

IMAGINE . . .

Fifty-Six Thought Experiments
That Tell You What You Think

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Acknowledgements

INTRODUCTION

Thought experiments are almost limitless in their diversity and range. They are in the toolkits of many scientists and philosophers. Einstein found them helpful in developing his theories of special and general relativity. Military strategists employ them in what they call war games. Law-school and medical-school exams are replete with hypothetical cases — thought experiments in which students are presented with a set of facts and asked: Imagine that you are the judge (or the doctor). How would you rule? (What would you prescribe?)

We all conduct thought experiments without realizing it, often as simple as “What if it rains?” The British philosopher Derek Parfit (1942 - 2017) was particularly keen on them. One of his celebrated ones is the model for thought experiment #43 in this book.

A thought experiment I’ve come upon a number of times is the trolley problem, which has been postulated in various forms. A version I remember asks you to imagine that you are standing next to a switch that can be used to redirect a trolley onto an alternate route. A trolley is coming along. *Horrors:* It’s on a route such that, if it keeps going, it will kill three people who are on the tracks beyond the switch. Fortunately, you can save them by turning the switch and redirecting the trolley on the alternate route. Unfortunately, if you do that, the trolley will kill a person who is on the tracks on that route.

What will you do? You have seconds to decide. Pull the switch, and you will have directly caused someone’s death. But if you don’t pull the switch, three people, instead of one, will die because of your inaction.

In another version of the trolley problem, in order to save three people, instead of pulling a switch with the result that the trolley will kill only one person instead of three, you have to push a person onto the tracks. Distaste for making physical contact in such circumstances tends to be stronger than for acting remotely, even though both actions produce the same result. Philosophical inquiries can’t ignore human emotions.

In his book *Life Is Hard* (2022), the philosopher Kieran Setiya asks, “Would you choose to save one person from an hour of torment, or to relieve a multitude from mild headaches?” In this experiment, unlike in the trolley problem, no one dies, and the facts are more nebulous. What is meant by “torment,” and how many is a “multitude”? It would be futile to try to be precise, and there is no right or wrong answer. Setiya, who suffers from chronic pain, tells of agonies

he has endured. His personal experience with pain, rather than philosophical reasoning, may have formed his view that it would be worse for one person to suffer torment for an hour than for a multitude to have a mild headache.

One could argue that all novels, movies, and plays are thought experiments or series of thought experiments. They depict imagined characters, imagined situations, and imagined actions. This is taken to an extra dimension in the movie *Groundhog Day*, starring Bill Murray. If you've seen it, you probably remember that Murray's character, Phil Connors, is a crude, cynical guy who wakes up the day after Groundhog Day and finds that it's Groundhog Day all over again, and this keeps happening day after day. Connors's successive Groundhog Days are like a series of thought experiments exploring the consequences of acting different ways in the same circumstances without affecting his real life.

This process is immensely frustrating but instructive for Phil Connors. He learns what otherwise might never have been possible: how to stop being a jerk. A Groundhog Day comes when he behaves in a reasonably sensitive and civilized way. The young woman he has been pursuing, who was repulsed by his conduct on previous Groundhog Days, gets a version of him she finds appealing. His succession of Groundhog Days ends.

Real life choices are rarely, if ever, as bizarre as the trolley problem, or as incommensurable as the torment and mild-headaches problem, or as fantastical as the Groundhog Day problem. Nonetheless, constructing hypothetical situations and thinking about what would happen in various contingencies can expand your field of vision and give you new windows into your psychic state.

In most thought experiments presented in this book, I describe a situation and ask what you would think or do in these circumstances. Then, in most cases, to supply another perspective, I say what I would think or do. Almost without exception, I don't presume to give the right answer to these questions. Few of them have right or wrong answers. The thought experiments in this book aren't intended to tell you what you *should* think; rather, they ask you to consider *what* you think. This can be useful: Becoming aware of what I think and of the consequences of failing to think have improved my chances that whenever the road ahead of me diverges, I'll know which way to go.

THE MIRACLE WIZARD

By way of accounting for the seemingly impossible situations that arise in this book, I'm pleased to present to you the Miracle Wizard, whom I'll refer to from time to time as the Wiz. As you'll soon see, the Wiz has an extraordinary range of imaginary powers, one of which he likes to show off by appearing right in front of you, which he is about to do now.

#1 At age 17, would you rather have an exceptionally wonderful life ahead of you, but die when you're 50, or have a mediocre and unrewarding life and live to be 100?

Imagine that you are 17. You're walking along on a bright spring morning, thinking about how in two months you'll be graduating from high school. You stop in your tracks and blink.

The Miracle Wizard has appeared out of the blue and is standing in your path. It's not in his nature to bother with formalities, like introducing himself or apologizing for startling you, but you've been briefed about him, and you're aware of his extraordinary powers. You know that you'd better put up with him — he might have an important influence on your life.

"It's time for you to make a decision," the Wiz says. "From now on, you can either have a mediocre life, with more than your share of troubles, heartbreak, and career problems, but live until you're 100, at which time you'll die peacefully in your sleep; or you can have a rewarding, enjoyable, and accomplished life, including a happy marriage and delightful children, but, sadly, you'll die in your sleep a few days after your 50th birthday. Once you've made your choice, you'll forget that we met — you won't know what lies ahead for you. But whichever of these two lives you decide to have, that's the one it will be."

What a cruel choice, you think when you hear this. Life has been good to you so far. The life ahead can be even better, but if you choose to have it, you'll only live until you're 50. You don't want to die that young. You'd like to live until you're 100.

Best to think a moment before making a decision. After 50, physically, you'll be in decline. You'd hate to give up a chance for a wonderful life just to have many years more of an unenviable life, growing steadily older until you're a doddering senior citizen.

You're still pondering this dilemma when the Wiz says,

"Well, what's your decision?"

The Wiz told you that you'd forget having met him, and that while you're having this great life, you won't know that it's going to end when you're 50. That's critically important. If you knew ahead of time that your life was going to be cut off when you're only 50, you'd probably think about it every day — it would drag you down. If you don't know that you're going to die prematurely, that doleful prospect won't hang over you. You can live happily, assuming that you have

as much life expectancy as anyone your age. I think that in these circumstances, from the perspective of a 17-year-old, living a great life to age 50 is the better option.

#2 At age 50, would you prefer to be living a wonderful life that's about to end, or a mediocre and unrewarding life, knowing that you'll live to be 100?

Imagine that in the previous experiment you chose the relatively short but wonderful life instead of the long but mediocre life. The years have gone by, and now you're 50. Life has been good to you. You have a great career, a wonderful family, and you feel that in your work and in your interactions with others, in a modest sense, you've made the world a better place.

You're feeling a warm glow of self-satisfaction when the Wiz suddenly appears in front of you. As he had said would be the case when you first met him, 33 years ago, you had completely forgotten about him. Now it comes back to you — the choice he gave you when you were 17, and how you said that you would prefer to have a wonderful life even though you'd die a few days after your 50th birthday. You feel faint thinking about it: You have only a few days to live!

"Relax," the Wiz says. "I can arrange it so you don't have to die in a few days if we reach an agreement on something."

You try to keep from shaking. "What's that?"

"You'll have to agree to having made the other choice — having had a mediocre, unsatisfying life — but you'll have good health and live to be one hundred."

"Huh!" you exclaim. "How can that happen?"

"Simple," the Wiz says. "I'll wave my wand, and a moment later, you'll find yourself in the circumstances you would be in today if you had chosen to live a long, mediocre life. You won't have any sense of having lived the wonderful life you've experienced. Instead, you'll remember the entire disappointing life you've led. The upside is that you'll have five more decades of healthy life ahead of you."

"But it will be a mediocre, humdrum life," you exclaim, "and that's what I'll remember about my first fifty years. What a come-down!"

"I have to agree with you," the Wiz says. "Though it's not as much of a come-down as having your life end a few days from now. But you're right: If you opt to change to the long, mediocre life, it's not as if you'll have lived the wonderful life that you remember right now — you will never have had it! Those great times won't have happened."

Is it more important to you to be alive even if you're not really satisfied with your life than to have lived a wonderful life and soon be dead but be remembered for all the good things you did and having your wonderful spouse and children living on?

It took me some time to decide what I would do in this situation. I thought about what it is that would make a life great. It's not just a function of the amount of money you have or the degree of success or status you attain. In a way, it depends on how much spirit you have — on what you make of life.

I'm trying to get my thinking straight about this. If I accepted the Wiz's offer to transition to the long, mediocre life, I could at least hope it would get better. That would mean a lot to me, even though right now, before I make my choice, I would know that it won't get better. That ignorance-is-bliss factor might tip the scales for some people. I might opt for the long, dull life if I didn't feel that I had a duty to stick with my present life even though it's about to end. If I chose to have lived the mediocre life, I'd live to be one hundred, but the good times I've had in life would never have happened. More important, I'd probably be committing my children to never having been born. That seems almost as bad as killing them. It's unfortunate, but it seems like the right thing for me to do in these circumstances would be to hold on to the good life I've had and prepare to die. At least I'll have a brief period during which I can reflect with satisfaction about the wonderful times I've had.

This makes me think of what would be an even starker choice. Suppose having people close to you is not a factor, and you're not about to die, but are already dead. Would you rather be alive and have fifty years more of a mediocre and unsatisfactory life ahead of you, or to have had a wonderful life in all respects except that you recently died? From your perspective, does it make the slightest difference what kind of life you lived once you're dead? Of course, once you're dead, you don't have any perspective, so maybe that's a meaningless question.

#3 How does the value of mobility compare with being able to look back on a wonderful life?

Imagine that you are single, and in your late seventies, and have recently moved into a retirement home. It seems like a no-brainer when the Wiz gives you the option as to whether, so far, you've had a wonderful, happy life, or a mediocre, unsatisfying life.

"A wonderful, happy life, of course," you say. Not to your great surprise — it's just like the Wiz to throw a curve ball like this — he tells you that if you've been living a wonderful, happy life, you're about to be diagnosed with irremediable spinal stenosis and will have to use a walker to get around for the rest of your life; whereas if you've been leading a mediocre, unsatisfying life, thanks to a successful course of physical therapy, you would be fully mobile and even be able to play tennis.

In your late seventies, other considerations being equal, would you rather have had an unsatisfying life but have excellent mobility, or be severely hampered in your activities but able to look back on the wonderful, happy life you lived?

I would go for having had the unsatisfying life coupled with excellent mobility. I'd try to think of a way to avoid looking back on my unsatisfying life — I would try to cultivate a state of mind such that I could dwell on positive things. I think I could convince myself that, regardless of whether my life up until now has been satisfying or not, it's in the past, and my focus will be on the present and the future.

#4 Is it better to be courageous or a coward?

The Wiz tells you that you are about to start a whole new life and will have no memory of the one you've been living up until now. Luck will play a big role in the kinds of circumstances in which you find yourself, but before your new life begins, you'll be allowed to choose from one of these two options:

Would you choose to be a courageous person or a cowardly person?

"Well, goodness," I'm guessing you'd say, "Wouldn't anyone rather be courageous than a coward?"

"Maybe; maybe not," the Wiz says. "Before you decide which you want to be, let me give you an example of how this might play out in the life you'll be living: Imagine that you're in your mid-20s and in good physical condition, and you're walking past a modest two-story house and are shocked to see smoke pouring out of one of the second-story windows. A car pulls up alongside you. The driver, an elderly man, lowers his window and waves his cell phone. 'I'm calling nine-one-one,' he shouts. Seconds later, a frail-looking woman with a cane hobbles out the front door. She's coughing and can barely walk. A cloud of smoke trails behind her.

"*Help!*" the woman cries, pointing up at another second-story window. 'My granddaughter is sleeping in that bedroom — she's just a baby!'

"You glance up at where the woman is pointing. You're trying to gather your wits when you see flames shooting up from a hole in the roof in the middle of the house.

"You try to think fast and keep calm. You don't hear any sirens. It may take several minutes for the fire department to arrive, maybe more."

The Wiz pauses, perhaps trying to achieve dramatic effect, then continues:

"At this point, you don't have a decision to make. You have already chosen whether to be courageous or a coward in this life. If you chose to be a coward, you stay put and say to the baby's grandmother, 'The fire department should be here any moment!' Then you peer anxiously down the street, hoping to see a fire truck coming. It seems like forever, but less than a minute later, you hear a siren; then you see a fire engine turning a corner and heading toward you. Thank goodness, you think, help is on the way! But will it get here in time?"

The Wiz sweeps his right arm through the air and doesn't

answer the question he posed. Instead, he says: “That’s not what happens if you are a courageous person. In that case, almost the instant the woman says that there’s a baby sleeping upstairs, you take a deep breath, rush into the house and run up the stairs, intent on saving the baby.”

“Then what happens?” you ask.

The Wiz rubs his eyes for a moment. “You make it upstairs. There’s smoke in the hallway. It takes you a few moments to get your bearings, but you find the baby’s bedroom, pick her up from her crib, and rush out of the bedroom only to find that flames have already reached the stairs you just climbed. You rush back into the bedroom, still holding the baby, and open the front window. A fire truck is pulling up in front of the house. Firemen jump out and begin unreeling hoses. You yell at them. One of them looks up and sees you with the baby in your arms. He runs up to the side of the house beneath you. You drop the baby. He gracefully catches her. The baby is saved, but the flames are advancing. You rush back to the top of the stairs, thinking you might be able to get down safely now that you’re not carrying the baby, but you see there’s no chance, so you rush back to the bedroom, hoping that the firemen have set up a ladder. At that moment the roof collapses, crushing you to death.”

You feel stunned, hearing this account. “Sorry,” the Wiz says, “but that’s what might happen if you’re courageous.”

“What might happen next if I’m a coward?” you ask.

“If you’re a coward, you wouldn’t try to rescue the baby. It would have been crushed by the falling roof or burned to death before the firefighters have a chance to place a ladder against the side of the house. You would feel terrible. You’d spend months trying to come to terms with how you didn’t try to save the baby. You’d lie awake at night, thinking about it.”

Hearing this, conflicting emotions swirl in your head.

“Now it’s time to decide,” the Wiz says. “When your new life begins, do you choose to be courageous or be a coward?”

If you choose to be a coward, turn to page 14.

If you choose to be courageous, turn to page 15.

“Call me a coward, Wiz,” you say. “I don’t mind. If something like what you described *did* happen, it would be too bad I failed to save the baby, but I’d still be alive! I’d rather keep living than be a dead hero.”

“Sorry” is one of the Wiz’s favorite words, and he uses it now:

“Sorry. The trouble is that, even if you never encountered a situation in which courageousness and cowardliness come into play, you’d never feel as good about yourself as you would if you had chosen to be courageous. Your decision would take a toll on you every day. If you had decided to be courageous, you would have had a slightly greater chance of dying at a younger age than if you were a coward, but you’d feel better about yourself. You would live a more satisfying and noble life. Next time, if you have a chance, choose to be courageous.”

“I choose to be courageous,” you tell the Wiz. He nods and tells you that you made the right decision. He goes on to say that courageous people tend to feel better about themselves than cowardly people do, and that they should: They are better people than cowards.

I agree with the Wiz, but he might have added that people aren’t always cowardly or always courageous. I think of myself as courageous, but maybe I’ve suppressed memories of acting cowardly. One such memory I didn’t suppress is of a time when I was fifteen years old and I was in a room with some other guys, and one of them — an aspiring alpha-type who was on the school wrestling team — was taunting and administering little pokes in the ribs of another kid. I felt uncomfortable and had an urge to rebuke this bully. I’d been bullied myself and knew how it felt. I wouldn’t have been able to best this thuggish character physically, but I could have called him out on his behavior. The kid being bullied would have appreciated that. Instead, I sat squirming nervously without saying or doing anything until the episode mercifully reached an end.

Sometimes, as in my case, courage gives way to cowardice. Sometimes courage overcomes cowardice. My father was a blimp pilot in World War I. His job was to patrol the U.S. coastline and drop depth charges on German submarines. He never located any, but on one mission his blimp developed a leak and slowly lost altitude until it flopped into the ocean. Pop and his crewman took to their life raft. They drifted for several days and were almost out of rations when they were spotted by sailors on a Chilean freighter. The ship altered course and turned toward them. Rescue seemed imminent, but then the ship turned away and resumed its original course.

That was probably the lowest moment in Pop’s life, but to his amazement, the ship changed course again, this time turning toward them. It continued its approach, then slowed almost to a stop as it pulled alongside the raft. Sailors lowered a cargo net. Pop and his crewman climbed aboard. The captain met them and explained that, after changing course with the intention of rescuing them, he became afraid that the raft with two men in it was a trap laid by a German submarine commander. He ordered the helmsman to resume the ship’s original course. Minutes after he’d made that decision, another emotion took hold: distress at having deserted two men in peril. He ordered the helmsman to change course again and head toward the raft. I’m sure he felt relieved and happy after taking Pop and his crewman aboard.

#5 Luxurious solitary confinement

The Miracle Wizard is back, this time with the sad news that you have only a few days to live, but he quickly adds that you needn't despair: Instead of passing into nonexistence, you can choose to live in solitary confinement, not in any way resembling a prison, but in a beautifully designed, extraordinarily well-equipped house on a large, lush island with a fabulous climate and sparkling, clear lakes, streams, and waterfalls. Not only that: There's an impressive mountain nearby with a trail leading to the summit, from which you'll have a superb view of the ocean in all directions. You'll have a tremendous stock of books you can read, musical recordings you can listen to, video games you can play, movies you can watch, virtual realities you can experience, a state-of-the-art kitchen, and an ever-stocked pantry and refrigerators always freshly filled with your favorite foods. Your house will have beautiful surroundings, a fifty-meter-long swimming pool, heated to whatever temperature you like, and use of a nearby ski and spa resort operated by unfailingly courteous robots. You're guaranteed good health; and you're likely to enjoy having every kind of workout equipment, a sauna, and a lovely garden visited by a great variety of songbirds; and you'll have many other perquisites, all tailored to your interests and tastes. The downside of this attractive setup is that you will not encounter a single other human being, ever.

Since the alternative is to resign yourself to dying in a few days, you're about to take the Wiz up on this offer when he tells you that you'll never be able to leave this place. You won't age, you can't get sick, but neither can you die. Any attempt at suicide will be futile. How long you'll continue to exist in this paradise is unknown. "It could be forever," the Wiz says.

Given the restrictions and limitations that come with it, do you opt for luxurious solitary confinement, or resign yourself to dying in a few days and not coming back to life?

Hmmm. The Wiz said that this new life might last forever, and that no suicide attempt would work. I've read that solitary confinement has such a bad effect on people that many consider it to be a form of torture. Taking the Wiz up on his proposal might be fun for a while — you'd be living in luxury, not in a jail cell — but it would take a toll on you

Over the long run, it might feel like being tortured. It seems best not to take a chance.

Having said that, it occurred to me that being dead is

solitary confinement too, though you're not conscious of it. On further reflection, if I were you, I'd be inclined to accept the Wiz's offer. I'm guessing that I could find enough human company in books and movies and listening to human voices singing, even if only on recordings.

Then again — alone forever? I don't know about that. I never imagined that eternal bliss could be scary, but this form of it is.

#6 Your very own universe

Many physicists and cosmologists think it's likely that there are multitudes of universes. They have no proof that this is so, but the existence of other universes would resolve some cosmic enigmas for which presently there's no other explanation. In any case, there's almost unanimous agreement among experts that the universe we are in came into existence 13.8 billion years ago when the event occurred known as the Big Bang.

You have read about this, so you know what the Wiz is talking about when he appears and informs you that there are indeed multitudes of universes and that new ones are coming into existence all the time. He says that they form so readily that he can assign you to be in charge of one. You can be that universe's God!

Do you say to the Wiz, "No thanks. That's more responsibility than I want to take on right now." Or do you say, "Why not? I'll give it a whirl."

Assuming that you choose the latter option, you have quite a task ahead. According to the instruction manual for universe creators that the Wiz has given you, your first step is to decide whether you want to create a universe in which the physical laws and parameters are such that life can emerge. The Wiz informs you that the vast majority of universes are flops. The laws of physics that obtain in them are such that they either collapse or blow apart, sometimes within milliseconds after they come into existence. That's no fun, you think. You want to have living organisms in your universe.

"No problem," the Wiz says, after reading your mind. He gives you specifications for satisfactory physical laws and parameters. You crank them in, and *whoosh* — you're witnessing your universe's Big Bang.

Fortunately, you can fast forward, so you don't have to wait several billion years, which is what it takes before life starts evolving in even the most promising new universes. As soon as that happens in your universe, reports begin reaching you (thankfully much faster than at the speed of light, which, from your divine standpoint, is exceedingly sluggish). Bacteria have appeared on thousands of planets in one of the first galaxies to form. About a hundred thousand billion trillion quadrillion more bacteria will form in each of billions of your universe's galaxies during the next few billion years, and you won't have to lift a finger to make it happen.

What have you wrought?

That's not an idle question. Given that conditions in this universe are quite similar to those in the universe you grew up in, within another few billion years, and maybe sooner, sentient creatures — animals — will appear and evolve. You know that life has never been easy for most sentient creatures that have lived on Earth. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes said that, for people without a government, life is poor, nasty, brutish, and short. That's been the case for the majority of humans through the ages. For animals with smaller brains than ours, circumstances have been even worse, which reminds me that the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer concluded that life is something that shouldn't have happened.

As the God of your universe, you have tremendous power, but some weighty questions have been thrust upon you; for example, in your universe do you want to have adorable-looking animals similar to seals that have to go through their lives in terror that at any moment they'll be chewed to pieces by the equivalent of a polar bear or a killer whale? And what about people? A tiny percentage of people on Earth have lived very well, but huge numbers have been no better off than weasels and toads. Countless millions of humans have spent their lives as slaves. Are you willing to let that happen in your universe? You could be the agent causing thousands of billions of people-like creatures to spend much of their lives in pain. You don't want that! Is there a way to fix your universe so that life isn't as hard for creatures as it's been in your home universe?

Of course, echoing the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz, you could say, "Look, the planet Earth in the universe I grew up in is the best of all possible worlds, so give me a break." Or you could be less crude and say, "What about all the great achievements of humans in art, music, and science? I'm not going to stop that from happening in my universe!"

How are you going to make a better universe than the one we're in without it being boring, and is that even possible?

Maybe it's possible, though, arguably, creatures need to endure some adversity, even pain, so they have challenges to overcome, something to add zest and spiritedness to their lives. Yet there's clearly too much suffering and cruelty in our universe. What can you do to prevent it in yours? What if you instilled a compassion gene in every sentient being? The average amount of compassion that every member of every species in your universe has will be a notch greater than it would be if such creatures had evolved without the nudge you're giving them. A disturbing thought comes to mind: Would creatures

whose genetic code had been designed that way function properly? Animals and human-like creatures in your universe might need natural selection rather than a divine gene tinkerer to survive. You realize that this is true when you consider how long a hyena with a compassion gene would survive.

Is there a way to have no hyenas in your universe — no carnivores? Could you have one where the pretty creatures that evolve will be content munching on grass and fruits and nuts and so forth and not live in fear? With no predators to keep them in check, they would probably multiply exponentially and devour all the edible plant life. They would compete more and more, biting and stomping each other to death in the battle for plant food. How can you avoid such unintended consequences, ones you can think of and ones you can't? That's a big question for you.

I'm sorry. I don't mean to be downbeat. I wish you good luck with your new universe, but don't have any illusions. It's not all peaches and cream being God.

#7 You are a character in a computer game played by an unstable adolescent.

You are living in a computer simulation. You're the avatar of an unstable adolescent (the "U.A."), who is manipulating you in a video game. The U.A. wants you to succeed. He wants you to overcome the Krogicides, who are trying to capture you and drag you off to the Krellium mines, where you'll have to work 22 hours a day doing slave labor while toxic fumes rise around you and orange-eyed lizards nip at your heels.

Permit me to digress: Are you aware that some big-brained hominins, like the prominent philosopher Nick Bostrom, for example, think that we humans are all living in a computer simulation? This could really be happening. The U.A. himself may be living in a simulation. He may be at the mercy of the overlords, as I'll call them. They may be responsible for his unstableness!

This is not a pretty scenario, but in your case there's a silver lining. Thanks to the Miracle Wizard, unlike every other avatar in a video game, you can see that the U.A. is unwittingly leading you down a path where Krogicides are hidden in a grove of bristle trees, waiting. You need to veer off the trail you're supposed to be moving on.

At the moment, the U.A. is distracted. He's exchanging text messages with his girlfriend instead of manipulating you and watching out for Krogicides. This is a chance to make a move:

There! You managed to go off the trail you were on. Or so you think. It might have been the overlords who turned you so that you were facing and moving in a different direction and made you think you did it of your own volition. In any event, you were able to hide behind a boulder before a Krogicide scout came by. You're safe for the moment, but you'd like to get back to base camp before the U.A. starts paying attention.

Uh, oh. You feel a tug on your shoulder — you're being pushed along. The U.A. is paying attention now, and he's eager to keep you from getting captured. Good for him. He's trying. He feels smug. He thinks he's saved you, but he doesn't realize how you helped him (or the overlords helped you help him). What a lucky U.A. he is to have you as his avatar!

But will *your* luck last? The U.A. has stood up and is staring aimlessly out the window, wishing for something, but he's not sure what.

The U.A. isn't playing, but you feel yourself moving on the board, walking on a path that runs along a cliff facing the sea. This is remarkable: Overlords may be playing the game

without bothering to have a human thinking he's playing it!

You pass a shabby white cottage. The front door is ajar. Now you've stopped. The overlords have stopped playing with you. At least it seems so. You're curious about what's in the cottage. You'd like to see what's in there.

Do you try to enter the cottage?

Or stay still and not risk attracting attention?

It's a tough call. If I were you, I'd want to see what's in the cottage. That's what I'd advise: Try to find out what's inside. Except, suppose the overlords notice that you're moving by yourself: From their point of view, the game would be having a malfunction. You could be deleted with a click of one of their big pudgy fingers. (I don't know if they have big pudgy fingers, but I have a hunch that they do, and I have good instincts in such matters.) Anyway, I think it would be best to play it safe and not move on your own.

You're standing motionless, thinking. Good. You realize you're not moving. Then you realize you don't have the power to move! You're frozen in time. At least it seems that way — such things happen. But thankfully it's not as if the seemingly real person that is you is frozen in time. It's just you as an avatar. The seemingly real you has escaped from the U.A.'s control! You know that has happened because you are back in what you think of as real life, except that you're not in control of your own will. Some force is tugging at you, moving you toward the kitchen, making you feel like you want a snack. You feel anticipatory pleasure.

Just as good and bad things can happen in a computer simulation the way they can in real life (if there is a real life, and we — all of us — aren't living in a computer simulation and aren't able to say anything about real life), it's in what seems to be real life that you have reached the kitchen. You open the fridge door — or the overlords have caused you to open the fridge door.

Hmmm. Leftover chocolate layer cake. You take it out and have a bite. You smile. It may only be simulated chocolate layer cake, but it tastes real. That's what counts.

#8 You die and go to heaven.

You lived a good life and tried to be a good person and regretted your moral failings. You may not have followed whatever special religious ritual would swing wide the pearly gates, but it turns out that the rules are looser than you had feared they would be. Within a short slice of eternity after you died, you found yourself in . . . *What else could it be when you're walking on a cloud, and all the souls you see have beneficent smiles on their androgynous faces, and you hear lovely music, except a bit heavy on the harps, and you're gliding along — no need for a tedious succession of lifting one foot off the ground, and then the other, and then the other . . .*

It is indeed pleasant, and you've only had a glimpse of it, so you still don't know that much about it, but you haven't felt this cheerful in a long time, if ever. . . until you think about tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, which was said, referring to life on Earth, by a famous character after he'd had a particularly bad day, but it occurs to you that it might be applicable to anyone's afterlife as well.

Assuming that you would be admitted, which you are aware is doubtful, and you still don't know much about it, would you want to go to heaven when you die?

If you need some guidance before answering this question, you might be interested to know that Emily Dickinson visited heaven when she was still alive and what she thought about it:

Almost contented
I could be
'Mong such unique
Society.

**#9 You are about to die, but you can have a second life
as an animal.**

Had not for each of us the ball of the great cosmic roulette wheel fallen in the slot marked *Homo sapiens*, we might have been born as members of a non-human species. We're lucky we aren't cockroaches or some such unpleasant-even-to-think-about creature.

In my Choose Your Own Adventure book *You Are a Shark*, I gave "you the reader" chances to be, successively, one of several animal species. (This was written before I'd heard of the philosopher Thomas Nagel's essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?")

Thinking about what it's like to be another species might make one appreciate being human. Imagine being a member of a herd of impalas, one or two of which are picked off by lions every few nights. It's best, generally, to be at the top of the food chain. At least that was true before humans came along. Early humans risked going hungry, but they didn't have to worry as much about predators as impalas do unless they were young children or well past their prime, though they faced other perils, for instance snakes, disease-bearing insects, and each other.

If you were about to die and had the option to be reborn as an animal, would you give it a try, assuming that you could choose the species of animal you would be? If so, what would that be?

I would be tempted to accept this offer if I could be an animal that has certain wonderful experiences that a human can never have. I'd be willing to risk being an eagle, or an albatross, or an orca, or even a sperm whale and see what it's like to dive down half a mile and battle a giant squid.

Maybe I'll backtrack on that. I wouldn't want to have been Moby Dick. Marine mammals have to worry about humans hunting them, ships mowing them down, choking on plastics, drinking polluted water, and enduring human-made noise.

Ever since humans arrived on the scene, they have been killing and abducting animals, enslaving them, breeding them to their liking, and driving untold numbers of species into extinction. It would seem better, as a general principle, to be an animal living in pre-human times.

Are there exceptions? I've known dogs that had a pretty cushy life. Champion racehorses in retirement are said to live well. When I was in the Navy, I watched dolphins riding the bow wave of the ship I was on. They were having a fine time.

#10 You are aging backward, but no one else is.

Here's the Miracle Wizard again. The last thing he would ever do is ask how things are going for you, or how your family is, or talk about the weather. As usual, he jumps right in:

"If you tell me to wave my wand, you'll start growing younger at the same rate that you and everyone else have been growing older. Before you decide if you want to do this, there are certain aspects of this condition I want you to be aware of. You may have seen the movie, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. If so, I don't want you to be confused by it. The title character in the movie was born having all the features of an old man, and he aged backward throughout his life. He'd never had a prior life, so he'd had no prior experience even though he looked as if he had. In your case, if you accept my offer to age backward, you'll retain all the memories and possess all the skills and knowledge that you've acquired during your present life. As you grow younger, the gap between your years of experience and those of your contemporaries will widen at the rate of two years for every year that passes, because each year you grow a year younger, you'll gain a year's experience, and your contemporaries will be a year younger (and a year less experienced) than your contemporaries were the previous year."

You're trying to decide what to say in response, but the Wizard continues: "Keep in mind that you won't be retracing the life you lived in reverse. If, let's say, you broke a leg at one point in your life when you were still aging, there's no reason to think you'll break it again when you've retro-aged to the age when it happened. That doesn't mean your life will be risk-free. You might not have broken a leg while you were aging, but break it while you're retro-aging."

You feel anxious trying to think this through. If you go along with it, you'll get younger at the same rate at which you aged from the time you were born. Take your age right now and count all the way back to where you will have retro-aged to a few months before you were born. At that point, you'll be too young to survive outside the womb, and that's when for all practical purposes you'll be dead. How do you feel about this? Given the age you're at now, would you be glad to have aging backward happen to you?

If you were, say, about ten years old, you wouldn't be happy retro-aging. In two or three years you'll be considerably smaller and weaker. Your reading and math scores will be way above average for your (now, younger) biological age — maybe off the charts — but you'll probably seem very young

to your former friends, who are now about twelve or thirteen. Because of the added experience you've had, your new, seven-year-old contemporaries will likely seem childish to you even though they're about your size.

If you're in your nineties, like me, this is a completely different situation. Getting steadily younger will be a welcome development. Instead of being in terminal decline, you can expect many decades of increasing physical capability and continuing progress in your career. As you are aging backward, you will have increasingly greater amounts of life and work experience than you had when you were at your present age when you were still aging forward.

If all goes well, you'll eventually have retro-aged long enough to be a teenager again (though you won't think like one), followed by slipping into pre-teen years and having diminishing options. You'll lose your driver's license because you can no longer see over the steering wheel, and your feet can't reach the pedals. As your retro-aging continues, it won't be long before you face the dismaying future of the retro-aging ten-year-old mentioned above.

Even while you're still in your prime, your situation will be problematic. Tensions are bound to arise as your spouse or partner ages at the same rate you are retro-aging. Your continuing chronological divergence with your former contemporaries is likely to distance you from close friends, a process that will become more pronounced every year. You will lose a valuable bond with others because you won't share with them the common experience of aging.

By the time you're a teenager, your old friends may find you too young-looking to tolerate. As you retro-age to infancy, your frontal cortex will be getting less and less well developed. During your final year, you may sink into a state comparable to dementia.

Who will take care of you? Your parents and aunts and uncles may have died by the time you've retro-aged to infancy.

Despite these downsides — depending on how old you are — for a lot of people, retro-aging, like forward-aging, would be good while it lasts.

#11 Risking everything while having a fabulous time and getting set up for life

Because of some mysterious transformation, you find that you are 20 years old and about to finish your sophomore year in college. You are in excellent physical condition and feeling psychically well-balanced and reasonably happy, but you're apprehensive about what career you'll pursue and about the large student debt you've run up, and you're apprehensive about your future generally.

You happen to be mulling over these challenges when the Miracle Wizard appears, unannounced, as usual. You weren't expecting him, but you're not surprised when the first thing he says is:

"I have a great deal for you!"

"Really?" you say, trying not to sound as skeptical as you feel.

"No need to go for it if you don't want to," the Wiz says.

"Maybe you're not interested in hearing what it is."

"I am. Please go ahead," you say.

"This would involve dropping out of college for a year or two, but the payoff could be tremendous. It will get you totally set up for life."

"Really?"

"It will cost a lot of money, but an incredibly rich benefactor will cover all your expenses, and if you complete your assignment — exclusive of the all-expenses-paid training period preceding it — within two years, she'll pay you ten million dollars."

This makes you more skeptical than ever. "What's the assignment?" you ask.

"Actually, there are three possibilities. You can pick whichever one you want, understanding that, whichever it is, you must complete it in less than two years. All you have to do is choose the assignment you prefer, and you'll be on your way to earning ten million."

"I'm listening," you say warily.

"Good. Here are your options:

"Option one: Starting and finishing at Buenos Aires, and rounding Cape Horn, sail around the world single-handed, making only four stops of no more than one week each to get resupplied and make repairs or replace equipment as needed. In the course of your voyage you'll have to travel about twenty-three thousand nautical miles. Your incredibly rich benefactor will provide you with a fully equipped, state-of-the-art, 36' sloop with self-steering capability, all supplies and provisions needed for getting underway, and money for

whatever you need to buy at re-provisioning stops. She'll also provide you with three months intensive training in ocean sailing and navigation by top experts before you set out. Many people have accomplished such a voyage, including ones in boats much less well-equipped and supplied than yours will be. Traveling west to east, you'll be favored most of the time by prevailing winds. There are risks, of course, for example, being caught in storms that no boat this size could survive, being run down by a large ship, falling overboard, being attacked by pirates, going off course and hitting a reef, becoming seriously ill or injured with no medical assistance available, and colliding with debris. (This last type of calamity is dramatized in Robert Redford's movie *All Is Lost*, in which his sailboat collides with a shipping container in the Indian Ocean.) In the best of circumstances, your voyage will be physically and emotionally demanding.

“Option two: Ride a bicycle (pedal power only) on roads and trails from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, on the Arctic Ocean, to Ushuaia, Argentina, on the Strait of Magellan, almost at the southern tip of South America — a distance of about ninety-five hundred miles. As in the case of the sailing assignment, your trip will be fully financed, including the cost of a top-of-the-line mountain bike, spare tires, replacement parts, camping gear, and food supplies. Before you set out, you'll be given three months of rigorous professional training and physical conditioning. Risks for this assignment include being struck by trucks or cars, falling ill or having an accident with no medical assistance available, and, when you're traveling through certain areas, being attacked by robbers and thugs.

“Option three: Climb Mt. Denali, the highest peak in North America, which rises twenty thousand, three hundred feet above sea level and requires a thirteen-thousand-foot climb from base camp. As with your other options, all expenses will be paid by your benefactor, including for three months of rigorous aerobic and high-altitude training in mountaineering skills, plus the services of a guide who will accompany you on your climb to the summit. Perils include avalanches, falls, hypothermia, dehydration, altitude sickness, and physical and mental exhaustion. Approximately fifty percent of those who attempt to reach Denali's summit turn back along the way.”

The Wiz pauses, giving you three or four seconds to think about this; then he says: “Whichever assignment you take on, you must complete it on the first try and within two years after completing your three-month training period to earn your award.”

Do you tell the Wiz that you'll take on one of these three assignments? If so, which one?

If I'd had this chance after my sophomore year in college, I would have jumped at it, and the prospect would be even more attractive if I were in college today because of advances in technical equipment.

I think you'll agree with me that your decision shouldn't necessarily turn on which activity you prefer among sailing, biking, or mountain climbing. Other factors to consider are how long it would take to complete your assignment, how much risk of death or serious injury there is, and how much risk there is that you wouldn't be able to complete the assignment on the first try and within two years.

Whichever assignment you choose, even if you quit after completing only part of it, you'll have had great training and a wonderful life experience that would have been over-the-top expensive if you'd had to pay for it yourself.

#12 You are alive and feeling fine even though you're 125.

Imagine what your life would be like if you were still alive and had reached the age of 125. You're the oldest person in the world, and the next oldest is only 117. You are able to walk with a cane and engage in interesting conversations, your mental faculties are largely intact, and you don't look a day over 120.

You reside in an assisted-living facility. Your hearing isn't good enough to enjoy music, and your eyes tire if you read for more than a few minutes at a time. You have to be helped getting into and out of the rocking chair where you spend most of your time. All your contemporaries are dead. You have no spouse or partner. All your progeny are dead or can't be located except for your great-granddaughter, Eliza, who visits you a couple of times a year.

You are barely aware that you are an international sensation. Doctors, physiologists, and other specialists want to study you. They want to solve the mystery of how you've been able to live so long. They offer to pay you to cooperate with them. Not that you need the money. You're making a lot from product endorsements like for the type of cereal you eat and even for the brand of gin you used for making martinis before you quit drinking when you reached 118.

All this attention is nice in a way, but rather wearing, and it's not going to last much longer. Eminent doctors who have examined you say that your heart is weakening, you are maxed out on medications. They say you're not going to make it to 130.

Would it be worth it to live this long and experience what it would be like? Or would it be an exercise in masochism? I didn't mention it earlier, but the Wiz has given you the option of taking a pill — no pain involved, just a pleasant buzz for a few minutes — and you'll be out of here.

I would say, "Give me the pill," except it occurs to me that doctors might be able to learn something about the aging process by continuing to study me. My extremely rare case might offer clues that would lead to effective treatments to slow aging. If I could be a useful subject for scientific study, it would bring meaning to my life.

In your case, there's your great-granddaughter, Eliza. Her visits must be high spots in your life, and probably in hers too. Maybe you can provide inspiration to her and have a positive effect on her life. Come to think of it, maybe you can have a positive effect on the lives of people who take care of you. And, of course, that would go for me too if I were in

your position. That's reason enough to hang on longer. If you have an honorable purpose in life, it's worth living no matter how old you are.

You see:

An aged man is but a paltry thing
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,*

*From "Sailing to Byzantium," W. B. Yeats

#13 Comfortably ensconced in a space capsule, you start falling upward, accelerating at the same rate as you would in free fall in a vacuum.

If you had the misfortune to fall out of an airplane without a parachute, were it not for air resistance, you would fall at an accelerating rate — about 22 miles per hour faster each second than the previous second. This is a rate of acceleration known as 1G (G standing for the gravitational force near sea level). This means that you would be falling at about 22 miles per hour at the end of the first second, 44 miles per hour at the end of the second second, and 66 miles per hour at the end of the third second, roughly the same rate of acceleration that's achieved by some high-end sports cars.

We're constantly "trying" to fall at this accelerating rate toward the center of the Earth, but we're kept in place by the Earth's surface or something on it, so our experience is of feeling weight. If we were in free fall, we'd feel weightless.

If just by falling, you can accelerate from zero to sixty in less than three seconds, it's not hard to imagine a spaceship taking off from Earth, and, thanks to being equipped with nuclear fusion or some such exotic method of propulsion, keep accelerating at that rate, not just for three seconds, but for hours, days, and weeks. All that time, if you were in this space capsule, because you're accelerating at 1G, you'd feel that you weigh the same as you do sitting in a chair on Earth, except that, depending on the ship's interior design, you might feel your weight against your back instead of against your feet or the seat of your space suit.

Continuing to accelerate at the same rate, it would take about two-and-a-half hours to pass the moon. This would be equivalent to a sports car accelerating from zero to 195,000 miles per hour in the same amount of time. Still accelerating at the same rate, you would pass the orbit of Neptune (roughly 2.7 billion miles from Earth) in eleven days. By then, you'd be traveling at about 5,750 miles per second, which is about three percent of the speed of light. As you build up such tremendous speed, maintaining this rate of acceleration becomes increasingly difficult. I'm wildly guessing that reaching more than, say, seven percent of light speed is the limit of future human capability.

Assuming that you could keep accelerating at 1G until you reached such a dazzling velocity, even if you could maintain it indefinitely, it would take about sixty years to reach Proxima Centauri, the nearest star to the Sun. This star appears to have at least three planets. It would be nice to land on the most attractive of them. It's not likely to have breathable air, but you could open the hatch. Then, keeping

your space suit on and fully secure, you could step outside, stretch, walk around, and admire the scenery; you can be sure it would be interesting to behold.

A problem to be dealt with on this fantastic journey is that if you don't start slowing down when the planet you're visiting is billions of miles ahead of you, you'll go by it so fast that you'll see nothing more than a bright, blurry streak.

**#14 You don't know when you'll die, but you
can choose how you'll die.**

Unless you're in unusual circumstances, you don't know when or how you're going to die. You probably don't want to know. But suppose, though you don't know when you'll die, you can choose how you'll die.

What way would you choose?

Not toughing it out while enduring terrible pain or discomfort, let's hope. Much better is to die mercifully sedated in hospice care. I had an elderly relative who had known death was coming and died peacefully in a hospital bedroom with his family gathered about him. That's a classic way to go. Better, in my opinion, is the route taken by my maternal grandmother. In failing health, she took a big swig of sherry and lay down for a nap from which she never woke up.

Well done, Grandma, I thought afterward. Only years later, I asked myself how I could be so sure that Grandma died peacefully. How could I know that she didn't have an episode of pain and anguish before she expired?

That's possible, but I think it's more likely that she had no conscious experience in the time preceding her death. Having brushed away this fear about Grandma, I think dying unexpectedly in your sleep is best. You're relieved of the grim expectation of oncoming death and whatever emotional distress may come from contemplating it. From the perspective of everyone close who survives you, your death is a shock no matter how you die — and probably more so if you die suddenly and unexpectedly. At a minimum, it's upsetting. Besides the sheer grief that those closest to you may feel, there is a lot else they have to deal with: acknowledging condolences, administrative chores, a funeral or memorial gathering, dealing with personal property, readjustment of plans, in some cases disruption of whole lives, and a feeling of loss that may linger for years.

The aftermath of one's death can be very burdensome for others, but from the perspective of the deceased, sudden death never happens. I would be happy to outwit death in this fashion. That I had checked out and wouldn't be checking in again might be distressing for others, but it wouldn't be for me.

#15 You are about to die, but have the option of living as a character of your choice in a novel that has become real; the events described or alluded to in it are actually happening.

You are shocked to learn that you have almost no time to live. You can hardly think straight, but the Wiz has made you an offer of continuing life as a fictional character made real, and that's worth considering. Closing your eyes to concentrate, you try to recall the name of a character in a novel you'd be willing to be if the events in it had become real.

Rarely does a novel follow a character through from birth to death. We usually only learn what happened during an eventful period in his or her life. Two famous novels come to mind, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, that chronicle the lives, respectively, of Leopold Bloom and of Clarissa Dalloway through a single day. But the Wiz posed the question this way:

Imagine that you are living the life of a character in a novel. Knowing what happened to that character in the time-frame of the novel, and imagining what happened to him or her before and after that time frame, is there a character in a novel you've read whose life you think would be worth living?

A literary character for whom I have affection is Huckleberry Finn. In the case of Mark Twain's novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it's not hard for me to imagine Huck's early childhood before the narrative begins and what his life might have been like after it ends — after Huck and Jim part ways, and Huck lights out for "the territory" (possibly Oklahoma and beyond). A wide variety of possible futures lay ahead of Huck after he left us on the last page of Mark Twain's book.

Instead of being Huckleberry Finn, I might choose to be Ishmael in Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*. Ishmael had an incomparable adventure and lived to tell about it. Another possibility I've considered is Pierre, a principal character in Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace*, which I first read roughly seventy years ago. I had remembered only that Pierre is a good-hearted fellow and gets in on a lot of the action, so he seemed like a promising candidate, but rereading the book a few years ago, I was reminded how impulsive, naive, and easily manipulated he is.

Early in the book, Pierre inherits an enormous fortune. Unsurprisingly, becoming fabulously rich does not bring him happiness. Over the course of hundreds of pages of the book, he seeks relief from angst in philanthropy, dissipation,

freemasonry, heroic feats of self-sacrifice, romantic love, and “the path of thought.” It takes being captured by the French, incarcerated in miserable circumstances, witnessing an execution, and almost being executed himself for him to appreciate the empowering benefit of simple goodness. That alone doesn’t quite do it, however. As the book nears its end, he has entered into what appears to be a reasonably happy marriage, but he still seems to be searching for psychic self-satisfaction.

Rereading this sprawling novel, I felt sympathy for Pierre and even some admiration, and would probably prefer to continue living as him rather than be dead, but I’d want to find a character in a novel with whom I feel more simpatico. I had read *A Farewell to Arms*, by Ernest Hemingway, years ago, and remembered enough about it to think that the hero / narrator, Frederic Henry, might be a character-come-to-life that I would be willing to be. I read it again to make sure.

Like Hemingway, Frederic Henry was an American and an ambulance driver in Italy during World War I, the period in which the novel is set. Henry had been commissioned as a *tenente* (a lieutenant) in the Italian Army. He is wounded, and he and a beautiful, witty, and wonderfully spirited nurse named Catherine fall in love with each other. Henry quickly recovers from his wounds and has some thrillingly described adventures, including — to escape pursuers — jumping into a swiftly flowing river and almost drowning before grabbing hold of a log as he is swept downstream. Later, with the ever-so-wonderful-and-beautiful Catherine as a passenger and sustained only by occasional swigs of brandy, he rows a boat thirty-five miles through rough waters on a long lake on a dark and stormy night to get himself and Catherine across the Swiss border so he won’t be shot for deserting the Italian Army. Once settled in Switzerland, Frederic’s and Catherine’s life together becomes so over-the-top idyllic that one senses that things will go very badly before the book ends, and they do; yet our hero survives unscathed. By then, I was so imbued with the Hemingway ethos that I would be ready to be this guy if the Wiz said that I could be after I die. Except maybe not, because, although Frederic Henry’s liver is apparently intact when the book ends, I don’t think it will be much longer, given the amount of cognac, whisky, martinis, and great variety of wines he has consumed at a rate averaging about two drinks per page and, in view of the story’s tragic dénouement, seems likely to increase after Hemingway finished writing about him.

So here I am, not sure of *any* character I’d like to be. I’d have to ask the Wiz to give me time to read more novels, hoping to find the right one.

There may be an even wider range of exemplary female

than male characters in literature. Shakespeare alone created some of the wisest and wittiest I've encountered. My guess is that a popular choice for the purposes of this thought experiment would be Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist of Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*.

Elizabeth and her family would be categorized as early-19th-century upper-class members of the landed gentry in England. Elizabeth's father had inherited a manor and agricultural lands that yielded a comfortable income, but because this estate was entailed, keeping it in his family required his having a male child. Mr. Bennet was a young man when he married, and it seemed unlikely that this would be a problem, but, one after another, every child born to him and Mrs. Bennet was a girl until there were five of them with no prospect of more children to come. This meant that upon Mr. Bennet's death the family would lose their estate and its income and they would have little to live on. It became imperative that suitable husbands for the Bennet girls be found!

Elizabeth is the second oldest and, in both character and intellect, by far the most impressive of the lot, but life for her does not go smoothly. (How could it for the protagonist in a great novel?) But her performance in finding her way through the thickets of genteel country life is phenomenal. It would be exhilarating being Elizabeth Bennet brought to life: "Her temper was to be happy . . . She was not formed for ill-humor." Her philosophy was to "think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure." Her father, speaking of "her lively talents," warned her that they "would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage."

Not that she never erred! As a result of her misapprehensions, she experienced painful recognition that she had "prided herself on her discernment . . . acted despicably . . . gratified her vanity . . . courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away."

But how often her wisdom shines through. When the haughty and imperious Lady Catherine de Bourgh tries to bully Elizabeth into declining the expected offer of marriage from Lady Catherine's nephew, Elizabeth meets her every argument, threat, and imprecation with élan:

"Has he, has my nephew, made you an offer of marriage?" Lady Catherine demands to know, to which Elizabeth replies: "Your ladyship has declared it to be impossible!"

"It ought to be; it must be so, while he retains the use of his reason. But your arts and allurements may, in a moment of infatuation, have made him forget what he owes to himself and his family. You may have drawn him in."

"If I have," says Elizabeth, "I shall be the last person to confess it."

At this point, this grande dame admonishes our heroine: "Miss Bennet . . . do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends, if you willfully act against the inclinations of all. You will be censured, slighted, and despised by everyone connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never even be mentioned by any of us."

"These are heavy misfortunes," Elizabeth replies. "But the wife of Mr. Darcy must have such extraordinary sources of happiness necessarily attached to her situation that she could, upon the whole, have no cause to repine."

Nor would any woman, I imagine, who chose to be Elizabeth Bennet in a second life.

#16 What would you say if you could talk to your much younger self?

The Wiz tells you that you can spend half an hour with your earlier self. He warns you that you will not be allowed to talk about anything that happened in your past (your earlier self's future) and that you should think carefully about what you're going to say.

Would you take advantage of this opportunity? If so, how old should your earlier self be when the two of you meet? And what would you say to your earlier self?

If the Wiz offered me this opportunity, my reaction would be: What a great chance to steer my earlier self onto a better course! I wonder if the best age to receive this counsel would be when I was twelve and undergoing an extensive period of debilitating anxiety. Despite my mental instability, I might have been receptive to wise counsel then, but it would probably have been more effective to have had such a talk when I was more mature, most likely when I was starting college. I think it would have been hugely beneficial if who I was then could have grasped a few basic precepts.

Not trusting my earlier self to preserve them in memory, I would print them neatly on a sheet of paper and hand it to him. "Hang onto this checklist," I'd say, "and refer to it from time to time."

CHECKLIST

1. True self-confidence and inner strength require honesty and compassion.
2. Wise decision-making requires consideration of the possible consequences of your actions or inaction.
3. Resistance to destructive impulses requires personal integrity.

**#17 Turning back the clock and living life forward again
from when you were much younger.**

Rather than only letting you talk to yourself when you were much younger, the Wiz just offered you what he calls “an even better deal”: You can turn the clock back to a pivotal point in your life and start living your life over from then on — for example, from when you were about to start high school or college. He says that if you take him up on this offer, you’ll remember everything that happened to you up till the time when you turned the clock back, so that once you do, it will be like knowing the future. He warns you, however, that, for the most part, what you remember having happened in the future isn’t going to happen again. The coincidences that formed your experiences — the situations in which you found yourself, the interactions you had with people — won’t reoccur. Not only that, but random variations are so pervasive in the progression of events that the personal lives of everyone on Earth will diverge increasingly from how they played out before. You will no doubt be wiser than you were when you were previously that age, because of your experience in having lived through those years of your life, but many of the situations in which you’ll find yourself and the choices you’ll have to make will be very different.

Even if you feel that you could live a more satisfying life this time, you might not choose to accept the Wiz’s offer, because you probably wouldn’t marry the person you did and definitely wouldn’t have the kids you had — it would be as if they never existed except in your memory. You wouldn’t want that! If such considerations aren’t applicable, you’ll almost certainly want to turn the clock back, because, being younger after you did so, you’d instantly have a longer life expectancy than you have now, and there’s a good chance that it would be a better-quality life because of the experience and wisdom you’ve gained during the life you lived earlier.

Given the circumstances that the Wiz laid out and your personal situation, would you turn your clock back, and, if so, what point in your life would you turn it back to? How do you think what you gained in knowledge and understanding in the life you lived before would affect your attitude and decision-making when you’re living through years of your life a second time?

Something I would consider before accepting the Wiz’s offer is the enormous role that luck plays in life, and how sometimes, through some misfortune, the right decision may set one on a path to adversity, and the wrong decision may

open up opportunities that one wouldn't have had otherwise.

I made some awful decisions that I wouldn't want to repeat, but one or two of them set me on a path on which, along the way, I had some exceedingly good luck that there's no reason to believe I would have had if I'd made the right decisions and found myself in different circumstances. Starting over — because of my experience in having lived a previous life — I surely would be wiser, but it's doubtful that I would be as lucky, and firmly lodged in my mind is the observation by the great New York Yankees pitcher Lefty Gomez: "I'd rather be lucky than good."

It's impossible to know, but I'm sure that, second time around, there would be both correspondences with, and divergences from, the life I've lived so far. I might have gone to a different college than I did the first time I was that age, and I certainly would have taken some different courses. It's likely I would have majored in philosophy instead of public and international affairs. Both are excellent courses of study for preparing to go to law school, but there are innumerable reasons why I wouldn't have gone to law school this time.

What made me decide to do that in the first place? The quick answer is that my older brother, Dick, went to law school and that seemed like a good enough reason for me to do the same. That leaves the question: Why did Dick go to law school? The best answer to that is that my Aunt Dorothy married a law professor, and he influenced Dick. The law professor had a brother who was a biology professor. Suppose my Aunt Dorothy had married the biology professor? I might have majored in biology. You can't make assumptions about how the years you'd be living over again will turn out, or even about what kind of person you will be.

You have probably thought of things you would have done differently if you'd had the knowledge and insights you have now. It might help heighten your awareness of what kind of person you are and how you've changed over the years to consider what they are. I feel as if I'm a whole different person than I was "back then." Who was that fumbling, bumbling character? I don't feel I even know him, much less that I *was* him, because, when I was him, I didn't know myself.

If the Wiz offered me this chance to turn the clock back, I might be too curious about how my second-chance life would progress to turn it down. That's true even though it's unlikely that in this second life I'd still be alive by the time I reached the age I am now.

**#18 Imagine that what John Lennon imagined
in his song “Imagine” happened.**

I’ve been thinking about John Lennon’s iconic song “Imagine.” Consider for a moment what it would be like if certain things referred to in the lyrics were, as Lennon imagined, absent from our culture and our polity, most notably “religion,” “countries,” and “possessions.”

Do you think the world would be better off if it were what John Lennon imagined?

I don’t think that religions, countries, or possessions are the problem. One could argue that it’s the character of the people who have possessions, the character of the countries, and the character of the religions as they are practiced that matters. Greed, religious dogmatism, and extreme nationalism have caused a lot of problems in the world — maybe most of them — but if everyone had the right state of mind, having possessions, being religious, and loving one’s country wouldn’t be a problem.

I don’t mean to be dismissive of the spirit of John Lennon’s song. He was thinking along the same lines as Gonzalo, a venerable character in Shakespeare’s play, *The Tempest*. Gonzalo revealed his idea of a better world:

I’ the commonwealth I would by contraries
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none . . .
No occupation; all men idle, all,
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty —

Gonzalo was even more dreamily idealistic than John Lennon, imagining a society where no one has to work, and where courts and judges would not be needed to administer justice. But Gonzalo would be more conventional than Lennon in that he would allow possessions, so long as no one is either rich or impoverished.

There’s no point in trying to think through how either Lennon’s or Gonzalo’s visions could work in practice. Neither is a serious prescription for restructuring societies. Rather, they express the age-old human yearning for a simple, peaceful, equitable society sustained by universal good will; an ideal civilization in which we are all spared the strictures of the law; the harsh rivalries of nations, tribes, and factions; the cruel disparities that emerge in the progression of events; and the ugly imprint of warped religious and secular doctrines on our lives.

#19 Would you rather have your brain uploaded into a special-purpose, super-AGI computer than be dead?

You are about to die, but the Wiz says you can avoid death if you're willing to accept this offer. He says that, in his opinion, it would be better to exist in this super-AGI computer than in luxurious solitary confinement as described in thought experiment #5. You will be physically isolated, it's true, but you'll have lots of interrelationships with other brains — in artificially intelligent computers and in human heads. You'll have plenty of stimulating input — full internet access, for example — no subscriptions needed, and you won't be degraded by aging.

You'll get increasingly skilled, learned, and capable. You'll be a valuable asset to humanity. You'll have no physical desires. You'll dine exclusively on electricity, and you'll have no trouble getting as much of it as you want. You won't need to move around. And because you are such an extraordinary phenomenon, you'll get lots of supportive attention. You will, of course, be tremendously intelligent — above genius level in some respects — in large part because you'll benefit from extraordinary connectivity with other minds and computers. Your life will be far richer than that of most people who have ever lived. The downside is that you'll be deprived of enjoyable physical sensations and experiences. Activities that most humans take for granted won't be available to you. You'll have only a poignant memory of what it's like to walk or run or dance or do innumerable other things that most people can do.

Would you find it tolerable, or even enjoyable and stimulating, to have your brain uploaded into a special-purpose, super-AGI computer? Would you rather have that happen than be dead? If you had been born that way — if your consciousness had first emerged in a computer — would that make life more tolerable than if you had a personal memory of having lived in a body and as a result found yourself obsessing about what bodies can do and you can't?

In a way, we are already confined in a very small place — in our heads. Perhaps some sensations that normally require a body can be artificially generated the way hallucinations can occur without input from sensory organs. In his book *Hallucinations* (2013), Oliver Sacks describes a great variety of these phenomena, Sacks says that some people can hear music playing “in which every note in a piece, every instrument in an orchestra, is distinctly heard.”

That must be an interesting experience for them. The

life you would have if your brain were uploaded into the Wiz's computer would be much richer than that. One caution, however: If you decide to take a chance on uploading your brain into a computer — even one provided by the Miracle Wizard — don't count on replicating physical experiences that embodied people take for granted.

Would a strictly intellectual life suffice? For people like me, and probably you, it's hard to see how it would, but for the super-brain you would be if you were a brain in this computer, it might be all you want or need. Someone once asked Bobby Fischer, the chess genius, "Do you think life is like chess?" He replied, "Life *is* chess." Since a brain in a computer is capable of playing championship chess, Fischer might have been satisfied being one. Without the distractions of physical life, he might be able to beat not only all the grandmasters, but the best chess-playing computers as well.

As a brain in a computer, if you have the right inputs, connections, and resources, you might function on a level beyond the reach of anyone else in the world. You'd be confined physically, but you could still have a rich, full, satisfying life. I would welcome a chance to have that experience, but only if I had the power to turn myself off.

**#20 You're living 30,000 years ago but know everything
you know now.**

The Wiz told you that it was about to happen, and you know he wasn't kidding when you find yourself — still remembering the life you were living in the 21st century — but transported to a cave in France 30,000 years ago.

Fortunately, your companions aren't stereotypical dull-witted people walking around carrying thick wooden clubs. *Au contraire*. Most of them are pretty sharp. There's an artist in the clan who has been drawing pictures of antelopes on the walls with charcoal. Light from a flickering fire makes them seem almost real.

You don't have to worry about seeming foreign to the others. You're wearing animal skins like everyone else. The moment you arrived in the cave, the Wiz instantly briefed you on your clan's culture and who everyone is, and made sure you could speak and understand their language, which is now your second language.

Everyone regards you as belonging to the clan, and you feel secure because you have a job — in fact two jobs: One is hunting for small game with a bow and arrows of your own making; the other is being a storyteller.

Late in the afternoon of your arrival, DeZog, the chief of the clan, takes you aside.

"Hunting and gathering were good today," he says. "Tonight, we feast. Afterwards, you tell a good story."

He grins and gives you a poke in the ribs. It hurts, but you know enough not to complain.

What sort of story will you tell your fellow cave people?

I would tell about the time I met an eagle that had landed on a rock outcropping near me, and, to my astonishment, started to talk. I said to it, "I never imagined that an eagle could talk!" But it did. It said, "I have taken the form of an eagle, but I am not an eagle. I am a prophet."

"A prophet?" I said. "Does that mean you can tell what happens in the future?"

"It does," said the eagle / prophet.

"Wonderful," I said. "Tell, me then, what will happen, not just tomorrow, but after hundreds of lifetimes of winter snows have covered the ground and melted away."

Then I would say to the people gathered around, "The eagle talked to me for such a long time that I fell asleep listening to it. When I woke up, it was gone, but I could remember every word it had said to me, as if everything it had said was what I had known all along."

Then I would tell them about some things that will happen during the next 30,000 years. One thing I would say the eagle told me is that far, far in the future, people will fly, and they will fly higher and faster and longer than eagles do today — so high and so fast that some of them will land on the moon.

Because of the extraordinary things I would tell everyone, I might become a legend. The members of my clan might come to think that I was a god. It's also possible that they would come to think that I was a nut, making up such ridiculous, impossible tales.

#21 You're 20 years old, and you have a super-advanced AI machine that can make the right decisions for you every time.

The Wiz really came through for you with this one. He says that the Super Advanced AI Machine (SAAI) he's providing you with is able to fully inform itself, take all facts and circumstances into account, weigh pros and cons, and analyze all possible factors in the light of your values and principles, or, to be more precise, in the light of the values and principles it has decided you have after analyzing everything about you so thoroughly that it knows you better than you know yourself.

This unprecedentedly amazing device is, of course, connected to the World-Wide Super General Artificial Intelligence Net and continually upgrades itself and informs you of what you need to know in a millionth of the time it would take thousands of PhDs to research and reflect on the matter and advise you, and it invariably produces the best possible decision. You won't have to spend energy thinking about anything before acting or deciding not to act. This SAAI machine will do it for you.

"Believe me," the Wiz says, "It won't take long before you've made super smart decisions that you wouldn't have made on your own — you'll see stunning results almost as soon as you start using it. Your SAAI is going to give you a great lift in life.

What would you do with your SAAI machine? How would you use it?

If you employ your SAAI in a business setting, you're likely to make a lot of money. It should be useful in everyday life too; for example, in how you spend your spare time; how you determine what sports, cultural, and social activities to engage in; what romantic relationships to develop, if any; whether to pursue your studies; and when and where to travel, engage in politics, or take up some other pursuit.

Wondering where to go on your next vacation? Maybe visit Italy or Greece? Or would you be happier getting in touch with the natural world? How about a canoe trip on the Allagash River in Maine? Maybe you should visit Glacier National Park, in Canada — see the glaciers while they're still there. You'll have no need to puzzle over what would be most rewarding: Your SAAI will know best,

It's weird to think about it, but this SAAI will make as good or better decisions than you could make on your own

every single time you consult it. You could let it make *all* your decisions, knowing that it would never, ever, go wrong!

Would you turn all your decision-making over to your SAAI?

I can see how this SAAI might work beautifully for me. Thanks to my incredibly improved decision making, within a few minutes, I'd get a novel I wrote revised to perfection, and within a few more minutes, SAAI would turn out a screenplay based on it that would be destined to be an Oscar-winning movie. I could make a huge amount of money in the stock market. It wouldn't be long before countless little things would be going better for me.

That's a nice fantasy, but it's just as likely that I'd feel that something is wrong. I might start wondering why I'm not happier. I might think I could use SAAI for everything, but then realize that doing so would reduce me to being a zombie or a robot because I would only be doing what the SAAI machine told me to do. I wouldn't be a free agent, making my own decisions, which is a requisite for leading a rich, full, satisfying life. To avoid that unappetizing fate, I would probably try to make decisions based on my own reasoning, as one would with the aid of an ordinary computer — keeping my SAAI machine at arm's length and considering in each important instance whether its “correct decision” is or is not right for me. *Except*, wouldn't that lead me back to where I was before — groping my way through life, and with the added worry that everyone who is doing what their SAAIs are telling them to do is passing me by?

#22 Checking out the scene 1,000 years from now.

I've been speculating about what it would be like to find myself a thousand years in the future. It reminded me of cases in which people who have been blind since birth have a surgical procedure that allows them to see perfectly. They don't behold a landscape or interior the way people sighted from birth perceive it, but a blur of colors and shapes. It takes them a long time before their brains can make sense of what those who were never visually impaired take for granted. Similarly, it might be beyond the capacity of most of us to make sense of what's going on if we suddenly found ourselves living a thousand years from now: It might require skills and understanding that can only be attained if cultivated from an early age. I can't begin to guess what life might be like if AI-enabled robots do everything that people used to do. *Homo sapiens* may be extinct, in which case, if you could be transported to that time — to a formerly well-populated part of the planet and found no one there— you would have reason to assume that our species flourished, proliferated, and transformed Earth, eventually causing our technologically dependent civilization to spin out of control, and that the human saga has come to an end.

Perhaps, the situation would not be so disastrous. On arriving in the 31st century, you might find that enough humans had acted sensibly until artificial intelligence got so it could do everything, including maybe some things so unexpected that no one can figure out what grand plan the AI machines have in mind, and we humble members of the human species aren't even trying to figure it out. If that's how things are a thousand years from now, when you arrive there, you might find that everyone is sitting around doing what looks like nothing from your perspective until it dawns upon you that they are living in virtual-reality land.

In his little book *Night Thoughts*, Wallace Shawn tells of reading *The Pillow Book* of *Sei Shonagon* and of the appeal to him of the life it describes of gentle folk in ancient Japan who seem to have nothing to do but recline on pillows and write letters and poems to each other. Such a life might be possible once AI takes care of everything, but I doubt if Shawn, or any of us, would find it satisfying. Not for long. And it's far from assured that the course of history will follow such a trajectory. Life in the 31st century may consist of misery and little else.

The more I think about it, the more apprehensive I feel about checking out the scene a thousand years from now. I can imagine arriving there and wanting to get in on the action, or inaction, but it doesn't work out that way. I'm in future

land, but I don't learn anything about future land because it's so different from our own, and there's no way to decide what to do in these circumstances. Thinking for oneself may not be the way things are done.

If you accept the Wiz's offer, there's certainly a risk that you would find yourself in a brutal situation, maybe a lot worse than if you had rematerialized thirty thousand years in the past. The Wiz didn't say whether AI machines would rule the Earth, or whether insects or bacteria would, or whether you might freeze, or fry, or experience some other form of immediate, or agonizingly slow, cessation of existence.

It's totally understandable if you decide not to risk being transported to the far future. As for me, despite these weighty considerations, and mindful that I may instantly regret it, I'm too curious to see what it's like to say, "Thanks but no thanks." Instead, I'd exclaim: "I'll go for it, Wiz. After I die, bring me back to life a thousand years from now."

#23 Checking out the scene 14 billion years from now.

“It’s an arbitrary span of time ahead of us,” the Wiz says.
“I’m only offering to transport you there because it’s about the same amount of time that lies ahead of us as the amount of time that lies behind us back to the Big Bang. The Earth will not exist fourteen billion years from now, but you’ll be provided with a comfortable space capsule with transparent walls. You’ll be able to view the cosmic scene in all directions, and afterwards you’ll get safely back to your own time.”

Do you tell the Wiz you’d like to see how things look fourteen billion years in the future?

Yes? Then you should know that roughly five billion years after you were living on Earth, the Sun expanded into a red-giant star, frying and blowing off Earth, the other inner planets, and a tremendous amount of gas, whereupon it collapsed into an extremely dense white-dwarf star, which has been cooling and becoming dimmer ever since. Now, thanks to the Wiz, you are situated where Earth would have been in relation to the Sun had our planet not been expelled into distant space. Your locale might sound like an undesirable place to be, but you are not too hot and not too cold, and perfectly safe in a top-of-the-line space capsule, just as the Wiz promised.

The Sun is no farther away than it was when you were in your own time, but it has shrunk and cooled so much that, if you were at the distance the Earth is from it now (about 93 million miles), it would probably look like an extremely brilliant star.

The Wiz has accompanied you on this astonishingly long trip through time. “How’s this for a fresh perspective?” he asks. Without waiting for an answer, he tells you that he doesn’t have the means to take you further into the future, but that if you could go far enough — by about ten to the hundredth power years from now — you would find that star formation has ceased and galaxies have gone dark. The expansion of space will cool all this vast amount of stuff to nearly absolute zero — the so-called ‘heat death’ of the universe.

“Maybe it will start up all over again,” you say.

“That could happen,” the Wiz says.

#24 You have a painful epiphany.

Is it worth experiencing an extremely painful emotional shock to have an epiphany — to suddenly become enlightened about the true nature of your character and the tragic nature of the life you have led? Suppose, in one or more important respects, you have failed to think about why you've behaved the way you have. It can't be easy to be suddenly enlightened as to how obtuse, or unaware, or unthinking you've been.

In Henry James's short story "The Beast in the Jungle," a gentleman named John Marcher has a feeling that some great event will happen to him, as if a beast in the jungle will spring out at him. He confides this intimation to a young woman, May Bartram, with whom he subsequently develops a close relationship, but holds back from courting, as if their romantic bonding would have to await the momentous happening that he is so sure lies ahead of him. May indulges him in this fantasy and is supportive of him for years, even after her health is failing. At a pivotal moment, she approaches him closely, inviting him by her manner to cease his arid speculations and simply *love* her. Marcher remains obtusely fixated on himself.

May dies soon afterward, and it is only when Marcher visits her grave and sees a man nearby, who — it is clear from his demeanor — is stricken with grief, that Marcher realizes that the great event that awaited him has passed.

The reader can imagine what is going through Marcher's mind at this moment: "*Why didn't I feel grief like that? Why didn't I express love to May? Why did I squander my chance to marry her?*" The beast in the jungle has sprung. Marcher, overcome with anguish, throws himself on May's grave.

That's the end of the story, but when I read it, I wondered what happens to Marcher afterwards. He is certainly wiser. He will no longer be emotionally numb. He'll have the capability to lead a richer, fuller life than he would have had otherwise. But the pain of his searing realization will always be with him.

If you were John Marcher, would you be glad that you'd had this epiphany or would you prefer not to have had it?

Marcher has aged considerably since he began his relationship with May, but he probably has many years ahead of him. If that's the case, if I were Marcher, I'd prefer to have the epiphany, painful as it is, because without it, I would only lack pain because I had remained numb. My chances for being happy and making others happy would be

diminished without the enlightenment that Marcher — despite his anguish — was lucky enough to have.

I can imagine how Gabriel Conroy, another good man, felt after having a similar epiphany in James Joyce's short story, "The Dead." After Gabriel and his wife, Gretta, return from a family Christmas party to the hotel room where they are staying, Gretta is distant and distracted. In response to Gabriel's questions, she explains that a song that was sung at the party, "The Lass of Aughrim," was the same one that a boy, Michael Furey, sang when she knew him in their youth.

She says that she and Michael Furey went on walks together, that he was a gentle boy, that he was in declining health, and that one evening, seemingly because he knew he wouldn't see her again, though it was cold and rainy, he walked to her grandmother's house, where she was staying, and threw gravel against her window to let her know he was there.

She went down and told him that he must go home; that he "would get his death in the rain." He replied that he didn't want to live. Soon afterward, she learned that he had died.

After recounting this incident, Gretta, overcome with emotion, throws herself on the bed, sobbing. Gabriel, stunned, realizes that "he had never felt like that himself towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love."

Like John Marcher, in Henry James's story, Gabriel Conroy had a belated and painful epiphany, one that may have awakened in him the capacity to love.

#25 Is your life like a novel?

Some decades ago, it occurred to me that my life was like a novel and that whether it would be like a relatively short novel or a relatively long novel would depend on how long I lived. I didn't think it was like a great novel, or even a particularly good one, or even a competently constructed one, but at least it had a succession of events, important characters, and some interesting settings and happenings.

That notion didn't resurface in my mind until a few years ago, when I came across a book by the British philosopher Galen Strawson with the intriguing title *Things That Bother Me* (2018). One of the things Strawson talks about is that many people, including famous writers he mentions, think of their lives as being a narrative, and one of the things that bothers him is how many people think that way.

Do you think of your life as being like a narrative, like a novel?

Strawson says that thinking of your life as a narrative is not a good way to look at it. He gives reasons I won't get into here and cites an even longer and no less impressive list of writers who, like him, see their lives as non-narrative. The difference bears on how you view your *self*. And that thought, Strawson says, requires introducing a refinement: Are you *endurant* or *transient*? If you're *transient*, you don't think of your *self* as having continuity. If you're *endurant*, you see your *self* as being the same *self* throughout life, though you don't necessarily see your life as a narrative.

The best way to be, it would seem, Strawson being that way himself, is to be non-narrative *transient*, because, as he says, "[I have] no sense of my life as a narrative. . . Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. . . Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future." The reason for this seems to be that, although Strawson knows that he is the same human being throughout his life, what happened a ways back in the past is something that happened to another self, and that is what's meaningful rather than that such former self is the human being known as Strawson that he is now. Similarly, future events in Strawson's life will relate to another self than the self Strawson is now.

After reading this, I thought, maybe I should start looking at my life differently than as a narrative. I'm unhappy with my former self, so disassociating myself from him (it?) has considerable appeal. Maybe, like Strawson, I should cease being interested in my former self. It's what my present self is like that counts. No need to think about my future self either.

This would seem to work pretty well. If you see any flaws in your present self, you can disassociate yourself from them simply by deciding to become another self, or at least initiating the process of becoming another self. There's a lot to be said for saying, "What I care about, insofar as I care about myself and my life, is how I am now."

Can you honestly stop thinking of your life as a narrative? I guess so, if you think of your personal history as nothing but a sequence of events. Even a mediocre novel (narrative) should have more going for it than that. Suppose, as in my case, you don't like or admire your former self. If you see your life as a narrative, then that former self is *you* — you can't get rid of it. The more I thought about it, the more I didn't want anything to do with the non-admirable self I regarded myself as having been. I decided to cut ties with my former selves completely and adopt Strawson's view and look at my life as *non-narrative transient*. You can't change the past, but you can change the present. My only self is the self I am now, and the right philosophy is to concentrate on trying to be the best new self I can be every day.

**#26 Would you want to live your life over again
after you die — the exact same life?**

According to the doctrine of eternal recurrence, everything keeps repeating itself. When you die — the theory goes — you'll be born again and live the same life over again. The Wiz just dropped by and told you that this isn't just a theory — it's true; at least it could be true for you, if you like. Keep in mind that if you are living your life over again, you won't know it. You won't have any memory or sense of having lived before. And there's nothing about the life you're living again that can change because of your experience or because of random events. This being the case, there's no logic in saying, "Once is enough." You'd have no memory of having lived before, so each time you live your life over again would be the same as living it for the first time. If you think your life is worth living, then it's worth living each time it recurs, so you should welcome eternal recurrence. It's a form of immortality!

Before deciding whether to accept the Wiz's offer, you might want to think not only about the quality of the life you've lived so far, but also about the life ahead of you. How it looks to you might affect your decision. Suppose your life has been wonderful, but the future looks bleak: You may not want to experience living your entire life more than once.

*Would you want to live your life over again after you die —
the exact same life?*

Because you have no memory of having lived before, the second time and each successive time your life eternally recurs is indistinguishable from the first. So, I think the questions you have to ask yourself are: Has your life been worth living so far, and will the rest of it likely be worth living? Will the pleasure be worth the pain? Will the joy be worth the sorrow? If the answer in each case is "Yes," or at least, "I think there's a good chance of it," then you'll probably want to thank the Wiz and say, "I'll go for it."

Thinking about this raised another question on my mind: If you wouldn't want to repeat your exact same life, does that mean, if you are logically consistent, that you would prefer not to have been born?

**#27 Would you want to live your life over again after you die
— beginning with the same circumstances at birth, but
because of chance variations, it will play out differently?**

This is not eternal recurrence, with everything repeating exactly as it did before. You are born in the same circumstances as before, with the same parents and with the same DNA, but chance occurrences continually introduce differences from the life you lived before. And, unlike thought experiment #17, in which you turn the clock back to a younger age, you'll have no recollection of the life you're living now. There will be important similarities to the life you lived before — most notably, you'll have the same parents, and your first residence will almost certainly be the same as it was last time, but differences will accrue because of chance occurrences. It might turn out that you have a baby sister this time instead of a baby brother, or maybe no younger sibling at all. Your second life will increasingly diverge from the first one. Overall, you might have more luck, or you might have less luck than you had the last time you were living through this period in your life. If you've had exceptionally good luck in life, you might want to consider how having average luck or below-average luck might affect you the second time you're living through this period of your life. If you've had a lot of bad luck in your life so far, you might want to consider that there's a good chance you'll be luckier the second time around.

Before you decide whether to choose to live a second life, you would be wise to consider what the initial conditions were of your present life, what the prospects are for you in your present life, and how they might develop similarly or dissimilarly this time.

Would you opt for living your life over again after you die, with no memory of the life you're living now, and considering that, although your initial circumstances will be the same as they were the first time you were born, this time your life might progress very differently?

I would accept this offer, though with some trepidation. I had some bad luck growing up, and the conditions that caused that bad luck would for the most part be present during the early years of my second life. Later in my present life, I had some exceptionally good luck that would not likely occur in my second life. Given these circumstances, it's risky to me to opt for a second life. If instead of having bad luck followed by good luck, I might have bad luck and then more bad luck. That's a considerable risk, but I enjoy life too much to turn down this chance to live again.

#28 Imagine that the species *Homo erectus* is still extant.

All humans on Earth today are members of the same species, *Homo sapiens*. Throughout human history dominant members of our species have constructed a variety of pretexts for enslaving others, or at least restricting the rights of others over whom they have power. In the United States, besides the indigenous people who were living there when the Europeans arrived, the “others” were mostly blacks abducted from Africa and their descendants, and alleged mental inferiority was a principal argument advanced as to why slavery was morally acceptable.

Enslavers denied their captives the most minimal educational opportunities, imposing ignorance upon them while arguing that it was justifiable to keep them as slaves because they were ignorant. Claims that blacks are inferior persisted long after slavery was abolished and are still made by some white Christian nationalists today.

They should read Jon Meacham’s biography of Lincoln, which is peppered with references to the astute speeches and writings of Frederick Douglass, which serve as a constant reminder that the intellectual capability of this African American far exceeded that of most white politicians and academics of the time — and of our time.

In our present semi-enlightened era, except among those who are outright racists, there is no question that the members of all varieties of our species have the requisite intellectual capability to be accorded the full measure of human rights. But what if the members of the genus *homo* who were captured in Africa and brought to America to spend the rest of their lives as slaves hadn’t been members of our species, but of a distinctly less mentally capable one, such as our precursors, *Homo erectus*, which became extinct a little over 100,000 years ago? As the name implies, these hominins walked upright. Their brains were smaller and less developed than human brains, but they were more intellectually capable than chimpanzees. It’s known that they used fire, made tools that were used for making other tools, and that they probably had a protolanguage. It would seem that they could perform a variety of useful tasks if required to. It’s reasonable to assume that they could be economically useful as slaves.

*Imagine that the Wiz informed you that hundreds of thousands of members of the species *Homo erectus* had been found living in a remote area on Earth. What policies do you think should govern our relations with them?*

Members of the species *Homo erectus* might be irremediably savage and incapable of mutually agreeable social interaction with humans, or they might be eerily human-like but have irremediable behavioral characteristics that are unacceptable in moderately enlightened societies.

Apart from targeted policies that would be appropriate to address such characteristics, I think the right thing to do would be to protect members of the species *Homo erectus* and grant them the full range, or, depending on their capabilities, almost the full range, of human rights. The specifics of a wise policy toward them would be governed by the degree to which we could communicate with them and by our impressions of their temperaments and desires. Their habitat and way of life should be protected against exploitation and malicious interference. It should be illegal to abduct them. Exhibiting them as specimens in zoos or otherwise should be prohibited.

Suppose some of them are intelligent enough to grasp that mentally superior bipeds rule the world, but they want to travel beyond the bounds of their existing habitat and interact with these demigods, which is what we might appear to them to be. Should members of our species be permitted to employ them, or adopt them? Might a charismatic *Homo erectus* become a television or social-media star? They should, of course, be treated beneficently. Only malevolent and cynical people would view them as work animals or nuisances that should be eliminated. Agreement on that point could stimulate debate on whether similar considerations should extend far more broadly. If it's agreed that we shouldn't slaughter, enslave, or exploit members of *Homo erectus*, should we not extend similar protections and care to other sentient creatures?

A quarter of the way through the 21st century, more humans seem to be deciding that not only deliberate but even incidental cruelty to animals is wrong. The issues to be resolved in formulating policies governing our interactions with members of *Homo erectus* would be a catalyst for serious thinking about how we treat our fellow creatures and how we treat each other.

#29 How would you react if you won a billion dollars in a mega-jackpot lottery?

Having a stupendous amount of money fall into your hands can impair your judgment. It's a good idea to "think slow" if it happens to you. Studies show that the euphoric effect of winning a huge amount in a lottery fades away. That may be a good thing, allowing you to think more clearly.

In this thought experiment we're conducting, you don't just win enough to achieve financial security — you win a billion dollars. It's highly unlikely you'll need more than a small fraction of that amount to live comfortably and undertake almost any project that attracts your interest. Extraordinary good fortune has propelled you into "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required ..." territory. How will you meet this obligation?

I understand that MacKenzie Scott, the ex-wife of Jeff Bezos, who had several tens of billions of dollars fall into her hands pursuant to her divorce settlement, has conducted an enlightened philanthropic program. I might try to get in touch with her and some others for advice. I would talk to people with imaginative philanthropic ideas. I have no yearning for luxuries or exotic experiences, like flying to the "edge of space" for the supposed thrill of it, much less owning a quarter-mile high penthouse in mid-town Manhattan. What would make me happiest would be using the money to relieve suffering, spread joy, and make the world a better place. Am I kidding myself, imagining that I would be so idealistic? I'd be happy to find out.

#30 Would you be willing to reduce your future life span by ten percent to learn the answers to some major scientific questions and how the future of Homo sapiens plays out?

The Wiz tells you that if you're willing to have the rest of your life be ten percent shorter than it would otherwise, he will spend the next few hours that are convenient for you describing the future history of humans and answering important questions scientists have about the universe.

Among the things you'll learn are: when our species will either become extinct or evolve into another species; how and when this will happen; what effect the development of artificial intelligence will have on humanity; what if anything happened before the "Big Bang"; how our universe will continue to evolve; whether there are other universes besides our own (or have been in the past, or will be in the future); what the nature is of ultimate reality (to the extent it's comprehensible); if and to what extent there is life in outer space; and if so, whether there are forms of life as intelligent or more so than humans, where they are, what they are like, and whether they will ever make contact with us.

Do you have questions that I haven't thought of? The Wiz will answer all of them, as long as you're willing to pay the price of having ten percent less time to live ahead of you.

Would you take the Wiz up on his offer?

In my view, one of the worst things about mortality is that you don't get to find out what happens after you die. Maybe most people don't care. "What's it to me? It won't affect me," a friend said when I brought up this problem with him. That's a reasonable attitude, I suppose, but not one I share.

I'm curious about what the future holds, and I'd like to learn a lot else about the universe, particularly whether there are advanced alien civilizations out there and where they are and what they are like. I hate knowing that I'll never find out, so I'm inclined to accept the Wiz's offer, even though I'm in my mid-90s and need every bit of future life expectancy I can get.

I realize that if you are young when you have this choice, it's not any easier. For example, suppose you are, say, twenty. Assuming that you take good care of yourself, you have a good chance of living seventy more years. Ten percent of that is seven years. That's a lot to blow off just to learn what happens. You could read a dozen science-fiction books and get several conceivable futures laid out in them, and they might be more interesting than the way future history plays out.

I've tried to set forth the arguments for and against

accepting this offer. For me, getting answers to key scientific questions and knowing what will happen to our species before it becomes extinct is almost like living that long. What a gift, one worth my giving up a few months for, or possibly even a year.

Uh, oh. I was about to go on to the next thought experiment when I heard the Wiz whispering in my ear: “If you take me up on this offer, you’re going to wish that you hadn’t at the moment when your ten-percent-shorter life is about to end.”

#31 If you open a particular door in front of you, the rest of your life may be continuously wonderful.

The Wiz has often appeared unannounced in front of you. This time, instead of that happening, somehow you find yourself next to him. The two of you are in a long corridor and standing in front of a door. Before you can think what to say, the Wiz says:

“If you open this door, the rest of your life may be continuously wonderful, and if you decide not to open it, your life will play out just as it would have if you had never had this option.”

You realize at once that the trouble with this offer is that the word “may” means you can’t be sure. You could open the door and find that the rest of your life will be continuously miserable.

Your first thought is that you should *not* open the door. At least, then, your life will play out as well as it would have if you had never been given that option. Still, it’s best not to be hasty. Maybe you can elicit more information from the Wiz, hopefully enough so you can make an informed decision.

“Come on, Wiz,” you say. “What do you mean when you say that the rest of my life *may* be continuously wonderful? How will I know that it wouldn’t be continuously terrible?”

“I understand how you feel,” the Wiz says. “Unfortunately, I’m not authorized to say anything more, except for one thing. I’m not required to say this, but I want you to know that I’m happy that I’m allowed to say it. Are you ready?”

“Ready.”

Looking you in the eye, the Wiz says, “This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

You press the Wiz to say more, but he only shakes his head and says that he’s not allowed to say another word.

Do you decide to open the door in hope of having a continuously wonderful life ahead of you, or settle for letting the rest of your life play out as it would if the Wiz hadn’t made this offer?

At this point you still don’t know whether you’ll have a continuously wonderful life if you open the door, but you do know that the Wiz is no longer being equivocal. He said that he wasn’t required to say anything more, but he chose to do so. That means he wouldn’t have said this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity unless he was trying to tell you that you’ll be happy if you open the door.

The remaining question is whether you can trust him. Is it

possible he wants to trick you into opening the door and having the rest of your life be miserable? You and the Wiz have gotten to know each other pretty well by now. He has been tricky at times, and sometimes he seems to enjoy keeping you in suspense, but I don't see the slightest indication that he is malicious. I think you can be confident he's telling the truth — that he's trying to tell you that the rest of your life really will be continuously wonderful if you open the door. If I were you, I'd feel that it's safe to open it.

I should say, however, that I have a major reservation. It's not about the Wiz. It's about the prospect of a "continuously wonderful life." A lot of what makes life rewarding is meeting challenges and overcoming obstacles. Doesn't that mean that there have to be occasional discontinuities in happiness to have a basically happy life? Might it be that a continuously wonderful life would be boring?

#32 It seemed to have happened in an instant: As far as you can tell, everyone in the world has disappeared but you.

What has the Wiz done this time? It's been two days now, and you haven't seen a single other person. You haven't been able to reach anyone on the phone, the internet is dead, and there's nothing on TV or the radio. At first, you thought there had been a cyber attack, but the real shocker was when you went outside and saw that some cars and a truck were stopped on your street; two others had gone off the road and come to rest on the sidewalk; and another had crashed into a tree; all this with not a soul in sight.

You tried to keep calm and you got in your car and drove around and soon found cars and trucks crashed everywhere and still not a person dead or alive, as if everyone but you had vanished into thin air.

You drove further afield, but everywhere it was the same, and in some places, cars and trucks had jammed up the road. Apparently, they had stopped for a traffic light, and all the drivers and passengers had disappeared before it turned green. Vehicles had just sat where they were or kept moving until they crashed into another one, or something else, or simply rolled to a stop. You often had to back up because the road ahead was blocked with stalled cars and wrecks, still none with any people in them. You returned home to try to calm yourself and figure out what to do. Despite the terrible shock of everyone having disappeared, you're sure you are still sane, because everything is rational and makes sense except for the complete absence of other people.

You don't have a cat or dog — you feel bad thinking of all the ones that may be dying of thirst or starving. It makes you wish that they had disappeared too. Maybe they did. You haven't heard any barking or seen any pets.

You try to calm yourself and think clearly. You're not in immediate danger — there's a practically unlimited quantity of non-perishable food in supermarkets. As far as you can tell, you can drive as far as you want in any direction. Whenever you're blocked by backed-up traffic, you can walk to the head of the line and find an unblocked vehicle with the key in it and continue your trip. The biggest problem you have is a heavy, dull feeling that's come over you: Maybe you're insane after all.

How will you handle this situation? Do you feel any hope for the future? Do you have a strategy?

It would help if you had a copy of Alan Weisman's book *The World Without Us*. In it, he describes what would happen if all humans suddenly disappeared. Among other effects, toxic gases and liquids would leak from untended factories, oil refineries would leak oil, and nuclear plants would melt down.

In some respects, the scenario you're dealing with is a little like luxurious solitary confinement (thought experiment #5). It's far less luxurious, but preferable, in my opinion, because it's open-ended. If you were in luxurious solitary confinement, you would almost certainly never encounter another human again. In the situation you're in now, you've been presented with a frightening mystery, but you should have no trouble providing for your basic needs, at least for a few years, and you'll be exploring and having adventures. You can drive great distances, looking for others — anyone.

Who knows what you'll find? You have reason to hope that if you search widely enough, you'll find other people, and that means everything.

#33 What duty, if any, do we owe to future generations?

The Wiz just appeared in front of you. He has a troubled look on his face. “Something’s been bothering me,” he says. “You can’t see the future the way I can. It would be inappropriate for me to disclose precise figures to you, but it’s not giving away too much to say that there will be billions of people born after you die. Their well-being will be determined in part by what people who are living now do to preserve Earth’s resources and ensure its continuing habitability.

“Because of humans’ profligacy with fossil fuels and despoiling of the ecosystem, suffering and morbidity will rise dramatically over the centuries to come. Global warming will be relatively tolerable for most people living today — but think what its effects will be during the next century or two!

“Imagine that a delegation of people born one hundred years from now returned to the present and asked why we’re turning the planet into a hot and noxious wasteland. It’s as wrong to ignore future people’s needs as it’s wrong to refuse to help a neighbor in distress.”

Should you be concerned about the welfare of future generations? For example, should more of your charitable donations and personal energies be directed toward efforts to arrest global warming and maintain sustainable long-term ecosystems and resources?

I suspect that many people feel that they have enough to worry about without taking the welfare of future generations into account. Still, what the Wiz said gives one cause to think about what it will be like on Earth hundreds of years from now.

My feeling is that it’s natural and right to direct our time, energy, and charitable giving to benefit people who are living now, but the welfare of future people should be considered too. In particular, I think that we should support and participate in efforts to ensure sustainable long-term ecosystems and resources; to prevent civilization-threatening catastrophes, such as nuclear war, bio-terrorism, and out-of-control artificial general intelligence; and to defend, preserve, and restore democratic and humanitarian institutions and processes. That would help make the world better for future people, and for us too.

#34 If you could have three famous writers (living or dead) join you for dinner, whom would you invite?

The Sunday New York Times Book Review regularly features a one-page transcript of an interview with a noted writer. Often the first question asked is, “What books are on your nightstand?” Judging by how many straight answers the interviewer gets, most authors have sturdy nightstands stacked with books. Also asked is: “What books have influenced you the most?” “What famous books have you never gotten around to reading?” “Is there a famous book you feel is overrated?” More often than not, the last question the interviewer poses is a thought experiment: “If you could have three famous writers, dead or alive, join you for dinner, whom would you invite?” This usually elicits an answer accompanied by a one-line explanation of why that choice is made. I’m sure I’ll never be interviewed for this column, but that hasn’t stopped me from thinking about what writers I would invite for dinner if I had the chance.

What three famous writers, dead or alive, would you have join you for dinner if you had the chance, and why?

Some of the interviewees name the famous writers they would most like to dine with, but don’t give reasons for selecting them; some name ones who they think would provide the most sparkling conversation; some name ones with the hope of clearing up mysteries about them. The first writer I thought of asking was Shakespeare. The characters he created exemplify virtually the whole range of human behavior. Dozens of them might be more interesting to have as dinner companions than most famous writers, and listening to Shakespeare talking about them would be the closest I could get to meeting them. I’d also ask him if he had kept up on the course of history during the four centuries since he died, and if he had, I’d ask what his opinion is of some major figures during that span and whether comparisons might be drawn between some of them and certain characters in his plays.

I hope my invitation would also be accepted by Joseph Campbell, a prominent 20th century expert on comparative mythology, two of whose lectures I attended. Campbell emphasized how the same basic themes could be found in the mythological traditions of disparate cultures throughout the world. This was the idea for his most well-known book — *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Surprisingly, he was irked by the mythology enshrined in the Bible.* In what may have been the last recorded interview of Campbell before he died,

in 1987, he replied to a question about the Bible by the interviewer, Fraser Boa, “Ahhh, don’t tell me — the Bible is a compendium of all the mistakes that have ever made in the translation of symbolic forms into historical.”

Boa failed to follow up on this radical assertion. Perhaps he thought the subject was too complex or too delicate to pursue. I would question Campbell at length on this if he’d be willing to attend my dinner party.

As for my third guest, I would invite that most perspicacious observer of the human animal, Marcel Proust, had he not covered so much in his six-volume-long (in my edition) novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, that I doubt he would have much to add to it. I thought a good alternative to Proust might be James Joyce, but I concluded that I would be bedazzled and befuddled by a stream of cryptic references and lexicographical oddities he would conjure up to amuse himself.

Maybe I could think of someone else. Otherwise, I’d probably seek the company of the Dalai Lama. I’d like to ask him what’s required to attain *bodhichitta*, which he defines as having “a good heart imbued with wisdom.”

* I suspect that this was the basis of much criticism directed at him.

#35 You've been sentenced to live for a year on a small, remote, uninhabited island. Electronic equipment is banned, and you can bring with you one printed book of your choice. What book would you bring?

This is another thought experiment that has some resemblance to luxurious solitary confinement (thought experiment #5) in that you are doomed to live in isolation, except, in this instance, confined for only a year. Your basic needs will be taken care of, and there's no particular health risk, and presumably the island won't be totally uninteresting. But instead of having an array of amenities, including whole libraries of books, movies, and games that some billionaires might envy, you'll have only one modest luxury: a printed book of your choice.

What printed book would you select to bring with you?

Shakespeare's collected works in one volume immediately comes to mind. Where else could you find such a rich assemblage of masterpieces between two covers? As was inevitable, the only one-volume edition of Shakespeare's complete works I've seen has small print, a tightly packed format, and is hard to hold. Still, it's the content that counts; right?

Another possibility is Harold Bloom's 800-page anthology, *The Best Poems of the English Language* (2004). In it, he comments on many of the poems he selected and supplies extensive biographical notes regarding each poet represented. Many of the poems in this volume are replete with cryptic passages and references that are obscure to most readers. With only one book to read on a remote island, this could be an advantage. You might want the book you bring to be one that you can puzzle over, day after day. You'd have plenty of time to speculate about what the poet is saying. It could be frustrating, though, if it turns out that you have all the time in the world but are perpetually in the dark about what a poem means.

An alternative to a tome stuffed with elegant literary passages and arcane references, allusions, ellipses, and antinomies would be a simple tale that's so endearing that it's a comfort to have around — that will always be there, like a big shaggy dog that will come over for a pat when you so much as look at it. Such a book is Kingsley Amis's classic novel *Lucky Jim*, a work that I've reread several times as an aid to preserving mental equilibrium.

Jim Dixon, the anti-hero of this 20th-century novel, is a

lazy, irresponsible, marginally competent young history instructor at a second- or third-rate British university. He's not above playing pranks and concocting outrageous fabrications, and he is rightly fearful that he will be sacked at the end of the term. He smokes too many cigarettes (even by 1950s standards), he drinks too much alcohol, and he shirks every type of responsibility as much as he can get away with — in fact, more than he can get away with. He is lucky indeed to end up with a sought-after young woman and a desirable job. Except it's not just luck that gets him through — he has a basic integrity, an entrenched refusal to be phony and pretentious, unlike nearly everyone else around him. He deserves the "ridiculously pretty" girl. As for the job he's offered, as his new employer tells him, he doesn't have the qualifications for the work, but he doesn't have the disqualifications, "and that's much rarer."

Before settling for having *Lucky Jim* be the only book in my possession for a year, I'd want to take a close look at the competition. Even the quietest life you could construct can be full of surprises and challenges. That's why I could imagine living in a world as narrowly circumscribed as that of Bertie Wooster in one of P. G. Wodehouse's accounts of him, such as *Right Ho, Jeeves* (Jeeves is Bertie's astonishingly astute butler.)

Reading one of these books will draw you into a dreamy state in which illness, aging, crime, poverty, war, natural or human-made disasters except for a chipped tea saucer or the occasional impositions of a fussy aunt or other such feather-weight adversities are rarely so much as mentioned, everyone is well-fed, well-clothed, and well-cared for, free of illnesses and other infirmities, and in which our narrator, Bertie Wooster himself, when he'd rather be sitting in a comfortable chair at his club gazing out the window while quaffing an agreeable beverage, is subjected to only the most inconsequential impositions one could imagine.

How can reading such stuff not be boring? Chalk it up to the genius of Mr. Wodehouse, a beguiling author if there ever was one, as attested to by Evelyn Waugh on the back cover of one of my copies: "Mr. Wodehouse's idyllic world can never stale. He will continue to release future generations from captivity that may be more irksome than our own."

I don't think I'd go crazy during a year-long confinement if *Right Ho, Jeeves* or *Lucky Jim* was the only book I could bring, but at the last moment, having no more time to think about it, I'd probably play it safe and bring the Bard.

#36 You have the chance to have the most over-the-top single experience of your life that you specify.

I'm thinking of a brief period, perhaps lasting only a few minutes — a true peak. For example, experiencing what it's like to be engaged in a prolonged rally at championship point against the #1 seed at Wimbledon, and your opponent drills a sharp-angled crosscourt shot, a sure winner had you not anticipated it and raced to get your racket on it and sent the ball clearing the net by a millimeter and catching the line while the crowd goes wild, and a few minutes later you're holding the trophy above you, turning, smiling at everyone. Or maybe it's the Masters golf tournament, and to win it you need to sink a 22-foot putt on an uneven, sloping green; the crowd is holding its breath as you give the ball a firm tap; for a second it looks like it will roll past the cup, but it veers slightly at the last half-second and drops in. You nod appreciatively at the onlookers, doffing your hat, acknowledging their applause.

Or maybe it's not sports that's delivering this over-the-top moment. Maybe you're lifting your baton to bring forth the opening notes of the overture to Mozart's *Don Giovanni* at the Metropolitan Opera House, in New York. Or, maybe it's nothing seemingly dramatic, and you're not a celebrity, and you have no special skills, but you happen to be walking in a swampy region of Louisiana and turn your head and gasp, because perched on a branch thirty feet away is an ivory-billed woodpecker, an exotic and beautiful bird that had been thought to be extinct, and you get almost a dozen good pictures of it, including one in which it is taking flight.

What over-the-top experience would you ask the Miracle Wizard to arrange for you?

It's hard for me to imagine the thrill of winning a major tennis or golf championship title because I never had the experience or skill to give it context. Same for conducting a great orchestra playing a work of genius. I'd probably be wise to ask for something not too distant from what I think of as over-the-top experiences I've had in my life.

Probably the best among these happened to me about thirty years ago: Swimming about a hundred yards off the beach in Kealahou Bay, on the Big Island of Hawaii, I became almost completely surrounded by spinner dolphins. I felt no fear — I had never heard of an attack on humans by dolphins — but I sensed that I had invaded their territory. I began leisurely backstroking toward the beach. Though none of the dolphins approached closer than within

perhaps twenty yards, they continued to monitor me. I knew that what was going through their minds was the same as was going through mine: curiosity. More than anything else, I think it was this feeling of kinship — our similarity seeming greater than our differences — that made this a peak experience for me.

So what have I never experienced that might rival this as a peak moment? How about skiing at breakneck speed down the mountain in Val d'Isere, France? That would have been peak experience for me, except that I probably would have completed the run strapped onto a toboggan guided by *la patrouille de ski*.

As an alternative, especially in view of my advanced age, I would probably settle for re-reading James Thurber's classic *New Yorker* story about a man named Walter Mitty, an inveterate daydreamer of the most dramatic peak experiences Mr. Thurber could summon up from the famously rich reservoir of his exceptional mind.

#37 You can choose to have a feeling of complete assurance that you'll go to heaven when you die.

"Here's a chance to banish anxiety completely for the rest of your life," the Wiz tells you. "If you accept my offer, you'll feel a warm glow of contentment no matter what happens to you."

"Sounds good," you say. "What's the hitch?"

"There's no hitch — just a terrific payoff."

You notice what you've come to regard as a sly grin on the Wiz's face, as he continues: "All you have to do is say yes, and from that moment on, you'll have an unshakeable belief that you are destined to go to heaven when you die, and that the heaven you'll go to will be even more wonderful than you could imagine."

Before you have time to absorb this, he adds, "Did you hear what I said? You'll never have a flicker of doubt. Nothing could make you happier than what I'm offering you."

"It does sound attractive," you say. "But you haven't assured me that I'll get into this super-great heaven."

"That's because you won't. You'll still be like everyone else after you die — you'll have no consciousness once you're dead. But you'll have total contentment and total confidence for the rest of your life — the happiness that can only come from being one hundred percent sure that your afterlife will be everything as wonderful as you could imagine and a lot more. In my opinion, you should think twice before passing up an opportunity like this."

Do you say yes to the Wiz's offer?

I can see the appeal of absolute certainty that you'll have a blissful afterlife, but I wouldn't jump to accept this offer. It's too much like an invitation to be brainwashed by a cult leader. I'm troubled by the negative effect it might have on my behavior. If my afterlife is going to be so much superior to my present life, and it will last forever instead of the few years (at most) remaining to me, my present life will seem inconsequential. I'll be living a lie even though I won't know it. Thinking about such an existence gives me the creeps. "No thanks, Wiz," I would say. "I'm not going to compromise my life for an illusion."

#38 You promised your uncle to perform a 10-minute religious ritual every day for the rest of your life.

Imagine that if your Uncle Harry had not paid for your education, you wouldn't have been able to graduate from college and embark on a promising career. Harry was a widower and had no children, and the two of you were quite close despite one big difference — he was very pious, and you are not.

When you heard that he'd suddenly been taken ill and had only a few days to live, you hurried to visit him. You wanted to say goodbye and let him know how much his kindness and generosity meant to you and what a difference it made in your life.

When you saw him, you were shocked by how ill he looked, but relieved that he was still clear-headed and quite talkative. Among his other acts of devotion, Harry unfailingly spent ten minutes each day performing a ritual he felt was of sacred importance. You've kept the written instructions he gave you for it. To please him, you learned the chants and prayers the ritual involved, but you never practiced it yourself. A couple of days after you visited him, you got a call informing you that he might not live through the night. You immediately went again to see him. With what seemed like his last breaths, he asked you to promise that you would carry out the same daily ten-minute ritual that he always had, and that you would try to never miss a day for the rest of your life. You felt that this was no time to equivocate, so you said,

"I promise I will, Harry."

"That means so much to me," he murmured. "Now I can die in peace."

To your amazement, there was a smile on his face, half an hour later, as he passed away.

It's now been a month since Harry died, and every day since then you've carried out the ritual. You've spent about five hours on it so far. That will translate to about sixty hours a year, if you keep it up. And you often have to fit this ten minutes in when it's inconvenient, like when you're tired and want to go to bed. It has no religious significance to you. You get no spiritual uplift from it. It won't do anything for Harry. It makes no sense to keep it up.

Still, you did promise him, and he probably wouldn't have died with a smile on his face if he hadn't thought it was a promise you would keep.

Do you resolve to keep your promise to Harry, or do you decide to quit?

I'm sure there would be a divergence of views as to how to deal with this problem. Personally, I would quit. If Harry hadn't been dying, he probably wouldn't have made such a demanding request. He knew I didn't share his religious feelings.

I appreciate how some people might have a contrary feeling. Even though they didn't share Harry's religious conviction, they might gain or maintain spiritual strength from keeping their word. They wouldn't be doing this for Harry — they would be doing it for themselves, so it would make sense for them. It wouldn't for me.

#39 Can you prove that you are a human conversing with René, a chatbot, even though René claims that it is human and that you are a chatbot?

René is the most advanced AI chatbot yet. A panel comprising computer scientists, neuroscientists, and psychologists will read the transcript of an hour-long conversation you're about to have with him, (or "it," as you prefer to call René, just as René prefers to call you "it").

Can you think of a stratagem to employ in your conversation with René that would demonstrate beyond doubt that you are the human and René is not?

It occurred to me that the best way to trick this crafty machine into exhibiting that it's not human is to make it betray that it has no sense of humor — or no more than a fake sense of humor. To try out this theory, I would say to René: "Recently, a friend of mine said to me, 'It would be nice to go to heaven when I die, but I'd rather go back to my apartment.'* That surprised me. So, here is my question, René: Does my friend have a fundamental misunderstanding about what afterlife options are available to those who are admitted to heaven?"

I suspect that René would discern that my friend's comment was intended to be a witticism, but the non-human quality of René's comments might be evident from its pedantic tone and failure to discern that I wasn't asking a serious question.

Maybe you have a better idea. I hope so.

* Similar to a statement attributed to Woody Allen

**#40 How would you feel when, on the brink of death,
you learn that you just won a Nobel Prize?**

If you're like me in this respect, there's not the remotest possibility of winning a Nobel Prize, but the purpose of this experiment is to imagine how you would feel if, just as your life is about to end, you received such a momentous recognition of something you had achieved. Call it the ultimate bittersweet moment.

It may be harder for you to imagine winning a Nobel Prize than it is to imagine creating a new universe, but imagine that it's possible: You're dying, but still clear-headed, and a nurse hands you your smart phone. A fully authenticated and indisputably verified caller notifies you that, for your special extraordinary achievement, you will receive this most esteemed award.

How would you feel?

You might feel a little thrill, maybe more — it depends on how important winning a Nobel would be to you emotionally. And you might feel a wave of melancholy as you reflect on how little time you'll have to enjoy this great honor. No trip to Stockholm for you. You won't have time or energy to read all the congratulatory messages and calls that will soon be pouring in. There will be a very large deposit in your estate's bank account, but that's not the same as one in yours. And you won't have years ahead enjoying that aura of exceptional attainment that attends Nobel laureates wherever they go.

Nonetheless, you know that the award of a Nobel Prize is recognition that you made an "outstanding contribution for the benefit of humankind." That would be something to cherish during your last hours — recognition that in, a not insignificant way, you made the world a better place.

**#41 Which of these three persons would you prefer
to be in your next life?**

Once again, the Wiz has appeared, smiling, as always when he's about to offer you one of his "special deals."

"What is it, and what's the hitch?" you ask.

"You're going to like this," he says, "and there's no hitch. I'm going to turn the clock back, but not until you live out your life just as if I had never come along. Then, the moment you die, I'll turn it back to the year, day, and time it is now, but instead of being the person you are now (and will be for the rest of your present life), you'll be the same gender you are now, but otherwise a completely different person, and you'll have just had your thirtieth birthday."

"That might be good, and it might not," you say. "What sort of person would I be in this new life?"

"Good question," the Wiz says. "It wasn't easy for me to arrange for this, but you'll get to choose to be one of three different people, each of whom is well above average in most ways, in good shape physically, and is a person of good character. Unfortunately, I'm empowered to give you only a few brief bits of information about each of them."

"I'll be interested in whatever you can tell me," you say.

"I thought you would be," the Wiz says. "But first I want to warn you that there will not be a trace of your present personality, values, skills, interests, or other characteristics in the new person you will be. You will be this new person and no one else. Instead of remembering your experiences in the life you're living now, you'll remember the experiences of the person you will be when this happens. I'm sorry, but all I can give you to go on in making your choice are these capsule summaries as to each of them:

"Person A has an interesting and well-paying job and bright future in a cutting-edge tech firm, is an accomplished jazz pianist, and has a close relationship with A's bright and delightful five-year-old daughter. Person A is also in a difficult and unhappy marriage that's been going downhill and probably hasn't long to last.

"Person B is a gregarious, well-liked, self-assured business and community leader, whose spouse is a lawyer and representative in the state legislature. The two of them have been called a future power couple. They don't have any kids yet.

"Person C, who is single, is a visual artist whose work has been rapidly gaining recognition and is commanding higher prices in gallery sales. Person C is presently unmarried, but has many friends and is "on the lookout

for the right partner to come along.”

You must choose to be one of these three people. Which one will it be?

Given the sketchy information you’ve been given, there’s a lot of guess work to be done here. The Wiz was wise to point out that whichever person you choose to be, you will be that person and have that person’s preferences and outlook on life and not your present ones. Nonetheless, since you are still *in* your present life, it would be natural for you to choose to be the person who seems most in sync with your own values and preferences.

Here’s my take on them:

Person B’s position in the community and prospects look excellent. B may be happy — possibly happier than either A or C — but I have a feeling that there’s something missing in B’s life. B and B’s spouse strike me as ambitious, but conventional, and — this is just a guess — lacking in joy. B may accomplish a lot and have a truly satisfying life, and if I were B, I probably would prefer to be myself rather than A or C, but at the moment I’m still me, and I’m not drawn to being person B.

One of the few things the Wiz was able to tell you about Person C, the artist, was that C has “many friends” and is “on the lookout for the right partner to come along.” There’s nothing wrong with that, and this is more guesswork on my part, but I sense that there may be a certain shallowness in person C.

Person A has an unhappy marriage and appears to be headed for a divorce, but A’s career looks interesting and promising. I suspect that A’s next romantic relationship will be a big improvement. It bodes well that A and A’s daughter have a close relationship, and that this daughter is bright and delightful. She’ll probably be a great joy to A throughout A’s life. That A is an accomplished jazz pianist, and presumably knocks out great stuff at the keyboard, clinches it for me. I’d tell the Wiz, “I’ll choose to be Person A.”

#42 Imagine that you had never been born.

The Wiz appears, as usual without warning. He drapes his arm around you as if to console you for what's about to happen.

"Sorry," he says, "but in exactly three minutes, history will be revised in a way such that you will never have been born. It won't be as if you had died. When people die, they leave traces of themselves behind — children, relationships, good things that they have accomplished, or in all too many cases injury they've done. But you'll leave nothing, because you'll never have been anything but nothing.

How do you feel when you learn that in three minutes, history will change in such a way that you will never have been born?

I think that when I die, family members and friends will feel sad, and I don't like to think of an event happening that makes anyone unhappy. That wouldn't be a problem if I'd never been born. On the other hand — and far more important — if I had never been born, my children and grandchildren would never have been born. They would have been deprived of their lives. And they would have been deprived of the good they have done and will do, for that is their character.

As for those for whom such considerations aren't applicable, once they are dead, it would seem to make little difference whether they had ever been born or not, except that it would make a difference if during their lives they had brought more happiness than unhappiness to the world. It would matter whether they had made the world a better place or a worse one. If the former, it would be a tragedy if they had never been born. If the latter, it would be just as well.

#43 What if logical reasoning from a sound premise leads to a repugnant conclusion?

Here's the Wiz again, but scowling instead of smiling.

"Remember the universe I let you set up?" he asks.

"You've been neglecting it."

"I thought it would run by itself," you say.

"It will, but not optimally. There's a big decision you should make. I'm aware of about three thousand of your planets on which species of intelligent self-aware beings are evolving. You can arrange their DNA so that, given the environment they're in, you can cause to come into existence about four hundred billion individuals who average very high on the happiness scale and feel that their lives are very much worth living — call it version A."

"That sounds pretty good," you say. "Can I change things so they average even higher on the happiness scale?"

"I'm afraid not," the Wiz says. "Physical conditions are quite harsh on most of these planets, and you can't change that. But if you'd like, you can arrange everyone's DNA so that you can cause to come into existence four hundred trillion intelligent beings who would be barely happy and feel that their lives are barely worth living — call it version B. That's *a thousand times* more intelligent beings with net happiness — though by the narrowest of margins — than in version A."

"Barely worth living? Somehow, version B doesn't appeal to me," you say.

"You'd better think this through," the Wiz says. "Each individual's happiness will be much less in version B than in version A, but there will be a thousand times as many individuals in version B as in version A, so the total amount of happiness will be greater in version B than in version A. Do you want to keep four hundred trillion intelligent creatures from coming into existence whose lives would be worth living — even if only by the slightest margin? Don't you have an ethical duty to run your universe so it has the largest amount of happiness possible?"

"I don't see that I do," you say. You're afraid the Wiz may get angry on hearing this, or at least give you a stern lecture. Instead, he grins and says, "This situation reminds me of something the British philosopher Derek Parfit wrote. I don't remember the details, but I know he did some kind of calculation from which it appeared that if your goal is to have the most happiness in the world, it's logical to have an extremely large number of people who are barely happy than a much smaller number of people who are very happy. Instead of being pleased with his finding, he said that he had reached

a “repugnant conclusion.”

Would you prefer your universe to be one in which there are four hundred billion intelligent beings who on average are very happy and feel that their lives are very well worth living, or one in which there are a thousand times as many — four hundred trillion — intelligent beings who on average are barely happy and feel that their lives are barely worth living?

It may logically follow that the total amount of happiness in a universe with a very large number of people who are barely happy is greater than in a universe with a much smaller number of people who are very happy, but I agree with Professor Parfit that this is a “repugnant conclusion.” My non-repugnant conclusion from this is that our instinctive emotions and esthetic judgments sometimes provide a truer answer to a problem than one reached by logical analysis.

#44 Would it be right to subject one person to a half-hour of agony to save 10 million TV viewers from missing the thrilling final of the World Cup soccer match?

The Wiz just dropped by to see you, but he doesn't have any pronouncements to make or deals to offer. He says he's curious as to how you would answer the question posed above. "I didn't think it up; some philosopher did," he tells you. "I can't answer it. Maybe you can."

Do you answer the question the Wiz put to you (and if so, how?), or do you say, "I've had enough of arguments that lead to repugnant conclusions, and the same goes for repugnant questions!"?

I'm with you if you chose the second option, but this particular repugnant question caused me to think of a question about *a repugnant situation*: Would it be worth it to impose a relatively modest increased tax on the richest one percent of the population to lift and keep ten million children out of poverty?

#45 The limits of civic duty: a case study

Here's the Wiz again.

"Stand still," he says. "I'm about to wave my wand."

Whoosh.

Suddenly you realize that you have just begun a three-day hike on a beautiful trail through a mountain wilderness. The area is new to you, and you feel excited at the prospect of immersing yourself in the natural world.

The trail winds its way through a forest of immensely tall spruce trees. The air is crisp and clear. Through the gaps in the forest, you see snow peaks in the distance. About ten minutes into your hike, you notice a discarded sandwich wrapper. You pick it up and stuff it in your backpack. A few minutes later, you come upon an empty plastic water bottle. You stomp it flat, pick it up, and jam it into your backpack, feeling a mixture of pleasure that you're being a good citizen and annoyance that some people litter. Don't they know the rule of hiking: "Pack it in. Pack it out"?

How many times do you think you'd stop to pick up litter on the trail before you'd say, "The hell with it?"

Littering can become so common that even people who revere nature stop picking it up. Keeping trails litter-free has to be ingrained in the culture.

#46 Suppose everyone held the view that free will, as most people think of it, is an illusion.

Many philosophers and scientists are of the opinion that we are exercising our free will when we make decisions. As the English poet, William Ernest Henley put it, “I am the captain of my soul.” Many other philosophers and scientists are of the opinion that we aren’t exercising free will when we make decisions. Their view is that whatever we decide to do was caused by prior events — including events inside our brains of which we’re not aware. Still other philosophers and scientists are of the opinion that we are exercising free will *even if* whatever we decide to do was caused by events that happened before we decided to do it. Those who hold this opinion are called compatibilists. *Huh*, I silently exclaimed when I first learned this. The writer I. B. Singer exhibited no such befuddlement. He said, “Of course I have free will — I have no choice.”

In his book *Determined* (2023), the Stanford University neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky makes an exhaustive, or exhausting (take your pick), argument that our decisions are determined by our brain states immediately before we made them. And these brain states were caused by other factors. And these other factors were caused by still other factors — notably our genes and our cultural and environmental experiences. And these factors all have their own respective causal antecedents. And for this reason free will is an illusion. Sapolsky is convinced that free will and determinism are not compatible. He leaves no room for free will.

My understanding is that the dominant view is that, though we may be affected by our emotional states and our thinking can be skewed by hormones and by psychological and physiological factors, we are capable of exercising free will in making decisions. For example, the philosopher Mark Balaguer believes that although many of our decisions involve no deliberation, we do exercise free will in cases where we make “torn decisions,” ones we are forced by circumstances to think about.

I’m far from being an expert on this contentious topic, and there is a wide variety of views among those who are. The purpose of this thought experiment isn’t to ascertain which view is the right one; it’s to consider what the effect would be if everyone believed that Sapolsky and his fellow determinists are right: that independent free will is an illusion; that, in fact, our decisions are caused by our brain states, which in turn are caused by a complex interaction of our genes, experience, environment, and random processes and events, all subject to the laws of physics.

If everyone (including you!) believed that independent free will is an illusion, would that affect your thinking or behavior? Would it have any effect on our society? Would it be conducive to people thinking differently about their own behavior and that of others?

My impression is that most people — experts and non-experts alike — think that it would be depressing if it were widely believed that we have no free will. I think this is — or should be — a baseless fear. For one thing, all of us, including determinists, are obliged to behave as if we are acting on our own free will. You can't wake up in the morning and think, "I'll just stay in bed until it's determined that I'll get up," and then lie there and wait. At some point you decide to get up and get moving. In any case, there have been a great many brilliant determinists who have been highly productive and have exhibited as much nobility in their lives as anyone who professes a belief in free will.

The prominent physicist Carlo Rovelli addresses this topic in his book, *White Holes* (2023). Rovelli aligns himself with the hard deterministic view of the 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, but he puts a poetic gloss on it with a parable about an old fisherman who had been enchanted with sunsets until he learns that the sun doesn't sink into the sea. The revelation that what he had thought was real is an illusion has a devastating effect on him. Rovelli calls this "the fisherman's mistake." The sunset is as beautiful and wonderful as ever, though viewed in a different perspective.

Rovelli likens discovering that the freedom we experience in making decisions is subject to the operation of the laws of physics — "that it is not borne out at the microscopic level" — to discovering that the sunset is not the sun sinking into the sea. "It changes nothing in our lives."

It changes nothing, except that if it became generally recognized that determinism is true — that free will is an illusion — it could affect how we think about life and how we view the world. There are those who believe that general acceptance that free will is an illusion would precipitate moral disintegration. I hold what I suspect is a minority view: that it would tend to increase compassion, foster equanimity, temper egoism, and help cultivate a sense of acceptance of the human condition — that people would, on average, behave better. Admittedly, such an idealized reaction might only occur in a world in which Rovelli's sensibilities, rather than those of the fisherman, prevail.

#47 Can a person change sufficiently to become another person?

Imagine that you are a judge, and you must decide whether to release a man from prison. The hypothetical individual in question — John Dozer — was convicted of beating a man to death with a crowbar five years ago. At the time, Dozer had a reputation for being erratic, impulsive, and sometimes violent. A neighbor said of him, “He made me nervous every time he looked at me.”

Dozer was sentenced to life imprisonment with no possibility of parole, but his lawyer claims that he should be released from prison because he is not the same person as the person who committed the crime.

Examining the record, you see that two months after Dozer started his term of imprisonment, he had a brain tumor removed, and that after recovering from the operation, he manifested a radically altered personality. Instead of being threatening and unnerving, he became completely rational and accommodating — a model prisoner in every way. He became known for teaching fellow prisoners computer skills, enabling many of them to get jobs after they were released. Dozer’s lawyer’s claim that he was now a different person was backed up by prison officials and two psychiatrists who examined the record and interviewed him at length. Even the prosecutor and members of the victim’s family have urged that Dozer be released, given the unusual circumstances of the case. (Tragically, the governor of Dozer’s state refused to pardon him.)

As a judge, you feel bound by the applicable statute, which mandates a sentence of “life imprisonment without parole with no exceptions for remorse, good behavior, or for any other reason whatsoever relating to the person convicted.”

You would like to be able to release Dozer from incarceration, but see no legal basis for doing so unless you are willing to accept the novel argument that the law doesn’t apply in this situation because Dozer is a different person than the person who was convicted.

Would you allow Dozer to be released from prison? Under the law, to do so, you would have to find not just that he has changed dramatically for the better, or shown deep and sincere remorse, but that, although he has the same name and life history, he is not the same person as the John Dozer who was convicted of murder five years earlier.

My view is that Dozer is the same person in many respects; for example, he has approximately the same DNA he has

always had. But unless there is a binding precedent that governs the facts of this unusual case, I think the judge has a legal basis for releasing Dozer from prison on the ground that he is a different person than the murderer in the respects that are most meaningful in defining what a person is in this context: his or her basic character, set of values, attitude, and behavior toward other human beings.

#48 Can you get rid of your sense of self?

As I understand it, according to traditional Buddhist doctrine and in the opinion of some philosophers and scientists, the self is an illusion. The extent to which that's true presumably depends on what one means by "self." If not having a self means not experiencing pleasure and pain, you may be able to minimize it, but you can't get rid of it. And you can't get rid of your experience of psychological continuity – your store of active memories, including ones that assert themselves from time to time whether summoned or not. What I imagine you might be able to get rid of is emotional concern about your status in the world. But would you want to? What would be the upsides and downsides of freeing yourself from concern about your self image?

Trying to get a grip on this conundrum, I listened to a podcast of a conversation that the neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris had with Jay Garfield, a professor of philosophy at Smith College and the author of *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live Without a Self* (2022).

Garfield doesn't deny that each of us is a *person*, but he's convinced that the sense of self is an illusion. He says that the reason the sense of self isn't real is that there isn't an executive in your brain managing your affairs. Rather, thoughts and decisions are produced by brain processes that are causally brought about. Your brain constructs impressions of the world based on inputs from your sensory faculties and in response to experience. One of the things it constructs is a sense of self.

Since a sense of self became naturally selected in the course of human evolution, one might think that it would be useful to maintain it. But Garfield argues that the illusion of self stokes pride, anger, and other emotions that he regards as deleterious, and that we would be less self-absorbed, more mindful, and more effective without it.

Do you agree that your sense of self is illusory?

Wouldn't one feel diminished without a sense of self? Wouldn't lacking a sense of self erode motivation, self-confidence, and one's sense of self-worth? These questions weren't addressed specifically in the interview, but I think there is merit in Garfield's view that you can feel more genuinely self-confident and strongly motivated once you recognize that your sense of self is an artificial construct of your brain. It helps us to accept ourselves for what we are.

#49 Would you want to be able to dream after you die?

Hamlet, contemplating death, mused:

To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause

They might be disturbing, those dreams, disturbing the sleep of death. Yet might they not provide some semblance of life, a shadowy continuation of that state of awareness and sensation that most of us fervently wish to keep?

Deprived of life, would you settle for experiencing dreams — some pleasing, some not, disjointed and fantastical as they are, a parade of images and improbable happenings? Would you prefer that to not existing at all? Would you want them for eternity, or just for a while?

My dreams tend to be mildly frustrating, most often involving trying to reach a destination, the location of which, and means of reaching it, is never clear. Once I'm dead, I would prefer not to be disturbed — to play it safe and not exist.

#50 Would you like to never have dreams when you're sleeping?

That's the option the Wiz just gave you. If you are like some people I've known, who have night terrors — really scary nightmares — this is a great opportunity to get rid of them. For others — maybe most people — it might not be so easy to decide on a preference. I suspect that most people's dreams tend to be mildly frustrating, like mine. But dreams can be quite pleasant, sometimes so much so that one feels let-down upon waking up.

Would you accept the Wiz's offer never to dream again when you're sleeping?

I would say, "No thanks. I'm content to continue having dreams." That may sound contradictory to my having said that I'd rather not have dreams after I die in the previous thought experiment, but it isn't, because, if I'm still alive, I'll have the chance for conscious reflection after waking up. My dreams are never frightening, and I often find them interesting to think about.

I was planning to end what I had to say on this subject with the previous sentence, but reading it over this morning, I realized that a dream I had last night is worth recounting because it's an example of what I'm talking about. In my dream, I was riding a bicycle in what seemed to be a moderate-sized city in northern Canada. I needed to bike to Washington State. This imaginary northern Canadian city was on the north side of a major river, and I was sure that I would have to bike back across an exceedingly long curving bridge to get to the south side of the river where I would find a road leading in a southwesterly direction toward Washington State. I succeeded in getting across the bridge and heading in the direction of Washington State, but I became increasingly doubtful that I was on the right road. I passed a public building that had something to do with tourism. I thought, maybe they have a map. I went inside and spoke to a woman who seemed to work there. She said that they didn't have a map. "I have to get to Winnipeg," I said. (Note: Winnipeg is nowhere near Washington State.)* "Oh," she said, "then you'll have to go back across the bridge." This seemed to me to be an exhausting prospect, and it would take me in the wrong direction to boot. I was trying to decide what to do next when I woke up.

What was the meaning of this dream? I don't know, but two phrases come to mind: "A bridge to nowhere," and "a bridge

too far.” Others have told me that they have had similar dreams. Maybe we’re groping our way through life, forever trying to get somewhere, and we’re not sure why, and we’re not sure how to reach our destination. I wouldn’t want to give up the fun of having dreams and speculating about them. Besides, I’ve read that dreams may have something to do with the brain reorganizing itself, and I’m sure my brain would benefit from that process. I’m content to keep on dreaming.

* I traveled to northern Canada about forty years ago, not to a city, but to an Inuit village on the north side of a long lake. I traveled through Winnipeg on the way to get there. A few years ago, I had an enjoyable trip to Washington State.

#51 Would you be willing to be the next human baby born in the world after you die?

You don't like the prospect that sooner or later you're going to die. You thought there would be no alternative, but here's the Wiz, claiming once again that he'll give you a special deal. He promises that you'll live out your predestined lifespan regardless of whether or not you accept his offer, but thanks to him, you'll have a chance to be the next baby born in the world after you die. You'll have no memory of your past life, but you will have something that you wouldn't have had otherwise: a second life after your first one ends.

Given that so many people in the world have burdensome disabilities, or live in chronic pain, or live in poverty or in countries ruled by repressive regimes or wracked by war, there's a fairly high probability that your second life will be one marked by ignorance, hardship, and misery. Nonetheless, the opportunity to have a second life is intriguing. Will you accept the Wiz's offer?

I'm aware that I was born into much luckier circumstances than the vast majority of humans living today, and my luck would likely be far less favorable if I were a random new baby coming into the world. Even so, I like the idea of being alive sufficiently to be inclined to accept the Wiz's offer. If you feel that way too, remember that you can't bring any of your experience, skills, and understanding of the world into your new life. You'll arrive as a squawking, helpless baby, who may not have a life that you would find agreeable from your present perspective.

A disturbing thought came to my mind: Would declining the Wiz's offer be the equivalent of saying that for the average person life is not worth living? I don't think it would, because, once you're alive, it's instinctive to want to stay alive — to feel that life is worth living even when you're facing great hardships. If I accept the Wiz's offer, my second life might not be worth living from my present standpoint, but from my standpoint as a new living being, it could be. That's why, on reflection, and realizing that it may be imprudent, if I had no choice other than being dead, I would accept the Wiz's offer to be the next baby born after I die.

#52 The notorious two-children problem

The Wiz has a beneficent smile on his face when he magically appears in front of you, interrupting you when you were reading this book.

“Oh my gosh,” you say. “What brings you here?”

“Nothing but a way for you to make a million dollars by solving a simple problem.”

“Now, Wiz,” you reply. “Is this another too-good-to-be-true deal you’re offering?”

“Not at all,” the Wiz says. “If you’re not interested —”

“I *am* interested,” you interrupt. “But, in view of our past history, you can’t blame me for being skeptical. What’s the simple problem?”

“Note this first. For the purposes of this problem, assume that there are equal numbers of boys and girls.”

“Got it — equal numbers of each.”

“Then here it is: Imagine that *while you are out walking, you meet a couple with one of their two children. Their other child is at home. The child with them is a girl. What are the odds that their child at home is a boy?*”

“This *is* easy,” you say. “It’s common knowledge that the gender of a couple’s first child isn’t the slightest bit predictive of the gender of their second child. Since you said to assume that there are equal numbers of girls and boys, there’s no reason that the child who was left at home is more likely to be a girl or a boy. Therefore, the odds are one in two — fifty-fifty — that the child at home is a boy.”

You let that sink in, and can’t help grinning as you say, “I’m ready to receive my million dollars.”

“You haven’t won it yet,” the Wiz says. “According to Professor Horace Bandwidth, who is a highly regarded mathematician, the odds are two-in-three that the child at home is a boy.”

Instantly, Professor Bandwidth appears before you, grinning as broadly as you were before he arrived.

“*You’re wrong*,” Bandwidth says, jabbing a finger at you as if you had committed a crime. “Here’s the mathematical proof:

“Among all couples with two children, there are equal numbers of GG, GB, BG, and BB couples. Since the couple you met has a G with them, she is clearly not in the BB group. She must therefore be in either the GG, the GB, or the BG group. Since there are equal numbers in each group, the odds are $\frac{1}{3}$ that she is one of the two Gs in the GG group, $\frac{1}{3}$ that she is the G in the BG group, and $\frac{1}{3}$ that she is the G in the GB group. If she is the G in the GG group, then her sibling at home is a G. If she is the G in the BG group or the

G in the GB group, in each case her sibling at home is a B. In one case, the child at home is a G. In two cases the child at home is a B. Therefore, the odds are 2/3 that the child at home is a B.”

“That can’t be right!” you protest.

“Sorry, but it *is* right,” Professor Bandwidth says severely. “It may go against your intuition, but intuitions may be faulty, whereas a mathematical proof is irrefutable!”

Rather than reply, you stand quietly, trying to work this puzzle through. Professor Bandwidth’s proof does seem to be irrefutable. But it also seems wrong!

“You still have a chance to win that million bucks,” the Wiz says gently, “but you’ll have to show that Professor Bandwidth is wrong.”

“And *that* will be impossible,” Bandwidth says. “I am never wrong.”

Can you show that you are right in saying there’s a one-in-two chance that the child at home is a boy, rather than a two-in-three chance, as Professor Bandwidth claims he has proved?

If you figured out why Professor Bandwidth’s “proof” is not a proof at all, proceed to the cashier’s window and collect the million dollars the Wiz promised. Although Bandwidth’s reasoning was rigorously logical, it rested on the false premise that because among all couples with two children there are equal numbers of GG, GB, BG, and BB couples, when you meet a couple who is out walking with one of their two children, and the child with them is a G, that the couple is equally likely to be a GG, a BG, or a GB couple.

To see why this isn’t the case, imagine that you are walking in a park. Living near the park are 50 GG couples, 50 GB couples, 50 BG couples, and 50 BB couples. All 200 of these couples have gone out walking in the park with one of their children and left the other one at home. You meet one of these couples, and they have a G with them. Obviously, you haven’t met one of the BB couples. You’ve met one of the 50 GG couples, one of the 50 GB couples, or one of the 50 BG couples. Of the 50 GG couples, all 50 of them who have gone out walking with a G have left a G at home. Of the 50 GB couples, 25 have gone out walking with their G and left their B at home, and 25 have gone out walking with their B and left their G at home; and the same is true of the 50 BG couples.

Since the couple you meet has a G with them, it must be one of the 50 GG couples who went out walking with a G and left a G at home, one of the 25 GB couples who went walking with their G and left their B at home, or one of the 25 BG couples that went walking with their G and left their B at home. Therefore, you met one of 50 GG couples who left a G at home or one of a total of 50 BG and GB couples that went walking with their G and left

their B at home. Therefore, the odds are 50-50 (1 in 2) that the child at home is a B, not 2 in 3, as Professor Bandwidth insists is the case. What appeared to be a paradox — the inconsistency between the common-sense answer and a mathematical proof — is resolved once it's clear that a false assumption crept into Professor Bandwidth's analysis.

The lesson of the (notorious) two-children problem is that, although you can't always trust your intuition, you shouldn't let the certainty of a mathematical proof deter you from examining the premise on which it is based.

#53 If you could save the life of only one of these three people, which one would you save?

In George Bernard Shaw's play *The Doctor's Dilemma*, first produced in 1906, a doctor has the time and resources to save only one of two patients entrusted to his care. Reading it last summer caused me to reflect on its subject. Hospital emergency rooms and doctors have triage protocols, but suppose you found yourself in a situation where you could save the life of only one of three individuals, but unlike hospital emergency room personnel, you have only a scrap of information about each of them:

Person A is a 30-year-old policeman who is single and has no children and recently risked his life to save three people from drowning in a flash flood.

Person B is a 20-year-old artist. She is single and has no children. Critics say she is destined for greatness. Despite her youth, a major museum just bought one of her paintings.

Person C is a 10-year-old boy who looked up at you with soulful eyes. He seems to understand that his life is in your hands.

Assuming you know nothing else about these individuals, and you have only time and resources to save the life of one of them, whose life would you save?

I can't imagine any triage protocol that would provide a satisfying answer to this question. The policeman is something of a hero — his life is certainly worth saving. But could I turn away from the ten-year-old boy who looked at me with soulful eyes? And, since I have a keen appreciation of fine art, I would hate letting the life of this gifted young painter slip away.

I suspect that, like most people faced with this dilemma, I would reach a decision based on feeling rather than on rational analysis, a result explained by the 17th-century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal: "The heart has its reasons, which reason cannot know."

#54 You are the dictator of policy relating to animals bred and raised for agricultural purposes in the United States.

Once again the Wiz has surprised you, this time by bestowing on you dictatorial power throughout the United States with regard to standards for the treatment of animals bred and raised for agricultural purposes. It will take a while for you to review policy considerations and draft a practical and humane statute.

“You need to think things through,” the Wiz says. “You might first consider whether such animals must be raised in circumstances in which they can move about comfortably, are allowed to develop normally, and are protected against force-feeding, mutilations, cruel methods of slaughtering, and other practices which, if imposed on humans, would be considered to be forms of torture. Practices such as these are common on ‘factory farms.’ That sounds bad, but arguably fewer people go hungry because of them; children who might otherwise be malnourished get enough to eat. I’m not sure that argument is valid, but if it is, would such practices be morally defensible?”

Would whatever law you institute reflect view a or view b?

(a) animals raised for agricultural purposes shouldn't be subjected to prolonged pain and suffering for the benefit of humans;

(b) concern for animal pain and suffering of animals must give way to preventing human deprivation and hardship.

Or do you see a way to avoid this unappealing trade-off?

I don't think we need to regard ourselves as protectors of animals, but I think we have an ethical obligation to not make their lives more painful and unpleasant than they would typically be in a state of nature. Animals should not be raised in ways that are the equivalent of torture. I think that humans have as much right as foxes to kill chickens for food, but foxes don't cause chickens to suffer for most of their lives before they die, and neither should we. I think that the economic cost of requiring that farm animals are treated humanely should be offset by instituting a more progressive taxation and subsidy structure and stronger safety nets, rather than by ignoring our ethical responsibilities to our fellow creatures.

#55 Hundreds of years after you die, you come back to life, but only for an hour.

Here's the way it happens. You're suddenly conscious of being well-dressed and sitting in a comfortable chair in a tastefully furnished, well-lit, windowless room, and feeling alert and healthy in every respect. The Wiz is in a matching chair a few feet away. He's smiling at you as if he's pleased to see you.

You struggle to clear your brain — to consider how this can be happening. The last thing you remember is that you were lying in bed in a hospice, knowing that you were about to die. Then nothing.

How long ago did that happen? How is it you're alive now?

The Wiz, mind-reading you, says: "I can understand why you're puzzled. You died hundreds of years ago. I brought you back to life, but just for an hour so that the two of us could have a talk."

You shake your head in astonishment. You remember some weird miracles the Wiz pulled off when you were alive before, but this is the weirdest of all, and it's not making you happy.

"Am I supposed to be grateful for this?" you say, "It's not exactly a picnic coming back to life if I know I'll be dead again in an hour!"

"I understand your feeling completely, but bear with me," the Wiz says. "It's only because you've been dead so long that I'm able to show you how this life-and-death business that humans experience is set up in the best possible way."

"You're telling me that everything is rosy because hundreds of years have passed since I died?"

The Wiz gazes at you with an expression that reminds you of the Mona Lisa.

"Not that it's rosy, and not that it's not rosy," he says. "I simply want you to see your life from the perspective you have once all the people on Earth who were alive when you died have themselves died, and even farther in the future than that — to a time in the future when not a single person living on Earth knows you existed. That's how far in the future we've come."

"So, nobody alive today ever knew me or talked to me. Maybe I have descendants who are still living."

"Maybe you do, but if there are any, you wouldn't know them if you saw them, and none of them would know anything about you. None of them would have ever heard of you. We're that far in the future."

"I guess I'm lost in the sands of time," you say ruefully.

“That’s a good way of thinking of it,” the Wiz says, “which is why I put that expression into your head — so you would say it. In any case, looking back through the sands of time, does the life you led hundreds of years ago seem any more meaningful to you than the lives of your contemporaries, all of whom have also been dead for hundreds of years?”

“I can remember my life in far more detail than I can remember the life of anyone else.”

“Of course, but at this point, it doesn’t make any difference who was who, or even who was real and who was fictional. Whoever you were, your life was simply another series of occurrences in the ever-continuing progression of innumerable events.”

The Wiz pauses for a few seconds, then says: “It *is* odd, isn’t it? Regardless of whether the world is better or worse because of your presence in it, once you and everybody who knew you, or knew anything about you, is dead, it doesn’t matter whether a certain set of accomplishments or failings were *yours* or those of any one of billions of other people. It’s all smoothed flat.”

Do you agree with the Wiz that once you and everybody who knew you or anything about you is dead, it doesn’t matter what your accomplishments or failings were; “it’s all smoothed flat”?

I think that’s a fair statement. It’s as if your life consists of swimming with countless others in one of the Earth’s oceans, waves churning and breaking in all directions around you, and after you die, time carries you up out of the sea, higher and higher, century after century, so that looking down as you rise ever higher above the ocean, it seems smoother and smoother until, when you have reached a great height — when you are far enough above it, far enough in the future — it looks totally flat: The life you lived, if you could come to life long enough to look back at it, would have no more significance to you than that of anyone who ever lived.

#56 You Are an Earth Inspector.

Imagine that you are a promising young intelligence officer, a member of an extremely advanced species of beings on the planet Cadmus, located a bit more than 1,473 light years from Earth.

Jack — that's his name, coincidentally a common name for males on Earth, notably in English-speaking countries — appears on a wall screen in front of you. Jack is Cadmus's Chief Surveyor of Intelligent Life in the Orion Arm of the Milky Way Galaxy. Knowing that Jack is seeing you as clearly as you are seeing him, you assume an attentive posture. This could be the moment you have been waiting for — an assignment to check out a developing situation on a habitable exoplanet.

Yes! That's exactly why Jack has gotten in touch with you! His perfectly modulated voice comes across:

"We've been watching a planet, called Earth by its most advanced inhabitants, for almost a full epoch (what they would measure as several thousand revolutions of their planet around its sun). I was still in Phase BB1 of my life when we last conducted an on-site inspection of this planet. Living conditions for humans at that time were generally miserable. The fastest mode of travel involved sitting on the back of a quadruped. Fusion energy wasn't even a dream. Superstitions and myths had more influence on behavior than scientific findings.

"We know from the striking rise in radio emissions from Earth, which we captured at far faster-than-light speed with our newly developed gravity-loop quantum tunneling technique, that humans have made great progress. Based on the data we've accumulated and our studies of comparable developing civilizations, when you visit Earth, you can expect to find less slavery and less colonial domination; lower rates of impoverishment and violence; higher rates of literacy; better nutrition; and dramatically more effective methods of medical treatment than obtained at the time of our last inspection. All to the good. But it's clear from recent data, most notably measurements of increasing concentrations of CO₂ in Earth's atmosphere, that this planet has entered the parabolic development stage and is likely experiencing the usual problems in such cases: accelerating global warming; increasing air and water pollution; dissipation of aquifers; increasing rates of emergence of oligarchically controlled, maximally militarized, imperialist-minded, autocratic governing bodies; increasing risk of nuclear devastation; escalating vulnerability to species-ending pandemics; and — most concerning of all — accelerating development of

prototypical class-two artificial general intelligence.”

“*Wa-ooo*,” you exclaim. “I’ve heard about what that can lead to!”

“What it’s already led to in the Cepheus sector,” Jack says. “And it could become a real nuisance to us if it flares toward its full potential on Earth. In any case, we need a fine-grained, close-up, virtually synthesized, full-scale, multi-perspective, omni-factor analysis of the situation, and you have been selected to provide it. You must be ready to leave for your inspection of Earth tomorrow at Beta Sun noon. We will provide you with a class A11A multi-enhanced capsule equipped with gravity loop quantum-tunneling capability for faster-than-light travel. On completion of your mission, we’ll expect you to provide a maximally encrypted report on this interesting planet and the creatures that have been transforming it. Are you up for this assignment?”

Of course you are! You’ve dreamed of inspecting a planet like Earth ever since you received your first brain enhancement implant!

T I M E

L A P S E

*Now that you have inspected Earth, what do you think of it?
Do you think its ruling creatures — “humans,” as they
call themselves — are going to make it?*

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