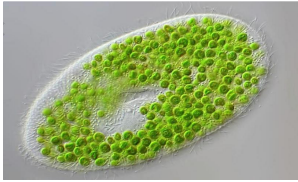


# What Am I?

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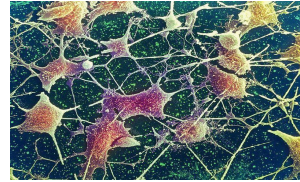
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*Paramecium bursaria* with endosymbiotic algae (600x)



Filamentous cyanobacteria (200x)



Neuron network



Human microflora

**W**HAT AM I? What am I not?<sup>1</sup> What does “I” even mean? If “me” did not happen with about 86 billion neurons, located in structures we now label *cerebellum* and *cerebral cortex*, would “I” even be?

And does the vast ecosystem of microbial flora in my gut also help to make me “I”? After all, those microbes have their own DNA, so how could they be “I”, right? But then what of my mitochondria? Those little cellular organelles which “like” to hang around on the endoplasmic reticulum inside all my cells. And like my gut flora, they have their own DNA too, ostensibly separate from my cells’ nuclear DNA. In fact, if the theory of endosymbiosis is true—it is—then prior to 1.8 billion years ago, my mitochondria were entirely separate prokaryotic organisms who managed to make a happy home inside my progenitor cells. Are my mitochondria “I”?

What am I? What the findings of biology reveal is that “I”-ness is (merely) an emergent property, built on an ongoing vast exchange of cellular bits-n-pieces in response to chemical and energetic change. “I”-ness is not my network of neurons. It is not my gut flora. It is not my mitochondria. It is even not my own DNA. “I”-ness is an emergent everything, together. And that I can even introspect about it is I think a happy happenstance, because by far, most other I’s on Earth are profoundly unaware of themselves.

So if I were to contemplate the gods, say, or the divinity of Jesus, or his Resurrection, or Krishna and Buddha being avatars of Shiva, or Mohammed riding to Heaven on a *buraq*, or miracle healings, or an afterlife, what is the “I” that is doing so?

Sagan once said that cosmology is a humbling endeavour. He’s right. But so is biology. Cosmology and biology both help give context to I Am.

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<sup>1</sup>This essay was inspired in part by:

“Where Did Eukaryotic Cells Come From?—A Journey Into Endosymbiotic Theory”  
Journey to the Microcosmos  
22 July 2019  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LhBZ2H5SwM>