

## A Puzzle of Material Identity: The Ship of Theseus

**1. The Ship of Theseus:** In an attempt to answer the question, "What makes something the SAME thing over time, even though it goes through changes?", Thomas Hobbes resurrects a 2,000 year old story from the ancient Greeks, regarding a ship belonging to a man named Theseus. (De Corpore, 2.11) Consider:

- The Ship of Theseus: Theseus owns and sails a ship. Every month, when he sails to port, he has one old plank of his ship replaced with a brand new plank. By the time 10 years has passed, not a single original plank of wood remains in Theseus' ship. Unbeknownst to Theseus, however, the ship repairman has saved all of the old planks that he removes from Theseus' ship. Slowly, he constructs a new ship. By the time 10 years has passed, he has acquired every single original plank from Theseus' ship and arranged them exactly as they were in Theseus' original ship.

The question that Hobbes poses is, "Which of the two existing ships is numerically one and the same ship as Theseus' original ship?" Is it the ship with all new parts, or the re-constructed ship with all of the original parts?

**2. Two principles:** Depending on which ship one judges to be the same as Theseus' original ship, a different principle is at work.

- (a) The Gradual Replacement Principle: If object X is composed of many parts, and a single part of that object is replaced, producing object Y, then objects X and Y are the same object.
- (b) The Same Parts Principle: If object X and object Y share all and only the same exact parts, arranged in exactly the same way, then objects X and Y are the same object.

**3. Transitivity:** BOTH of these principles cannot be true. If they WERE, then this would be a violation of the law of the "transitivity of identity." This law says that:

- If "A=B" and "B=C" are true, then "A=C" is also true.

To illustrate this in the Ship of Theseus case, let us call Theseus' original ship "A". Next, call the ship with all new parts "B". Finally, call the ship re-constructed out of all the old parts "C".

Now, by The Gradual Replacement Principle, "A=B" is true (do you see why?). But, by The Same Parts Principle, "A=C" is true. But, then, by transitivity of identity, "B=C" must be true. This means that the ship with all new parts and the ship re-constructed from all of the old parts must be numerically ONE AND THE SAME SHIP. But, that is absurd—for, they are clearly two distinct ships.

We must conclude that one of the two principles (or transitivity) is mistaken. But, which should it be?

## Personal Identity and the Afterlife

**Afterlife and identity:** There is much speculation about whether or not there is an afterlife, and what the afterlife might be like, etc. Here, however, we will simply ask: Is the afterlife even POSSIBLE?

In order to answer the above question, the following question becomes relevant: What would be required in order for it to be the case that the person living NOW (i.e., me) would be the SAME person as the one living in the afterlife? Imagine that you are shown you a photo of yourself when you were a child. How might you reply if someone asked you, "What is it that makes you the same person as the person in this photo?"

In short, what are the criteria for "personal identity"?

**Personhood:** First, a note on what a "person" is. A "person" is the rational, emotional, self-aware "self" that is found in every normal, adult human being. Most take the terms "human" and "person" to be equivalent, but they needn't be. For instance, a severely disabled human being may be no more conscious than a vegetable. In this case, we might say that—though there exists a living human organism—there is a "man" present, but no "person" present. Likewise, if there were a super-intelligent, self-aware, philosopher-cat, this cat would be a "person" even though it is not a "human."

**Two Criteria of Identity:** When asking the question of whether one person is identical with another (e.g., the 5 year old child in the photo, and YOU, the person reading these words), it may help to ask two questions. Consider that there is one person (A) at time-1, and another person (B) at a later time, time-2:

1. Anticipation of Pleasure/Pain: If person A and person B are indeed one and the same person, then it should be rational for person A to anticipate or be excited about the future pleasures of person B. Likewise, it should be rational for person A to fear the future pains of person B.
2. Fair Punishment: If person A and person B are indeed one and the same person, then it should be fair to punish person B for any crimes committed by person A.

Our intuitions about the answers to these two questions should guide us in determining what it is that makes someone the same person over time. Let's look at some of those views now.

**1. The Soul Theory:** One theory of personal identity states that each of us has some IMMATERIAL thing inside of us. This thing is called a “soul,” and your soul is the thing that makes you YOU. In other words, the child in the photo is the same person as you because you both have the same immaterial SOUL; and a soul is just some invisible, immaterial thing that inhabits our bodies.

Regarding the afterlife, on the soul view, an afterlife would be quite possible, because God could just put your soul into some other body, and whatever body that soul inhabited would be YOU.

Problem: Note that a soul is not ghost-like (as is often depicted in movies), but totally invisible. In order for something to be visible (as ghosts are), it would either need to reflect light or emit light. Either way, it would be made up of matter/energy. But, that is not the soul view. That would be a version of the BODY view (see below). Souls are supposed to be COMPLETELY lacking of matter or energy; i.e., they are completely IMMATERIAL.

As such, souls cannot be perceived with the senses. You cannot see, touch, or smell something that is devoid of all matter or energy. So, the problem is that, when you claim that the child in the photo is the same person as you, then you are making the claim that you and the child have the same soul. But, there is absolutely no observable evidence for this claim. You cannot perceive the soul, so how could you possibly know (even in PRINCIPLE) that you and the child have the same soul?

It seems that we can very easily know when some person is the same person that we met yesterday, or 5 years ago. If the soul were the thing that made one the same person over time, then it would not be easy to know whether or not some person is the same person that we met previously. For all we know, souls are constantly jumping in and out of bodies. If they WERE, there would be no way to tell. For instance, for all I know, Abraham Lincoln’s soul is presently the soul that resides in my body. If so, then I \*AM\* Abraham Lincoln. That is, he and I are numerically one and the same person. But, even if that were true, the fact that he and I share some immaterial substance in common seems irrelevant to my identity (just as the fact that most of the material substance in my body—e.g., my atoms—were once in plants, and dinosaurs, and perhaps even other human beings seems irrelevant to my identity). So, souls do not seem to be the thing by which we judge sameness of person over time.

**2. The Bodily Theory:** Another view states that it is the BODY that constitutes identity. The child in the photo is the same person as you because you both share the same body. During the time between that photo and now, there has existed one continuous, living, bodily organism—and that organism is YOU.

The Brain Theory: One initial worry is that, NO ONE remains in exactly the same body over time. We are constantly losing cells and gaining new ones as we replenish old cells, or grow, or gain or lose weight. If the body theory were true, a person beginning a meal would never be the same person as the one who finished it. A prisoner could shave off a few skin cells and claim that he is now a different person as the one who was convicted, and should therefore be freed.

We might even think that we could do without quite a bit MORE than just a few cells. For instance, people lose arms or legs, and we still judge them to be the same person. If, one day, science advances so that we can successfully perform brain transplants for people whose bodies have been too damaged, it seems that it would make sense for the recipient of the operation to say “I got a new body!” Thus, personal identity does not require sameness of the ENTIRE body, but only sameness of one PART of the body: Namely, the brain.

Bodily resurrection?: Is an afterlife POSSIBLE on the bodily view? Perhaps there could be an afterlife if God resurrected our bodies (or brains). The person living the afterlife would be YOU because it would be the SAME BODY (or, brain) that is resuscitated.

Problem: But, most of the bodies of people in history are completely gone—decayed and returned to ashes and dust. What happens in those cases?

Solution?: Perhaps our bodies in the afterlife are not composed of the same MATERIAL, but are merely exact DUPLICATES of our original bodies.

Problem: It does not seem that an exact duplicate of my body would really be ME. “Exactly similar” is not the same as “identical.” Consider:

- Kleenex: You have a Kleenex box in your bathroom. For fun during one of your parties, I set fire to the box, reducing it to ashes. You hear about this and become angry. But, the next day, I bring you an EXACTLY SIMILAR box that I just bought at the store. “Look. It’s the same box,” I say.

But, clearly this is not the SAME box. It’s merely an indistinguishable duplicate of the original. The original, however, has been destroyed. So, it seems that, if the afterlife contained some person with a body that looked exactly like mine, that person would

LOOK like me, but it would not BE me. I do not look forward to that person's future pleasures, or fear his future pains. We need to distinguish between two ways in which the term "identical" are used:

- **Qualitative Identity:** When two things are qualitatively identical, this means that they LOOK the same (or have all of the same observable qualities). For instance, two cans of soup are qualitatively identical. "Identical" twins are also identical in this way.
- **Numerical Identity:** When "two" things are numerically identical, they are not really TWO things at all, but rather ONE AND THE SAME THING. For instance, Superman is numerically identical to Clark Kent. The third president of the U.S. is numerically identical to the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence (namely, Thomas Jefferson).

It seems that, if God were to create a **qualitatively** identical duplicate of you in heaven, this would not be enough to constitute an afterlife. Rather, what is needed seems to be **numerical** identity. Still not convinced? Consider an example from science fiction:

- **Teletransporter:** There is a machine that is said to be able to "transport" individuals from one place to another. This machine works in the following way: You step into a booth, where a device scans your body. It then creates an exact bodily duplicate of that body in another booth, in another location. The original body in the first booth is then destroyed.

Would the DUPLICATE who steps out of the second booth be YOU? Would you be willing to be "transported" by such a device? In shows such as Star Trek, it is assumed that the person who steps out of the second booth IS the same person as the one who stepped into the first booth. But, is this right? Imagine that the first person's body is NOT destroyed. It seems more clear in this case that the person who steps out of the second booth is NOT you. For YOU are still standing in the FIRST booth. The duplicate is merely someone who LOOKS a lot LIKE you—even has the same memories and personality as you. But, they are not numerically identical to you (rather, they are only qualitatively identical). For illustration, see John Weldon's cartoon, "[To Be](#)".

It seems, then, that an afterlife is only possible on the bodily view just as long as God can resurrect ONE AND THE VERY SAME BODY as the one that is buried in the ground. Creating a similar-looking duplicate is not good enough. Imagine that God was going to create a body in heaven that LOOKED just like you (and even had your memories, personality, etc.), but your original body was still rotting in the ground. Would you be excited about going to heaven? It does not seem that it would be rational to be excited about your duplicate's future experiences.

### **3. The Psychological Theory:** Consider the following story:

- **The Prince and the Cobbler:** Imagine that a prince and a cobbler go to sleep one night, in their respective homes. When the body that went to sleep in the cobbler's bed wakes up, he thinks he is the prince, he claims to be the prince, has all of the memories of the prince, etc. Meanwhile, the prince's body wakes up, and claims to be a cobbler, has all of the memories of the cobbler, etc. (This is just like what happens in the movie, *Freaky Friday*)

Something about this story seems plausible. At least, it does not seem incoherent to think that someone might wake up in a different body. Many would have the intuition that the prince now inhabits the body of the cobbler and vice versa. This seems to suggest that we do not think the body is what constitutes identity.

Lots of things are constantly changing the material or parts that they are made of, while remaining the same individual thing; consider a river, or a basketball game—both of these things have constantly changing parts, and yet they remain the same. What matters is some sort of CONTINUITY between those parts.

What is it that creates a continuity between our own body's parts? The answer seems to be: CONSCIOUSNESS. Even if we go to sleep, or into a coma, when we wake up we have a consciousness or psychology that is continuous with the previous consciousness. So, perhaps you are the same person as the child in the photo because you both share one psychologically continuous stream of consciousness. For instance, you REMEMBER being that child, so you ARE the same person as that child. Consider the following example:

- **Day Man and Night Man:** In one body, every morning at dawn, a man wakes up and goes about his life by the name Day Man. Every evening at sunset, however, he completely forgets everything that he has done that day, and "wakes up" and goes about a completely different life by the name Night Man. Day Man and Night Man are completely unaware of each other, live completely different lives, and have completely different sets of memories—yet, they share the same body.

It seems to most of us that there are two people—or "persons"—sharing the same body. The key to their distinct identities seems to be separate consciousness, or separate sets of memories. This seems to support the psychological criterion of identity. If the bodily criterion were true, we should conclude that there is only ONE person in the story above. But, clearly, it would be irrational for Day Man to anticipate the future experiences of Night Man, or vice versa. And clearly it would be unjust to punish Day Man for Night Man's crimes, or vice versa. Do you agree? Consider another case:

- **Amnesia Surgery:** You are diagnosed with a fatal disease. The doctor lets you know that there IS a cure, but the surgery required will erase your mind. She gives you two options: (1) Live 5 more years of a painless, happy life and then die of the disease. During this 5 years, you keep your memories, personality, etc. (2) Have an operation later this week. The operation will cure your body of its illness so that your body will live 50 more years of a painless, happy life. However, your mind will be erased such that, when your body recovers, it will not remember any of your current friends or family. It will retain the ability to read and write, drive a car, etc. but likely will not develop the same personality, opinions, preferences, goals, or desires. Your body on the other side of the surgery may or may not end up acting NOTHING LIKE you act currently.

Would you have the surgery or die in 5 years? If you chose to have the surgery, would it be rational for you to look forward to the future experiences of that person? Many would choose to die in 5 years. This seems to indicate that it is MEMORY or PSYCHOLOGY that is important for retaining personal identity.

Problem: First, cases like Teletransporter are problematic. For, the person who steps out of a teletransporter IS psychologically continuous with you—and yet, it seems that this may not be YOU. The following sort of case is also problematic. Consider:

- **Fake Obama:** Sam Miller goes to sleep in his home. In the morning, the person who wakes up in his bed has all of the memories of Barack Obama. He thinks he is Obama, he claims to be Obama, and he has all of the memories of Obama—he can even recall private details of Obama’s life that only Obama would know. He is arrested on the White House lawn, while struggling and insisting that he is the president of the United States of America.

Is this person Barack Obama? If all that is required in order to BE some person is that they share the same psychology, then this person on the white house lawn IS Obama. But, that is impossible. For, at the same time, there is a man inside the white house who ALSO claims to be Obama. There cannot be TWO of the same person. That is impossible. Clearly, in this example, we only think ONE of the two people is the REAL Obama. The other person—namely, the one being arrested—is a FAKE Obama.

Solution: Perhaps the psychological continuity theory could be repaired. Perhaps the thing that makes someone the same person is that they have a GENUINE continuity of consciousness (i.e., not a fake one).

Problem: This account is circular. “Circularity” occurs whenever the definition of a word makes use of the very word that is being defined IN the definition itself. To insist that



psychological continuity must be GENUINE is the same as saying that this continuity must be the sort that preserves personal identity. But “personal identity” is THE VERY WORD WE ARE TRYING TO DEFINE. In other words, the revised account is saying, “**Sameness of person** = Psychological continuity, but only the sort of continuity where there is **sameness of person**.”

Solution: Perhaps it is still the case that identity is preserved whenever there is a psychological connection that is caused in the “right way.” We may not have a good account of what this “right way” is, but surely God is capable of creating a body in the afterlife with memories that are connected in the right way—and this person will be ME.

Problem: If God is capable of creating ONE such individual, then He should be capable of creating TWO such individuals. This means that the me that exists RIGHT NOW—call him  $me_1$ —will be the same person as the first individual that God creates with the right causal connections—call him  $me_2$ . Furthermore, the me right now will be the same individual as the SECOND individual that God creates with the right connections—call him  $me_3$ . This means that:

- $me_1 = me_2$
- $me_1 = me_3$

But, whenever  $A=B$ , and  $A=C$  is true, we can infer that  $B=C$ . This law is known as the “Transitivity of Identity.” So, from the above we may infer that:

- $me_2 = me_3$

But, that is impossible. The two people that God creates in the afterlife cannot be ONE AND THE SAME individual. They are clearly two different individuals.

Solution: Perhaps God only creates ONE such individual. Then this problem would never arise.

Problem: Then, it would be the case that the only reason we continue to exist in the afterlife is because God doesn’t create two duplicates of me. Our continued existence would be contingent on some action of God’s. For, if He DID decide to create another duplicate of me, I would cease to exist. Furthermore, it seems like God could create someone with the right sorts of causally connected psychology RIGHT NOW—and if He did so, I would cease to be the same person. And that is absurd.

**4. Conclusion:** It looks as if each of the three accounts fail in some way. If that is true, then an afterlife is impossible—the idea of continuing to exist after death is incoherent.

Furthermore, it seems that many of us have INCONSISTENT intuitions about what constitutes personal identity. Recall the teletransporter case. If psychological continuity constitutes identity, then why do we have the intuition that the person who steps out of the second booth is NOT the same person as the one who stepped into the first booth? If psychological continuity were all that mattered, then we should not fear being “transported” by a teletransporter. The teletransporter case seemed to suggest that sameness of BODY is what mattered for identity. But, consider the Day Man/Night Man or the Amnesia Surgery Cases. THOSE cases seemed to suggest that the body had nothing to do with identity; but rather, sameness of PSYCHOLOGY. If you shared these intuitions, you should note that your intuitions are inconsistent, and beliefs based upon them cannot coherently be held at one and the same time.

Is there ANY coherent view about what makes someone the same person over time?  
What do you think?

[Potential solution?: Perhaps we can combine the psychological view with one of the other two views, such that person A at time-1 and person B at time-2 are numerically one and the same person if and only if person B is (1) psychologically continuous with A, and (2) is composed of the same substance as A—e.g., has the same soul as A, or has bodily continuity with A. One potential problem: Split-brain cases. Imagine that half of your brain is taken out and put in one body, while the other half is put into another body. Both people claim to be YOU and have all of your memories, etc., so they are both psychologically continuous with you. Furthermore, they both share material continuity with you, since they both have half of your brain. Question: Which one IS you?]