

I was a little shaken by the peculiar dream I had just had.

I was at a large meeting that had been called to decide what I ought to be doing with my life at the moment. All of the people at the meeting were seated at a large round table, with me at the head of it.

The strange thing was that all of the people at the meeting were me.

There was me when I was one, me when I was two and one more of me for every year up to the age I was last year. Then there was me. And then there was me next year, and me the year after that, and so on. I didn't have time to count how many of me there were. Maybe that's a good thing.

It was a bit like sitting between two mirrors, repeating my reflection left and right. Except that the reflection changed a little each time. It got younger in one direction and older in the other, until the point where the last me sat entertaining the first me by playing peek-a-boo.

The thing was, each me had had a different idea about what I ought to do. Some thought I ought to be out enjoying myself, some thought I should be getting on with my work so that I could have a good career. Some thought I should be spending my money and some thought I should be saving it.

At one point, one of me suggested that we take a vote. But then an argument broke out. Should any me that was under 18 be allowed to take part, or was that too young to take the responsibility? Then a young me said that if anyone was going to be stopped from voting, it should be the oldest me, who had probably lost my marbles anyway.

At that point, a middle-aged me tried to get up to give the young me that had just spoken a piece of my mind, but was frustrated that I seemed to be rooted to the spot. Just then, the youngest me sneezed violently, and the same sneeze travelled backwards round the table like a Mexican wave.

When the wave reached me, I sneezed too and took off like a rocket, rising high above the table where we were all sitting. As I gained height, I could see that all around me were other tables, each one surrounded by someone I knew. The further out, they were surrounded by individuals I didn't recognise.

As I rose higher and higher, propelled by my sneeze, the ground on which all the hundreds and thousands of tables were standing began to curve down at the edges, until it formed a perfect globe. As I rose still higher, that globe shrank into the distance and I could see that it was just one among many hundreds of other globes stretching off in a long line.

At that point, I woke to find myself sneezing in the real world. And here I was, by myself, trying to make sense of all I had just imagined. I felt sure I was trying to tell myself something, but what was it?

Me, Myself and Us

This is a rather weird, Harry Potteresque story. I am guessing that it would be most appropriate with communities of enquiry for adults or older teenagers, although when I try resources with an age group younger than intended, I often find I have underestimated them. It takes its cue from a particular tradition of looking at ethics. You might share some of this with the class but it's mostly for your own thinking.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is the ethical theory that the right action is that which will lead to "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". In taking a decision, you should add up how many people will benefit and by how much, and subtract how many people will suffer and by how much. It is open to many criticisms, such as the unpredictability of what will happen, the difficulty of measuring happiness and the time it would take to go through the process itself. But the core idea is that an action is judged good or bad by its intended consequences, rather than because it follows or breaks particular rules.

One of the central features of utilitarian thinking is that the interests of each individual affected by an action should be considered equally important: "each to count for one, none for more than one". By way of a rehearsal for this scrupulous neutrality, you can do the same exercise within the confines of your own life. If what is important in your life is happiness, then surely the happiness you experience in each part of your life is equally important? Assume that you are 30 years old. The impact of your present decisions on your life from 70-71 ought to have as much weight in your deliberations as their impact your life from 30-31 (allowing an appropriate discount for the uncertainty of whether you will be still be around). Hence the story's metaphor of a representative for each year of your life, taking a joint decision on what to do.

Prudence or Liberty?

It's obviously a tall order to take a bird's eye view of the whole of your own life. Indeed if people did so, we'd probably save so much for our pensions that we'd be locked into a deflationary spiral. But at the other extreme, decisions that run a risk of permanently harming your body for the sake of a short-lived pleasure would almost certainly not make it past the "me committee" of the story. The most obvious question that could arise out of this story is perhaps, "How much should you think about the future in deciding what to do now?" Pulling in one direction, there is evidence from psychology that the ability to defer gratification is one of the biggest determiners of future success (see "marshmallow experiment" on youtube). But, particularly when you are young, or in affairs of the heart, making such calculations suggest you are rather a cold fish. Here is Charles Darwin's list of pros and cons on the subject of marriage, which defies widespread cultural expectations that love should be spontaneous and even anti-rational:

MARRY

Children—(if it please God)—constant companion, (friend in old age) who will feel interested in one, object to be beloved and played with—better than a dog anyhow—Home, and someone to take care of house—Charms of music and female chit-chat. These things good for one's health. Forced to visit and receive relations *but terrible loss of time*. My God, it is intolerable to think of spending one's whole life, like a neuter bee, working, working, and nothing after all.—No, no won't do.—Imagine living all one's day solitarily in smoky dirty London House.—Only picture to yourself a nice soft wife on a sofa with good fire, and books and music perhaps—compare this vision with the dingy reality of Grt Marlboro' St.

Not MARRY

No children, (no second life) no one to care for one in old age . . . Freedom to go where one like—Choice of Society *and little of it*. Conversation of clever men at clubs.—Not forced to visit relatives, and to bend in every trifle—to have the expense and anxiety of children—perhaps quarrelling. *Loss of time*—cannot read in the evenings—fatness and idleness—anxiety and responsibility—less money for books etc—if many children forced to gain one's bread.—(But then it is very bad for one's health to work too much) Perhaps my wife won't like London; then the sentence is banishment and degradation with indolent idle fool—

If it is hard or odd not to be especially attached to the year of your life you are living at the moment, how much harder and odder would it be to be equally concerned about the happiness of lives other than your own? When in the story, the narrator is rocketed skyward by his sneeze, the scale of the task in taking account of all the possible interests affected by an action can be seen. The final expansion of the scene to include a whole series of globes of tables of stages of lives, is intended to hint at whether the interests of future or past generations should be taken into account as well. (I'm not sure how much what I mean by the story determines what it should mean for the reader, but that's another question...)

It would be easy to say that any such calculations are just too difficult, both in their mathematics and in the extreme altruism they require. It seems chilly not to give more weight to the interests of your nearest and dearest, and superhuman not to give more weight to your own life. But imagining taking the "view from nowhere" can be a nudge towards greater consideration for the welfare of others, present and future, just as imagining a "committee of me" deciding what you should do for the benefit of your life as a whole could be a nudge in the direction of a more considered life.

One way you might extend the engagement with the story before asking them to frame questions is to re-enact the scenario as a way of resolving a particular dilemma. For example, with the group in a circle, ask them to imagine you (or a volunteer who doesn't mind being the centre of attention) have just left the sixth form and are deciding whether to go travelling or to work and save up for a year before going to university. Giving each person around the circle an age to represent, from perhaps 6 up to 90, what would they prefer you to do?

Some of "yous" who would have the job of paying off the debt if you travel might want you to work and save up. Or they might take the attitude that it is good to have pleasant memories to recall, or that the independence you developed would be useful at university.

Perhaps this method would have some merits in considering issues like teenage pregnancy, drugs, smoking, etc. I don't think it offers any definitive answers to such issues, but it might be a useful tool in expanding thinking about them, especially if the speakers are given some time to work up a dramatic presentation of what they think – something of the "ghost of Christmas future" effect.

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