

The Longer Fable

A different fellow (We'll call him Wilbur) is afraid of losing at strip poker, so he puts on every garment he can fit before the game begins. He loses the first hand and has to take off his topcoat. "Augh!" he cries.

"That was my signature outerwear! Who am I now that I have lost my topcoat?"

"You're still Wilbur," says the dealer. "How many cards?"

Then Wilbur loses again and must remove his smoking jacket. "Woe!" he cries. "I am really diminished now! I have neither a topcoat nor smoking jacket!"

"You're still Wilbur," says the dealer. "How many cards?"

Of course, Wilbur is a terrible player. He loses his sweater vest, his cufflinks, and on and on. Each time he shouts something like "Oh no! I am diminished! I am nobody! What has happened to the man I once was?!"

And every time the dealer says, "You're still Wilbur. How many cards?"

But after many losing hands, Wilbur is naked. "Now I can play no more," he wails. "I am nobody, naked and poor, and I can't even play the game any longer!"

"Sure you can," says the dealer. "If you lose, you can shave off your beard."

So Wilbur plays again. He loses again. He shaves off his beard, and he cries out again. "Now it's worse than I thought possible! Before I was naked, but now I'm naked and beardless, and I don't look anything at all like the picture on my driver's license! And I can't play any more, because I don't even have a beard!"

"Sure you can," says the dealer. "If you lose, you can cut off your hair."

So Wilbur plays again. He loses again. He cuts off his hair, and he cries out again. "Before, I thought it was worse than I thought possible! Before I was naked and beardless and didn't look anything at all like the picture on my driver's license, but now I'm bald, too! And I can't play any more, because I don't have anything left!"

"Sure you can," says the dealer. "If you lose, you can chop off your little toe."

"Wait a minute," says Wilbur. "Clothes I can buy, hair I can grow. But toes, now once those are gone they are gone forever. I thought before that I was giving up my identity—especially now that not only am I unrecognizable, but also if someone did recognize me they would scutter away as fast as possible—but toes are a natural part of my actual body. If I cut off a toe, I can never go back."

"Perhaps," says the dealer, "but what if your luck is about to change?"

"Then again," muses Wilbur, "it's just a toe. Evolution is apparently dropping them anyway—I would just be hastening the already destined fate of the toe, right?"

"How many cards?" asks the dealer.

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Later, Wilbur has worked out a way to communicate by waving his arm stumps like Navy semaphores.

"Look what I have done to myself!" he signals. "No one in their right mind would look at this lump of flesh and have the faintest inkling that it was once Wilbur!"

"Do you know that it is Wilbur?" the dealer replies.

"Well of course I do. If I didn't know I was me, then my situation wouldn't bother me, now would it?"

"So even though you've no arms or legs; and no liver, spleen, or gall bladder; even though you've lost your eyes, your tongue, one ear, and most of your blood supply, you still know that you are Wilbur. True?"

"I suppose that's true," Wilbur waves. "Perhaps there is a lesson in this. Maybe there is something at the core of Wilbur that remains in spite of what is stripped away— maybe there is a thing called 'me' that is still there, will always be there no matter what happens to my physical self."

"So you are saying that as long as you are self aware, you still have something?" the dealer inquires.

"Yes, that sounds right. As long as I know who I am, I still have my true self."

“Wilbur?” the dealer speaks.

“Yes?” Wilbur signals.

“How many cards?”