

# CONTINUITY THEORY AND THE COMPONENT THEORY OF THE SHIP OF THESEUS

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## ABSTRACT

The Ship of Theseus paradox explores whether an object remains fundamentally the same when all its components are replaced over time. This paper examines two competing theories—Continuity Theory (identity preserved through form/function) and Component Theory (identity tied to material composition)—drawing on perspectives from Hobbes, Locke, Leibniz, and contemporary philosophers. The analysis reveals that identity is a dynamic construct shaped by material, functional, and perceptual factors, with implications for modern debates in AI, biotechnology, and personal identity. The paradox underscores the fluidity of identity, resisting singular resolution while enriching metaphysical discourse.

## KEY WORDS

Ship Of Theseus, Identity, Continuity Theory, Component Theory, Materialism, Functionalism, Metaphysics

## Introduction

The philosophical question of the Ship of Theseus is: If all the parts of an object are gradually replaced, does it remain the same object?

First, I will state the main premises of the problem as well as a brief historical introduction. In his work „Life of Theseus“, Plutarch, a Greek philosopher and historian, describes Theseus, a legendary hero. [Scaltsas, T. 'The Ship of Theseus.' \*Analysis\* 40, no. 3 (1980): 152–157.]

In Greek mythology, Theseus, the legendary king of Athens, saved King Minos's children by slaying the Minotaur and later escaped to Delos. Over time, the ship used by Theseus became a symbol of Athenian heritage and was preserved by the citizens of Athens.

The ship, central to Plutarch's thought experiment, undergoes continuous repairs as its parts wear out over time. Gradually, every original component is replaced with new materials until none of the original structure remains.

This raises a fundamental question: Is the fully reconstructed ship—now composed entirely of new materials—still the same ship, or has it become an entirely different entity?

## Main Philosophical Issues

Thomas Hobbes introduces a new perspective by proposing additional ship as a paradigm for reconsidering the Ship of Theseus paradox. [Noonan, H. W. 'Same-Kind Coincidence and the Ship of Theseus.' \*Mind\* 106, no. 421 (1998): 53–67.]

Imagine that someone reconstructs another ship using the original materials from Theseus's ship. Which of the two is the true Ship of Theseus? This question raises several philosophical dilemmas.

One key issue is the nature of identity: If an object undergoes continuous and frequent changes, does its essence—defined by its function and structure—remain the same, or does it become something entirely different?

Materialist philosophers argue that identity is tied to the physical composition of an object. According to this view, if the original material ceases to exist, the object becomes a completely new entity, unrelated to the original ship.

In contrast, functionalists maintain that identity is not dependent on physical materials but on the object's form and function. Unlike materialists, functionalists incorporate a metaphysical dimension by distinguishing between matter and the concept of the ship itself. Even if the ship's structure has changed, it still serves the same purpose, preserving its identity.

A practical example of this view is a car: Even if its engine is replaced, it remains the same vehicle, as its function and purpose remain unchanged.

In Hobbes's interpretation, several possible answers emerge. Identity theory asserts that an object remains the same despite undergoing changes over time. The essence of the ship endures, much like living organisms that regenerate, grow, and evolve while maintaining their fundamental identity.

However, a key counterargument challenges this notion: the material composition of a ship is fundamentally different from that of a living organism, which possesses a metaphysical and even cognitive dimension—something inanimate matter lacks.

The identity of the second ship, constructed from the original parts of Theseus's vessel, could be considered the true Ship of Theseus. Yet, this claim is undermined by the fact that the second ship does not have a continuous existence.

Furthermore, Hobbes presents a third perspective, arguing that neither ship is truly the original; instead, both are new entities. This assumption stems from the idea that each ship is merely a replica or successor of the original. Hobbes's reasoning in this paradox often relies on the belief that materiality is the sole foundation of knowledge. For instance, he perceives existence as the fundamental aggregation of matter in motion.

A clear influence of the Greek atomists is evident in Hobbes's interpretation, as many of his views suggest that existence—and even identity itself—can be reduced to the arrangement and movement of matter. Identity ceases to exist when the original material disappears, particularly in the case of physical objects. According to this view, a ship can only reclaim its identity if it is reconstructed using the very materials from which it was initially built.

In contrast, functionalists argue that an object's identity is preserved through its function, irrespective of its material composition. Hobbes, however, strongly disagrees. If identity were defined solely by function, and materiality disregarded, then both ships would be identical—a conclusion he finds untenable.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning John Locke's theory of psychological continuity, which posits that identity is based on memory and consciousness rather than physical attributes. [Parfit, D. 'Personal Identity.' *The Philosophical Review* 80, no. 1 (1971): 3–27.]

## The Main Premises of Continuity Theory and The Component Theory of The Ship of Theseus

The Ship of Theseus presents a profound philosophical dilemma, particularly concerning the nature of identity.

When discussing identity, it is essential to consider both the Continuity Theory and the Component Theory. The Continuity Theory asserts that an object's identity is preserved through the consistent maintenance of its form and function rather than its material composition. Even if substantial changes occur in the object's physical components, its identity remains intact as long as its structure and purpose remain unchanged.

In the context of the Ship of Theseus paradox, what is most significant is the persistence of design and function. This suggests that the ship retains its identity despite the replacement of its materials, as long as it continues to serve the same purpose. Functionality, therefore, is not tied to the specific components but rather to the role the ship fulfills. Moreover, the ship's continuity is expressed through its ongoing operation and the function it performs, further reinforcing its identity over time.

Conversely, the Component Theory argues that identity is inherently tied to an object's physical composition. According to this perspective, the specific matter from which the ship is constructed is fundamental to preserving its identity. If every part of Theseus's ship is replaced, the original identity is lost. Furthermore, this theory suggests that if a new ship is built using the original materials of Theseus's ship, the newly constructed vessel would inherit both its characteristics and identity, as its physical substance remains unchanged.

Ultimately, these two perspectives offer competing yet compelling explanations for how we define and perceive identity, not just in objects but in broader metaphysical and existential discussions.

When discussing continuity, we must revisit John Locke and his perspective on identity, which he does not define in terms of matter and form but rather through psychological inheritance.

Locke argues that identity is preserved through varying levels of consciousness and memory. The Ship of Theseus, therefore, does not maintain its identity due to the persistence of its materials, nor does it lose it due to their replacement; rather, its identity endures through its continuous function and purpose over time.

David Wiggins expands on this idea, asserting that for something to remain "the same," it must belong to the same kind over time. In the case of the Ship of Theseus, this principle applies because the ship retains its function and structure, regardless of changes to its physical composition. [Wiggins, D. *\*Sameness and Substance.\** Harvard University Press, 1980.]

Continuity extends beyond psychological reality to semantic and practical considerations as well. Eli Hirsch approaches continuity theory from a linguistic and pragmatic standpoint, suggesting that an object—such as the Ship of Theseus—maintains its identity insofar as people describe and use it as the same entity in everyday life. Theseus' ship remains part of the collective consciousness and is still regarded as the original because society treats it as such, and historical records continue to affirm its identity. [Hirsch, E. 'The Persistence of Objects.' *\*Philosophical Studies\** 42, no. 1 (1982): 33–42.]

An intriguing contribution to this discussion comes from Roderick Chisholm, who distinguishes between strict identity and relaxed identity. [Chisholm, Roderick. *\*Person and Object: A Metaphysical Study.\** Open Court Publishing, 1976.]

- Strict identity holds that the ship ceases to be the same if all its parts are replaced, as its defining characteristics have changed entirely.
- Relaxed identity, on the other hand, allows for certain changes as long as the ship's function and structure remain intact.

This nuanced debate highlights the complexities of continuity, illustrating how identity can be understood through different lenses—whether psychological, linguistic, or structural.

The Component Theory, as I have stated, is a materialist theory that does not interpret this philosophical paradox in a one-dimensional or overly simplistic manner.

According to Aristotle's perspective, Component Theory can be understood through the duality of matter (hyle) and form (morphe)—a concept known as hylomorphism. Aristotle argues that if all the material components of the ship are replaced, its substance changes, leading to a different identity. However, an interesting inconsistency emerges in his view of identity: while he acknowledges the importance of material composition, he also recognizes that the ship's form and function play a crucial role in preserving its identity.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz introduces a new concept—indistinguishability—which is deeply rooted in the materialist approach. According to this principle, two entities cannot be identical if they differ in any respect, at any level. From a Leibnizian perspective, if Theseus' ship undergoes any material change, it immediately assumes a new identity because its originality ceases to exist. Leibniz's strict view does not permit the replacement of parts while maintaining the ship's identity; instead, he argues that constant transformation results in a mere successor, not the original ship itself. [Leibniz, G. W. *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays*. Hackett Publishing, 1991.]

Leibniz's theory is further developed by Saul Kripke, who introduces the concepts of identity essentialism and rigid designators. Kripke asserts that certain objects possess essential properties that are fundamental to their identity. Simply put, if Theseus' ship is defined by specific materials, those materials confirm its essence. Consequently, altering them transforms the essence of the ship itself. [Kripke, S. *Naming and Necessity*. Harvard University Press, 1980.]

Thus, even if the ship's function and historical significance remain unchanged, its material transformation means it is no longer the same entity in a strict materialist sense.

It is also worth highlighting Peter Geach's theory of relative identity, which challenges strict materialism while still acknowledging the significance of components in determining identity. [Geach, P. *Reference and Generality: An Examination of Some Medieval and Modern Theories*. Cornell University Press, 1970.]

Geach argues that identity is not absolute but rather relative, depending on the category and description under which it is considered. According to this view, the Ship of Theseus may remain the same in a practical sense, yet it can never be identical to the original ship in a material sense.

From a materialist standpoint, the original planks of Theseus' ship constitute its true material composition, which is essential to its existence. However, Geach's perspective also allows for the historical continuity of the ship, suggesting that identity can persist through time based on how it is perceived and described.

In contrast, W.V.O. Quine advocates for mereological essentialism, a stricter materialist position. According to Quine, an object is identical to itself only if it retains all of its original parts. His focus lies exclusively on material composition and its persistence, not merely on the identity of an individual component—such as a plank—but on the ship as a whole, maintaining precisely the same materials and structure. [Quine, W. V. O. 'On What There Is.' *Review of Metaphysics* 2, no. 5 (1948): 21–38.]

## **Conclusion of the phenomenon of the Ship of Theseus and the theories of continuity and component**

The Ship of Theseus paradox continues to fascinate philosophers, scientists, and scholars precisely because it resists a single, definitive resolution. Rather than providing a clear-cut answer to the question of identity, it compels us to reconsider the very nature of existence, transformation, and persistence over time. Whether approached through the frameworks of materialism, functionalism, psychological continuity, or

linguistic relativity, the paradox illustrates that identity is not a fixed, immutable quality, but rather a fluid construct shaped by perception, memory, and context.

Far from being a mere intellectual exercise, this paradox permeates everyday life, influencing how we perceive ourselves, technology, culture, and the evolving nature of reality. In a world where constant change is inevitable—from our physical bodies to social institutions—the Ship of Theseus paradox serves as a profound reminder that identity is as much about continuity and perception as it is about material substance.

## **A Broader Exploration of Identity and Continuity**

The philosophical question of the Ship of Theseus extends far beyond a theoretical puzzle—it is an inquiry into the nature of consciousness, identity, permanence, and the reality of objects. The concept of identity is woven into this problem not only through material existence but also through historical succession and longevity over time.

The key questions raised in this discussion include: Is an object's material composition essential to its identity, or does its historical continuity define its essence? However, as evident from the perspectives explored, no single theory can fully encapsulate the multidimensional nature of identity.

Materialist philosophers such as Leibniz and Kripke argue that identity is inextricably linked to its material composition, meaning that when the physical components are altered, the entity itself ceases to be the same. On the other hand, functionalists like Wiggins and even Aristotle contend that an object's form and purpose define its identity rather than its material components. In contrast, Peter Geach's theory of relative identity suggests that identity is not absolute but context-dependent, fluctuating based on the perspective from which it is analyzed.

From these competing perspectives, it becomes evident that identity cannot be neatly defined when examined through the lenses of continuity and composition.

## **The Ship of Theseus in Contemporary Issues**

Discussions about continuity and identity remain highly relevant today, influencing diverse fields such as science, technology, and ethics. The rise of artificial intelligence raises fundamental questions about digital identity—if an AI system undergoes continuous upgrades, replacing its software and hardware, does it remain the same entity, or does it become something entirely different?

Similarly, as humans increasingly integrate technology into their bodies and cognitive processes, new questions emerge regarding human identity in a technologically enhanced world. If a person augments their intelligence through neural implants, modifies their biology with synthetic organs, or exists predominantly in a digital space, do they remain the same individual? The Ship of Theseus paradox provides a powerful framework for examining these pressing ethical and metaphysical dilemmas.

Beyond technology, this paradox also applies to personal transformation. Consider a person who experiences severe trauma, leading to a profound change in personality and a complete loss of memories—are they still the same person? If their past experiences, relationships, and self-awareness are erased, does their identity persist, or has it fundamentally changed?

## **A Paradox Without Resolution**

The Ship of Theseus paradox ultimately reveals that identity is neither wholly material nor entirely conceptual—it exists at the intersection of continuity, function, perception, and historical reality. As technology advances, as societies evolve, and as individuals undergo profound changes, this paradox remains as relevant today as it was in ancient Greek philosophy.

Perhaps the most profound lesson from this debate is that identity is not a static truth but a dynamic, evolving concept—one that is shaped as much by philosophical inquiry as by personal and societal perspectives.

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