plato and demonstrated in the film, the idea that all you think that you know about the reality of the world might be an illusion is painful. Where does this doubt about the external world end? What if Neo finds out that the world that is presented to him as real after he has been unplugged from the matrix is also an illusion? Neo thought that he was having a real life in the matrix until he is told that his body was kept outside the matrix in a small compartment that was filled with a liquid that kept him alive to provide energy for the machines to survive. The actual reality of the machines seems more questionable to Neo than the reality he used to experience. He had been deceived by the machines all his life in to believing that he was having a good life, there are houses, trees an entire city around him, that he felt the heat of the sun and the taste of wine whereas in actual fact he was just a battery. What if these evil machines are still deceiving him? Does not Descartes warn us that it will be wiser not to trust entirely that that has deceived us before? That is the core of his 'evil demon thought experiment. He asks us to consider an evil genius who is extremely powerful who "has employed all his energies in deceiving"[5] us.

How could Neo be sure of what is real? In the film Neo touches the chair and asks "This isn't real?" Morpheus replies "what is real?" he continues "If you are talking about what you can feel, smell, taste and see then "real" is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain." He touches the chair and feels it, but he cannot trust his senses which once deceived him. Could what he is experiencing be a dream and that he will wake-up and find out that everything is in place. In the film Neo experiences many dreams within dreams, he thinks that he opened the door to talk to his friend and finds himself waking up in front of his computer, he thinks that he is being interrogated by the agents of the matrix and has been implanted with a bug but then he finds himself in his bed indicating that has been dreaming. So Morpheus asks him: "Have you ever had a dream Neo, that you were so sure was real? … How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?" takes us directly to the main question of Descartes' dream argument. Descartes tells us

[4] *Ibid*., 517a, p. 259.

[5] Descartes, "Mediations on First Philosophy" in *Key Philosophical Writings*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haddane and G.R.T. Ross, ed. Enrique Chaves-Arviso (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997), p. 138.

that we have dreams that are less likely to happen but some of our dreams can reflect the things that can happen outside the dream. How can we be sure that when we think we have just awoken we are not still dreaming? Descartes thinks that we cannot. He says: "that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep … And my astonishment is such that it is capable of persuading me that I now dream."[6]

Now we end up with doubts about the reality of the external world. We could all be sleeping right now or be in a computer generated matrix and there is no tool that we can use to verify the reality of the external world. Can we wonder about the meaning of life while we doubt even the existence of the external world? Certainly we can. We can still wonder about the meaning of life. If nothing exists but myself what is the meaning of my life? If I am in a constant sleep or in a matrix what is the meaning of my existence in such a mode of existence?

David J. Chalmers provides another point of view on our doubts of our external world. If Neo was in a matrix all of his life, being in a matrix is not a skeptical hypothesis rather it is metaphysical hypothesis. He says that "it is a hypothesis about the underlying nature of reality."[7] This hypothesis tells us about the nature of the external world not that it does not exist; it gives us the information on what our world is. He explains the nature of world as: "First, physical processes are fundamentally computational. Second, our cognitive systems are separate physical processes, but interact with these processes. Third, physical reality was created by beings outside physical space-time."[8] How would this new knowledge about his world effect Neo? Would it change his interaction with the external world that is not made up of atoms but of bits? What would he do with this new consciousness of the world? Would he change all his beliefs about the external world if he accepts that he is living in a matrix? Chalmers suggests that that is not necessarily so. He says that: "At most they should come to revise their beliefs about the underlying nature of their world: they should come to accept that external objects are made of bits, and so on. These things are not massively deluded: most of their ordinary beliefs about their world are correct."[9] Thus, the chair that Neo was asking whether real or not, is real. The nature of the chair changes but not its reality, the chair exists, not made up of atoms but of bits.

Camus shares Chalmers' idea that the knowledge that is provided about the underlying nature of his world will not change most of his beliefs about his world. He says that the science that provides him his multi-colored universe can be reduced to atoms and atoms can be reduced to electrons and a nucleus. That is not much different than knowing that external objects are made of bits. This knowledge of the

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[6] *Ibid*., p. 136.

[7] David J. Chalmers, "The Matrix as Metaphysics" in *Science Fiction and Philosophy From Time Travel to Superintelligence*, ed. Susan Schneider (Blackwell Publishing, Kindle Edition, 2009), p. 36.

[8] *Ibid*., p. 36.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 42.

nature of the world neither brings him to a conclusion about the meaning of life nor ends his wonder. Camus says that:

> All this is good and I wait for you to continue. But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain this world to me with an image. I realize then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know. Have I the time to become indignant? You have already changed theories. So that science that was to teach me everything ends up in a hypothesis, that lucidity founders in metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art. What need had I of so many efforts? The soft lines of these hills and the hand of evening on this troubled heart teach me more.[10]

Thus, knowledge about the nature of the external world, although very doubtful, will not stop us searching for the meaning of life. Even if we do not agree with Chalmers that these thought experiments do not necessitate a skeptical hypothesis that doubts the existence of the external world, the idea that there is no external world might even trigger the urge to find a meaning of life. But what if not only the external world but also our bodies do not exist?

In all of the above thought experiments the doubt about the existence of our bodies was implied. This doubt is very important for us to understand what consciousness is, but I specifically leave the mind-body problem to the next section and elaborate upon it through different thought experiments.

The Brain-in-Vat: The Age of Death Ended

The doubt about the existence of the external world inevitably brings us to the doubt about the existence of our body since our body is thought to be a material thing which is the part of the external world. Descartes through his 'evil demon' thought experiment arrives at the famous conclusion "I think, therefore I am" (cogito ergo sum). Even if everything is an illusion that is created by the evil demon who wants to deceive us I must exist in order to be deceived. Although I cannot know the existence of my body, I can know my existence. Being able to think is a key element for the knowledge of my existence and this is nothing to do with my body. Thus consciousness does not require a body. Avicenna, long before Descartes, comes to the same conclusion with a different thought experiment.

Avicenna, in his *De Anima of the Shifa*, uses the Floating Man thought experiment to confirm the existence of consciousness without the need for the existence of a body. He says:

> One of us must suppose that he was just created at a stroke, fully developed and perfectly formed but with his vision shrouded from perceiving all external objects - created floating in the air or in space, not buffeted by any perceptible current of the air that supports him, his limbs separated and kept out of contact with one another, so that they do not feel each other.[11]

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[10] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 18.

[11] Quoted from Lenn Goodman's *Avicenna*. Lenn Goodman, *Avicenna* (Florance: Routledge, 1992), p. 155.

Then Avicenna asks whether the Floating Man could affirm the existence of his self in such a condition. His answer to this question is affirmative, he believes, without doubt the Floating Man would confirm the existence of his self although he could not confirm the existence of external world including his body, inner organs, heart or brain. He concludes that:

> Indeed he would affirm the existence of this self of his while not affirming that it had any length, breadth or depth. And if it were possible for him in such a state to imagine a hand or any other organ, he would not imagine it to be a part of himself or a condition of his existence.[12]

This suggests that our bodies and minds are two different entities. The body is a physical, material entity whereas the mind, the source of our consciousness is a non-physical entity. For Avicenna it goes without saying that affirming the existence of the body is not necessary for the affirmation of the existence of self. Also, Descartes claims that his 'evil demon' thought experiment smoothly takes us to the same conclusion. And he declares without a shadow of a doubt that: "It is certain that this I [that is to say, my soul by which I am what I am], is entirely and absolutely distinct from my body, and can exist without it."[13]

Daniel C. Dennett says that the modern-day version of Descartes' 'evil demon' thought experiment is the 'brain-in-vat' thought experiment. Although, the brain-in-a-vat thought experiments differ in their story settings, basically we are talking about a case where experienced neuroscientists disembody a brain and place it in a vat which is filled with liquid to support the brain in this vat. The brain is connected to a computer that simulates the world, and just sends inputs to the brain and receives its outputs. Throughout the process the brain in vat thinks that everything is normal and usual and is not aware that it lacks a body. This is similar to Neo's situation in *The Matrix* movie and the scientists deluded the brain as the evil demon does to Descartes.

The concern in this modern-day version, shifts from "proving one's own existence as a thinking thing" to concern about what "we may conclude from our experience about our nature, and about the nature of the world in which we (apparently) live."[14] This paper is also interested in the implications of the knowledge about our nature and the nature of the world.

Both philosophers and Science Fiction writers explore many 'what if' scenarios and tell us what the nature of the world is in each 'what if' case. Thus, what will be the impact of having a physical and mortal body and a non-physical eternal mind? What will it tell us about the nature of our world? What is it to have a body without mind or a mind without body? What is it being a human being in these forms of existence? It is not so easy to determine that brain-in-a-vat thought experiments are science fiction or philosophy thought experiments. John Pollock's "Brain in a Vat" begins like a thriller. Pollock tells us that on a rainy night his friend Harry's wife

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[12] *Ibid*., p. 155.

[13] Descartes, op.cit., p. 181.

[14] Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Penguin Science, Kindle Edition, 1993), p. 3.

called him and told him that six hooded armed men had broken in, made sure that he was the right person, put him in an ambulance and drove away. When Harry's wife Ann called the police, two plain clothes officials arrived and told her to keep her mouth shut otherwise she would never see her husband again. As Ann wrote down the number of ambulance, Pollock was able to find out that Harry had been taken to a private clinic. After an adventurous search he fouds Harry, but a surgical team had removed the top of his skull and had taken his brain out. The brain was placed in a stainless steel bowl and some tubes and wires connected to Harry's "disembodied brain." Pollock was himself caught and strapped to the operation table. He was told that Harry was not dead and that Harry's brain had been removed from the body and kept alive with a new surgical procedure developed by the best neuroscientists of the world. The wires which were connected to Harry's disembodied brain also connected him to a computer. This powerful computer provided input to the sensory cortex of the brain which was in the vat. Through these inputs Harry had a "fictitious mental life" which seemed to him as normal. He was not aware that he was just a brain in a vat. The scientists eased Pollock's apprehension that he too would go through the same procedure by telling him that there was nothing to worry about because they had already done this operation 3 months ago. They then let him go with all the doubts in his mind about whether he is a brain in vat or he is really going to his office and for him there is nothing there to confirm him whether it is the case or not.[15]

Science Fiction writer Greg Egan explores the idea of minds without bodies or bodies with minds that are supported by quantum computers in his *Schild's Ladder*. Twenty-thousand years in the future, human beings manage to come to a stage that embodiment becomes almost a preference. Those who are used to being corporeal insist on having a body. Cass, a scientist from Earth, travels 370 light years to Mimosa Station, a remote experimental facility, to conduct some experiments that might shed light on the physical laws that govern the entire universe. It is a custom that travelers leave back-ups of their minds in a safe place and travel to wherever they want where a new body is grown for them. Mimosans are acorporeals so they do not need a body, but, Cass, who used to have a body back on Earth, prefers embodiment for having honest perceptions of her surroundings. Six hundred years later this story is told to the protagonist, Tchicaya, by a Mimosan named Yann as: "When Cass came to Mimosa, she insisted on a body. We obliged, but we made it small enough to fit."[16] Indeed the body they gave her was 2 mm long, a joke on her insistence for embodiment. The bodies are grown through a process called morphogenesis and they are made of flesh.[17] But the brain is not flesh. The brain in the skull is linked to the person's Mediator which works via nerve and skin cells and the Mediator is connected to the Qusp (the quantum singleton processor) and in the

[15] John Pollock, "Brain in a Vat" in *Science Fiction and Philosophy From Time Travel to Superintelligence*, ed. Susan Schneider (Blackwell Publishing, Kindle Edition, 2009), pp. 17–19.

[16] Greg Egan, *Schild's Ladder* (Kindle Edition, 2010), p. 181.

[17] Morphogenesis can be a long process if the basic DNA code used is the one the mind was born with or a three hours process if any other DNA code or even a perused body is used.

Qusp the mind is cocooned.[18] What is the implication of being able to have a mind that can survive without a body, a mind that you can have back-ups of? There are several implications on our understanding of our nature and the nature of the world we live in. I will consider two. The first one is to understand what it is like to be a person as described in the *Schild's Ladder* and the second one is what it is like to have an eternal mind which is what is it like to live in the Age of Death Ended.

Is Tchicaya, while living on a Qusp, a person? What is it like to be a person? After having a problem in the space shuttle Mariama asks Tchicaya, 'Are you all right?' He replies: "'that depends what you mean by *me*. My Qusp is fine. Parts of my Mediator got fried; I only have a short IR link left. My body's not a pretty sight, but it's recovering.'"[19] So what makes Tchicaya Tchicaya? His digital brain, his Qusp, his Mediator or his body?

Dennett in one of his brain-in-vat thought experiments mentioned the brain-body- and self distinction. He says: "'Yorick,' I said aloud to my brain, "you are my brain. The rest of my body, seated in this chair, I dub 'Hamlet.'" So here we all are: Yorick's my brain, Hamlet's my body, and I am Dennett. *Now*, where am I?"[20]

Although, 'how and where does consciousness occur?' is not an issue that everyone agrees, there is no dispute that there needs consciousness to be able to affirm that we exist. Aristotle states that for all human activity, like hearing, seeing, walking and he adds:

> [T]here is a faculty that is conscious of their exercise, so that whenever we perceive, we are conscious that we perceive, and whenever we think, we are conscious that we think, and to be conscious that we are perceiving or thinking is to be conscious that we exist.[21]

Thousands of years later, with the advancement of science which brings the knowledge of evolution and neuroscience, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has arrived the same conclusion. He says, "[i]n the absence of consciousness, the personal view is suspended; we do not know our existence; and we do not know that anything else exists."[22] This personal view that is provided by consciousness brings the concept of self. As John Locke states thinking is essential for consciousness and consciousness makes one what he or she calls self. Locke's distinction of man and person depends on consciousness and makes possible his notion of self identity. For Locke, man is "a living organized body … nothing else but of an animal of such a certain form."[23] It does not have the concept of self. Whereas a person is "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the

[18] Greg Egan. op.cit., see pp. 23, 260, 277.

[19] *Ibid*., p. 251.

[20] Daniel C. Dennett, "Where am I?" in *The Mind's I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul*, ed. Daniel C. Dennett and Douglas R. Hofstadter (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 220.

[21] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Harris Rackham, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1996), 1170a, p. 248.

[22] Antonia Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, (London: William Heinemann, Kindle Edition), p. 4.

[23] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (John Locke Book Collection: Kindle Edition) Book 2, Chapter 27, sec. 8, location 5405.

same thinking thing, in different times and places."[24] This understanding of person makes possible the 'self,' which one can distinguish herself/himself from others and this is what Locke calls 'personal identity'. It is consciousness that makes personal identity. He defines it as "the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person."[25]

Thus the answer we could provide Tchicaya's question, i.e., "what makes me *me*?" evidently depends mainly on our assumption of the unity or the dichotomy of mind and body. Whether we accept the unity or the dichotomy of mind and body, we will agree that first of all we need consciousness to be able to talk about our existence. Then, the inevitable question arises; where does consciousness occur? In the body, specifically in the brain or in the mind?

For Locke personal identity is not dependent on whether it is attached to "one individual substance" or it is "continued in a succession of several substances." In the *Schild's Ladder* when Tchicaya was provided a new body he tried to get accustomed to his body we are told that there is a "distracting sense that his own flesh was like poorly-fitted clothing."[26] Metaphorically 'cloth' is also used by Locke, he says in case of change of substance a person will not become two people no more "than a man be two men by wearing other clothes to-day than he did yesterday, … the same consciousness uniting those distant actions into the same person, whatever substances contributed to their production."[27] For Locke, if you separate the body from the "thinking conscious self" personal identity will not change. "Self depends on consciousness, not on substance"[28] whether material or immaterial. Thus self does not depend on soul or body. Locke agrees that "consciousness unites substances, material or spiritual, with the same personality."[29] Here, if we answer Tchicaya's question what makes him him according to Locke's argument, as Qusp is the recorded personality of Tchicaya it is his Qusp that makes him him.

Locke's idea that consciousness unites substances is restated in its modern version by Damasio. He says that: "The idea that it is the entire organism rather than the body alone or brain alone that interacts with environment often is discounted, if it is even considered."[30] Locke, considering how his thought experiments and his idea that consciousness does not depend on substances might be seen as absurd asks: "Did we know … whether it could or could not perform its operations of thinking and memory out of a body organized as ours is?"[31] This doubt is not baseless; we

[24] *Ibid*., Book 2, Chapter 27, sec. 9, location 5441.

[25] *Ibid*., Book 2, Chapter 27, sec. 9, location 5446.

[26] Greg Egan. op.cit., p. 47.

[27] John Locke, op.cit., Book 2, Chapter 27, sec.10, location 5467.

[28] *Ibid*., Book 2, Chapter 27, sec.17, location 5548.

[29] *Ibid*., Book 2, Chapter 27, sec.25, location 5629.

[30] Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 224.

[31] John Locke, op.cit., Book 2, Chapter 27, sec.27, location 5663.

can only separate "mind-self-body-brain" in thought experiments we do not know yet how they will function when we have the technology to separate them like the brain in vat thought experiments. With this scientific information, Damasio says that:

> The idea that mind derives from the entire organism as an ensemble may sound counterintuitive at first… . the concept of mind has moved from the ethereal nowhere place it occupied in the seventeenth century to its current residence in or around the brain – a bit of demotion, but still a dignified station.[32]

He is not suggesting that the mind is in the body what he is suggesting is that "the body contributes more than life support and modulatory effects to the brain. It contributes a *content* that is part and parcel of the workings of the normal mind."[33] Damasio says that mind occurs from "activity in neural circuits" and those circuits "contains basic representations of the organism" and as an answer to Locke's question 'whether it could perform its operations out of a body organized as ours' he says that "if the basic topic of those representations were not an organism anchored in the body, we might have some form of mind, but I doubt that it would be the mind we do have."[34]

Is Tchicaya a person as we are and is his mind different than ours? Despite the fact that there are acorporeal beings in the book, the embodied beings like Tchicaya use bodies that are organic, which are made up by DNA code, and their Mediators work via nerve and skin cells. In a way their mind contains representations of the organism. They are consciousness and have a concept of self. Tchicaya is a thinking intelligent being, he has reason and reflection, and he considers himself to be himself and he is conscious of present and past actions. Thus, depending on Locke's definition of person, he qualifies as a person. But what happens if he loses the memory of his past actions? For Locke, as memory and consciousness is the same, Tchicaya will not be the same person if he loses his memory.

Indeed, in *Schild's Ladder* there are cases of memory loss where they must retrieve their back-ups. When there is a possibility of an explosion that might destroy everything in the experimental facility one of the Mimosans asks the protagonist Cass:

> 'If the station is destroyed, we all have recent backups en route to Viro. What about you?' She said, 'I have my memories back on Earth. But nothing since I arrived here.' The five years she'd spent among the Mimosans would be lost. It had still happened. She had still lived through it all. It would be amnesia, not death.[35]

If we take memory as the fundamental criterion of identity we do not depend on body. Terence Penelhum in his article "Personal Identity" states that in such a situation "perhaps bodily death is merely one major event in a person's history and not the end of him."[36] Mimosans having recent back-ups would have survived death.

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[32] Damasio, op.cit., p. 225.

[33] *Ibid*., p. 226.

[34] *Ibid*., p. 226.

[35] Greg Egan. op.cit., p. 40.

[36] Terence Penelhum, "Personal Identity" in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd Edition, Donald M. Borchert, Editor in Chief, Vol 7. pp. 214–215.

Cass' condition is somewhat different since she will lose 5 years memory, when she retrieves her back-up she will have no memory of all these 5 years and she will not be the same person who she was in the last 5 years. When the acorporeal Mimosians worried about her bodily death Cass responded: "'I'm embodied, not deranged! If a copy of my mind experiences of a few minutes' consciousness, then is lost, that is not the death of anyone. It is just amnesia."[37]

At this point, it is better to start to evaluate the second implication, which is what is it like to be immortal, to have an eternal mind. In *Schild's Ladder* the time before the invention of Qusp is defined as the Age of Death. Descartes tells us that the mind is immaterial and eternal which suggests that there is no notion of death. If there is no notion of death how it will affect the meaning that we attached to life? What will be the meaning of life where we live in eternity? Camus tells us the absurdity of life and says that "like everything else, the absurd ends with death."[38] What is it condemned to live this absurd life forever with no hope that it will end with death?

Egan tells us the mixed feelings of the protagonist when he thinks that the woman he has loved for thousands of years might be harmed even knowing that she will not die, as:

> The structure of his mind had been passed down with only a few small modifications from the original form, shaped by evolution in the Age of Death, leaving him with the choice between embracing its impulses in all their absurdity – … – or struggling to invent a whole vocabulary to replace them.[39]

Thus, we still have the choice to embrace life with all its absurdity or struggle to find a meaning for it. It is like choosing courage and reasoning as Camus' absurd man, but the main difference is here it will not be a protagonist's "revolt devoid of future and of his mortal consciousness"[40] since he has an immortal consciousness. Is it possible that it is a revolt of his immortal consciousness? What if he loses all the back-ups that contain the memory of the woman he has loved for all these thousands of years?

Although the end of absurdity depends on death, Camus and Wittgenstein agree that "there is no experience of death"[41] and "we don't live to experience death"[42] thus for an immortal being like Tchicaya embracing the absurdity will not be much different since the absurd man will not experience death either. They will choose life with the awareness of its meaninglessness, one with a limited life span one with a limitless life.

Bernard Williams has a strong and interesting suggestion that "[I]mmortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless, I shall suggest; so, in a sense, death

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[37] Greg Egan. op.cit., p. 22.

[38] Albert Camus, op.cit., p.29.

[39] Greg Egan. op.cit., p. 97.

[40] *Albert Camus*, op.cit., p. 64.

[41] *Ibid*., p. 14.

[42] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routlege Classics, 2005), # 6.4311.

gives meaning to life."[43] Although Williams provides a different line of argument to arrive this conclusion, I will take the liberty to consider what he says as a phrase to evaluate the concerns of an absurd life. In the light of the arguments on the absurdity of life it is understandable to say that immortality would be meaningless and although it is not easy to accept that death gives meaning to life it is hard to deny the strong connection of death to the meaning of life. The meaning of life is generally associated with our limited life span.[44] Within our limited life span all the searches for an answer to the meaning of life remain unanswered unless we believe that there is an after-life where our actions will be rewarded or punished. But if we take Thomas Nagel's definition of death, permanent death, which is a state "unsupplemented by any form of conscious survival"[45] or as he later puts as a permanent nothingness, then with death everything ends. So what is this fuss about the meaning of life? Since, we are going to die all the activities to sustain us, to support a family, to pursue a career "is an elaborate journey leading nowhere."[46] Nagel says that the arguments about the absurdity of life with its connection to time and space takes the form "we are tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe; our lives are mere instants even on a geological time scale, let alone a cosmic one; we will all be dead any minute."[47] But he adds that if life is absurd it will still be "infinitely absurd if it lasted through eternity."[48] Thus having an eternal life would not make any difference if life is absurd. Nagel suggests: "If sub specie aeternitatis there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either, and we can approach to our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair."[49]

Since we have self-consciousness we have the ability to question our existence and our aspirations. Nagel says that we can view our life *sub specie aeternitatis* through our capacity to step back and survey ourselves, "we see ourselves from outside, and all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear."[50] Here comes the absurdity. Nagel thinks that the absurd does not arise from "confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world,"[51] but "from a collision within ourselves."[52]

Whether absurd arises from a collision between our expectations and the world or from a collision within ourselves could be discussed but what is clear is that both

[43] Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 82.

[44] After all, Camus defines the absurd man as one who 'does nothing for the eternal'; with the awareness of his limits and his limited freedom Camus' absurd man sees the "burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe." Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 58.

[45] Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press, Kindle Edition, 1979), p. 1.

[46] *Ibid*., p. 12.

[47] *Ibid*., p. 11.

[48] *Ibid*., p. 11.

[49] *Ibid*., p. 23.

[50] *Ibid*., p. 15.

[51] Albert Camus, op.cit., p. 26.

[52] Thomas Nagel, op.cit., p. 17.

Camus and Nagel would agree that in order to be aware of the absurdity of life we should be able to view our lives from outside and this view is provided by our self-consciousness. Damasio says that the brain needs subjectivity in order to become conscious. He explains this as follows:

> The decisive step in the making of consciousness is not the making of images and creating the basics of a mind. The decisive step is *making the images ours*, making them belong to their rightful owners, the singular, perfectly bounded organisms in which they emerge.[53]

If subjectivity is what makes images ours and consciousness possible through this subjectivity then we can talk about a discrepancy between the images as they are and the images that we make ours. Indeed, Damasio says that "we adopt two sorts of optic when we observe our beings; we see the mind with eyes that are turned inward; and we see biological tissues with eyes that are turned outward."[54]

Wittgenstein states that "The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside."[55] Looking at things from outside gives us a different picture, a picture how things really are and looking at things from the midst of them provides a subjective view that is the picture of things that we make ours. And when these two pictures do not match we struggle.

Therefore, it is crucial to know from what framework we are conceiving the nature of the world we live in, the meaning of life. Our interaction with the world and the place we attribute to ourselves in the world is related to our standpoint. From the outside 'the brain in vat' is a brain in a vat whereas from the inside, or as Dennett puts it from the brain's perspective, it has a body and it is wherever it wishes. From the outside Neo is in a small compartment that is filled with a liquid that keeps him alive, from the inside he is having a real life in the matrix. From the outside everything in the cosmos is arbitrary, from the inside it has a meaning. Since consciousness requires subjectivity, since we can only ascribe meaning to life with the view from the inside then the consciousness of cosmos depends on the view from the inside. The absurdity of our existence in the cosmos which arises from the clash between the view from the inside and the view from the outside could be resolved with the embracement of the cosmos with a specific kind of consciousness.

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[53] Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, p. 10.

[54] *Ibid*., p. 14.

[55] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, trans. and ed. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p. 83.