

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?

4. Personal identity: With regard to material bodies, Hobbes seems to opt for rejecting The Gradual Replacement Principle. He writes,

if some part of the first material has been removed or another part has been added, that ship will be another being, or another body. For, there cannot be a body "the same in number" whose parts are not all the same, because all a body's parts, taken collectively, are the same as the whole. (*De Mundo Examined*, 12.3)

However, with regard to continuously changing things (e.g., rivers, persons, nations), he seems to opt for rejecting the Same Parts Principle; and this is how we judge someone to be the same person over time. He writes,

if one asks: "Is a man, when old and young, the same being, or matter, in number?" it is clear that, because of the continual casting of [existing] body-tissue and the acquisition of new, it is not the same material [that endures], and hence not the same body; yet, because of the unbroken nature of the flux by which matter decays and is replaced, he is always the same man. (*Ibid.* 12.4)

Therefore, Hobbes' criterion for personal identity (sameness of PERSON over time) seems to be sameness of body—allowing for parts to be switched out gradually over time. It seems, then, that a person could persist even if all of her parts were replaced—that is, just as long as those parts are replaced GRADUALLY, and not all at once. Yet, a person does not have the same BODY for her whole life, since the parts of that body are continually being shed and replaced (this is because Hobbes rejects the gradual replacement principle for bodies; strictly speaking, if you shed even one skin cell, you have a different body).