She won't be me

By Susan Blackmore

I take Chalmers' "deflationary" position, "that we never survive from moment to moment, or from day to day". But I don't agree with him in thinking of this as a "pessimistic spin on the deflationary view" (p 61).

Indeed I find it rather liberating and thrilling. This "me" that seems so real and important right now, will very soon dissipate and be gone forever, along with all its hopes, fears, joys and troubles. Yet the words, actions and decisions taken by this fleeting self will affect a multitude of future selves, making them more or less insightful, moral and effective in what they do, as well as more or less happy.

Why should I care? Is this, as Chalmers puts it "enough for the future to matter"? (p 61). I do not have to care. After all, those multitudinous future selves will not be "me". But there are still good reasons to care.

Some of these reasons concern my current projects and intentions which I do care about now. If I, now, act in a certain way, those projects are more likely to come to fruition. In other words, this current fleeting self is laying the groundwork for a future self to be more likely to complete them. If I, now, act kindly towards other people, I am encouraging habits of kindness that future selves may continue, thus helping the people I currently care about.

Other reasons are more general. Why, for example, should I care about the future happiness of another fleeting self who won't be me? The implication of this question is that I am an utterly selfish being who cares solely for my own happiness and no one else's. But this simply isn't true for this particular fleeting "me now" and I doubt it is true for many others. By and large, all things being equal, I would like everyone to be happy. I cannot bring about such a global state of happiness and contentment, but if the actions I take now are more likely to make at least a few future selves happier then (up to a point) I am willing to take them. Do I drink that last glass of wine that I suspect will give someone else a worse headache in the morning? Do I leave that pile of washing up for the person with the headache to deal with? Do I invest another half hour of hard work struggling to write this article so that someone else may find it easier to complete this afternoon, and so that yet another future self may take the blame, praise or indifference of its readers in the future? After many years of practicing living with this view it seems quite natural for me to care for these future selves. They will not be me, but I can do something to make their brief lives a little more pleasant.

Oh! Here (after a brief interlude of gazing out of the window) is a new me that has just woken up. How interesting to read what that previous one wrote a few moments ago. How nice that she cared for me and took so much trouble to try to explain what she meant. How nice that another previous me made that cup of hot coffee that I now find beside me on the desk. Thank you. I will now carry on with the project she began.

This is a way of living that accepts the feeling of being a continuous self as an illusion. It is a way of living with what Parfit (1984) calls a bundle theory of self as opposed to an ego theory of self. Again and again I seem to be here, to be conscious, to be having a stream of conscious experiences, but I know that this "me" is just another one of countless "me"s that have arisen and will arise. The apparent continuity of self is not sustained by this "me" but by the physical continuity of this body and its memories, habits and skills.

More generally, each human body gives rise to a multitude of fleeting selves over its lifetime. These are all somewhat similar because of the continuity of this body with its memories, habits and skills, not

because any experiencing self continues. Selves come and go. There may be long gaps with no self, rapid successions of new ones, and even overlapping or simultaneous selves (Blackmore 2011). Mindfulness may maintain a self for long periods, while switches of attention and distractions promote rapid changes. Whenever a self like this is constructed it seems to be having a stream of experiences and easily imagines itself to be the same one who previously experienced the things that this one can now remember, even though this is not true.

You may have balked at the use of the word "I" throughout this article, in such phrases as "I take Chalmers ….", "I do not agree …" or "I think …". You may think it hypocritical, dishonest of just plain confused to be claiming both that selves are fleeting and that "I" have persisting opinions to express. But those opinions arise from the physical properties of this body; the reading and thinking it has done, the conversations it has had with others, the training of attention it has undergone. These and many other past events ensure that each time a new conscious self appears it finds itself holding opinions related to those that came before.

Living with Chalmers' "pessimistic" view does not mean giving up all continuity of opinion, understanding or belief, any more than it means giving up having such skills as riding a bike, paddling a kayak, knowing where you keep the sugar or speaking English. It does mean accepting that every time I seem to be conscious this is a new ephemeral self, and that a moment before there might have been a different one or, more likely, none at all (Blackmore 2011). It does mean always being willing to let go and give up each ephemeral self knowing that another one will come along in due course. You could say that it means being constantly willing to disappear.

How does this relate to the singularity? First, unlike Chalmers, I doubt that uploading is a likely prospect. I think it far more likely that we biological human beings will gradually merge with non-biological machines (Kurzweil 2005). Indeed this is already happening. I am not thinking so much of cochlear implants and the like, but of the machines we routinely depend upon. The singularity concerns intelligence, and as far as intelligence is concerned ours is already machine-dependent. Such intelligence as I have manifests itself, presumably, in the things I think, write, say and do. All of those are highly dependent these days on this keyboard at which I write, my computer, my laptop, my phone, the GPS systems and search engines I use, the World Wide Web and the multiplicity of servers and other machines which sustain the information I feel free to find if I need it. And by modern standards I am a backwards old-fogey. The typical British teenager uses far more machines than I do and would not feel "himself" or "herself" without them. The fact that these machines are mostly outside of the physical bodies of these biological creatures is what will change, not the essence of our dependency on them.

What then of the consciousness of these uploaded or merged creatures? What I have said above implies that so long as the machinery involved is capable of constructing fleeting selves then things will seem much as they do now. So investigating just what it means for a human brain and its associated machinery to construct an experiencing self becomes an important question. Perhaps it involves constructing not only models of the world but also of the machinery doing the construction. Perhaps it involves building the kind of software that models itself as an observer. Perhaps it involves creating an environment within which memes compete to build a stable selfplex (Blackmore 1999). Perhaps it entails something else altogether. In the case of our own brains we do not yet have an answer but if we really are approaching the singularity I suppose it will not be long before we do.

We might also consider the consequences of the evolution of information in artificial systems and networks. I have suggested that we call the information that is copied, stored, varied and selected by such systems temes (or technological memes, Blackmore 2010). Temes compete for space and processing capacity within artificial systems just as memes compete for space and processing capacity within human brains. If this is so then we might expect such competition to give rise to all sorts of virtual creatures including experiencing selves.

These selves might be housed in discrete machines such as single computers. In this case they might think of themselves, much as we do, as *being* that machine or inhabiting that machine. But they might not be. They might be distributed among many machines or even exist as relatively stable temeplexes distributed across vast networks. We are a long way from understanding any of this but we might

already have an inkling that such creatures might also be fleeting experiencing selves that imagine themselves to be continuing entities when they are not.

Should we care about these potential future creatures? For the reasons I have given above I do care. I would like to think that the technology we have let loose will lead to experiencing selves that are happy and contended rather than depressed or miserable, but I have no way of judging whether they will be or not. Even so, I think this is the more important question to ask, not whether any of them will be me for they will not be me, any more than the self who is finally completing this article was the one who started it all those days ago.

References

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