

Q&A ABOUT MATERIAL OBJECTS

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General Worries

Miriam: After our long discussion about abstract objects and whether they exist, I assumed once we moved to concrete objects, we would talk about whether they exist. Once we established that they do exist, fairly early in the chapter, I didn't know what use there was of discussing boundaries. Take the first example of the Ship of Theseus: it has mass, and occupies space, and time. This is true of S1, S2, and S3, no matter what we call them and if any of them are the same or not. I don't see why the identity of these items should have any bearing on their existence. Perhaps there is some underlying notion that for something to exist it needs to be identifiable as a "thing". If so, I guess I would like that better spelled out, because to me it doesn't seem important. We can give any thing or grouping of things a name (like as we discussed previously about shoes and pairs of shoes). You can chose to think of a hive as a living thing or a collection of smaller things. Water in a cup could be one thing, but if you put it into a pot it may not be. To me this all sounds like a decision you may want to make in classification, not a fundamental question about existence.

As usual when doing metaphysics, I am pulled in two directions. Like you, I have a strong sense that these are somehow fake problems that we're discussing. On the other hand, I am not sure how to diffuse the arguments given in the chapter.

Let me try to help you to see what the issue is. Remember back to the chapter on ontology, and the question of whether fictional characters and merely possible entities exist (or subsist, or have being, or whatever). Quine had a very specific argument against their existence (which his imaginary opponent, Wyman, advocates):

Wyman's overpopulated universe is in many ways unlovely. It offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes, but this is not the worst of it. Wyman's slum of possibles is a breeding ground for disorderly elements. Take, for instance, the possible fat man in that doorway; and, again, the possible bald man in that doorway. Are they the same possible man, or two possible men? How do we decide? How many possible men are there in that doorway? Are there more possible thin ones than fat ones? How many of them are alike? Or would their being alike make them one? Are no two possible things alike? Is this the same as saying that it is impossible for two things to be alike? Or, finally, is the concept of identity simply inapplicable to unactualized possibles? But what sense can be found in talking of entities which cannot meaningfully be said to be identical with them selves and distinct from one another? —Quine, "On What There Is", pp.23-24

Quine's slogan is "no entity without identity". In other words: we should not believe in the existence of things that do not have clear individuation conditions (aka identity conditions). He thought that merely possible things as well as abstract entities were mysterious and ontologically undesirable because we didn't know how to individuate them.

What this chapter points out is that the same kind of problem applies to ordinary material objects (including organisms and people). There are all kinds of puzzles about their individuation conditions. And so by Quine's criterion, they are ontologically problematic. And, indeed, one way to

respond to this line of thought is to argue that ordinary material objects don't exist. This is what the mereological nihilist argues. But whereas Quine tried to present his skepticism of possibilities as being on the side of common sense and science, it looks a lot weirder to conclude, by analogous reasoning, that chairs and people don't exist.

Ship of Theseus

Ksenia: I think the reason the Ship of Theseus' puzzle remains unsolved is because it is being analyzed under criteria that is too relative (at least by Ney). ... I don't understand why Ney presents only four options to the Ship of Theseus puzzle..... what does it actually mean for the ships to be the "same?"

I'm a bit confused about why you think that there are other options that Ney has left out. What other options are there? It seems to me that these are the only ones, and that is what Ney is assuming.

"Same" in this context means "numerical identity". Think of it this way: suppose the police catch someone who they think has committed a crime. In order to decide whether to punish this person, we have to decide whether it was the same person who committed the crime. It's not enough to show that the person who's been caught is very similar to the person who committed the crime. We need to know that it's the very same individual. That's the sense of "same" that's at issue here.

Another example: imagine that someone steals your ship and then does a ship-of-Theseus manoeuvre on it: they slowly replace each part and then at the end they build a ship from the old parts. Then suppose that the police catch them and recover both ships. Which one should they give back to you? You're entitled to have your ship back, but which one is your ship? If the ship(s) that the police have recovered are merely similar to the one that was stolen from you, they shouldn't give it to you.

So I think that this notion of "sameness"—numerical identity—is actually one that we use all of the time, and that is presupposed by our usual way of doing things. What these paradoxes show is that it is not as well understood as we normally seem to think.

Raima: Regarding to the the ship of Theseus, I do agree with option 2, but to a certain extent. Option 2 claims that $S_1=S_3$ cause they are derived from the same material, however, option 4 claims that S_1 is not equal to S_3 for the materials in S_3 are not in its original condition as it was in S_1 . For Option2, can it be said $S_1=S_3$ because the materials are thing-in-itself and despite the damaged materials, they still have the exact essence from their original condition?

This is one way to go, but you should recognize that this idea has some strange consequences. It's totally normal to replace parts of things and go on thinking that they are still the same thing. I recently got my computer's keyboard replaced after it stopped working properly. Your view would seem to entail that I no longer have the same computer; I have a new one. Maybe we can just "bite that bullet" (i.e., accept that implausible conclusion). But the problem becomes stranger when it comes to organisms, including people. My body loses some molecules and gains others continually. Eventually, all of the molecules that currently make up my body will be gone, replaced by different

molecules. So if the essence of a thing is the stuff it is made of, then I won't be the same person anymore. (Depending on how strict your criterion is, maybe I am a different person every second.) This is a surprising conclusion!

Aanisah: On Pgs. 91-93, Ney discusses the paradoxes of material constitution. She gives the example of the Ship of Thesus. On pg. 92 Ney says S2, the ship whose planks were gradually replaced, is the ship that is identical to the original one. I understand how replacing one plank from a ship or changing a tire on your car doesn't make it a different ship or car. However, I'm having trouble understanding that at what point does the replacement of materials make it a fundamentally different object. For instance, if half of the planks on the Ship of Thesus were to be replaced, would at that point the ship become something different from the original? What about if three-quarters of the planks were replaced? Furthermore, if all of the wood of the original ship was replaced, as Ney mentions on pg. 91, how is it still the original ship of Thesus?

I think the example is most plausible if we imagine the pieces of the ship being replaced slowly, over a long period of time. The thought is this: replacing one small piece of a ship doesn't make it a new ship. But we can slowly repeat this process, never making it a new ship, and eventually we will have a ship made up of entirely new stuff. If we imagine this happening over the course of years, I think it becomes more plausible that no single replacement changes the identity of the ship. (And in any case, it would seem completely arbitrary to choose a single replacement.) And as I said in response to the last question, this is actually how our bodies work: we slowly replace small parts of ourselves over time, eventually winding up with all new molecules.

The Statue and the Clay

Chateldon: As for the matter of "the statue and the clay," I was thinking of what we saw in the previous chapters. That is about properties. The statue has a list of its properties, and a mass of clay has a list of its properties. Making up by clay is one of that statue's properties.

This is plausible, but it sounds like you're just accepting the two-objects view. After all: making up the clay is presumably not one of the statue's properties? But then you're committed to the conclusion that two distinct things (the statue and the clay) can occupy the same place at the same time. This is what the philosopher David Wiggins has argued.

Identity

Miriam: In the discussion about the Ship of Theseus, the book notes that the identity relation is an equivalence relation. Does that need to be the case? It would not be crazy to remove the transitivity requirement, and then for our ships S1, S1*, S1**, ..., we can simply claim that every ship is identical to the ships within some number of alterations and not others.

Some philosophers have experimented with making identity something other than an equivalence relation. Or rather, it might be better to say that they have experimented with replacing the identity relation with something other than an equivalence relation, for most purposes. For example, David

Lewis has argued that if I say “I might have been an inch shorter than I am”, the person I am talking about—the possible shorter version of me—is not literally me, but is rather my *counterpart* in another possible world. The counterpart relation is a lot like the identity relation, and it is what we often care about when we seem to be talking about identity, but it is non-transitive, and so isn’t an equivalence relation. We could say something similar about identity over time. (There’s more on these issues in chapters 6 and 7 of Ney’s book.)

Leibniz’s Law (The Indiscernibility of Identicals)

Ksenia: “Superman and Clark Kent cannot be the same person because Clark Kent wears glasses and Superman does not” (96)... This doesn’t work, in my opinion, because glasses aren’t even attached to one’s body. This would be a better analogy to the ship if talking about detaching one’s body parts or something, but even that wouldn’t work for obvious reasons (that’s like telling an amputee they no longer bear the same identity - citizenship, name, whatever).

Syeda: On page 96 – Exercise 3.1(A) made me unconvinced regarding Leibniz law... [Superman and Clark Kent] are contrary identities that belong to an Alien from planet Krypton whose name is Kal-El. All 3 are not identical however, Kal-El can either be Clark Kent or Superman at a time. There is still an overlap in identity. Kal-El is present in Clarke Kent and he is also present in Superman.

I think there’s a better thing to say about this. Superman *is* Clark Kent and is *also* Kal-El. Superman *does* wear glasses, at least sometimes (namely, when he’s dressed up in his Clark Kent costume) and Clark Kent *does* fly, sometimes (when he’s dressed in his superman costume). It’s just that people don’t know that all of these things are true of one and the same person. We should not take it literally when someone says that Superman flies but Clark Kent doesn’t; to do that would be to mistake facts about the world for facts about people’s (e.g. Lois Lane’s) beliefs about the world.

Loreta: Does Leibniz's law take in account time and location? For time, is the cup i drink coffee today identical to the one I will drink from tomorrow (assuming I use the 'same' cup). Or more complex - am I in this second identical to the one in this second (it took a few seconds to write that). As for location/space, can two physically separate things ever be identical? how much do numbers mess up with the law? until now, numbers have created this distinction between things..

I think your coffee example is mixing up two senses of “cup”: there’s the coffee cup, the vessel (which is the same today and tomorrow) and there the cup of coffee, the stuff in the cup (which is not the same).

All of our ordinary ways of acting presuppose that it’s possible for a person to continue being one and the same person over time. Our concept of friendship, our systems of reward and punishment, and so on, don’t make sense if people can’t be identical over time. So if Leibniz’s law is an axiomatic truth about identity (which a lot of philosophers think it is), then it had better not break down when we start talking about time. It’s worth noting that there is a huge philosophical literature about this

very topic. A good first thing to read would be John Perry's "[A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality](#)" (click the link for a PDF).

I would think that two physically separate things *can't* ever be identical.

I think numbers work pretty well with Leibniz's law. Or at least, I'm curious about why you think they wouldn't...

Miriam: On page 95 Leibniz's Law is introduced, that all things that are the same share the same properties. The law is not portrayed as contested. Unlike other ideas, about which Ney will describe those who disagree, Leibniz's law is just presented. I don't know if the intention here is that it is undisputed or not. But if it is undisputed, it is strong enough to resolve all the paradoxes. S_1 is not the same as S_1^* because they differ in the property of being composed of that one plank that was replaced. Similarly, the clay and everything else differs. I differ from myself yesterday in the property of my age. Now perhaps there is some limit on what constitutes a property for the purpose of this law, but I am not aware of it.

I think you're right that most of the paradoxes in this chapter can be thought of as apparent conflicts with Leibniz's law. And yes, Leibniz's law is probably the closest thing to a consensus idea in philosophy, so that's why Ney does not contest it. Much of what you find in the philosophical literature on these topics is a series of attempts to figure out how to preserve common sense ideas (such as the idea that a person can continue being the same person over time) without abandoning Leibniz's Law. What you're suggesting here is tantamount to saying that we should simply abandon common sense. But there are more sophisticated options...

Identity over time for people and other organisms

Misa: The ship of Theseus is made of planks. The statue of Goliath is made of clay. The planks make the shape of the ship. The clay makes the shape of the statue. How about human beings? We are made of somatic cells. It seems that the brain is the most personal and identical part because if one lost other parts of the body, one can keep one's identity as one thinking one is the same person. Is not the shape of human being important?

Syeda: ...when it comes to living organisms, Leibniz law becomes somewhat less convincing. Let's take an example of a life cycle of a caterpillar (stage 2) – butterfly (Stage 4). A butterfly is still a caterpillar but now has big beautiful wings added to it – another overlap of identity?

As I have already mentioned in a couple of earlier comments, there is a big philosophical literature about what makes an organism or a person the same person as time passes.

The idea that it is something about the brain is one popular option, but it is not the only one. One problem is that there is still the problem of what makes a brain the same brain over time. After all: my brain when I was one day old does not share many of its physical properties with my brain now. And so what is it that makes it the same brain (and so me the same me)? If you would like to read about personal identity, I would suggest starting with John Perry's "[A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality](#)" (click the link for a PDF).

Cynthia: On the other hand, identity when it comes to living material things seems to be different. The cells in our bodies are being replaced constantly, and yet we still tend to identify as ourselves. Wouldn't this indicate that identity itself is metaphysically vague, and that criteria for it is only sufficient for certain intents and purposes?

You've got two different (very interesting) ideas here: (1) identity claims about organisms are vague; and (2) identity claims about organisms are only ever true relative to certain intents and purposes. A lot of philosophers have resisted these ideas because they violate the traditional principles by which identity is supposed to work. For example, there's nothing in Leibniz's law about vagueness or purposes, and so if we accept either of these claims, we have to get rid of Leibniz's law. That might be the right thing to do of course, but then we'll be in a situation of having to replace it with something. What are the rules of identity, if not Leibniz's law? This is the sort of question that some philosophers devote substantial portions of their career trying to answer.

As Ney mentions at the end of the chapter, one person who has tried to take seriously the idea that things themselves are vague (and so identity claims are presumably also vague) is Elisabeth Barnes, in her paper, "[Ontic Vagueness: A Guide for the Perplexed](#)" (click the link to see the paper). I don't know of anyone who has argued that identity claims are themselves true or false relative to our intents and purposes, but one person who has defended "interest relativity" about vagueness is Delia Graff Fara, in her paper, "[Shifting Sands](#)".

Chateldon: Let's say a plant Q is planted by means of cuttings using a plant P, from the view of former, P and Q are not different, but from the latter, those are different (I did not use the example of a mother and its child because we need to see the minds though some scientists say plants have thought/emotion(?).)

This is a really interesting point. It reminds me of a point that is made by Bernard Williams in his influential paper, "[The Self and the Future](#)". He imagines someone going through a Star Trek-style teletransporter, which works by taking apart all of the molecules in your body and then reassembling an exact molecule-for-molecule duplicate somewhere else. Williams argues that if we ask the person at the new location if they are you, they will say "yes, still me!". But from the perspective of the person going into the transporter, it may as well be a very efficient murder machine, since all it does it vaporize them and create a new person somewhere else. I really recommend this paper!

The Identity of Indiscernibles

Robert: I'm just curious about Blacks counterargument regarding the identity of indiscernible's, he describes two spheres that are exactly the same in every way, from chemical composition to their color as a way of saying its not impossible for two things to have all their properties in common. But I was wondering about their position in space, while they have all the same properties, they are still located in different regions of space, and why isn't that location considered an inherent property to that object? am i missing something, is there an argument to be had here?

Black is assuming (with modern physics) that location is always relative rather than absolute. Since the only two things in this hypothetical universe are the spheres, you can only specify the location of each sphere relative to the other one. This means that anything that can be said about one sphere's location can also be said about the other sphere's location, namely: "x distance from the other sphere". If you would like to read the paper (it's quite short and very readable), you can find it [here](#).