

Two questions
about what you
are

The case for
materialism

What
version of
materialism is
best?

Two
arguments
against
materialism

You are a material thing

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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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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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.

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. But it also matters because it is 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?

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.

Today I want to introduce one appealingly simple answer to the identity question:

Materialism: I am a wholly physical thing.

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am a wholly
physical 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.)

It is very easy to generate arguments for materialism. Here is one:

1. I walked to class today.
 2. Only physical things can walk.
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- C. I am a physical thing.

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Here is another:

1. I weigh more than 100 lbs.
 2. Only physical things have weight.
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- 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. Then I could still have a weight, since my material parts have weight; but materialism would be false, since I would not be a wholly physical thing.

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Fair enough. But once you accept that you are partly a material thing, the simplest view would seem to be that that is all that you are. So a reasonable strategy is to try out the simpler view, and see if it runs into any trouble. We'll consider other alternatives later.

Further, the easy arguments can be adapted to show that you are a wholly physical thing. For example, you are now in a classroom. Is all of you in the classroom, or just part of you? It seems pretty plausible that all of you is in the classroom. But then all of you occupies space; and it looks like only physical things can occupy space. So if all of you is in the classroom, it looks like materialism is true.

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

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

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Well, let's think about other wholly physical objects, like this lectern. What does it take for it to survive from one day to the next?

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

This suggests:

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

Materialism: I
am a wholly
physical thing.

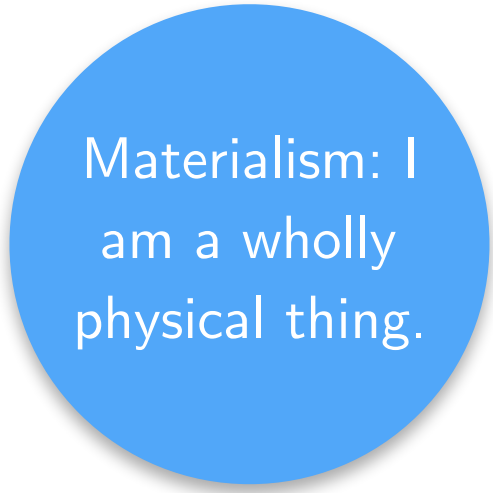
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These are two simple materialist answers to our two questions.

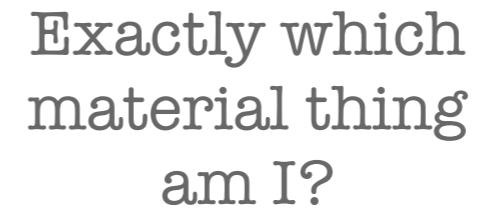
I now want to raise two questions about these two views, which show that matters are not quite as simple as we have made them look so far.

Exactly which
material thing
am I?

What does it take for
a physical thing at
one time to be the
same as a physical
thing at another
time?



Materialism: I
am a wholly
physical thing.



Exactly which
material thing
am I?

This again might look like it has an easy answer.

I am a human being, which is a certain kind of organism. More specifically, I am a kind of animal. Let's call this the **organism view**. This is a version of the materialist answer to the identity question.

One problem for the organism view can be brought out by imagining a certain sort of surgery which is not now possible, but might one day become possible.

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One problem for the organism view can be brought out by imagining a certain sort of surgery which is not now possible, but might one day become possible.

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.

After recovery, a human organism walks out of the hospital. Is that human organism the same organism as the one which was driving the car?

By any ordinary standard, it is not. Yes, it has the same brain; but it has no other parts in common.

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After recovery, a human organism walks out of the hospital. Is that human organism the same organism as the one which was driving the car?

By any ordinary standard, it is not. Yes, it has the same brain; but it has no other parts in common.

Imagine, for comparison, that we were able to transplant the brain of a cardinal into the body of a robin. Would the robin after the surgery be the same organism as the cardinal before the surgery? It seems not.

But now ask a different question: would **you** survive the brain transplant? It seems to many people that you would.

But if the human organism who was driving the car does not survive, and you do, it looks like you cannot be that human organism.

But now ask a different question: would **you** survive the brain transplant? It seems to many people that you would.

But if the human organism who was driving the car does not survive, and you do, it looks like you cannot be that human organism.

This looks like a problem for the organism view. But even if it is, that does not show that materialism in general is false. Perhaps you are a material thing, but not a human organism. Perhaps, instead, you are your brain. That seems to give us the right result on the case of Brain Transplant. Let's call this second materialist answer to the identity question **the brain view**.

But the brain view raises problems of its own. 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.

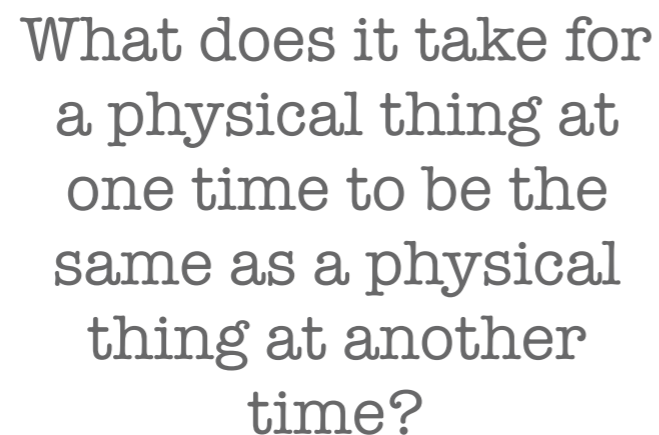
C. I am not my brain.

I'm not going to dwell on the question of whether the organism view or the brain view is the better version of materialism. But you should be aware that if you are attracted to a materialist answer to the identity question of what we are, then these look like the two best options, and both face substantial challenges. In what follows I'll adopt the organism view for simplicity.



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

Let's return to our answer to the survival question, and the question we raised about that answer.



What does it take for
a physical thing at
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The basic fact which makes this question hard to answer is a simple one:

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
 $x \neq y$.

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

People are material things.

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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)

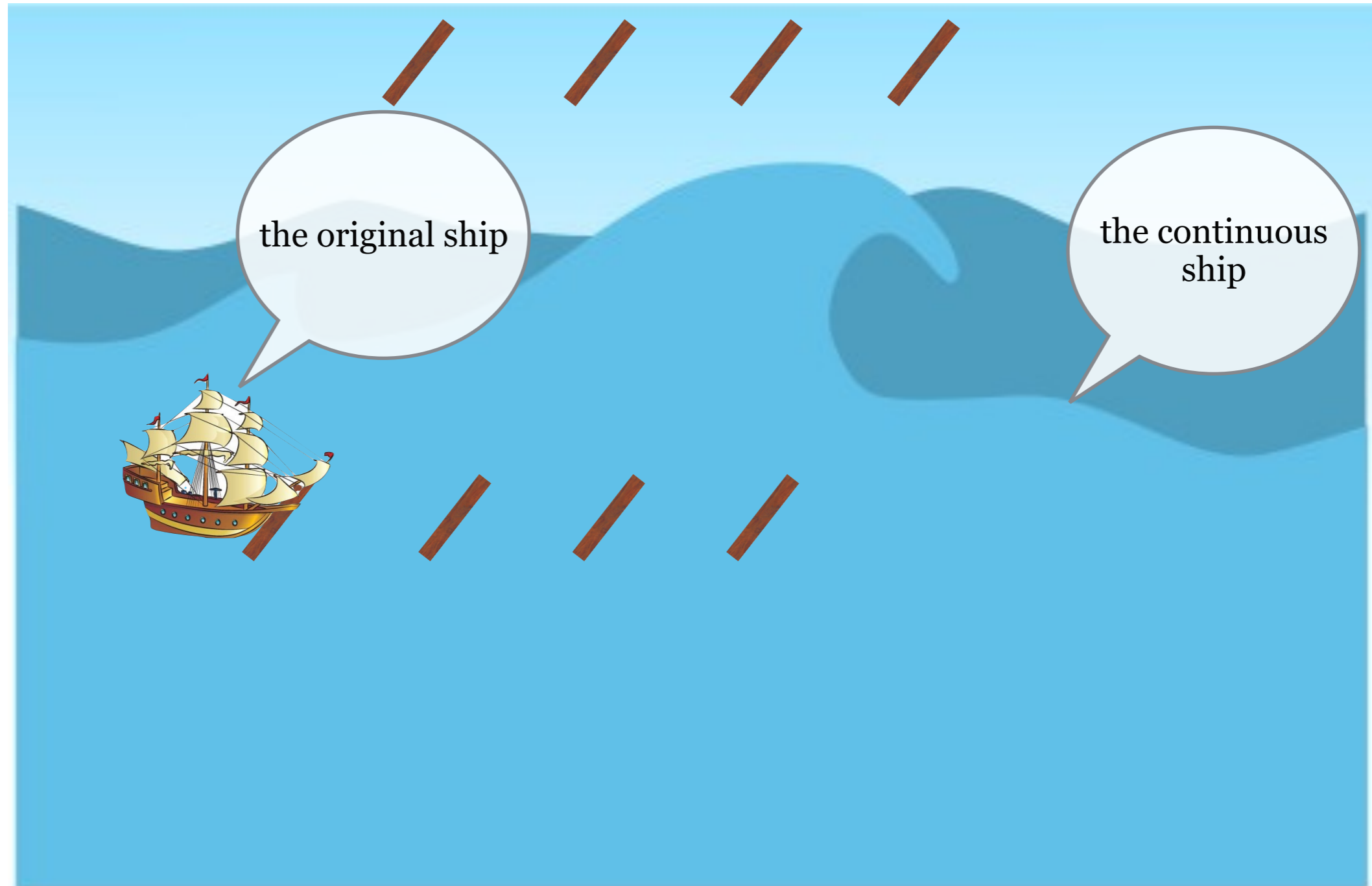
The materialist must accept (4); and (1) is just an observed fact about the physical world. But the conclusion seems plainly false.

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.

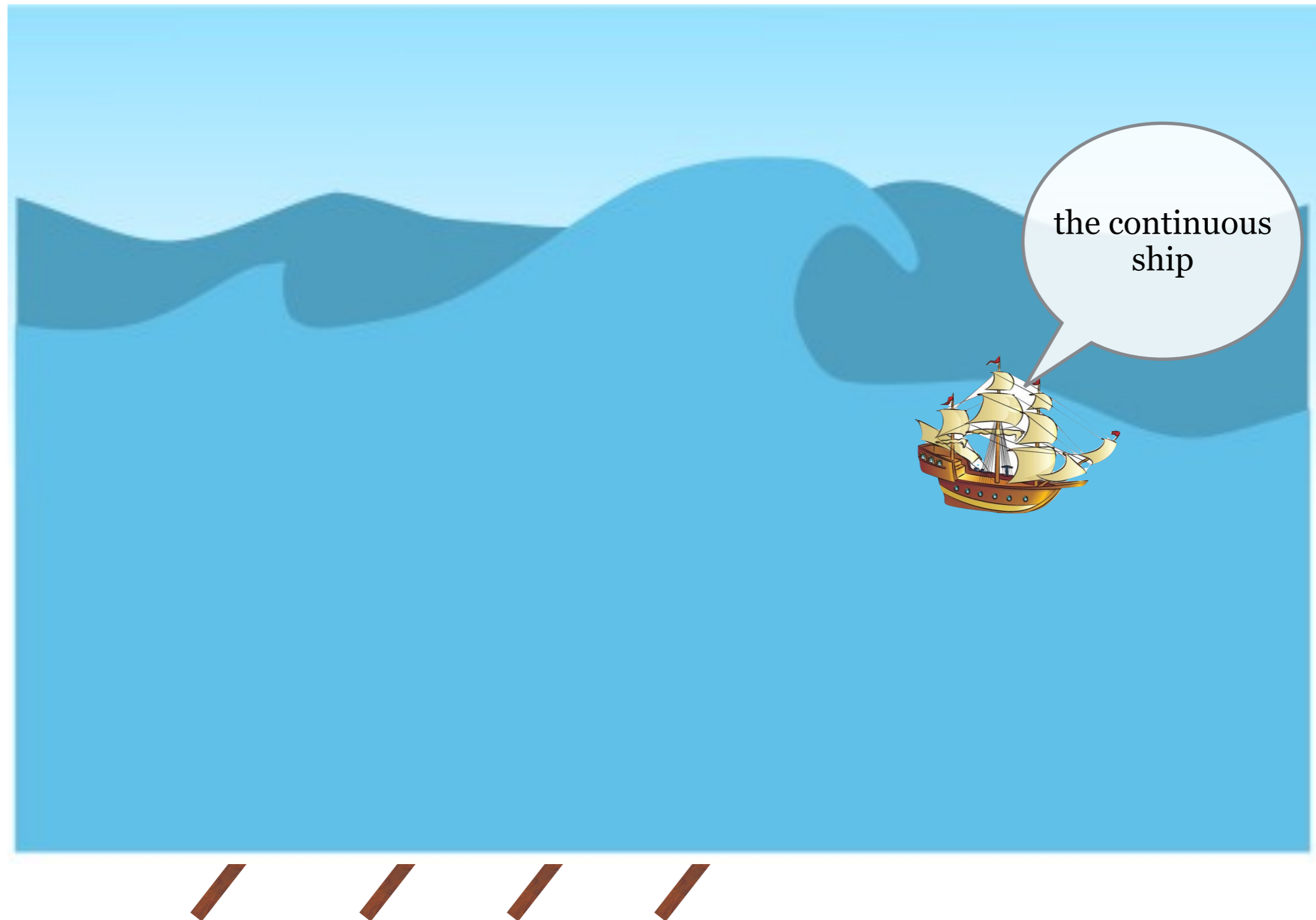
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Our previous discussion strongly suggests that the following claim is true:

Original Ship = Continuous Ship



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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:

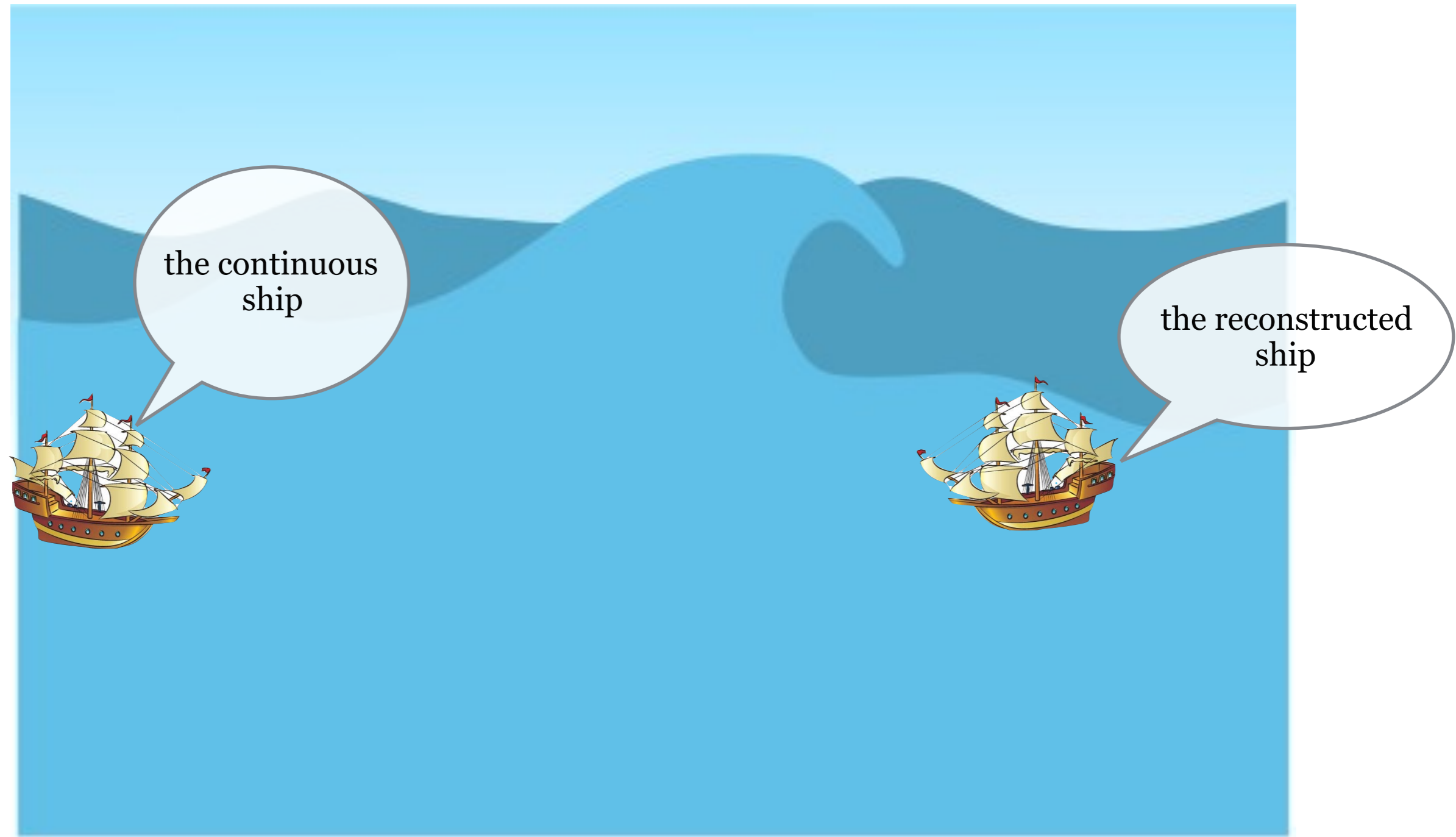
Original Ship = Reconstructed Ship

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

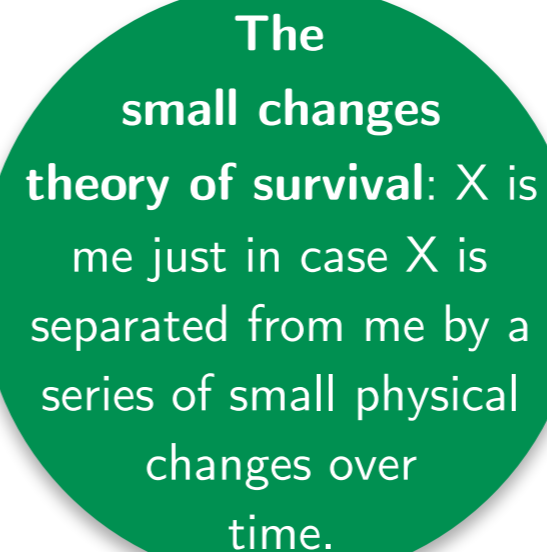
The problem, though, is that these three claims are inconsistent. This is due to the transitivity of identity: if $A=B$, and $B=C$, then $A=C$.

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:



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

This response to the Ship of Theseus connects in an immediate way to questions about the possibility of life after death.

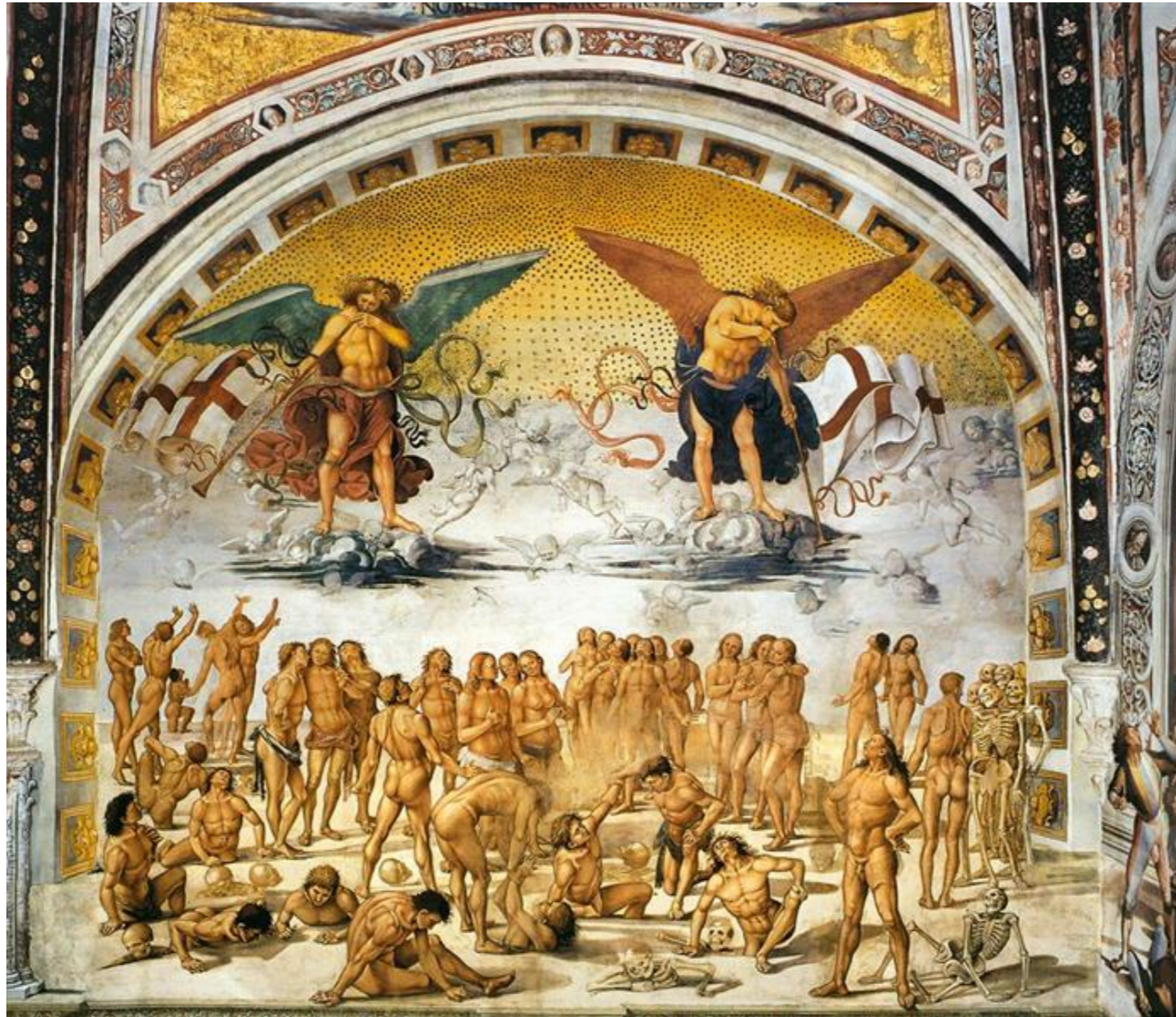
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One important question about materialism is whether it makes room for the possibility of life after death.

I think that most people today would be inclined to think that it does not, and that if life after death is possible, then people must be immaterial souls rather than material things.

The interesting thing is that the Christian view of life after death is in some ways much closer to a materialist view than to the view that we are immaterial souls.

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Luca Signorelli, The Resurrection of the Dead (1501)

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If the traditional Christian view has this kind of materialist element, it becomes a pressing question for Christians how the material thing which you are could survive death.

One natural answer would have been: God could collect all of the particles that composed you at the moment of your death, and then, when the dead are resurrected, re-arrange those particles in the way that they were arranged at the moment of your death.

But, if we give the response that we just considered to the Ship of Theseus, this does not look promising. If Reconstructed Ship \neq Original Ship, then it looks like your reconstructed organism \neq your original organism.

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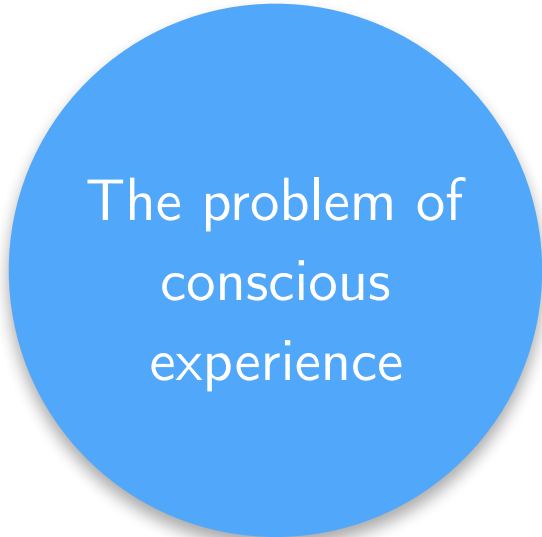
This gives rise to a difficult question for the materialist who believes in life after death: how could resurrection work?

This is a question to which we will return when we focus on the possibility of life after death.

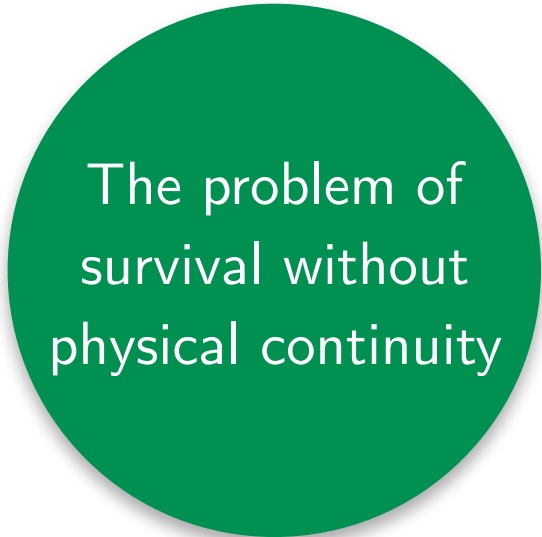
So far we have considered two materialist answers to the identity question: the organism view and the brain view.

We've also considered the "small changes" theory as a response to the survival question.

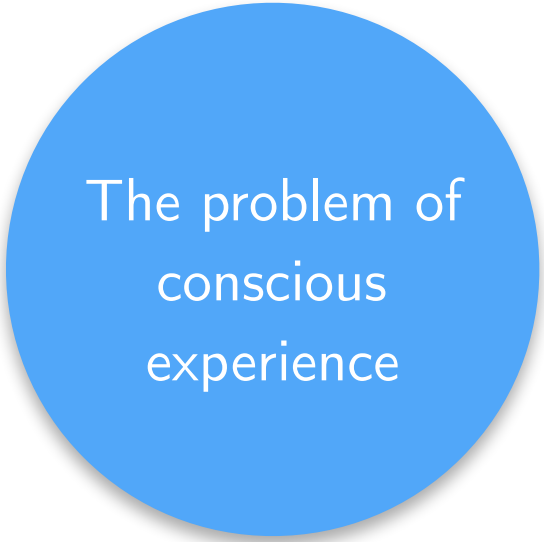
I want to turn now to two objections to the kind of materialist theory we have developed so far.



The problem of
conscious
experience



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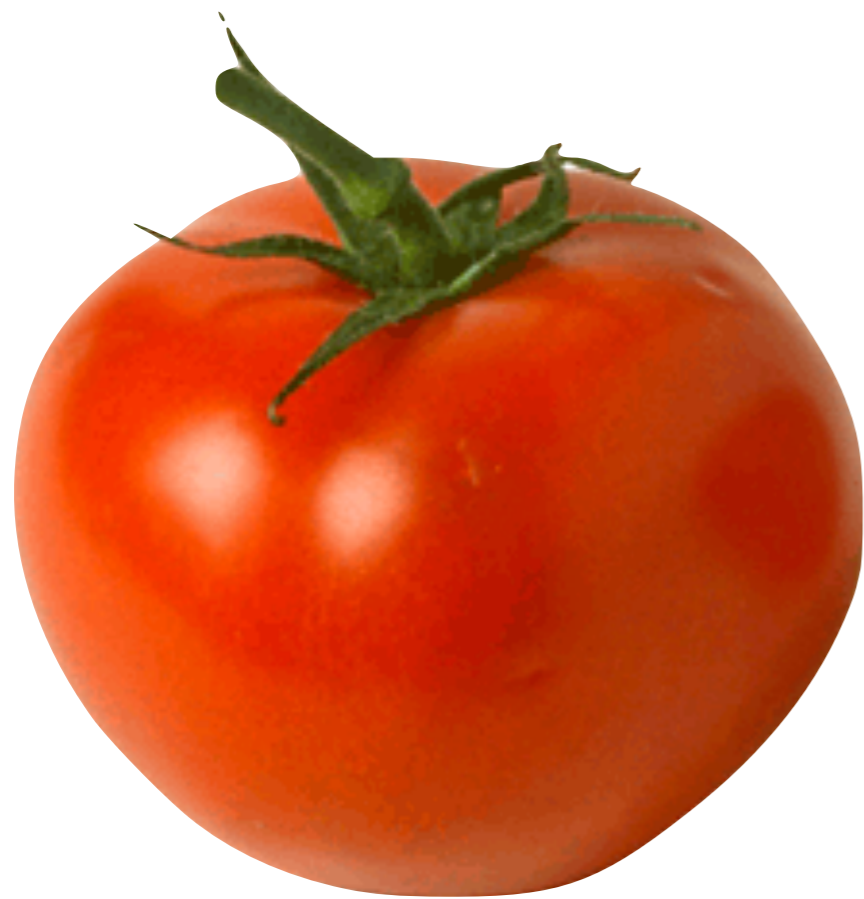
She is so brilliant, in fact, that she has learned every fact that there is to learn about the physical world. In particular, she has learned all of the facts about the neurophysiology of color vision, and has studied extensively everything that happens to the brain when subjects are experiencing color.

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 a new fact 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)

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One of the most popular responses to the knowledge argument from materialists involves denying that (3) is true.

Here's one way to make this seem plausible. Consider Lois Lane. She knows that Superman can fly; and she knows who Clark Kent is. But she does not know that Clark Kent is Superman.

Suppose that one day she sees Clark don the Superman costume and fly away. She is surprised — just like Mary is surprised.

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If you asked her why she is surprised, she might say, "I did not know that Clark could fly!"

But of course in a way she did. She knew that Superman could fly. And Clark = Superman. So isn't the fact that Superman can fly just the same as the fact that Clark can fly?

It looks like Lois is surprised, not because there is some new fact that she learns, but because (in some sense) she learns a new way of thinking about a fact she already knew.

Could the materialist say that, similarly, Mary does not learn a new fact, but instead learns a new way of thinking about a physical fact she already knew?

The problem of
survival without
physical continuity

A second problem for the materialist 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 Cobbler 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 the small changes theory of survival cannot be correct.

Other variants on this sort of case are much more in the realm of possible future science than in the realm of Hollywood movies. An example is the possibility of [uploading](#).

Suppose that there is a process by which, one by one, the neurons in your brain are replaced by silicon circuits that are **functionally equivalent** to the neurons they replace — that is, they do just the same things as those neurons in every situation.

It seems plausible that you would be psychologically just the same at each stage in the process. After all, at each step your brain would be functioning in just the way that it did at the preceding step.

We can imagine that technology improves so that this can now be done very quickly. Perhaps all of your neurons could be replaced by silicon circuits in the space of a minute.

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Further, this new entirely synthetic structure, which now is where your brain once was, could be removed from the rest of your biological body, and connected to a computing system, which might contain a kind of virtual reality world which you would inhabit.

If this would indeed be you, this makes problems for the materialist answers to the identity question. After all, it looks like the material object which (according to materialism) you were no longer exists. After all, there is no human organism around any more; neither is there a brain.

Some have thought that this kind of case points in the direction of a different answer to our two questions. Perhaps I am not a material thing, but a psychology; and perhaps my survival requires not the continued existence of a material thing, but the continued existence of a psychology. This is the view we will discuss next time.