

# **The ‘real you’ is a myth – we constantly create false memories to achieve the identity we want**

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We all want other people to “get us” and appreciate us for who we really are. In striving to achieve such relationships, we typically assume that there is a “real me”. But how do we actually know who we are? It may seem simple – we are a product of our life experiences, which we can be easily accessed through our memories of the past.

Indeed, substantial research [has shown](#) that memories shape a person’s identity. People with profound forms of amnesia typically also lose their identity – as [beautifully described](#) by the late writer and neurologist [Oliver Sacks](#) in his case study of 49-year-old Jimmy G, the “lost mariner”, who struggles to find meaning as he cannot remember anything that’s happened after his late adolescence.

But it turns out that identity is often not a truthful representation of who we are anyway – even if we have an intact memory. Research shows that we [don’t actually access](#) and use all available memories when creating personal narratives. It is becoming increasingly clear that, at any given moment, we unawaresly tend to choose and pick what to remember.

## **The disremembered**

[Marina Benjamin](#)

*Dementia undermines all of our philosophical assumptions about the coherence of the self. But that might be a good thing.*

When we create personal narratives, we rely on a psychological screening mechanism, dubbed the monitoring system, which labels certain mental concepts as memories, but not others. Concepts that are rather vivid and rich in detail and emotion – episodes we can re-experience – are more likely to be marked as memories. These then pass a “plausibility test” carried out by a similar monitoring system which tells whether the events fit within the general personal history. For example, if we remember flying unaided in vivid detail, we know straight away that it cannot be real.

But what is selected as a personal memory also needs to fit the current idea that we have of ourselves. Let’s suppose you have always been a very kind person, but after a very distressing experience you have developed a strong aggressive trait that now suits you. Not only has your behaviour changed, your personal narrative has too. If you are now asked to describe yourself, you might include past events previously omitted from your narrative – for example, instances in which you acted aggressively.

Our commonsense understanding of the self has been dominated by an individualistic idea that goes back to René Descartes and John Locke in the 17th century. Descartes found

certainty within himself – ‘I think, therefore I am.’ The inner, mental life of the self was also grounds for knowing our experience to be real, and that we were not dreaming. Locke, for his part, identified the self with the ordered flow of sense experiences that the mind recorded. That tradition, more recently updated by the British philosopher Derek Parfit in books such as *Reasons and Persons* (1984), argues that identity and memory come from the same place: a psychological connectedness and continuity maintained inside our heads. Selfhood hinges on our ability to order memory, and connect a set of experiences to form a coherent autobiography of who we were and how we became the person we are now. The theory has implications for dementia, because dementia destroys the temporal binding that sustains our identity.

According to Baldwin van Gorp of Leuven University in Belgium, who studies how the media reports dementia, this individualistic, inward looking, memory-based account of identity is the default way that dementia is framed in most public debates. That framing carries clear implications for how we might hold dementia at bay: keep your brain as fit as possible; do lots of physical and mental exercise. It explains why dementia self-help books lean so heavily on the provision of external supports: Post-It notes and other visual reminders that jog the memory. Google – that instant memory-jogger – might already be helping to forestall the dependency created by dementia. Before long, no doubt, little robots will accompany us to make sure we remember to take our pills and flush the toilet.

A more promising way forward might be drawn from ideas about personhood that sit within the continental philosophical tradition that includes Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. At the risk of simplification, philosophers in this tradition contend that who we are depends not simply on our self-reflective ability to marshal our memories but, crucially, on our relationships with other people and how we are embedded in the world around us. Heidegger argued we were ‘beings-in-the-world’, not just in our own heads. It suggests that the question ‘Who are you?’ cannot be answered by delving within ourselves, but by looking outwards to understand how we relate to others.

You are a husband or wife, mother or father, son, friend, colleague, lover, writer, cook, teacher, or plumber. And your identity is secured through mutual recognition or, as the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre puts it in *After Virtue* (1981): the story we tell about ourselves in our own heads has to line up with the stories that other people tell of us.

Dementia is troubling because, at the same time as it erodes someone’s memory, it also eats away at this capacity to create shared meaning. If someone cannot remember not just where the milk bottle goes, but what a milk bottle is for, then the shared pre-suppositions on which communication, meaning and identity depend become badly strained. The common vantage point that we depend upon, splinters and fractures. Besides, as the British anthropologist Daniel Miller has shown in his study of our relationship to the material world, *The Comfort of Things* (2008), people cherish objects precisely because they embody relationships and emotions. When someone forgets what an object is for, they lose its social and emotional context as well.