

Persistence at Eternity: Borges's "The Immortal"
& the Philosophical Problem of Persistence

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ABSTRACT

How is it that you are the same person you were yesterday, and (presumably) will be tomorrow? The philosophical *problem of persistence* is the problem of trying to provide good answers to such questions. In this research paper, I provide a survey of this problem, as well as some of the popular solutions to it, and use a short story by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, entitled "The Immortal", to motivate a novel thought experiment about the persistence of personhood over long, even infinite, stretches of time.

As the end approaches, there are no longer any images from memory — there are only words. ... I have been Homer; soon, like Ulysses, I shall be Nobody; soon, I shall be all men — I shall be dead. — Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal”

These are the last known words of Joseph Cartaphilus, rare-book dealer and briefly immortal fictional character in Jorge Luis Borges’s story “The Immortal”. Cartaphilus was ‘briefly immortal’, that is, for a few thousand years, after which Borges allows Cartaphilus to be confronted with the question as to whether or not he can even be considered the same person he was at the beginning of his life. The philosophical implications of Cartaphilus’s questions in “The Immortal” are the topic of this paper, in which the story will be interpreted as a philosophical thought experiment relating to the philosophical *problem of persistence*: the problem, roughly, of classifying under what necessary and sufficient conditions a person persists in time, despite their changes. A large assumption made by the problem of persistence (it will be explained) is that persistence is in fact compatible with personhood, that is, that persons can in theory persist for any length of time, though we may not know, philosophically, how. This paper argues that, when understood as a thought experiment, “The Immortal” asks whether persistence *itself* is problematic for accounts of personhood; in particular, whether persons can indeed persist without qualification.

To this end, the paper is divided into four sections. The first section is concerned exclusively with the problem of personal persistence, so as to give the reader a clear survey of the problem before “The Immortal” is interpreted in its context. The second section summarizes “The Immortal” along with a popular analysis of the work, before reformulating the story as a philosophical thought experiment. The third section discusses how this thought experiment applies to the problem of personal persistence, particularly with respect to its popular attempts at

solutions. Included in this discussion is a discussion of whether or not each solution will need to make changes. The fourth section is the conclusion.

1. The Philosophical Problem of Personal Persistence

This section presents the problem (as given by Olson, 2019) along with four major types of attempts at solutions to it; in particular: brute-physicalist, psychological-continuity, narrativist, and anticriterialist approaches. With the presentation of each approach is given a thought experiment or two motivating that approach as well as a few objections, but the main purpose of this discussion is to discuss the positions, not to argue either for or against them.

A. The Problem. It might seem odd that there should be anything problematic about something so ordinary as persistence. Everywhere, all the time, things are persisting. In the note “Of Identity and Difference”, however, philosopher Thomas Hobbes presents the following classic paradox:

[Thought Experiment 0: The Ship of Theseus]

For if, for example, that ship of Theseus, concerning the difference whereof made by continual reparation in taking out the old planks and putting in the new, the sophisters of Athens were wont to dispute, were, after all the planks changed, the same numerical ship it was at the beginning; and if some man had kept the old planks as they were taken out, and by putting them afterwards together in the same order, had again made a ship of them, this, without doubt, had also been the same numerical ship with that which was at the beginning; and so there would have been two ships numerically the same, which is absurd. (136)

This thought experiment, often called the ‘ship of Theseus’ thought experiment, dates back at least to Plutarch, in 75 CE (Tittle 69). It asks the reader to consider the nature of not just the

persistence of this ship of Theseus, but to consider the nature of persistence in general. In the words of Hobbes, “And from hence springs a great controversy among philosophers ... namely, in what sense it may be conceived that a body is at one time the same, at another time not the same it was formerly” (135). The apparent inability to settle this controversy is known as the philosophical problem of persistence.

There are attempts at solutions to the problem as pertains to ships and other objects (Tittle 69), but the problem is often most seriously considered as pertains to persons (or people).¹ In these cases, the problem is known as the problem of *personal* persistence. Philosopher Eric Olson presents the problem more formally as follows: “What does it take for a person to persist from one time to another — to continue existing rather than cease to exist?” (Olson sec. 1; par. 7). The following four sections present popular attempts to solve this problem.²

B. Brute-Physicalist Approaches.

Incredulous, speechless, and in joy, I contemplated the precious formation of a slow drop of blood. I am once more mortal, I told myself over and over, again I am like all other men.

— Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal”

On the face of things, human persons are just human beings. Perhaps, then, all it takes for a human person to persist is for them to persist as the human being that they are, that is, as that biological organism. This is the claim that ‘brute-physicalist’ approaches to the problem of personal persistence endorse. As Olson writes, brute-physicalists hold that, “You are that past or future being that has your body, or that is the same biological organism as you are, or the like”

¹ Just what is meant by a ‘person’ will be left until the discussion of Borges’s notion of the ‘self’ in section two of this paper. It suffices for now to continue to think common-sensically about these ‘persons’ for the purposes of this section’s discussion.

² Sometimes, the problem is put more schematically as the question, “... what makes a person (x) at time t1 and a person (y) at t2 the same person[?]” (Schroer et al. 446), in which case it is sometimes known as the problem of ‘diachronic’ personal identity.

(sec. 3; par. 2). It is important to note that this identification is consistent with how human persons tend to come to have knowledge about the identity of other persons. If, for example, new person *X* looks, walks, and acts just like old person *Y*, then, all else being equal, it seems fair to claim in most situations that person *X* is probably person *Y*. One important, common-sensical justification for brute-physicalism is that it aligns nicely with this common practice.³

Another (more philosophical) justification for brute-physicalism is given by philosopher William R. Carter, in “How to Change Your Mind”. Carter writes:

[Thought-Experiment 1: Carter’s Too-Many-Thinkers]

The brain that is my brain is undeniably part of ... the human organism with which I presently coexist. On any ‘naturalistic’ account of mental functions, [the human organism with which I presently coexist] has precisely as much claim to having a mind as do I. If we deny that [the human organism with which I presently coexist] and I are one individual (that is, identical), then we appear to be committed to saying that *two* psychological beings ([the human organism with which I presently coexist] and I) presently are located in one place. This leaves us with one psychological being too many. ... The chair in which I presently am sitting contains only one psychological being — if you will, only one mind. (And how can two individuals share one mind?). (Carter 9)

Tittle classifies this justification as part of the ‘too-many-thinkers’ thought experiment (sec. 6; par. 4). Its purpose is to point out an apparent absurdity implicit in the negation of the brute-physicalist claim: if a human person is not just the human organism they find themselves

³ It is important to point out that there is a distinction drawn between the rational way to come to *know* that person *X* is person *Y* and the actual criteria under which this occurs. In general, it is not the case that such things are the same. Philosophers call the first ‘epistemic’, having to do with knowledge, and the second ‘metaphysical’, having to do with the way things are (Olson sec.1; pars. 7-9). The problem of (personal) persistence is a metaphysical problem, *not* an epistemic one. Of course, however, it is nice when our epistemology about persons matches up well with our metaphysics about persons.

in, then both that person and that organism seem to share a mind, so that there are too many thinkers. Because of this absurdity (the reasoning goes), brute-physicalism must be true. Of course, the debate is not settled with these considerations, as will be shown in the next section.

C. Psychological-Continuity Approaches.

Among the Immortals, on the other hand, every act (every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, and the faithful presage of others that will repeat it in the future, advertiginem. — Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal”

Brute-physicalist accounts are not without their faults, however. Philosopher Sydney Shoemaker presents the following thought experiment as reason to deny brute-physicalism:

[Thought Experiment 2: Shoemaker’s Brain Swapping]

Two men, a Mr. Brown and a Mr. Robinson, had been operated on for brain tumors, and brain extractions had been performed on both of them. At the end of the operations, however, the assistant inadvertently put Brown’s brain in Robinson’s head, and Robinson’s brain in Brown’s head. ... Over a period of time, [the one with the brain of Brown and body of Robinson] is observed to display all the personality traits, mannerisms, interests, likes and dislikes, and so on that had previously characterized Brown, and to act and talk in ways completely alien to the old Robinson. (Shoemaker qtd. in Tittle 78).

The significance of this thought experiment is that it seems plausible that the person inhabiting Robinson’s body really is the same person that used to be in Brown’s body, and vice versa; that with Brown’s brain went Brown, with Robinson’s brain went Robinson, and that the business about the bodies is likely unimportant. That is to say, these human persons are not just human organisms (which are constituted by their bodies). Furthermore, even the brain (which is part of

the body) is likely unimportant. As Tittle claims, quoting Shoemaker, “‘If upon regaining consciousness, [Robinson’s body] were to act and talk just as Robinson has always done in the past’, then we’d say it’s Robinson even though he has Brown’s brain” (79). What matters, then, appears to be those things which are presumed to cause the body to act and behave in a particular way: its psychological states.

Approaches which endorse this viewpoint are called ‘psychological-continuity’ approaches to the problem of persistence, claiming in general that, “[...] our persistence consists in some psychological relation. You are that future being that in some sense inherits its mental features from you — beliefs, memories, preferences, the capacity for rational thought, and so on — and you are that past being whose mental features you have inherited in this way” (Olson sec. 3; par. 1). Beyond brain swapping considerations, psychological-continuity approaches to the problem of persistence also gain a great deal of credence from common-sensical considerations; for instance, a person’s beliefs, memories, and overall psychological constitution are generally assumed to play a large role in what characterizes them as themselves — maybe it does the same for what characterizes their persistence.⁴

Before moving on to the final two approaches to the problem of personal persistence, it is worth noting that brute-physicalism’s thought experiment (too-many-thinkers) is often also interpreted as a serious problem for psychological-continuity (Olson sec. 6), just as psychological-continuity’s thought experiment (brain swapping) is often interpreted as a serious problem for brute-physicalism (Olson sec. 7; par. 4). Afterall, since psychological-continuity does not require that human persons are human beings (organisms), then any given mind seems to belong to two thinkers: the person and the being; and an organ transplant, even that of a brain,

⁴ As before, this is not to say that the problem of personal persistence boils down to figuring out what characterizes persons, which is known as the ‘characterization problem’ (Olson sec.1; par. 2-4). The problem of persistence is distinct from the characterization problem.

does not stop an organism from remaining that organism,⁵ so that brute-physicalism would seem to suggest that persons remain themselves when their brains are swapped, so long as their lives continue. Either option seems absurd. The next section presents a third option.

D. Narrativist Approaches.

As the end approaches, there are no longer any images from memory — there are only words.

— Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal”

While brute-physicalist and psychological-continuity approaches to the problem of personal persistence often provide convincing accounts of personhood, one might object that in some senses the views assume overly objective accounts of personhood. Persons have bodies, minds, emotions, and thoughts, but also important things like responsibilities and conscience, both of which seem to require something beyond mere bodily or mental states. In particular, persons have self-awareness. Put another way, philosopher Christine Korsgaard writes, “. . . our relationship to our actions and choices is essentially *authorial*: from it, we view them as *our own* . . . We think of living our lives, and even of having our experiences, as something we *do*” (121). Furthermore, persons are not only self-aware and authorial about their actions; their self awareness and authorship often are the underlying causes of their actions. To quote Schroer et al., “. . . psychological continuity accounts [and, presumably, brute-physicalist accounts] neglect the importance of self-interpretation (and self-creation) activities that feature prominently in our personhood” (450). In the attempt to codify what can be concluded about these considerations, philosopher Marya Schechtman gives the following thought experiment:

[Thought Experiment 3: Schechtman’s Soup]

A soup is, of course, made of different ingredients, and these must exist prior to the soup

⁵ This is not universally held, despite the apparent absurdity. Philosopher Rory Madden, for instance, argues that both positions are compatible (1).

itself. Once they are mixed together, however, they interact to produce something that is not best understood as a mere collection of ingredients laid out in some particular arrangement. Each ingredient contributes to the flavor of the whole and is itself altered by being simmered together with the others. A soup can, of course, be divided into portions, but the character of each portion is determined by the soup from which it came.

(Schechtman 143)

The purpose of this thought experiment is explained promptly by Schechtman: “In a like manner the experiences woven together into a person’s narrative interact and alter one another in such a way that the narrative itself becomes the primary unit” (143-144). To Schechtman, then, a person’s experiences do not merely come together in their life as distinct ingredients, but rather as a cohesive whole (the soup).⁶ Schechtman is what is called a ‘narrativist’, and, appropriately, the broad view which highlights the narrative capacity of persons as being essential is known as ‘narrativism’. Olson puts the general narrativist claim as follows: “Roughly speaking, a past being is you just if you now have narratives of the right sort identifying you with her as she was then. A future being is you just if the narratives she has then identify her with you as you are now” (Olson sec. 3; par.4). Just what ‘right sort’ of narratives are intended will vary from account to account. Objections to narrativism are often used to motivate one of the other three popular approaches. A striking one will be used in the following section to motivate ‘anticriterialist’ approaches.

E. Anticriterialist Approaches.

I dreamed, unbearably, of a small and orderly labyrinth at whose center lay a well; my hands

⁶ Not all narrativists justify their position this way. Schroer et al., for instance, justify their variant of narrativism in stark contrast to Schechtman’s justification, which they call “non-Reductionist” (452), in the sense that Schechtman’s ultimate theory does not ‘reduce the soup to its ingredients’. Schroer et al. see themselves as motivating a ‘reductionist’ narrativism. Still, Schechtman’s soup thought experiment functions well as an introduction to the narrativist manner of thinking.

could almost touch it, my eyes see it, but so bewildering and entangled were the turns that I knew I would die before I reached it. — Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal”

Psychological-continuity, brute-physicalist, and narrativist approaches to the problem of personal persistence, despite their differences, all agree with the claim that “[...] there is something that it takes for us to persist — that there are informative, nontrivial necessary and sufficient conditions for a person existing at one time to exist at another time” (Olson sec. 3; par. 5). Such conditions are called ‘criteria’, and so psychological-continuity, brute-physicalism, and narrativism can be categorized as ‘criterialist’ approaches to the problem of personal persistence. Accordingly, any view objecting their existence is known as ‘anticriterialist’.

The common justification for anticriterialist approaches to the problem of personal persistence may be found in the inadequacies of other approaches. A common anticriterialist objection to narrativism is to point to the human proclivity to construct ‘false’ narratives. Philosopher Bernard Williams provides an extreme example of this in the following thought experiment:

[Thought Experiment 5: Williams’s Guy Fawkes (Delusion)]

We may suppose that . . . all the events [a man, Charles,] claims to have witnessed and all the actions he claims to have done point unanimously to the life-history of some one person in the past — for instance, Guy Fawkes. Not only do all Charles’ memory-claims that can be checked fit the pattern of Fawkes’ life as known to historians, but others than cannot be checked are plausible, provide explanations of unexplained facts, and soon [sic]. Are we to say that Charles is now Guy Fawkes, that Guy Fawkes has come to life again in Charles’ body, or some such thing? (237-238)

Charles is suffering under a delusion that he is Guy Fawkes, when he is presumably not Guy

Fawkes. Yet, if narrativism is taken seriously, it would seem that he is Guy Fawkes; another absurdity. For the purposes of the present discussion, in effect this ends up being a positive for anticriterialism (as well as the other accounts). Moreover, the anticriterialist is able to point out the problems with these others as well.

A common anticriterialist objection to psychological-continuity approaches is to point to what are known as ‘fission’ cases, wherein a person’s psychological continuity is apparently preserved despite the apparent splitting of the person into two persons, often pose problems for such accounts. Olson cites (disputed) neurological research to the effect that either hemisphere of a healthy brain may go on to exist independently as a person (sec. 5; par.1). With this, he proposes the following thought experiment:

[Thought Experiment 6: Lefty and Righty (Fission)]

... suppose that both [of your] hemispheres are transplanted, each into a different empty head. ... The two recipients — call them Lefty and Righty — will each be psychological continuous with you. ... [But, under psychological-continuity,] any future being who is psychologically continuous with you must be you. It follows that you are Lefty and also that you are Righty. ... [yet] there are indisputably two people after the operation. (sec. 5; par. 2)

Such a counterexample is known as a ‘fission’ counterexample, because it evidences a situation in which an account of personhood allows for one person to split into two persons in such a way that one person really is two persons. This is seen as objectionable via recourse to the fact that one does not equal two, making any account advocating for such an absurdity just as absurd.

As for objections to brute-physicalism, the anticriterialist is of course still free to point to the issue of brain swapping, which for most acts as an serious objection. What results is a

justification for anticriterialism: if brute-physicalism faces the problem of brain swapping, psychological-continuity faces the problem of too-many-thinkers and fission, and narrativism faces the problem of delusion, then perhaps the problem has little to do with specifics and much more to do with the criterialist assumption in the first place. That is, maybe there simply are no criteria for personal identity over time.

With this account of the problem of personal persistence and the popular approaches to it out of the way, attention can now be turned to “The Immortal” and how the story might be said to be relevant to the problem of persistence.

2. “The Immortal” & Persistence

“The Immortal” was published in Spanish in 1949’s *El Aleph (The Aleph)*, Borges’s third short story collection. It is the first story in the collection, and in the afterword Borges writes of it that, “... its subject is the effect that immortality would have on humankind. ... an ethics of immortality ...” (287). This section provides a summary of the story, before discussing some of Borges’s own views relating to personhood. It concludes with a presentation of the story in the form of a philosophical thought experiment.

A. Summary of the Story. The story of “The Immortal” works as follows: in the last volume of a six-volume copy of Alexander Pope’s translation of Homer’s *Iliad* that she bought from a rare book dealer named Joseph Cartaphilus, the princess de Lucinge finds a manuscript with a fantastical tale “. . . written in an English that teems with Latinisms” (183). The narrator of “The Immortal” then claims to provide a “. . . verbatim transcription of the document” (183), which is published by Borges in his native Spanish. For the purposes of this research paper, reference will be made to the English translation of *The Aleph* by Andrew Hurley, in his 1998 translation of

Borges's *Collected Fictions*.⁷

As for the fictional manuscript, it recounts the story of a Roman centurion, Flaminus Rufus, in Thebes, who hears from a dying horseman of the city of the immortals, and in response embarks on a quest to find it. He does, and, once there, drinks from an “. . . impure stream, clogged by sand and rubble” (185) and meets the ‘Troglodytes’, who are passive, silent, eat serpents, and emerge from shallow holes, “. . . with gray skin and neglected beards” (185). Thereafter, Rufus walks through the city of the immortals, horrified by its meaningless construction. When he emerges, he names a troglodyte who followed him ‘Argos’, after Odysseus’s dog in Homer’s *Odyssey* (189). When a “slow, strong rain” (190) begins to pour, the troglodyte begins to recite Homer, which leads directly to Rufus discovering that the troglodyte really is Homer, “. . . *eleven hundred years since last [he] wrote it*” (190). Thereafter, it is revealed to Rufus that the Troglodytes are the immortals, who, after centuries of existence have begun to practice an intense ethic of passivity. Rufus writes, “I recall one whom I never saw standing — a bird had made its nest on his breast” (192). As to the content of this ethic, Rufus reports:

Taught by centuries of living, the republic of immortal men had achieved a perfection of tolerance, almost of disdain. They knew that over an infinitely long span of time, all things happen to all men. As reward for his past and future virtues, every man merited every kindness — yet also every betrayal, as reward for his past and future iniquities. . . .

Viewed in that way, all our acts are just, though also unimportant. . . . The notion of the world as a system of exact compensations . . .” (191)

This ideology of ‘exact compensations’ eventually leads the immortals and Rufus to conclude

⁷ This last translation ‘back’ into English is a turn that Borges likely would have appreciated. As critic J. Agassi writes, this would be, “. . . part of the game, for Borges wishes to shake in his reader the commonsensical confidence that one knows the difference between dream and reality . . .” (288).

that, just as there was a river that gave them immortality, there must just as well be a river that will give them mortality, and the immortals spread “through new realms, new empires” (192). A thousand years later, at some unknown port, Rufus habitually drinks from a river, before he accidentally pricks himself on a thorn and begins to bleed. “*I am once more mortal*, I told myself over and over, *again I am like all other men*” (193). A year later, Rufus asks whether at the end of this long life he was the same roman centurion who had “looked out over the Red Sea” (193), and it is revealed that Rufus is Cartaphilus. The exact content of his questions will be returned to in subsection C below. Cartaphilus’s manuscript concludes with the epigraph of this paper.

B. Borges the Metaphysician: The Self, Identity, & Eternity.

It would be vanity to suppose that in order to enjoy absolute validity this psychic aggregate must seize on a self, that conjectural Jorge Luis Borges on whose tongue sophistries are always at the ready and in whose solitary strolls the evenings on the fringes of the city are pleasant.

— Jorge Luis Borges, “The Nothingness of Personality”

Before discussing how “The Immortal” may be viewed as a thought experiment about the problem of personal persistence, it is worth mentioning some of the contents of Borges’s own philosophical writings, which may be found in his nonfiction pieces. In particular, it will be important to survey some of the accounts Borges has given of such topics as the ‘self’ and identity.

As early as 1922, in “The Nothingness of Personality”, Borges wrote that, “There is no whole self” (3). The relevance of this early writing to “The Immortal” can be seen in the explicit allusion to it in “The Immortal”. In “The Nothingness of Personality”, Borges writes “[Torres Villarroel] saw that he was like everyone else: that is, *that he was no one*, or little more than an

unintelligible cacophony, persisting in time and wearing out in space” (5). At the end of “The Immortal”, accordingly, Borges has Cartaphilus write that, “soon, I shall be all men — I shall be dead” (194), a sentence which is commonly interpreted as self-denying (Christ, 215). This allusion to Borges’s explicit denial of the self is obviously intentional.

In “The Nothingness of Personality”, Borges writes that, despite that we are still ourselves, “It suffices to walk any distance along the inexorable rigidity that the mirrors of the past open to us in order to feel like outsiders, soberly flustered by our own bygone days [to see that] There is no community of intention in them, nor are they propelled by the same breeze” (5). This sentiment, it will be shown, is Cartaphilus’s.

C. “The Immortal” as Thought Experiment.

Consider the following thought experiment, adapted from “The Immortal”:

Thought Experiment 7: The Immortal

Cartaphilus drinks from the river of the immortals and gains immortality. Throughout Cartaphilus’s life, he lives many different kinds of lives: lives of violence, lives of peace, of hate and love, and of forgetfulness. Slowly, he begins to no longer recognize who he was in the past, to the extent that he seems a different person altogether. The Immortal believes he really is not the same person as he was before.

The next section discusses the responses of psychological-continuity, brute-physicalist, narrativist, and anticriterialist approaches to the problem of personal persistence to this thought experiment.

3. Application to the Problem

In Rome, I spoke with philosophers who felt that to draw out the span of a man’s life was to draw out the agony of his dying and multiply the number of his deaths.

— Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal”

Psychological-continuity, brute-physicalist, narrativist, and anticriterialist approaches to the problem of persistence take it as their goal to explain something like the following statement: *persons persist*. This statement is presumably true. The task of explaining just how persons manage to do this, from one second to another, is a hard task, and indeed so hard that the problem of persistence is born. Still, the case of Cartaphilus confuses the issue somewhat, for if Cartaphilus’s life is truly infinite (in a way that Borges’s Cartaphilus is not), then his body, mind, and narratives (at any given finite timespan) are still finite. Moreover, though the changes that Cartaphilus goes through happen in a continuous manner, Cartaphilus’s life is such that the shorter time scales that regular persons perceive as slow are infinitesimal when compared to it. For Cartaphilus, a thousand years ago is no older than yesterday, and yet the person of a thousand years ago is radically different than the person of today or yesterday. The recourse to ‘continuity’, so comfortable for most persons, is simply not available to a truly eternal person, like Cartaphilus.

It might seem at first glance to function well as a thought experiment for narrativism. ... Literary critic Rex Butler might be taken to endorse the claim that this thought experiment is narrativist. He writes, “It is not that immortality is some enigma which cannot be fathomed ... It is rather because immortality is equivalent to its narration, and does not exist before it, that it lives on for ever” (182). Yet, classifying the thought experiment completely as narrativist is not without its own troubles. It is Cartaphilus’s inability to reconcile his narrative that leads him to come to his anti-personal conclusion, and this conclusion is not just epistemic, but also seemingly metaphysical; Cartaphilus lacks all connection with his previous selves. It is not that time eats away at memories, or personality, or narratives, but that time eats away at all of these,

and any other possible criterion of personhood. All chains of psychic states, perhaps even all chains of bodily states, must be finite, in which case the true immortal eventually leaves them for others. In “The Nothingness of Personality”, Borges records a Buddhist precept used to arrive at a similar conclusion, “Those things of which I can perceive the beginnings and the end are not my self” (8). The true immortal must witness the end of all things, even their criteria of identity.

4. Conclusion

The immortal Cartaphilus writes, “As the end approaches, there are no longer any images from memory — there are only words” (194). This reads, interestingly enough, as a rejection of psychological-continuity and an embrace of narrativism. But, promptly, Cartaphilus writes again, in a denial that personhood exists at all. Again, “... I have been Homer; soon, like Ulysses, I shall be Nobody; soon, I shall be all men — I shall be dead” (194). It may be said to deny personhood because of this last claim, that ‘all men are dead’; presumably, even those which are alive are somehow dead. The endorser of brute-physicalism or psychological-continuity may press the claim harder, that Cartaphilus really remains the roman centurion, despite his many changes. Pressing such a claim ignores the importance of Borges’s thought experiment, however: why *is it* that we should assume that persons can persist without qualification? Perhaps Rufus is Cartaphilus, but if a trillion years more had passed, would there have been anything left of either?

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