

FIL1001 oblig

Bjørn-Andreas Lamo
janilam

15.03.18

In this essay I'll be discussing The Ship of Theseus, and the metaphysical problems connected with this problem. A quick recap; we as humans distinguish objects from one another by their composition and form. We also consider composite objects as one entity. Classification of things has served us well through the ages, without it we would not be able to figure out what's food or not just by looking. This trait is not unique to us, but necessary for all sentient life on Earth. It's a basic ability, but when applied to slightly unusual circumstances the intuition becomes illogical and disputed, The Ship of Theseus problem is just such a case where our intuition breaks down. The problem goes like this:

"The ship of Theseus goes on a long voyage. Naturally parts deteriorate and are replaced. When the ship returns all the original parts are replaced. Is it the same ship? And if it is, what if someone collected all the old original parts and built a ship, would that also be Theseus ship?"

It's easy to form an opinion on this topic, but formalizing this as sound logically is difficult if not impossible. And in the absence of logic we may be tempted to resort to radical conclusions regarding identity.

Transitivity of identity

One radical solution would be that our rudimentary understanding of identity is wrong. Obviously we want identity to be in accordance with our intuitive understanding. If we replace one plank on the ship of Theseus, it's not exactly the same object as before, but it's still the ship of Theseus, it does not lose its identity. The transitivity principle seem to fit in this case. From a logic stand point this makes sense; an object has a reflective, transitive, and symmetric relation to itself, namely that it's identical to itself ($\forall x.x \equiv x$). It's necessary that the identity relation is transitive, if we concede that an retain it's identity over time.

Contradicting intuition

Discussing this problem with people without an education in either philosophy or logic often ended with them denying the transitive property of identity if even the minutest change had happened to the object. This by extension also refuses the existence of composite objects as an identifiable entity, because the fundamental property of composite objects is that they are not contingent on any one specific of their constituent parts. Rather as a whole they form the object. There was however a consensus with the people I discussed with, that the old original parts that were taken from the ship of Theseus and put back together was not the ship of Theseus. Which is strange because they would deny the mutability of an object, but when faced with two ships, the ship made of original parts was something else than the ship of Theseus. It's probably this contradiction in intuition that's lead to the problem being labeled as a paradox.

Abstract entities

One problem with the transitivity of identity is if we instead of replacing parts, we'd remove them entirely, then that too would have to be transitive. Removing one plank from the ship would not be detrimental for the ship, we'd still refer to it without any problem. After ten parts or maybe even twenty parts, it would still be the the same ship. But the ship has a finite amount of parts. One would hardly consider a ship constituting of five planks any ship at all, but by the transitivity principle that would be the ship of Theseus. Most people would probably argue that we run into the vagueness problem here, but this is because they regard "the ship of Theseus" as a definition akin to baldness. It might seem counter-intuitive at first, but it does make sense if you consider "the ship of Theseus" apart from the physical ship.

How do we define "the ship of Theseus" to begin with? It's actually a little problematic because it's a description of a ship that belongs to a person. The problematic part here is that it's a descriptive title, and it appears on first glance to require descriptivism, but I'll argue that it's a proper noun at this point. Descriptive objects are are refereed to in virtue of their description, but "the ship of Theseus" has transcended both being a ship and being owned. Rigid designators, i.e. proper nouns refers directly to the object. But there is nothing inherent in the physical object that verify that it is indeed the object that is refereed to. When we discuss the ship of Theseus today, we are only talking about the ship in an abstract metaphysical sense, and also back when the ship existed, they would refer to it as an entity in itself.

Continuation of identity

In my view it is paramount that "the ship of Theseus" is indeed a rigid designator and not a description. If it was a description, when we remove enough parts then one could argue that it's no longer a ship and that it's now "the rubble of the ship of Theseus". But identity is continuous even down to the last plank. If consider again removing a part instead of replacing it, we can remove parts from the ship of Theseus until it's strictly not a ship, but it would still be "the ship of Theseus" nonetheless. The original parts that are removed from the ship does not constitute as a ship in any way shape or form. If the original parts are built into a ship, that ship would be a new ship (albeit quite old looking). If you imagine a time line for the two ships, the new ships time line start after the ship of Theseus. It's a little tempting to let the new ship inherit the constituent parts time line, but that wouldn't make sense. If that were the case then we would have to consider what atoms previously were. Lowe has an example with a certain tree that dies, after some time all the atoms by a miracle comprise another tree, and as Lowe concluded that would not be the same tree. It would be ridiculous to say they were the same tree. The first tree ceased to exist when it decayed away.

Fusion, fission, and incineration

After a fusion two or more objects are irreversibly synthesized merged together. That would mean the previous objects cease to exist and a new object emerge. Or so it would seem in the perfect world. What if the ship of Theseus is in dire need of a comprehensive repair, and a perfect donor ship appear which has exactly the parts needed and nothing more since it is too in need of repair. After merging the two ships, the ship of Theseus would retain it's identity even though many, or even most, of the parts are from the donor ship.

Fission does not fare any better, we could cut the ship exactly in two equal parts and never agree which part is the ship and which is only parts from a ship. The obvious answer would be that none of them are, and that they have both become rubble. If it were the case that the ship was cut 30-70 percent we'd have no problem saying the 70% part retains the identity, but if it was 49.999-50.001 percent it's not clear at all.

Fission and fusion didn't help us at all, but maybe an extreme example would. Consider the ship Cutty Sark, let's say it burned completely up, but it was a beloved ship so an exact replica was made. The replica is just called "Cutty Sark" after the original. Now, it's obvious that the replica is not identical to the ship that burned up, but we still refer to it with the same name. So maybe we add connotation to the names people use, the Cutty Sark replica would be "Cutty Sark [replica]", and people who refer to the ship of Theseus even after a fission would really be saying "the ship of Theseus [part 1 of 2]". It's not a very satisfactory solution, but we can be comforted in that most repair jobs leave us with a clear continuation of identity.

Conclusion

There are no definitive answers to the identity of the ship of Theseus. We'll have to leave the identity to the people referring to the object. The object can lose or gain parts and still retain its identity as long as people kept referring to the object the same.