

The Ship of Theseus

“To understand the philosophical problems involved in persistence, in the fact that one and the same thing may endure through a period of time, we will begin with what Reid would have called the ‘imperfect’ cases and remind ourselves of some ancient philosophical puzzles. One such puzzle is suggested by the familiar dictum of Heraclitus: ‘You could not step twice in the same river; for other and yet other waters are ever flowing on.’ Another is the problem of the Ship of Theseus.

Updating the latter problem somewhat, let us imagine a ship – the Ship of Theseus – that was made entirely of wood when it came into being. One day a wooden plank is cast off and replaced by an aluminum one. Since the change is only slight, there is no question as to the survival of the Ship of Theseus. We still have the ship we had before; that is to say, the ship that we have now is identical with the ship we had before. On another day, another wooden plank is cast off and also replaced with an aluminum one. Still the same ship, since, as before, the change is only slight. The changes continue, in a similar way, and finally the Ship of Theseus is made entirely of aluminum. The aluminum ship, one may well argue, *is* the wooden ship we started with, for the ship we started with survived each particular change, and identity, after all, is transitive.

But what happened to the discarded wooden planks? Consider the possibility, suggested by Thomas Hobbes: ‘If some man had kept the old planks as they were taken out, and by putting them afterwards together in the same order, had again made a ship of them, this, without doubt, had also been the same numerical ship with that which was at the beginning; and so there would have been two ships numerically the same, which is absurd’. Assuming, as perhaps one has no right to do, that each of the wooden planks survived intact throughout these changes, one might well argue that the reassembled wooden ship *is* the ship we started with. ‘After all, it is made up of the very same parts, standing in the very same relations, whereas that ugly aluminum object doesn’t have a single part in common with our original ship’.

To compound the problem still further, let us suppose that the captain of the original ship had solemnly taken a vow that, if his ship were ever to go down, he would go down with it. What, now if the two ships collide at sea and he sees them start to sink together? Where does his duty lie – with the aluminum ship or with the reassembled wooden ship?”¹

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¹ Chisholm, R. M 2002, *Person and Object: A Metaphysical Study*, vol. 5. Routledge, London.