

Might I have had another life?

Philipp Keller*

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We all think, I hope, that our lives might have been different. Presumably, some of us even believe that they might have had lived the life of another person, living or dead. While of great moral and social importance, it seems difficult to make philosophical sense of such pre-theoretical opinions.

A relation close and in many ways analogous to the one between me and my life is the one between me and my body. My body will be burnt or buried after my dead – not me, I hope. I may wish to have another body and body switch seems a coherent and fascinating metaphysical speculation. Some rational people believe in resurrection and some actors have body doubles.

There is an important pattern here, which allows for generalisation.

We have, first, the case of a substance and the process traced by it in space and time, or alternatively, the process and the substance undergoing it. Second, we have the case of the statue and the lump of matter constituting it, differing in their modal and temporal persistence conditions. We have, third, ordinary wholes composed of ordinary parts according to the laws of classical extensional mereology. Fourth, we have species or kinds and the groups of individuals sharing their essential properties making them up. Fifth, there are types and tokens instantiating them. Sixth, there are universals, e.g. the colour red, and their particular instances. Seven, we have abstracta and the concreta, or relative concreta of which they are abstracted.

All these relations share important logical and metaphysical features, perhaps the most important being that they underlie the transferal of some, but not of all properties.

The formal similarities between our seven variants of constituency in the broadest sense and our taste for desert landscapes strongly suggest some sort of reductive project. In my talk, I will try to gather them under some substantive notion of abstraction.

*University of Geneva, Switzerland, philipp.keller@lettres.unige.ch.