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The Ship of Theseus: A personal essay

The Ship of Theseus paradox is an ancient philosophical debate that still challenges modern philosophers. Originating in the works of Plutarch, a Greek historian, the paradox questions our understanding of identity and how it persists over time. The paradox explores whether, if we replace all of an object's components, it remains the same. Thomas Hobbes, a 16th-century philosopher, added further complexity to the paradox in his work *De Corpore*. By examining Hobbes' ideas and other scholarly works, we gain deeper insight into the nature of existence and identity. What makes something truly itself? The purpose of this thesis is not to prove or disprove the paradox but to introduce new ideas and provide a well-reasoned perspective.

Theseus is a legendary Athenian hero, known for rivaling Hercules and defeating the dreadful Minotaur. He is considered the last mythical king of Athens and is credited not only with establishing the city's democratic government but also with becoming one of its most iconic symbols. He was adored and remembered in everything from pottery to temples, celebrated as the ideal Athenian man. In Plutarch's essay, he explores whether Theseus's legendary ship, which has had all its parts replaced over time, can still be considered the same ship. This paradox invites us to question the nature of identity—whether it is tied to the material components or the continuity of form and function. Just as the Athenians maintained Theseus's ship by replacing decaying timbers, the identity of Theseus himself has been preserved through the stories, symbols, and cultural significance attached to him. Thus, the legacy of Theseus raises broader questions about identity: if the substance changes, does the essence remain the same? And how does this apply not just to objects, but to the symbols and people we idolize?

We can look at a current example of the Ship of Theseus in the USS Constitution, the oldest commissioned vessel. Built in Boston in 1794, she is a three-masted, wooden-hulled heavy frigate. She is noted for her actions during the War of 1812, which earned her the name "Old Ironsides" and public adoration. The ship continues to be actively maintained and is occasionally taken out into Boston Harbor for ceremonial purposes. However, much of the ship has been restored over the centuries, with only a small portion of the original wood remaining. This raises a philosophical question reminiscent of the Ship of Theseus paradox: Is it still the same "Old Ironsides"? What defines its identity—is it the physical materials, the name, or the legacy it carries? The current wood on the ship may not have witnessed any battles, yet the vessel remains a symbol of American naval history. If it can be argued that the ship is no longer the same, at what point did it stop being the original? Ultimately, is it the ship's name, its enduring form, or the legacy it upholds that truly makes it "Old Ironsides"? The short answer is that it is not the same ship; it has seen no wars and currently exists as an antique for ceremonial and historical purposes.

This opens a range of discussions regarding the composition of matter, form, and identity. First, we will cover relative identity. Relative identity is the idea that objects can be similar in one way and different in others. This concept allows for more flexibility, meaning the ship could be considered the same in terms of function and legacy but different in terms of materials. This flexibility in how we view identity provides a more nuanced understanding of continuity and change over time. If we consider only relative identity in relation to the Ship of Theseus or even "Old Ironsides," it can be regarded as the same ship in a certain context. This view has significant implications for debates in metaphysics, particularly concerning questions about persistence over time and the nature of objects.

Absolute identity requires that an object must maintain complete likeness; any change to the ship or its properties immediately breaks its absolute identity. This idea is not tied to form and function but rather to the persistence of the original materials. In the context of the Ship of Theseus, this theory would argue that the ship ceases to be the same the moment any part of it is replaced. Its identity is tied to the original materials that constitute it, whether it's a nail, a plank, or even a string. Because this concept is so extreme, it presents a great deal of complexity and a range of challenges. For instance, if we were to replace something as simple as a seatbelt in a car, according to this theory, it would no longer be the same car—which seems absurd, considering that maintenance is necessary. Similarly, if a car window is broken, does this theory suggest that the car is entirely different because its likeness has changed? While on a basic level this could be considered true, since it is no longer the "original" window, seat, or even engine, the theory leaves no room for repair or maintenance to preserve an object. This makes absolute identity too rigid to be a strong argument in discussions about the Ship of Theseus or even the USS Constitution. However, I believe this argument can be applied to other more significant objects, such as the cross, or even original pieces of art.

Numerical identity is similar to absolute identity, it focuses on the concept that the object is the same through time; however, for it to maintain its numerical identity it must remain the same substance. It's no longer composed of the same physical materials even though it remains "one ship", it is no longer the "same ship" because of its physical connection to its legacy being severed.

In my opinion, the key issue with the identity of the Ship of Theseus isn't just material continuity, but what those materials have experienced. For instance, the original cross from Christ's crucifixion holds its holiness because it witnessed a sacred event. Changing its material

would strip away that connection, thus violating its absolute identity. Moreover, replacing parts of the ship or the cross might preserve the name and symbolic meaning, but not the object's true physical identity, which is tied to its original, unaltered materials. Once altered, the object becomes something new, no longer linked to its sacred or historical past. I believe this is the only instance where we can apply the theory of absolute identity without it being too controversial. Aristotle, considered the most influential philosopher, developed a theory that addresses the nature of identity and change. In his work *Categories*, he distinguishes between matter and form, which offers a crucial insight into our current paradox. Aristotle makes clear distinctions between primary substances (individual objects, like the USS Constitution) and secondary substances (general categories, like a ship). In regard to the Ship of Theseus, this distinction allows us to wonder whether the ship, as a secondary substance, retains its identity when the individual parts are replaced with newer ones. It might also be argued that the primary substances are what preserve the ship's true identity, rather than its secondary characteristics.

Moreover, in Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, he steps away from the distinction between different kinds of attributes and moves into a metaphysical analysis of what a thing is in itself. This is where we discuss the meaning and distinct differences between matter and form. "Matter" is what Aristotle calls what serves a certain purpose in a particular item, specifically being the building blocks of that entity. Aristotle uses the word "form" for both trivial matters, such as possessing a certain color or shape, and traits that make a concept what it is. These are called substantial forms, similar to "secondary substances" in *Categories*. In this case, a ship can still be rebuilt with different kinds of wood (materials) while still being the same ship and maintaining its form. A ship isn't just a ship because it's made of certain wood. I disagree with the sentiment wholeheartedly because, of course, it is still "a ship"; however, its identity has

changed and cannot be considered "the same ship." Aristotle argues that form is ultimately more important than matter, and form provides the essence of what something is. However, this seems contradictory to his previous work, where form is considered secondary or categorical.

According to Aristotle, the secondary substance, the category "ship," will always apply, regardless of the materials that make up the ship. For him, the form of the ship, which includes its function and structure, is what truly matters—not the specific materials used. To him, the materials are not intentional like the ship itself; they are simply just materials. Whether built from wood from the east or the north, the ship's form remains the same. He argues that the ship's identity cannot be found within the wood; instead, its identity is preserved as long as it continues to function. However once again, I disagree because this perspective overlooks the significance of the legacy tied to its original materials. For example, no ship can truly be considered the iconic "Old Ironsides" except the one that fought in the War of 1812 and earned its famous name. In this case, the material is deeply tied to the ship's historical identity, making replacement parts insufficient for maintaining its true essence. This makes the current USS Constitution an antique at best.

Thomas Hobbes, a famous 16th-century philosopher, poses another refinement to the paradox. What would happen if we take the rotten pieces of the ship and reassembled another ship with them? What would be the original Ship of Theseus—would it be both, or neither? This introduces a brand new theory: the theory of transitivity, which suggests that if $A = B$ and $B = C$, that also means that $A = C$. Applying this to the Ship of Theseus means that all ships are the same. This theory is very problematic when we apply numerical identity, which requires the object remain the same entity over time. Likewise, absolute identity, which demands complete likeness in all aspects, rejects this theory once more. Finally, it is relative identity, which allows

some flexibility, suggesting that the object can be the same in one likeness but different in another. But it still does not uphold transitivity. Relative identity might suggest that both ships are the same in function but not materials. The theory of transitivity fails under all three identity frameworks.

The ship is not the same ship based on relative and absolute identity and physical continuity. While it retains its form and even the name, it is no longer made of the original material that once composed it. The identity of this ship, and any other symbolic items, is not tied to its form and function but to its material. In these cases, the material of these symbolic artifacts is directly tied to their legacy. It can be argued that the ship is the same ship; according to Aristotle, the form and function are the same, and the symbolic legacy has not wavered. Identity is not solely based on an unchanging subject, but rather on the continuity of memory and legacy. Is identity rooted in the material or the immaterial?

The identity of the ship is not solely tied to its physical components but to its role and meaning. However, I believe the material from which an object is made carries historical sacredness. The wood of the original ship was present during wars and voyages, while the new material has none of that historical continuity. Therefore, while the ship symbolizes Theseus and his heroism, it lacks the tangible connection to historical events and its original identity. This duality presents the core tension in the Ship of Theseus paradox: identity is preserved in form, but the material reality points to the fact that this is a new ship, devoid of the original's lived experiences.

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