



STAR TREKKING

THE PHILOSOPHY

This is one of a themed number of sessions on personal identity. In this session the children will consider, philosophically, a familiar device used in many science-fiction stories in which teleportation is a reality. It is similar to the clone session, *You On Another Planet*, but with a significant difference as it is not left with the problem of there being two versions of the same person. One implication of this situation is that if we conclude that the molecularly distinct versions in the story are not the same then it might seem that we are left with an uncomfortable consequence that the young and an old versions of ourselves must also be distinct in the same way. But we don't feel that the 10 year-old me no longer exists; just that he has grown. So we are left with the job of trying to explain what is different about our situation and the star-ship captain's situation. Maybe the nature of the change has something to do with it: in our case it is gradual and incremental but in the case of the captain it is sudden and complete. But then surely the speed at which complete change occurs shouldn't make any difference to the fact that it is 'complete change'. Or does it?

THE STIMULUS

You are the captain of a star-ship, the TriStar, and have been now for the past 10 years during which time you have trekked across the universe exploring new planets and encountering all kinds of new life forms. The ship has a teletransporter on board and this is the routine method of transportation on and off the ship. You must have been through the transporter hundreds – if not thousands – of times. However, you hear about a strange case on the news reporter. A scientific report has been published back on Earth claiming that anybody who travels through the teletransporter suffers a terrible - but hitherto unknown - fate: they die!

The report explains it like this: each time a person transports through the machine the actual material that they are made of is destroyed, or, more accurately, disassembled, and the information about the person is then beamed across space and the person is copied using the atoms available at the designated place where they are simply copied in every detail including memories and feelings. The person who materialises at the other end will feel like a continuation of the person who stepped into the machine on board the ship, but – according to the report – they will, in fact, be a completely new person having replaced the old one.

You read the extract with astonishment: that would mean that you have died many hundreds of times. But you feel like the same person - you don't feel like you've died and been replaced.

You are requested to beam down onto Earth's surface for a routine meeting. You step towards the teletransporter and then hesitate...

Task Question:

- ✓ Should you step into the machine? Will this be the last journey you ever make?

Draw a diagram as you explain to help ease understanding.

Nested Questions:

- ✓ If you are copied by the machine then is the copy the same person as you?
- ✓ There is only one of you at any one time, does this mean that it is you when you appear at the other end?

FURTHER THOUGHT 1:

One way to think of this is to imagine two scenarios:

Scenario one: a car is taken apart and then the parts are taken somewhere else where the car is rebuilt, using the same parts.

Scenario two: a car is taken apart and the information about how the car was built is sent somewhere else where the instructions are followed accurately and the car is rebuilt, using other parts that they make at the new location, indistinguishable from the first car.

Task Question:

- ✓ Is the story of the captain of the star-ship more similar to scenario one or scenario two?

FURTHER THOUGHT 2:

If we imagine that the teletransporter was able to actually transport the atoms that comprise you, if those atoms are first of all completely dismantled, flown through space, and then reassembled at the other end, would the end result be the same person or a different person do you think?

Task Question:

- ✓ Would it be you on the other planet?