The Fishing Boat

Let’s consider an updated version of a very old philosophical puzzle. The original puzzle is referred to as the ship of Theseus.

A commercial fishing boat goes out on one-month excursions. The owner, Abraham, is a fanatic about keeping it in pristine condition. So every time it comes in he replaces one part (usually perfectly good parts). After ten years there are no parts on the boat that were on the original boat. The owner has a friend he hasn’t seen in ten years. This friend shows up and says, “Hey your boat looks really good.” Should Abraham say “I keep her in pretty good shape” or “Oh, it’s a different boat”? In other words, are Abe’s current boat and his original boat the same boat. Or is the current boat a replacement for the original boat, which no longer exists?

[aside on “same”—we’re talking about the numerical sense “one and the same boat” not the qualitative sense “exactly the same features”]

If you’re inclined to think it’s the same boat (kept in good shape) consider this: Abraham puts the parts he takes off the boat in a warehouse. Ben is looking to get into the fishing business, and notices that these are perfectly good parts. He offers to buy them from Abraham. Ben then puts all the parts together into a very nice fishing boat. Is Abraham’s boat the same one he had ten years ago, or is Ben’s boat the one Abraham had ten years ago? Or are both? Or neither?

Some symbols might help here. Let’s say that

- A1 is the original boat
- A2 is Abraham’s current boat, and
- B is Ben’s boat

Which would you say?

- A1 = A2
- A1 = B
- A1 = neither
- A1 = both

If you think that Abraham’s current boat (A2) is the same boat as the original (A1) and Ben’s (B) is a different boat, consider this case: Abraham buys the original boat and goes on one excursion. He catches almost nothing and wanting a change of scenery anyway, he decides to relocate his business from the Pacific Coast to the Indian Ocean. His boat is too small to sail that far, so he disassembles it completely and has each part shipped to his new home where he rebuilds it. Unfortunately all the parts get tied up in customs for ten years. Finally he gets possession of the parts and reassembles them. Is this rebuilt boat on the East African coast the same boat as the one he took apart in California?
If you think so, notice that, at least as far as the parts that make up the boats are concerned, the relationship between the boat in California and the boat in Africa is the same as the relationship between A1 and B in the original story. Is that a reason to switch from thinking that A1 = A2 to A1 = B? In other words, in our original story, should we now think that Ben, not Abraham, owns the original boat?

If you’re inclined to think this (and maybe you’ve thought it all along), consider one last thing--you’re body. As I understand it, over the course of about seven years, every last molecule that makes up the human body is exchanged for a new one. This doesn’t happen all at once of course, nor are all exchanges happening at the same rate. Nevertheless there are no molecules presently in your body that were in it in 2003. So, the relationship between your present body and your body seven years ago is the same as the relationship between Abraham’s original boat and his current boat. If your view is that those are not the same boat, but that Ben’s is the same as Abraham’s original boat, then it seems we will have to say that the body you now have is a different body than the body you once had, and that at some point in the future you will not have the body you currently have. You keep getting replacement bodies over the course of your life.

The issue that these illustrations raise has to do with what is called identity over time. The basic question is what must be true in order for a thing to remain one and the same object over time? Or, what (if anything) gives things identity over time?

The cases we’ve considered suggest competing theories of identity. According to one theory an object at a given point in time is the same as an object at another point in time only if every part of the first is a part of the second, and every part of the second is a part of the first. In other words, an object has identity from one point in time to another only if it is composed of all the same components at both times. If you thought that Ben’s boat and Abraham’s original boat are the same boat, that suggests you hold this theory. This theory is, on its face, supported by the case in which Abraham mails the parts of his boat to Africa and rebuilds it. But if we look closer, this theory has the result that our bodies (and in fact any other plant or animal, and maybe any physical object) do not have identity over even the briefest amount of time, since with every breath we are adding new components to our bodies and eliminating old ones.

If we are uncomfortable with a view of reality according to which nothing is stable or enduring—that everything, including our bodies (selves?), is in flux, then we might reject this view by rejecting the theory of identity it rests on. Instead we might start with the assumption that things that exchange or gain or lose parts can nevertheless remain the same thing from one point in time to another and seek a theory of identity compatible with this assumption.
An alternate theory of identity says that an object at a given point in time is the same as an object at another point in time as long as at every point at which the object gained or lost or exchanged a component, other components remained part of the object. The situation would look like this:

let A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J be components of an object

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The object at time 1 and the object at time 6 are composed of entirely different components, and according to the first theory would be different objects (as are the objects at time 1 and 2). But according to the alternate theory, they would be the same object because during the process of change there was always overlap. The components of the object at one time always overlap with the components of the thing at the next time (though not at all times). The relationship between Abraham’s original boat, and his current boat would satisfy this condition, as would the relationship between your body now and you body at the beginning of class. So this theory solves some problems, but it raises others. I get to say that I have the same body that I did at the beginning of class, and that this is the same desk that was here last time we met. But on this theory we can’t say that Abraham’s boat in Africa is the same one as the boat in California. In addition, it has the result that if I replace the pieces on my minivan with pieces of a boat, until none of the original pieces remain, the minivan and the boat are the same thing.

Another possibility that solves several of these problems is to say that it’s not about parts, but about the whole--an object at one point in time is one and the same as an object at another point in time if it has the same form or shape or structure as the object at the first point in time. This theory would allow us to say that a thing that completely exchanged components was still the same thing. It would also allow us to say that a thing that was disassembled completely then reassembled was the same thing. Furthermore, we could escape from having to say that the minivan and the boat in the last illustration are the same thing. But this has serious problems too. If all it takes is identical form or shape, then Abraham’s current boat is the same as his original, but so is Ben’s, and on the assumption that if two things are the same as a third thing, then they’re the same as each other, Abraham’s current boat and Ben’s boat are one and the same boat, even though they may be sailing in different parts of the sea. Worse yet, it’s probably safe to say that nothing retains exactly the same shape or structure over time. This is certainly true, for example of our bodies. So we’d have to say that things only have to have approximately the same shape in order to count as the same thing. But this raises troubles too. Ben’s boat has approximately the same shape as Abraham’s current boat, so according to this theory they’re the same boat. But that doesn’t seem right.
Still another idea that would make identity not be about parts is the idea that if the thing ceases to serve the same function, it ceases to be the same thing. But notice that the function of an object is not an objective feature, at least not of natural objects. Function is in the idea of the beholder, and often varies wildly with context. What is the function of a rock? Or a tree? Or a swallow? (We might say that the function of artifacts, man-made objects, is an objective feature, since an artifact, say, scissors, is in part defined by its function.)

Yet another idea is spatio-temporal continuity. We might say that if an object traces a continuous path through space and time, it remains one and the same object. Parts may come and go, but the whole is tracing a continuous path through space over time. This allows us to say that Abraham still has the boat he bought ten years ago, but it has the odd consequence that an acorn and the oak that grows from it are one and the same object. (Maybe that’s the right thing to say.)

We could take a very different approach and say that an object’s identity isn’t an objective feature of it at all, but something that we put on it—it’s name, for example. Notice that this would have the result that the identity of objects would become, in part at least, a function of how they are thought about by a conscious being. If we asked the question about an unperceived or un-thought-about object whether is remained the same object after some change, there would literally be no answer.

The upshot of all this is that we seem to be at a loss regarding what has to be true in order to say that some object at different points in time is one and the same object, or in more technical language, what the conditions are for objects having numerical identity over time. It seems we have two options: either admit that we don’t have a good reason for saying, for example, that our bodies are the same ones we came in here with, and keep working on a good theory of identity—one without the problematic consequences of those we’ve considered; or we could accept one of the alternatives we’ve considered and eat its troubling consequences—perhaps radically rethinking our understanding of reality.

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclites took the second approach. He apparently accepted the theory of identity according to which if you add or subtract a part from an object it ceases to be the same object. Based on it he proposed a bold account of reality—denying any permanence, or stability to that which exists, and asserting instead that nothing simply is; everything is in a continual state of becoming something else. There is no being, there is only becoming—there is no stability, there is only flux—there is no permanence, there is only change.

Heraclites, by the way, is not alone. About fifty years prior to Heraclites, in India, a man named Siddhartha Gautama was reaching similar conclusions about the nature of reality. Gautama is better known to us by the word his followers used for him—Buddha, which means enlightened one. One of the Buddha’s principle doctrines is called anicca, which is the Pali word for impermanence.
The Buddha, like Heraclites, stressed the impermanence of all things. But he went further than Heraclites in not limiting himself merely to metaphysical speculation. He was concerned with the practical ramifications of this view.

The Buddha’s primary concern was an ethical one—the elimination of suffering. It was his contention that suffering resulted from becoming attached to things. The reason attachment leads to suffering is that the things we are attached to are changing right out from under us. So getting attached to them will only bring pain. The secret to freedom from suffering is freedom from attachment to impermanent things. In the teaching of the Buddha we have not only a radical new way of thinking about reality, but a radical way of life based on that metaphysical view.

By the way, the Buddha’s view also seems to be reflected in a qualified way in the teaching of Jesus. Remember his claim that the grass withers and the flower fades, and his advice not to lay up treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy. Jesus too seems to be asserting the impermanence of things, and to be suggesting that attaching ourselves to such things is the short road to suffering, though given the acquisitiveness of contemporary Christians, we seem not to be heeding his advice.