

What am I?



A material thing

A central alternative to the view that persons are immaterial souls is the view that persons are certain sorts of material things — namely, physical organisms.

We saw that the conceivability argument provides a powerful argument for dualism. Why might one hold the physicalist, or materialist, view?

One central argument, which van Inwagen calls the [interaction argument](#), is the argument that physicalism is to be preferred over dualism on the grounds that dualism makes it hard to understand the causal connections between mind and body. We discussed this in connection with Elisabeth's correspondence with Descartes. van Inwagen gives a few different spins on this argument in the readings for today.

Let's look briefly at two other arguments one might give in favor of a materialist view of human persons.

The first is what might be called **the common sense argument** for materialism.

There are lots of versions of this argument. Here is one:

- 1. I am sitting in a chair.
- 2. Only material beings can sit in chairs.

- C. I am a material being. (1,2)

Which premise should the dualist reject?

1. I am sitting in a chair.
 2. Only material beings can sit in chairs.
-
- C. I am a material being. (1,2)

A dualist like Descartes seems forced to deny the first premise, since Descartes thought that we are identical to immaterial souls.

But one might adopt a less pure dualist view, and say that we have immaterial souls, but also have material parts. On this view, we are a kind of fusion or combination of an immaterial soul and a material body, and cannot exist without both. This seems to be the kind of view that Aquinas, for example, had.

Can this sort of 'mixed' dualist view be motivated by the conceivability argument?

The second is what might be called [the argument from parsimony](#).

This argument begins with a principle which is sometimes called ‘[Ockham’s razor](#)’, after the great 13th century Franciscan friar and philosopher William of Ockham.



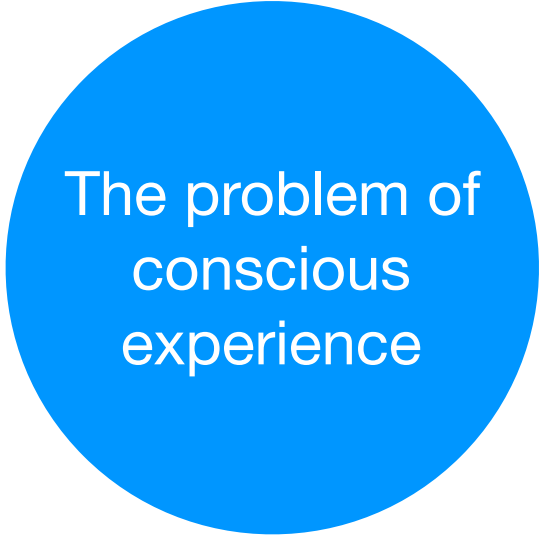
Ockham’s razor

One should never multiply entities without necessity.


Ockham’s idea was that, in our reasoning, we should not believe in the existence of entities unless we are forced by the evidence to do so. We should avoid believing in entities if they play no role in explaining anything we observe.

How might one use this principle to make a case for materialism about human persons?

Today we are going to focus on four objections to this materialist view of human beings.



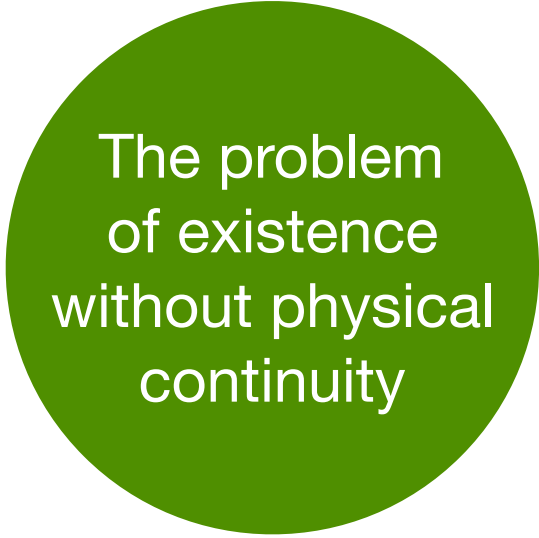
The problem of
conscious
experience



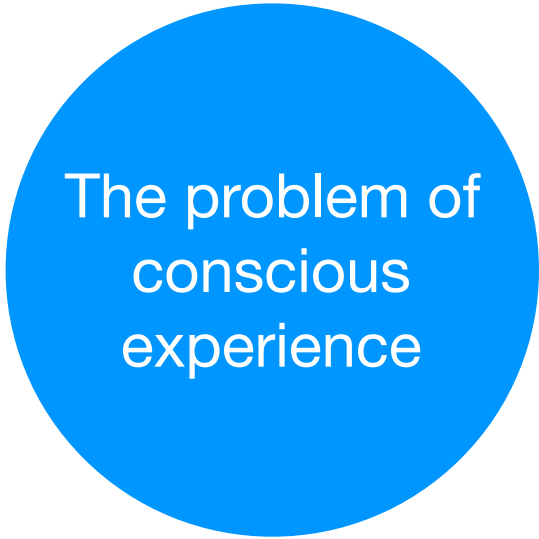
The problem of
physical change



The problem of
fission



The problem
of existence
without physical
continuity



The problem of
conscious
experience

The first argument against physicalism tries to show that the view cannot make sense of conscious experience.

What does the physicalist say about conscious experiences?

“If a human person is a physical thing, any change whatever in a human person must be a purely physical change. If, for example, Tim becomes elated because of some news contained in a letter he has just received, this change in Tim, his becoming elated, must be the very same thing (or perhaps we should say the very same event) as some purely physical change.”

So conscious experiences must, if physicalism is true, be physical events.

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This is the view that the philosopher Frank Jackson tried to refute with his example of Mary and the black-and-white room.



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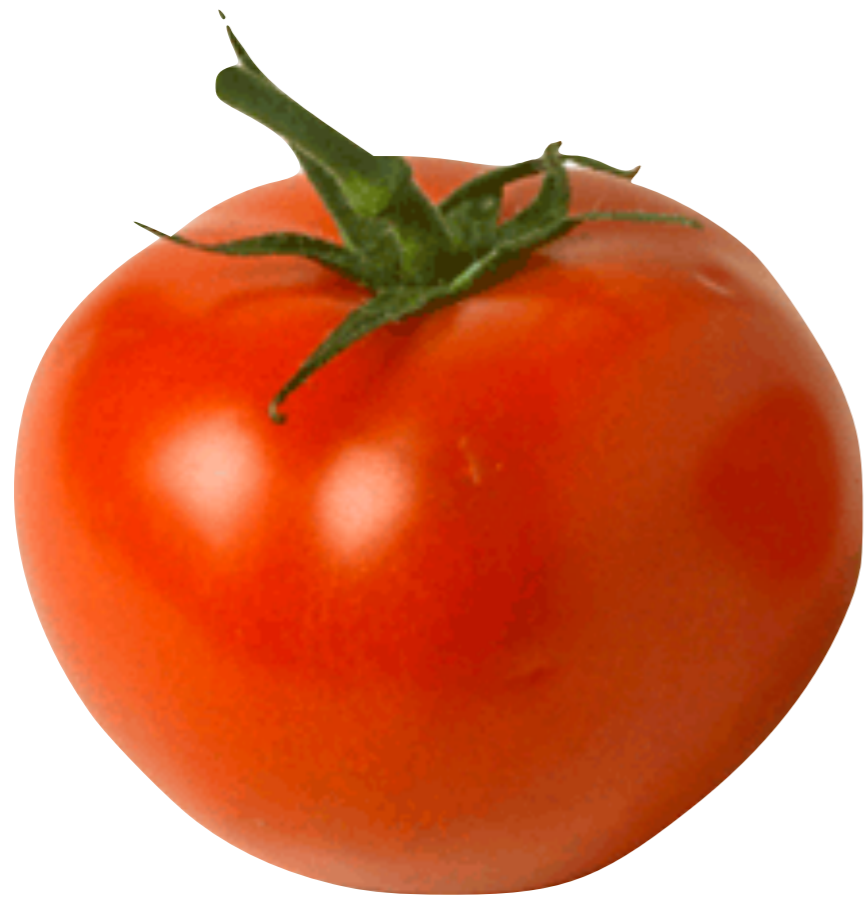
She is so brilliant, in fact, that she has learned every fact that there is to learn about the physical world. In particular, she has learned all of the facts about the neurophysiology of color vision, and has studied extensively everything that happens to the brain when subjects are experiencing color.

One day, someone brings a new object into Mary's room:



Does Mary learn anything new when she sees the tomato?

Intuitively, yes: she learns **what it is like to experience red things**.

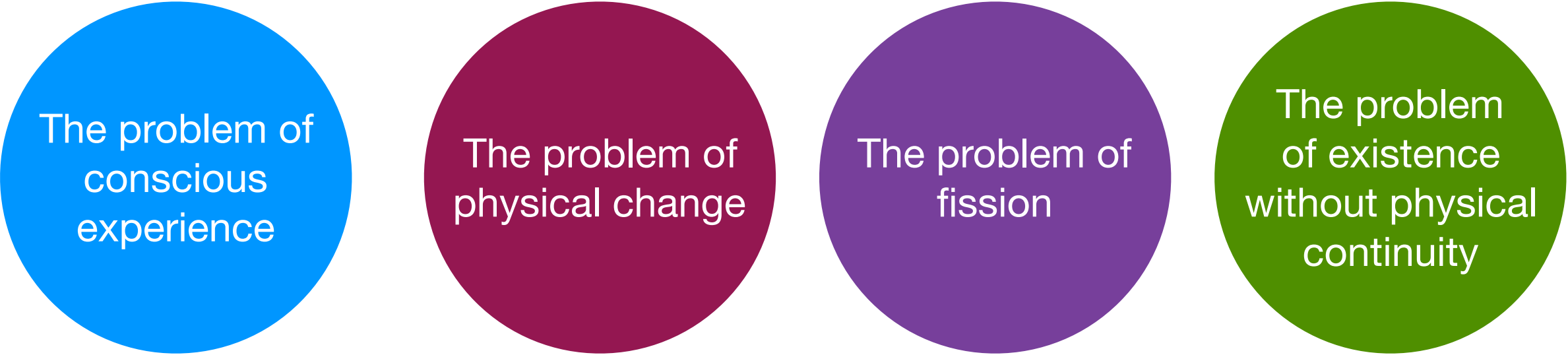


But this seems to show that conscious experience is not a wholly physical process.

Here is one way in which the argument, which is sometimes called the **knowledge argument**, can be laid out.

1. If conscious experiences are wholly physical processes, then all of the facts about conscious experiences are physical facts.
2. Before seeing the tomato, Mary knows all the physical facts about conscious experiences.
3. Upon seeing the tomato, Mary learns something new about conscious experiences.
4. There is at least one non-physical fact about conscious experience.
(2,3)

C. Conscious experiences are not wholly physical processes. (1,4)




The problem of
conscious
experience

The problem of
physical change

The problem of
fission

The problem
of existence
without physical
continuity

Let's turn now to the problem of physical change.



The problem of physical change

The problem of physical change is simple. You are constantly gaining and losing physical parts, as, for example, small bits of skin are shed from your body. So it seems that the material being which you call 'my body' at one moment is distinct from the material being which you call 'my body' at the next moment.

But now suppose, as the materialist says, that you are identical to your body:

Jeff Speaks at 12:25 = Jeff Speaks' body at 12:25.

The fact that we are constantly gaining and losing parts seems to show that:

At 12:26, the material being which was Jeff Speaks' body at 12:25 no longer exists.

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At 12:26, the material being which was Jeff Speaks' body at 12:25 no longer exists.

At 12:26, the person which was Jeff Speaks at 12:25 no longer exists.

This looks bad, since we generally think that we are able to survive such events as haircuts, and hence can exist for more than a few moments.

We can formalize this argument as a reductio of materialism about human persons.

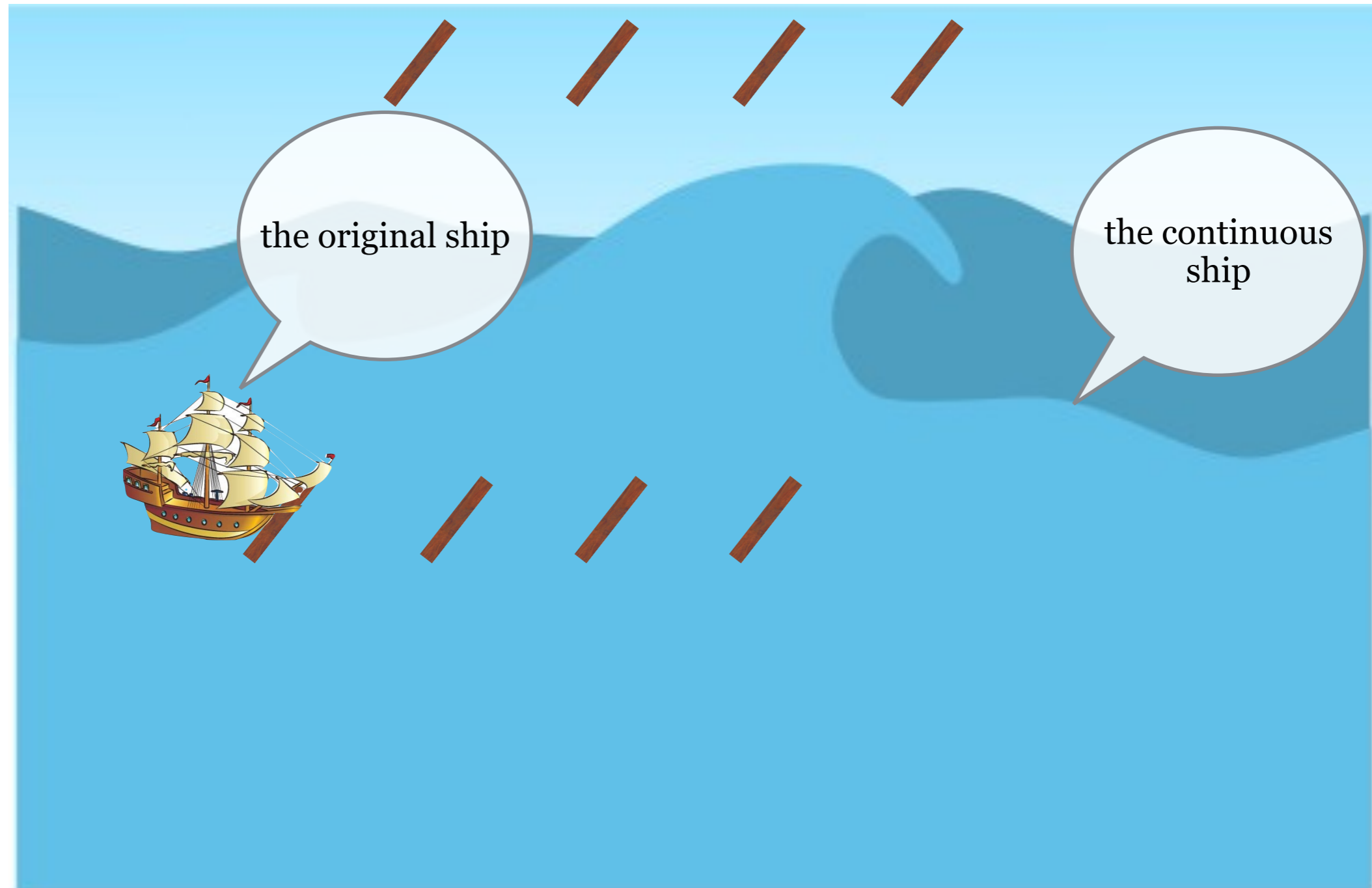
1. Human persons are identical to their bodies.
 2. Human bodies gain and lose parts every few seconds.
 3. If x and y are material things, and x and y have different parts, then $x \neq y$.
 4. Human bodies only exist for a few seconds. (2,3)
-
- C. Human persons only exist for a few seconds. (1,4)

Suppose that you are a materialist. Which premise of the above argument should you reject?

1. Human persons are identical to their bodies.
 2. Human bodies gain and lose parts every few seconds.
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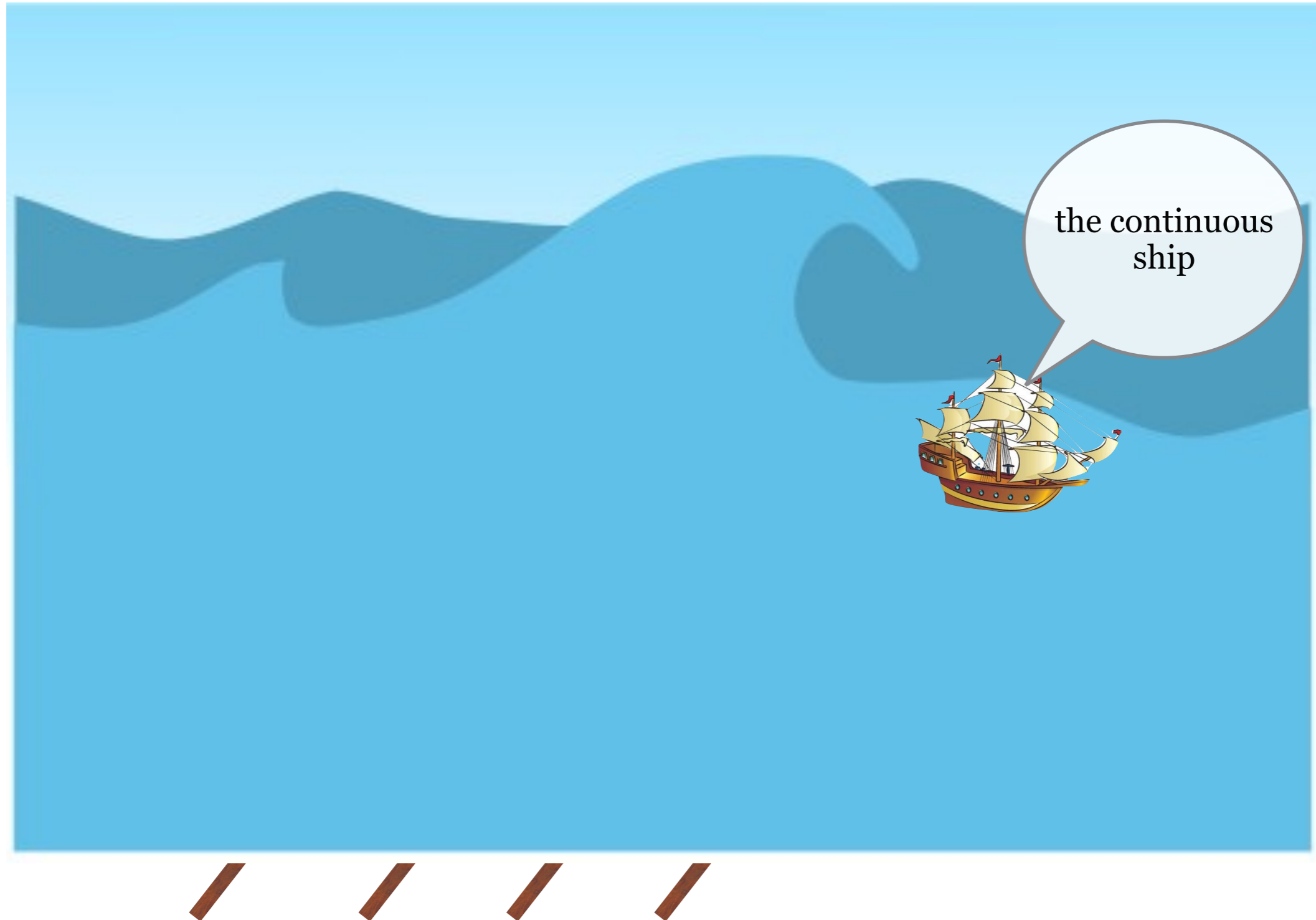
It is natural to reject premise (3). For surely we ordinarily think that, for example, a bowl can continue to exist over a period of days even if it is a material thing, and even if it is constantly gaining and losing atoms.

But the problem of physical change is not so easily disposed of. This can be shown by an ancient paradox, the puzzle of the [Ship of Theseus](#), which is discussed in today's reading.



Our previous discussion strongly suggests that the following claim is true:

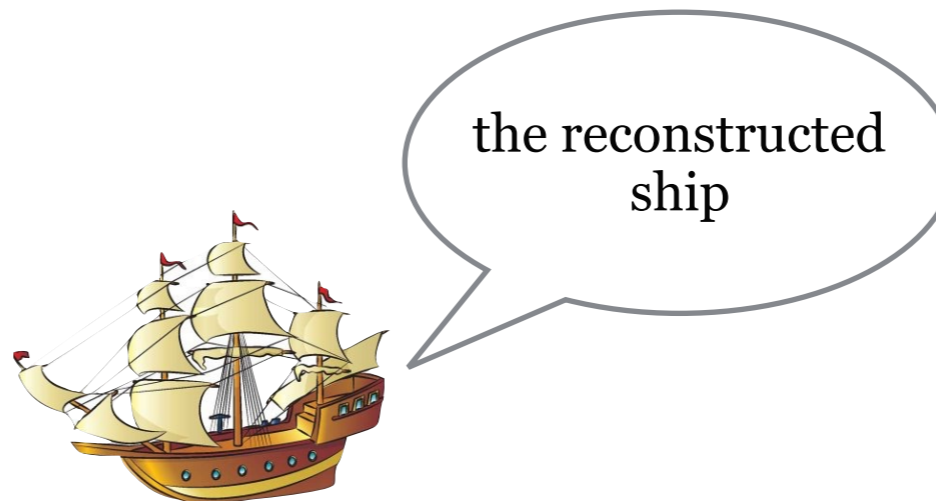
Original Ship = Continuous Ship



Our previous discussion strongly suggests that the following claim is true:

Original Ship = Continuous Ship

But now imagine that some enterprising person gets the idea to rebuild the original Ship of Theseus from the wooden planks which have, over time, been replaced.



The following now seems plausible:

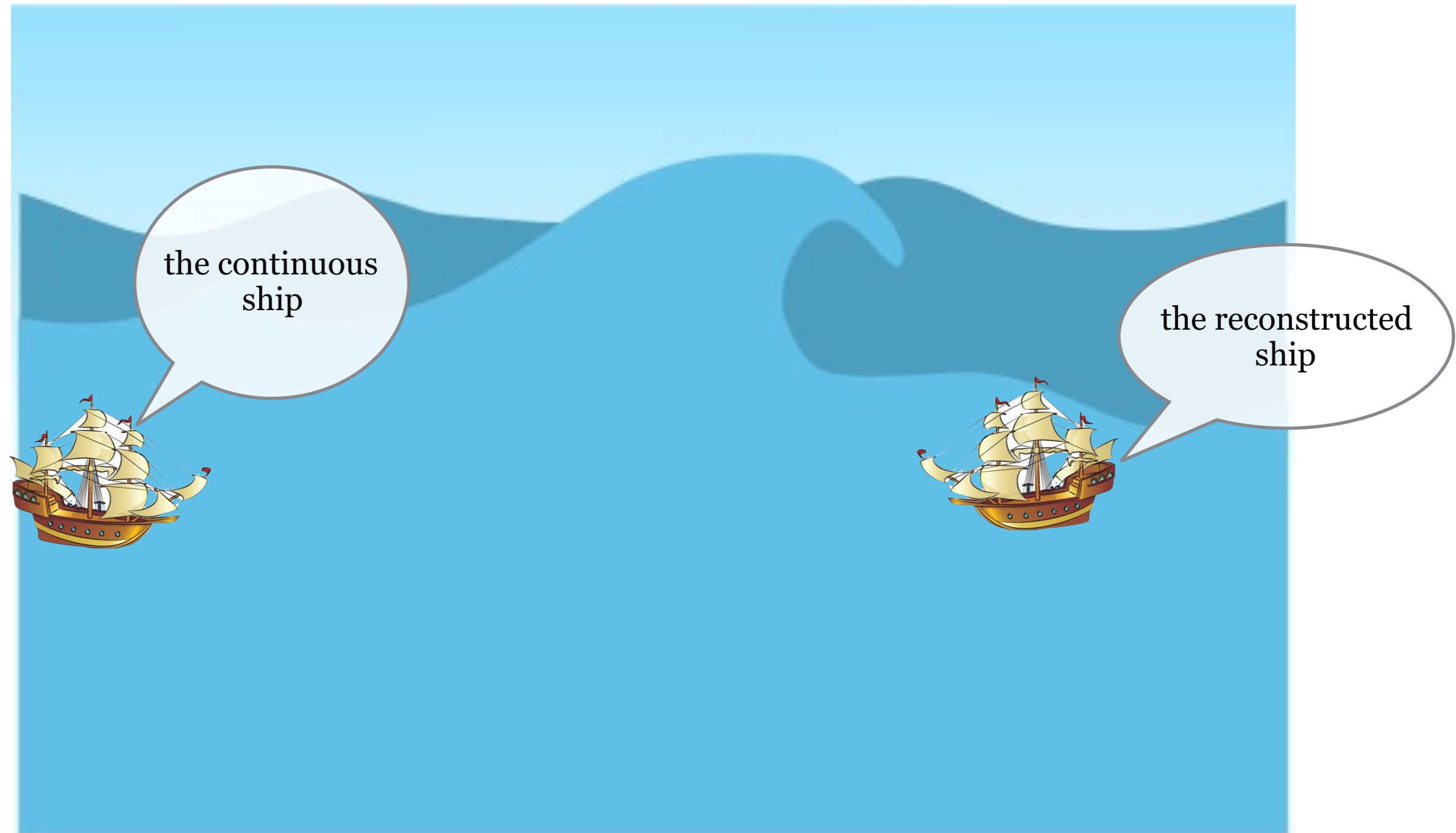
Original Ship = Reconstructed Ship

After all, Original Ship and Reconstructed Ship are made of exactly the same materials organized in exactly the same way!



Original Ship = Continuous Ship

Original Ship = Reconstructed Ship



But suppose that we take our reconstructed ship for a cruise.

Original Ship = Continuous Ship

Original Ship = Reconstructed Ship

This is not a story of a ship crashing into itself; so it seems fairly clear that:

Continuous Ship \neq Reconstructed Ship

The problem, though, is that these three claims are inconsistent. This is due to the transitivity of identity: if $A=B$, and $B=C$, then $A=C$.

What's the best way out of this paradox?

The problem of fission

Let's turn now to the problem of fission. This problem can be introduced by describing an ambitious new form of surgery.

We are all familiar with surgeries in which parts of one's body are removed. One might remove a tumor, or an organ, or a limb.

Let us suppose that in the future medical technology continues to improve. It is now possible to amputate half of a person's body.

Fortunately, prosthetics have also improved, so that it is now possible to make an exact duplicate of the half that has been removed, and attach that to the original half.



It seems as though it should be, in principle, possible to survive this surgery. So the materialist, who thinks that you are identical to your body, must also say that it is possible for your body to survive this surgery.

So, it seems, they must endorse the following claim:

A body continues to exist even if 50% of that body's matter is removed.

But this assumption leads to trouble.

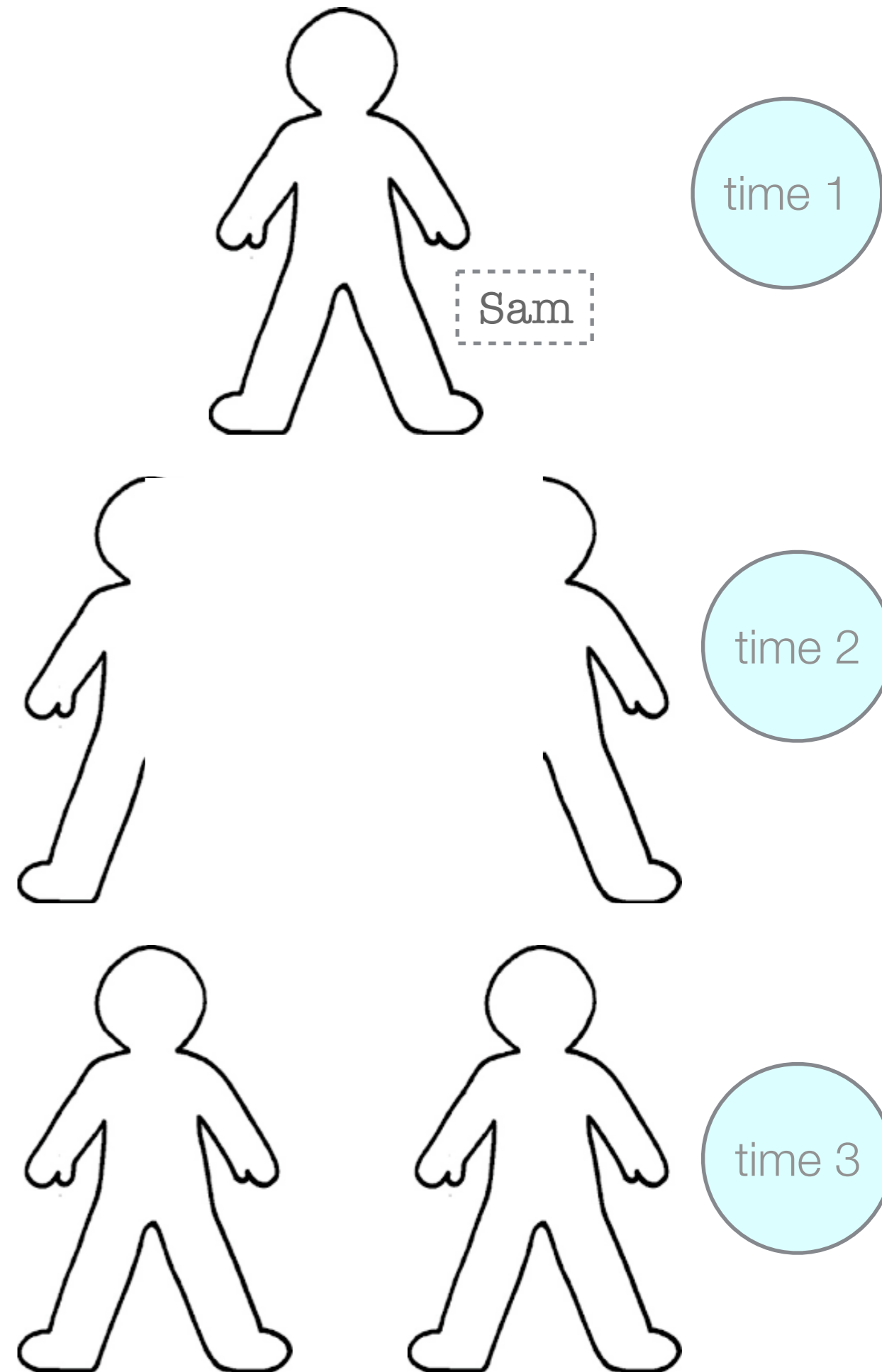


A body continues to exist even if 50% of that body's matter is removed.

Suppose that we take a healthy patient, Sam, and cut him in half.

We then, as in the previous surgery, make duplicates of the two halves, and join them to the two severed halves.

Call the two resulting individuals "Lefty" and "Righty."



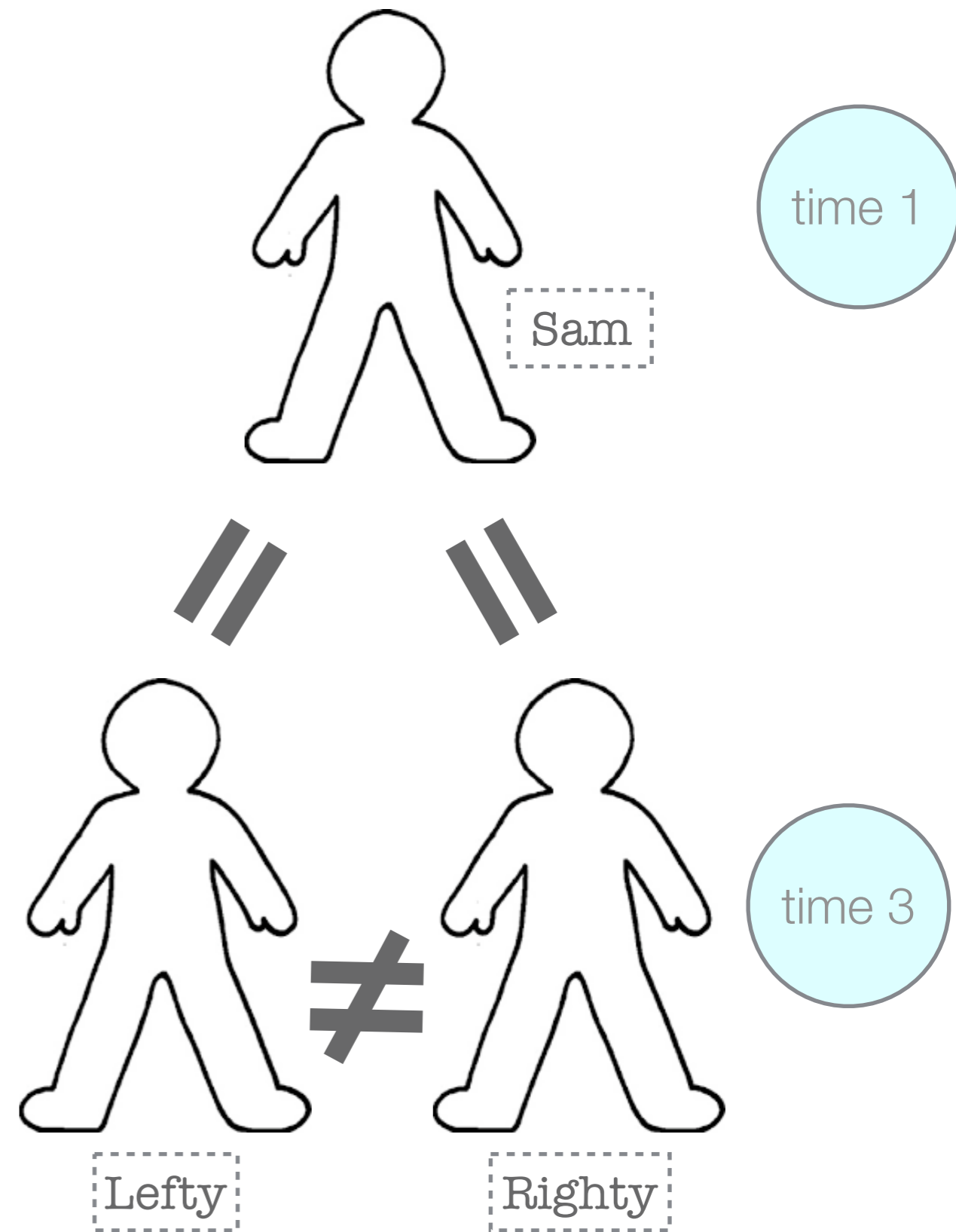
A body continues to exist even if 50% of that body's matter is removed.

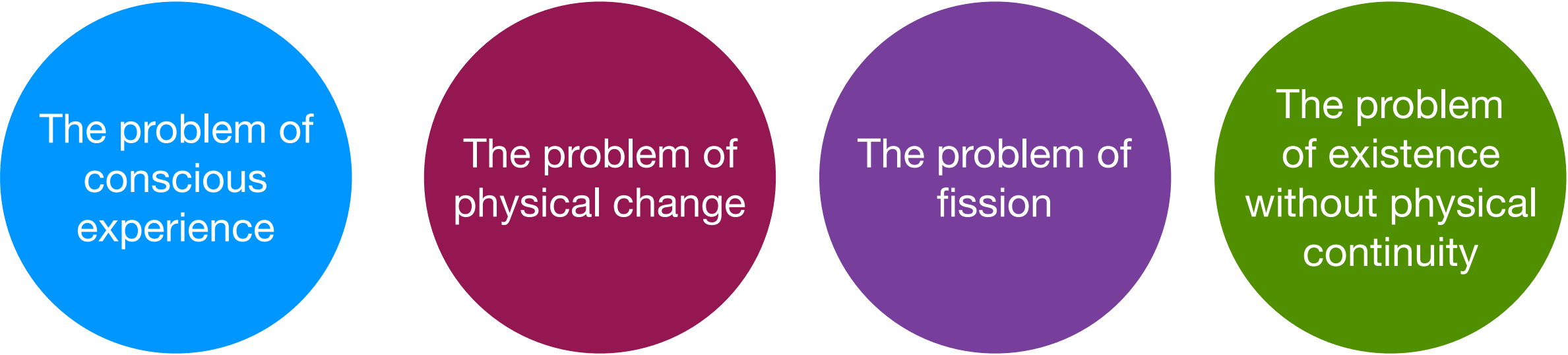
The problem is that the materialist who endorses the above principle seems forced to say that Sam=Lefty and Sam=Righty.

But, obviously, Lefty \neq Righty.

And this is a contradiction.

How should the materialist respond?





The problem of
conscious
experience

The problem of
physical change

The problem of
fission

The problem
of existence
without physical
continuity

Let's now turn to our last problem for materialist theories: the problem of existence without physical continuity.

The problem
of existence
without physical
continuity

This argument is based on John Locke's example of the prince and the cobbler.

For should the Soul of a Prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the Prince's past Life, enter and inform the Body of a Cobler as soon as deserted by his own Soul, every one sees, he would be the same Person with the Prince, accountable only for the Prince's Actions

What sort of example is Locke imagining here?

This seems to be a problem for the simple materialist views of human persons introduced above. If Locke is right, and we can coherently imagine cases in which two persons “swap bodies”, then it seems that we cannot be identical to our bodies.

One might here simply say the same thing that we imagined someone saying to the conceivability argument: 'Yes, this seems to be possible, but sometimes (as in the example of the small town with the barber) things are conceivable but not possible. Body-swapping is one of those cases. It is conceivable, but it is not really possible.'

But there is another option. One might say that we are, not immaterial things, and not material things, but psychological things, whose identity over time is given by relations of psychological connectedness. Next class, we'll ask how we might go about developing a view of this sort.