

two questions  
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# Identity & survival

Today we turn to our third big question. This question can be introduced by an example.

Suppose that in the year 2069 the surviving members of this Introduction to Philosophy class decided to have an Intro to Philosophy reunion, and all gathered in this room. Suppose that they decided to get a group picture taken.

Now imagine that, via some sort of time travel device, I now have that photo, and show it to you. You might ask: Am I one of those people? Which one am I?

It is very natural to assume that these questions must have determinate answers. There must be some fact of the matter about whether one of the people in the photo is you. And, if one is you, there must be some fact of the matter about which one is you.

Let's suppose that this is true: there must be a fact about whether you survive to be in this picture, and must be a fact about which of the survivors you are.

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Let's suppose that this is true: there must be a fact about whether you survive to be in this picture, and must be a fact about which of the survivors you are.

Then we can ask a question about these facts:

**The survival question:** What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

This might seem like kind of a weird question. It also might seem to be a really easy question; you might think that it would just be the person who looks like you, or who has a driver's license with your name on it.

It turns out that this is not such an easy question. One way to see this is by thinking about some harder cases where this question arises.

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It turns out that this is not such an easy question. One way to see this is by thinking about some harder cases where this question arises.

Many people believe in the possibility of life after death. To believe in life after death is to believe that in the afterlife, some time after your death, some person will be you. But what would it take for some person in heaven (say) to be you?

Surely you are not confident that people in heaven will look like people on earth, or carry driver's licenses. So our seemingly easy answers to the survival question don't help us here.

If we want to know whether life after death is possible, it looks like we need a better answer to the survival question.

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**The survival question:** What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

Here is another question about the future.

Given advances in computing, it may well be possible in your life time for you to enhance your cognitive powers by replacing parts of your brain with computing devices. It may even be possible for your cognitive apparatus to be, in some sense, uploaded to a computer.

The resulting thing would be, wholly or in part, a synthetic device. Would that thing be you?

Again, the easy answers don't help. It looks like we need an answer to the survival question.

**The survival question:** What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

A different question concerns the past.

At some time roughly 20 years ago, there was an embryo in some woman's uterus from which you grew. Was that embryo you?

Again, the easy answers are no help. But the question seems to matter; it seems relevant to the question of whether, and when, abortion is morally permissible.

These are reasons why the survival question matters. It is also connected to another question which seems to be of basic importance:

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**The survival question:** What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

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**The survival question:** What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

**The identity question:** What are you? Are you an organism, an immaterial soul, or something else?

As we will see, these are not the same question. But our answer to one clearly affects our answer to the other.

It will be useful to get clear at the outset on one distinction which, if not attended to, can make these questions more confusing than they have to be. This is the distinction between **numerical** and **qualitative** identity.

To say that x and y are numerically identical is to say that they are literally the same thing — they are one, not two.

To say that x and y things are qualitatively identical is to say that they are exactly resembling — they have just the same properties.

**The survival question:** What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

**The identity question:** What are you? Are you an organism, an immaterial soul, or something else?

Here are some examples to help you see the distinction.

Suppose that I have a pair of golf balls that are just the same in every respect — they have the same things printed on them, and they are the same shape and color. They are therefore qualitatively identical. But are they numerically identical? No. They are two, not one.

Now consider a different golf ball. Suppose that tomorrow you paint the golf ball green. Now think about the golf ball today, and the golf ball tomorrow. Are they qualitatively identical? No — one is white, and the other is green. But are they numerically identical? It seems like they are — it is one and the same golf ball that was white today, and is green tomorrow.

**The survival question:** What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

**The identity question:** What are you? Are you an organism, an immaterial soul, or something else?

Just the same distinction is operative when we are thinking, not about golf balls, but about things like you and me.

Suppose that I have a machine which can make a clone of you, which exactly resembles you. Are you and your clone qualitatively identical? Sure. But are you numerically identical? No — you are two people, not one.

Conversely, consider yourself today and yourself tomorrow. Are you qualitatively identical? No; you will be wearing different clothes, your hair will be a little longer, etc. But will you be numerically identical? Presumably so — we think that that person really will be you.

**The identity question:** What are you? Are you an organism, an immaterial soul, or something else?

With these distinctions in hand. let's turn first to the identity question. What are the possible answers here?

Here's one obvious answer:

**The organism view:** I am a human organism, a kind of material thing

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**The organism  
view:** I am a  
human organism,  
a kind of material  
thing

To say that I am a physical thing is to say that I am entirely composed of the kinds of things studied in physics: atoms, molecules, etc. (Here 'material' and 'physical' are being used as synonyms.)

The kind of physical thing I am is a human animal: a member of the species homo sapiens.

It is very easy to generate arguments for a materialist answer to the identity question. Here is one:

1. I walked to class today.
2. Only physical things can walk.

---

C. I am a physical thing.

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- 1. I walked to class today.
- 2. Only physical things can walk.

---

- C. I am a physical thing.

**The organism view:** I am a human organism, a kind of material thing

Here is another:

- 1. I weigh more than 100 lbs.
- 2. Only physical things have weight.

---

- C. I am a physical thing.

You get the idea. Call arguments like this **easy arguments for materialism**.

Now, you might point out that the easy arguments don't get us all the way to materialism. Maybe, you might say, I am **partly** a material thing, but partly not. Maybe I also have an immaterial soul. We'll get to that!

But: isn't it plausible that **all** of you is in the classroom?

The organism view is not the only game in town. Another possible view is that you are not a material thing, but instead are an **immaterial soul**.

On this view, in addition to the physical things which surround us, certain immaterial things exist — and we are, at least in part, those immaterial things.

What sorts of things would immaterial souls be?

It seems as though they would have to be something which does not occupy space — since it seems that occupying space is a defining feature of physical things.

They are also typically taken to be **simple**, in the sense that they have no parts.

Answers to the identity question which make use of immaterial souls are often called **dualism** about persons, since according to this view there are two different kinds of things in the world: material things like tables and chairs, and immaterial things like you and me.



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There are two different dualist answers to our identity question. Here's the simplest:

**Simple  
dualism: I am  
an immaterial  
soul**

Pretty obviously, the dualist owes us some answer to the easy arguments for materialism.



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

**Simple  
dualism:** I am  
an immaterial  
soul

Which premise should the dualist reject?

The believer in immaterial souls has two moves here.

The first is a simple one: deny the first premise. This is what a simple dualist would say. Strictly speaking, since I am an immaterial soul, I neither sit in chairs, nor walk to class, nor eat at the dining hall.

But there is another possibility. A believer in immaterial souls might reject simple dualism, and instead give the following answer to the identity question:

**Fusion  
dualism:** I am  
a combination  
of a soul  
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**Simple  
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But there is another possibility. A believer in immaterial souls might reject simple dualism, and instead give the following answer to the identity question:

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According to the fusion dualist, I am sitting in a chair, because part of me — namely, the material part — is. This is the kind of view which Aquinas seems to have had.

**The organism view:** I am a human organism, a kind of material thing

**Simple dualism:** I am an immaterial soul

**Fusion dualism:** I am a combination of a soul and a body

We now have three candidate answers to the identity question.

How should proponents of these views answer the survival question?

**The survival question:** What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

It looks like each of these views comes with a kind of natural answer to this question.

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What should the materialist say? Well, let's think about other wholly physical objects, like a table. What does it take for it to survive from one day to the next?

This question looks pretty easy. For the table to survive over time is just for this collection of material parts to continue to exist in the shape that it is in.

That suggests:

**Materialist survival:**  
X is me just in case X is the same physical thing as me

**The organism view:** I am a human organism, a kind of material thing

**Simple dualism:** I am an immaterial soul

**Fusion dualism:** I am a combination of a soul and a body

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The simple dualist would also seem to have a straightforward answer to our survival question:

**Simple dualism:** I am an immaterial soul

**Soul survival:**  
X is me just in case X is the same immaterial soul as me

**Fusion dualism:** I am a combination of a soul and a body

**The organism view:** I am a human organism, a kind of biological entity

**Materialist survival:**  
X is me just in case X is the same physical thing as me

**Fusion dualism:** I am a combination of a soul and a body

What should the fusion dualist say?

Again it looks like we have a natural answer:

**Fusion survival:**  
X is me just in case X has the same immaterial soul as me and is the same material thing as me

**Simple dualism:** I am an immaterial

**Soul survival:**  
X is me just in case X is the same immaterial soul as me

In fact, though, these are not the only options for answering the survival question. Let's take a closer look at our materialist combination of views.

**The organism view:** I am a human organism, a

**Materialist survival:**  
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**The organism view:** I am a human organism, a kind of material thing

**Materialist survival:** X is me just in case X is the same physical thing as me

In fact, though, these are not the only options for answering the survival question. Let's take a closer look at our materialist combination of views.

Materialist survival says that for me to continue to exist over time is for the physical thing which I am to continue to exist over time. But just how do physical objects manage to continue to exist over time?

There is a basic fact which makes this question hard to answer.

**Fusion dualism:** I am an immaterial soul and a material thing

**Fusion survival:** X is me just in case X has the same immaterial soul as me and is the same material thing as me

**Simple dualism:** I am an immaterial soul

**Soul survival:** X is me just in case X is the same immaterial soul as me

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The organism view: I am a human organism, a kind of material thing

**Materialist survival:**  
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There is a basic fact which makes this question hard to answer.

Material things constantly gain and lose parts.

But the following seems plausible:

If x and y are material things, and x and y have different parts, then  $x \neq y$ .

**Fusion dualism:** I am a fusion of an immaterial soul and a material body  
**Fusion survival:** X is me just in case X has the same immaterial soul as me and is the same material thing as me

**Simple dualism:** I am an immaterial soul  
**Soul survival:** X is me just in case X is the same immaterial soul as me

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Material things constantly gain and lose parts.

If  $x$  and  $y$  are material things, and  $x$  and  $y$  have different parts, then  $x \neq y$ .

Material things never exist for more than a fraction of a second.

People are material things.

People never exist for more than a fraction of a second.

### Materialist survival:

$X$  is me just in case  $X$  is the same physical thing as me

This looks pretty bad for our materialist answer to the survival question.

1. Material things constantly gain and lose parts.
  2. If x and y are material things, and x and y have different parts, then  $x \neq y$ .
  3. Material things never exist for more than a fraction of a second. (1,2)
  4. People are material things.
- 
- C. People never exist for more than a fraction of a second. (3,4)

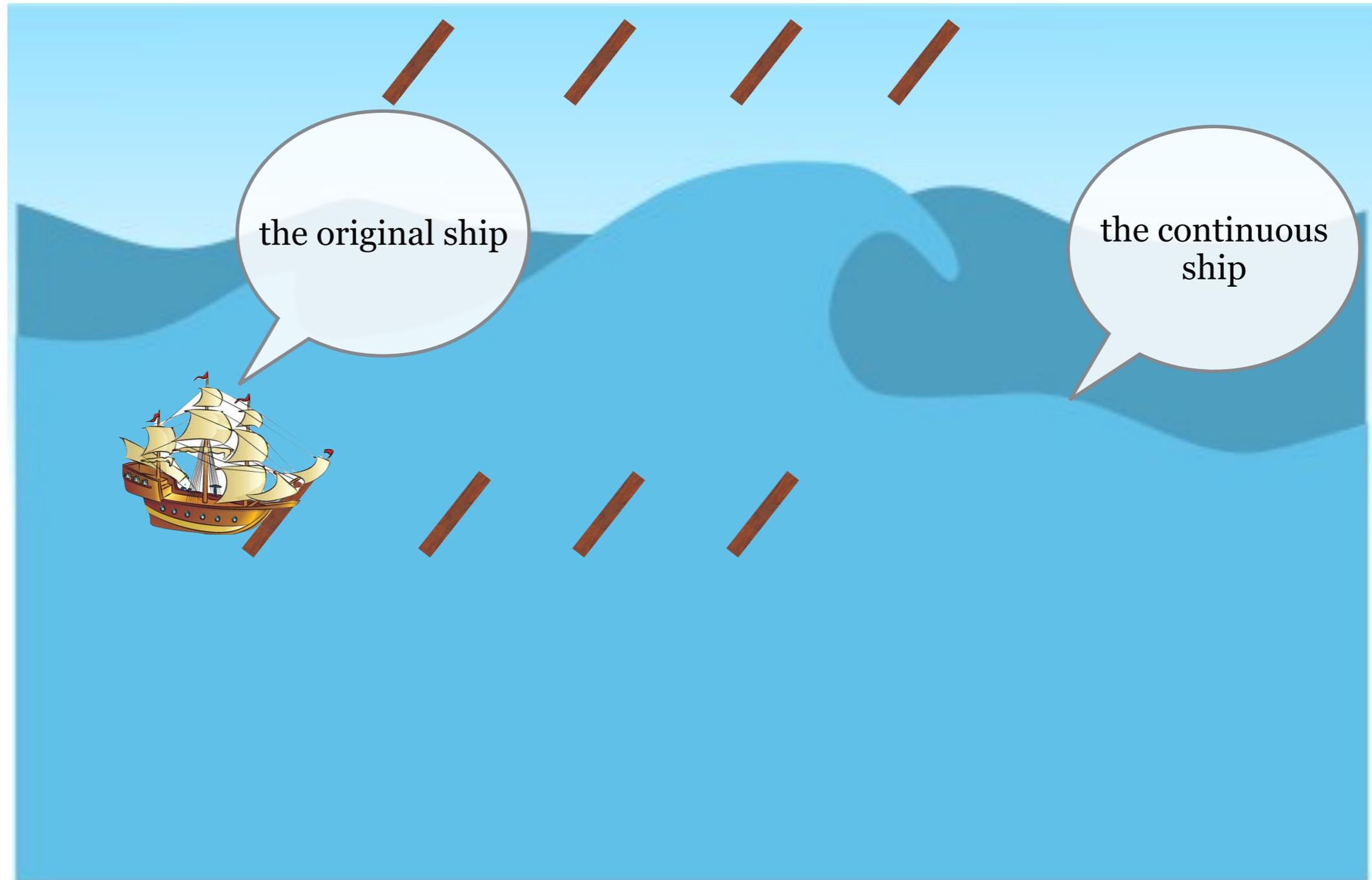
**Materialist survival:**  
X is me just in case X is the same physical thing as me

The materialist must accept (4); and (1) is just an observed fact about the physical world. But the conclusion seems plainly false.

So it seems that the materialist must reject (2). And this might not seem a big deal; after all, we ordinarily think that this lectern, for example, can continue to exist despite gaining and losing small parts.

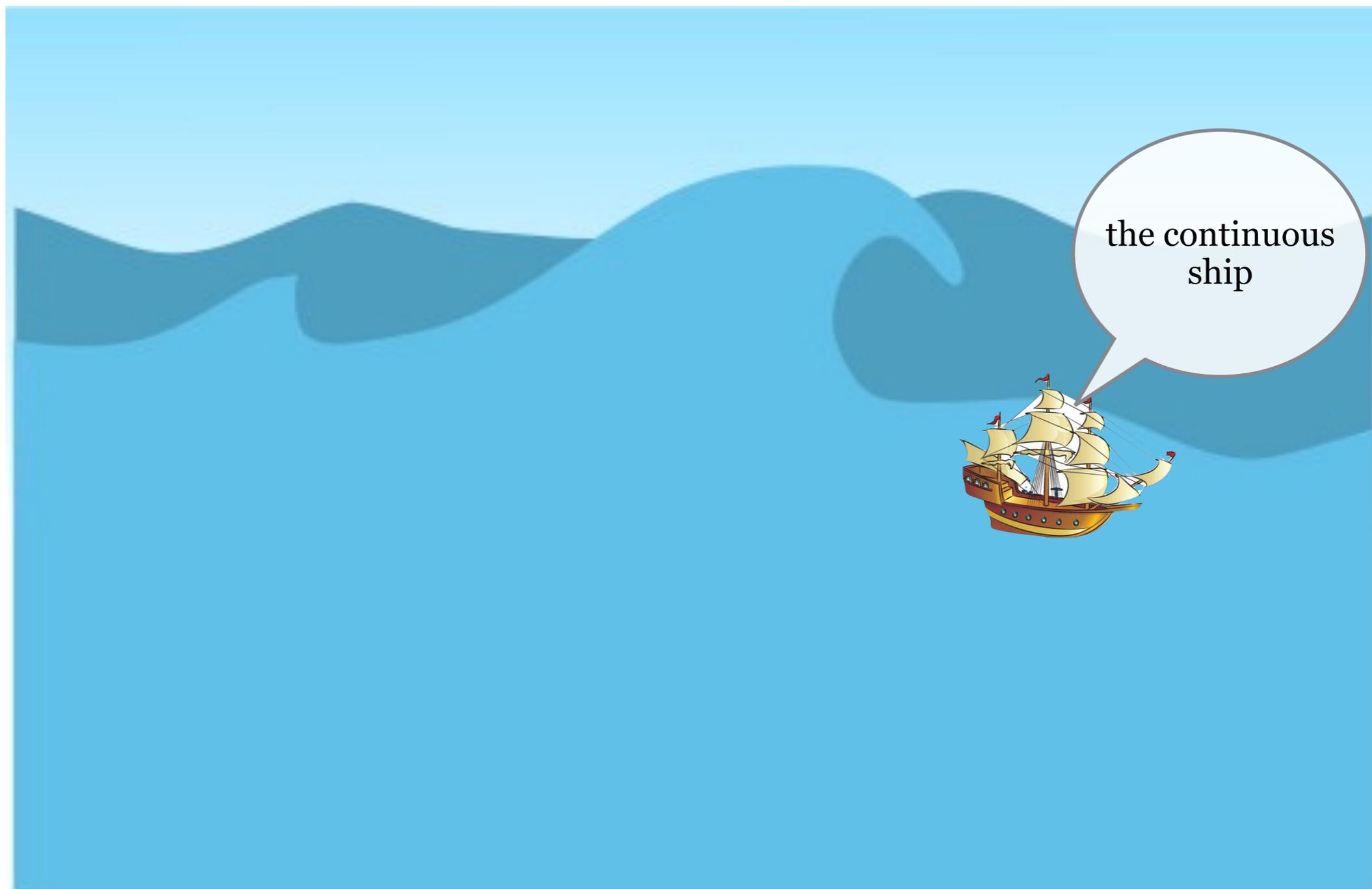
But the puzzle of how material objects survive is not so easily disposed of. This can be shown by an ancient paradox, the puzzle of the **Ship of Theseus**.

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

Original Ship = Continuous Ship



the continuous ship

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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:

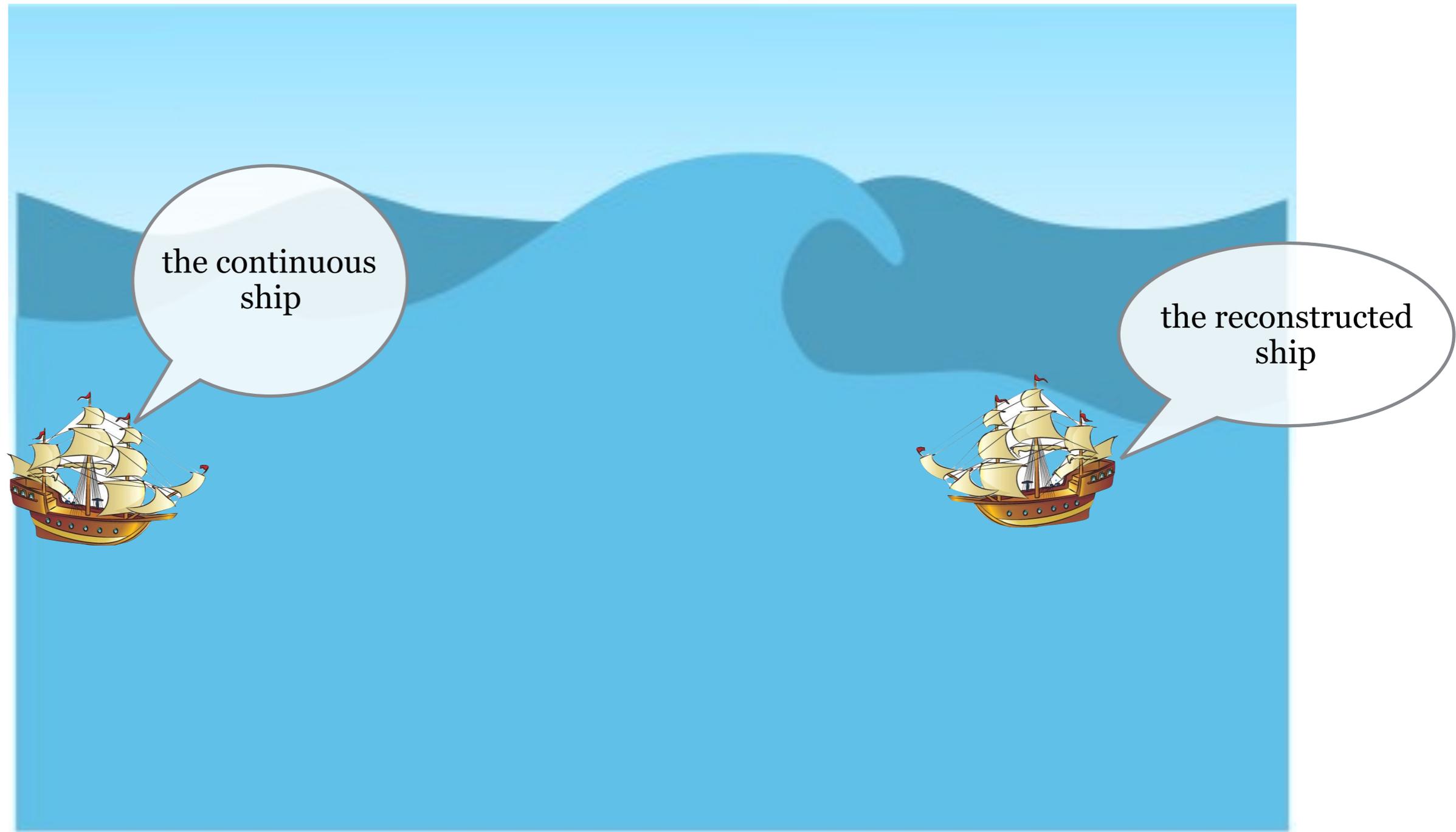
Original Ship = Reconstructed Ship

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?



What's the best way out of this paradox?

One natural thought is that we should reject the claim that Original Ship is the same as Reconstructed Ship. On this view, if you find all of the parts that composed some thing, and put them back together, that is not enough to reconstitute the thing. Rather, on this view, material objects survive via a series of causal connections over time, perhaps with the requirement that only relatively small changes at one time are possible.

Given a materialist view of persons, that gives us:

**Small changes survival:** X is me just in case X is separated from me by a series of small physical changes over time.

This seems more informative than our former materialist theory of survival, and seems to solve our problem about how physical things continue to exist over time.



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But it seems to many people to give the wrong treatment of the following case:

### **The brain transplant**

While driving, you have gotten into a car accident, and your body has been irreparably damaged, but your brain has not. Fortunately (for you), your passenger's body was unharmed, but she has sustained irreparable damage to her brain. Surgeons quickly transplant your brain into your passenger's body.

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Small changes  
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Suppose that you are a human organism. Now consider the moment which the brain is transferred to the new body. Is this a small change or a large one?

But, intuitively, you could survive this process (albeit in a new body). This seems to rule out the organism view + the small changes theory of survival.

### The brain transplant

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But, intuitively, you could survive this process (albeit in a new body). This seems to rule out the organism view + the small changes theory of survival.

There are three possible responses for the materialist.

The first is just to deny the intuition that you could survive the case of the brain transplant.

One problem is that this seems to lead to the result that the **passenger** survives. Can you see why?

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The first is just to deny the intuition that you could survive the case of the brain transplant.

One problem is that this seems to lead to the result that the **passenger** survives. Can you see why?

Let's look at other options. One option is to say that I am a material thing, but not a human organism. The view that the case just discussed suggests is:

**The brain  
view: I am a  
brain**

**Small changes  
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The brain view + the small changes theory of survival seems to say the right thing about the case of the brain transplant.

But it does face some other problems.

**The brain  
view: I am a  
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over time.**

The brain view + the small changes theory of survival seems to say the right thing about the case of the brain transplant.

But it does face some other problems.

For one thing, it seems to be open to versions of the kind of easy arguments we discussed earlier.

1. I walked to class today.  
2. Brains can't walk.  
-----  
C. I am not my brain.

1. I weigh more than 100 lbs.  
2. My brain does not weigh more than 100 lbs.  
-----  
C. I am not my brain.

**The organism  
view:** I am a  
human organism,  
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thing

Another option for the materialist is to stick with the organism view, but give up the small changes theory of survival.

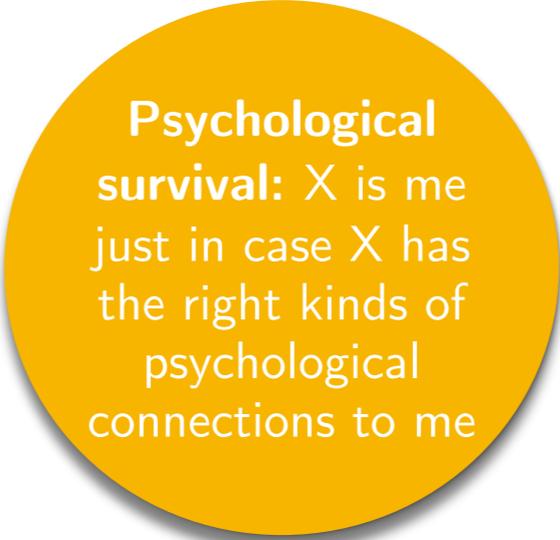
Why do we think that you survive the case of the brain transplant, even though all of your body besides your brain is destroyed? Why is the brain so special?

Presumably it is because the brain is the seat of our mental functions. Our memories, desires, and personality are stored there. Plausibly, the reason why we think we could survive a brain transplant is that our psychology would survive.

**Psychological  
survival:** X is me  
just in case X has  
the right kinds of  
psychological  
connections to me



**The organism  
view:** I am a  
human organism,  
a kind of material  
thing



**Psychological  
survival:** X is me  
just in case X has  
the right kinds of  
psychological  
connections to me

This view says that survival is a matter, not of physical connectedness, but of psychological connectedness.

On this view, I am now a certain human organism. But, if my brain were transplanted, I could in the future be a different human organism. What would make those two human organisms both me is the psychological connections between them.

But note that this appeal to psychological features need not be a dualist view; we have said nothing about the existence of immaterial souls.

Note also that the view circumvents the problems raised by the Ship of Theseus — there's no need to figure out just how and when material objects continue to exist.

**The organism view:** I am a human organism, a kind of material thing

**Psychological survival:** X is me just in case X has the right kinds of psychological connections to me

**The brain view:** I am a brain

**Small changes survival:** X is me just in case X is separated from me by a series of small physical changes over time.

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**Fusion dualism:** I am a combination of a soul and a body

**Fusion survival:** X is me just in case X has the same immaterial soul as me and is the same material thing as me

**Simple dualism:** I am an immaterial soul

**Soul survival:** X is me just in case X is the same immaterial soul as me

We've now got a number of packages of views on the table.

These look like the five most plausible combinations of answers to our three questions.

We've been focusing on the materialist options. Next class we'll ask: are there really such things as immaterial souls, and could we be among them?