

11.2 When, Where, and Who (p. 272)

The Washington Intelligence Community

HERE'S A JOKE THAT gets its point from confusions about "me," "your," and so on.

While visiting England, George W. Bush is invited to tea with the Queen. He asks her what her leadership philosophy is. She says that it is to surround herself with intelligent people. He asks how she knows if they're intelligent.

"I do so by asking them the right questions," says the Queen. "Allow me to demonstrate."

She phones Tony Blair and says, "Mr. Prime Minister. Please answer this question: Your mother has a child, and your father has a child, and this child is not your brother or sister. Who is it?"

Tony Blair responds, "It's me, ma'am."

"Correct. Thank you and good-bye, sir," says the Queen. She hangs up and says, "Did you get that, Mr. Bush?"

"Yes ma'am. Thanks a lot. I'll definitely be using that!"

Upon returning to Washington, he decides he'd better put the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to the test. He summons Jesse Helms to the White House and says, "Senator Helms, I wonder if you can answer a question for me."

"Why, of course, sir. What's on your mind?"

"Uh, your mother has a child, and your father has a child, and this child is not your brother or your sister. Who is it?"

Helms hems and haws and finally asks, "Can I think about it and get back to you?" Bush agrees. Helms leaves and immediately calls a meeting of other senior senators, and they puzzle over the question for several hours, but nobody can come up with an answer. Finally, in desperation, Helms calls Colin Powell at the State Department and explains his problem.

"Now look here, Colin Powell, your mother has a child, and your father has a child, and this child is not your brother, or your sister. Who is it?" Powell answers immediately, "It's me, of course, you moron."

Much relieved, Helms rushes back to the White House and exclaims, "I know the answer, sir! I know who it is! It's Colin Powell!"

And Bush replies in disgust, "Wrong, you fool. It's Tony Blair!"

No, we're not allowed just to enjoy a good joke; we have to drag some philosophical significance out of it. What this joke tells us is that, whatever the philosophical complexities of explaining how indexicals work in English, you have to be really dumb not to be able to understand them in their real uses.

“One imagines that he is deeply, perpetually, unavoidably aware of something he calls ‘I’ or ‘me.’ The philosopher then baptizes this thing his *self* or perhaps his *mind*, and the theologian calls it his *soul*. It is, in any case, something that is at the very heart of things, the very center of reality, that about which the heavens and firmament revolve. But should you not feel embarrassment to talk in such a way, or even to play with such thoughts? As soon as you begin to try saying anything whatever about this inner self, this central reality, you find that you can say nothing at all. It seems to elude all description. All you can do, apparently, is refer to it; you can never say what is referred to, except by multiplying synonyms—as if the piling of names upon names would somehow guarantee the reality of the thing named! But as soon as even the least description is attempted, you find that what is described is indistinguishable from absolute nothingness. Then when you realize that you began by fearing nothingness, that it was this invincible nothingness that was making you miserable, driving you toward madness; when you go back and review your thought and feeling and find it leading to the most familiar thing imaginable, you feel like a child caught making faces at itself in the mirror. You feel like a child plunged into anxiety by a skin blemish or ill-fitting pants, the absurdity is so overwhelming.”—Richard Taylor¹

Finding Out Who You Are

MICHAEL FRAYN OFFERS THIS version of the same puzzle:

‘Aren’t you Michael Frayn?’ you ask uncertainly, meeting me in the street and not knowing me very well. I look down uncertainly in my turn at what I’m wearing. ‘I think I am,’ I say, ‘These trousers are the sort that Michael wears. Though quite a lot of people have got trousers like these.... My hands look familiar.... Have you got a mirror? I’m very bad at names but I’m quite good at faces.’

You expect me to have a sense of myself that goes beyond trousers and facial features—a sense against which I can check my identification even when I’m wearing a Father Christmas costume and mask.¹

But he doesn’t say exactly what a “sense of myself” is. It clearly doesn’t amount merely to naming something. If he knew that the person walking down that street and stopping to chat was named ‘Michael Frayn’ he could answer that question, but that doesn’t involve a “sense of myself.”

¹ *Metaphysics*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. 122.

² *The Human Touch: Our Part in the Creation of a Universe* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 234–35.