

Part 1: I am...

a. Name: For most people asked the question of ‘who are you/who am I?’, this is the first answer that comes to mind. We identify ourselves with our name all the time, in contexts from school to social gatherings to being stopped by the police. Although many other elements in ourselves change over time, we (usually) keep our name from birth to death. A name can confer association or attachment (e.g., marriage, or birth into a family with a well known name), as well as status and pride (e.g., celebrity).

b. Nationality: Close behind name, we often identify ourselves by which “team” of humans we belong to. If we travel, we bring our passport that has our nationality clearly stamped on it. When we meet others abroad, the question “where are you from?” usually arises. Discussion of various associations we’ve made with each particular country usually comes up, and can (sometimes) tell us about the person we’re meeting. We may feel as individuals that we’ve absorbed or adopted elements of the collective around us. Many of our relationship and possibilities arise on account of nations.

c. Body: Again, this can seem fairly obvious. We often point to the body as “me”. It goes without saying that the body is an essential component of our identity. Our physical appearance, race, and gender all play a role in who we are, and impact how others perceive us. This can lead to pride or shame, depending on a person’s relationship with their body.

d. Social Media: Particularly relevant to students today! Many people spend a lot of time and energy posting on Facebook, Instagram, twitter, etc. –they wouldn’t do this unless this was an important element of themselves. We do this often to show others who we are. This can be a double-edged sword: it can help us connect with a larger circle, but potential employers, lovers, and strangers can look you up on social media platforms and form an impression of who you are before even meeting you in person.

e. Thoughts: We all have an internal narrative, an “inner voice” that feels like “me”. What we speak about with others, which is clearly a big part of who we are, begins as thoughts. We can direct thoughts to a particular subject and create and share new ones.

f. Choices: Again, it seems obvious to many people that we are the sum of the choices we make. In social interactions, asked to describe ourselves, we often mention the types of things we’ve done in our lives (go to school, get married, etc.). When we tell people the choices we’ve made, that generally reflects the type of person we are and what we value.

Part 2: How I am *not*...

a. Name: We did not choose our names; they were given to us by our parents. We can change our names legally if we want. Many other people might also have the same exact name (look yourself up on Facebook!). A name is a useful label, but it could never convey who we really are. Sometimes people use a pseudonym or a stage name that they've chosen that feels truer than their given name.

b. Nationality: Like name, you didn't choose your nationality. Although we might like to think of ourselves as "Canadian", what does that really mean? Does that mean that I share characteristics or values with everyone who lives in Canada? We may not want to be associated with our nationality because we feel our individual selves to be at odds with the collective identity. Plus, what is a nation? What is Canada, or Quebec? A shared idea that gets passed down over time. If you look at the earth from space, no nationality boundaries are visible. Nations are constructs in human minds, not external realities. Which is not to say that the social aspect of defining yourself like this isn't important –try traveling without a passport! It's just that we normally get stuck on the level of thinking "I am my nationality" without considering what that really means. We are all, in truth, citizens of the world and the universe for that matter.

For a) and b) refer back to the 1st Brad Warner clip and his mention that these answers are useful, *conventional* terms of self (i.e., required for day-to-day use in society).

c. Body: Like name and nationality, the body is something you didn't choose. It changes over time. Most household dust comes from shed hair and skin cells. Each cell will have replaced itself at least once every 7 years (some, like stomach lining, replace themselves twice a day!). Likewise, our perception of body changes over time, and there are examples where one might feel alien or uncomfortable with one's physical body (e.g., body dysmorphia, transgender). Also, the body draws on the environment to survive for everything from air to water to food. It's not a stretch to look at a river, or a tree, or the entire earth and say "that's my body." Without those things, your individual body wouldn't exist. **Refer back to the Brad Warner clip where he mentions that we are the universe.** Question to ponder: if you lost a limb (or multiple limbs), would you still be you? There are a few (older) pop culture references that explore this: [Monty Python and the Black Knight](#) and [Cat Stevens "Moonshadow"](#)

d. Social Media: We pick and choose what we want to show others on these platforms. We curate the moments of our lives and select what we think is important according to the narrative we've established for ourselves ("I am such-and-such a person"). Exaggeration, embellishment, and lying can result. It can also lead to neglecting or ignoring sad, difficult, boring, or routine moments, which all of us live through, but very

few of us share (unless we're searching for sympathy). If we don't question this aspect, it can also lead us to compare ourselves to others, which could make us feel like our lives are not as exciting/meaningful everyone else we see.

e. Thoughts: It seems like the internal voice in our heads is such a big element of who we are. But are you in control of your thoughts? Where do your thoughts come from? This question could be explored in a number of ways, including investigating elements of parental and social conditioning, and power structures. Some examples would be what we find sexually attractive, what we consider a successful life to look like, and the thoughts we have about different groups of people. Most of the time, the thoughts that arise in our minds in these respects can be traced back to the social conditioning we were raised with. This begs the question: to what extent are our thoughts actually ours?

f. Choices: You may justifiably look back and define yourself this way, but what about the *conditions* that lead you to make those choices? Did you choose them? For instance, you may have chosen to go into business, and that may be a big part of your identity. But you didn't choose to be born into a society, or at a historical time, where that is a possibility. You didn't even choose to exist in the first place! Even being able to "choose" to go to public institution of higher learning requires existing in society that values and subsidizes education. We owe the fact that we are sitting in an educational institution to the millions of people who contribute taxes that are spent in this way. Additionally, we all rely on the support of our parents (again, not chosen) to become who we are. It's not a given that we will have supportive and loving parents who will allow us to be able to make the choices we want. There are also many other unchosen elements that inform our choices, like synchronicities, bad luck, the actions of others, social pressure, and many other elements "outside of our control."