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# IDENTITY & SURVIVAL

Henri Rousseau



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

Suppose that in the year 2070 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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**The survival question:** What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

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.

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**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.

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

To get a handle on how we might answer the survival question, we might introduce another one:

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

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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.

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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?

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.

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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?

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.

When we ask the survival question, we are asking a question about **numerical identity**.

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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?

When we ask the survival question, we are asking a question about **numerical identity**.

This is not just an arbitrary choice. Intuitively, this is the question we care about. When we ask about whether life after death is possible, we are not asking whether after your death someone will exist who has the same properties as you.

We are asking whether **you** — this very individual — will exist. And to ask this is to ask whether someone numerically identical to you could then exist.

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

With this distinction 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 an organism, a kind of material thing

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**the organism  
view:** I am an  
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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the organism  
view: I am an  
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1. I walked to class today.  
2. Only physical things can walk.  
-----  
C. I am a physical 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.

Let's look at this possibility.

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Let's look at this possibility.

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

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 **dualist views** 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 souls.

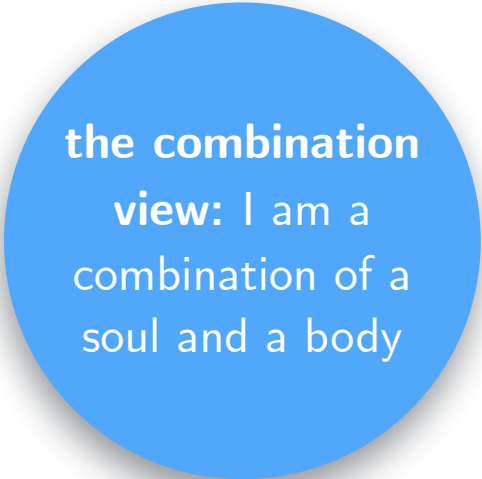
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We're considering the view that you are partly a material thing, and partly an immaterial soul. Let's call this "the combination view", since according to it you are a combination of a material thing and an immaterial thing:



**the combination  
view:** I am a  
combination of a  
soul and a body

According to the combination view, I am sitting in a chair, because part of me — namely, the material part — is. But not all of me is in the chair, since I am partly immaterial. This is the kind of view which Aquinas seems to have had.



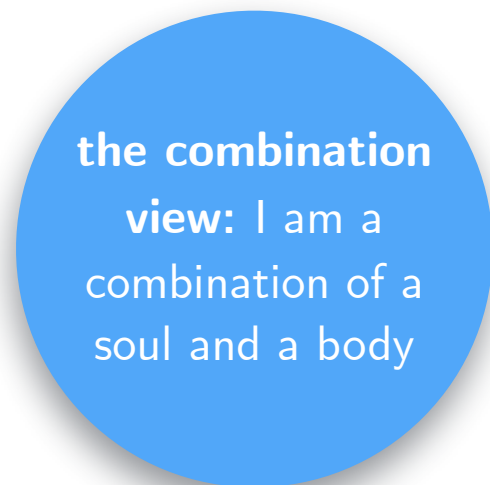
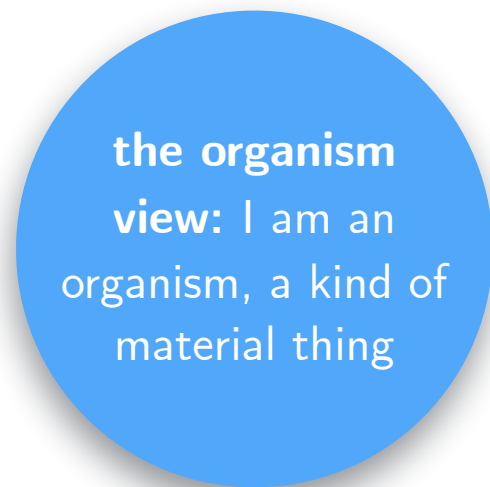
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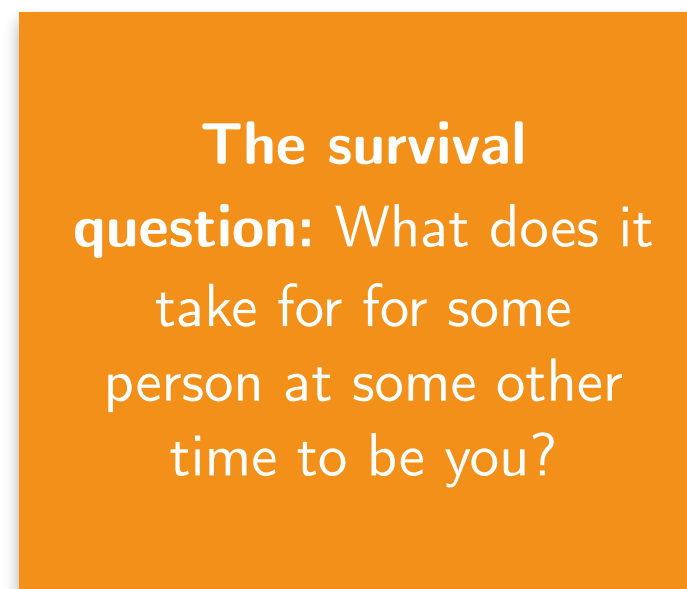
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We now have two candidate answers to the identity question.

How should proponents of these views answer the survival question?



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

The organism view says that I am a human organism. This suggests the following answer to the survival question:

**the organism view:** I am an organism, a kind of material thing

**organism survival:** X is me just in case X is the same organism as me

**the combination view:** I am a combination of a soul and a body

The combination view says that I am a combination of a soul and a body. That suggests the following view of survival:

**combination survival:** X is me just in case X is the combination of my soul and my body

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**the organism  
view:** I am an  
organism, a kind of  
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**organism  
survival:** X is me  
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**the combination  
view:** I am a  
combination of a  
soul and a body

**combination  
survival:** X is me  
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combination of my  
soul and my body

Notice that these two answers to the survival question have something in common.

They both say that for me to exist at some later time, a certain material thing must exist at that time.

The combination view also says that certain immaterial thing — my soul — must exist at that time. But if I am a combination of a soul and a body, then it looks like a certain material thing — namely, my body — must also exist at that time.

This leads to a question: what does it take for a physical thing to exist over time?

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This leads to a question: what does it take  
for a physical thing to exist over time?

This might seem like it has an easy answer.  
Physical things are made up of physical  
parts; so, you might think, for a physical  
thing to continue to exist just is for its parts  
to continue to exist, and continue to be  
arranged in the right way.

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This might seem like it has an easy answer.  
Physical things are made up of physical parts; so, you might think, for a physical thing to continue to exist just is for its parts to continue to exist, and continue to be arranged in the right way.

This suggests the following plausible principle:

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

Here's the problem:

Material things constantly  
gain and lose parts.

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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.

But it looks like both  
answers to the survival  
question agree on:

I exist at a later  
time only if a  
certain material  
object exists at  
that time.

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

This looks pretty bad!

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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. I exist at a later time only if a certain material object exists at that time.
- 

C. People never exist for more than a fraction of a second. (3,4)

Both of our views of survival 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**.

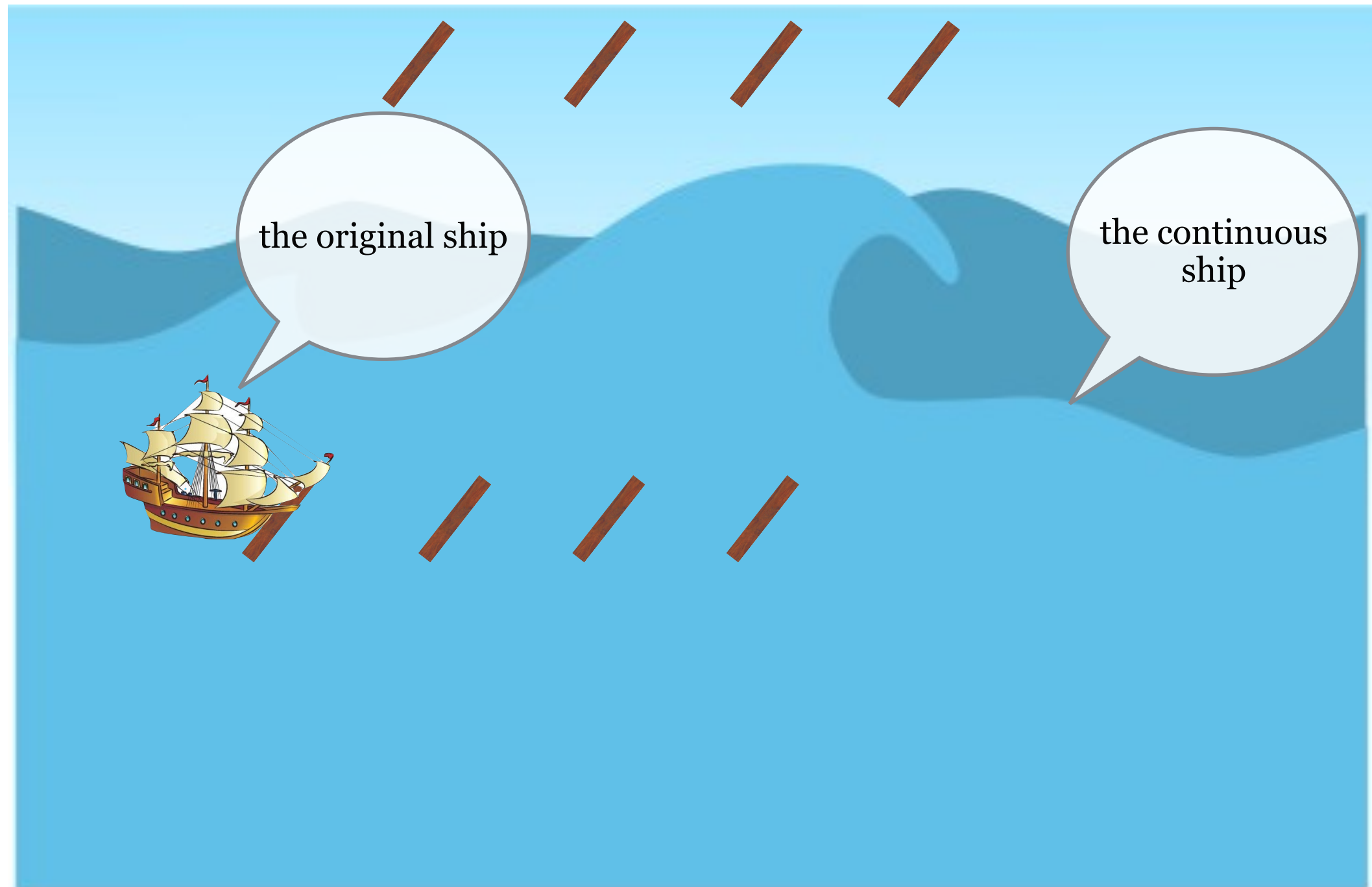
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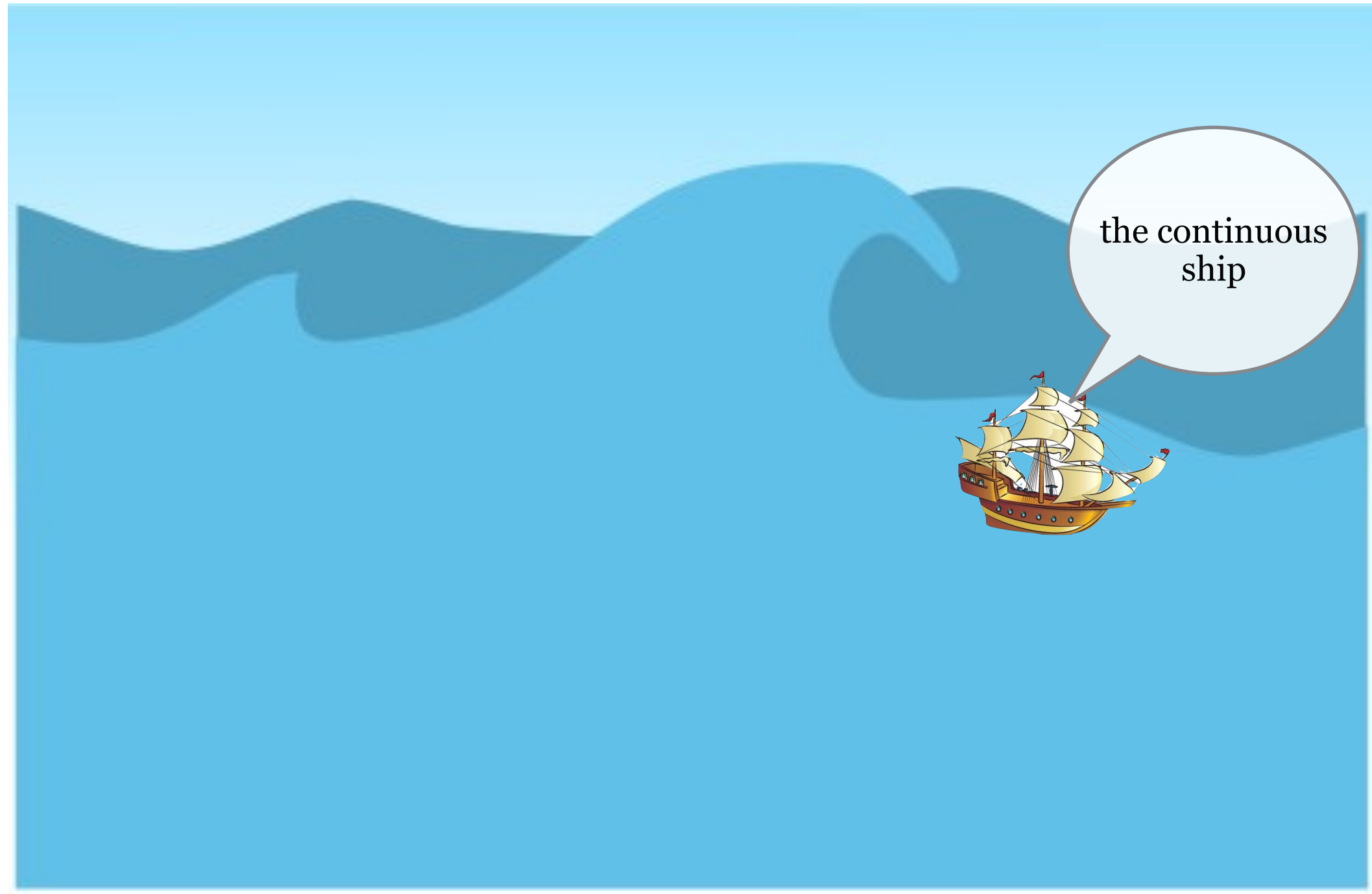
But the puzzle of how material objects survive is not so easily disposed of.  
This can be shown by an ancient paradox, the puzzle of the **Ship of Theseus**.





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:

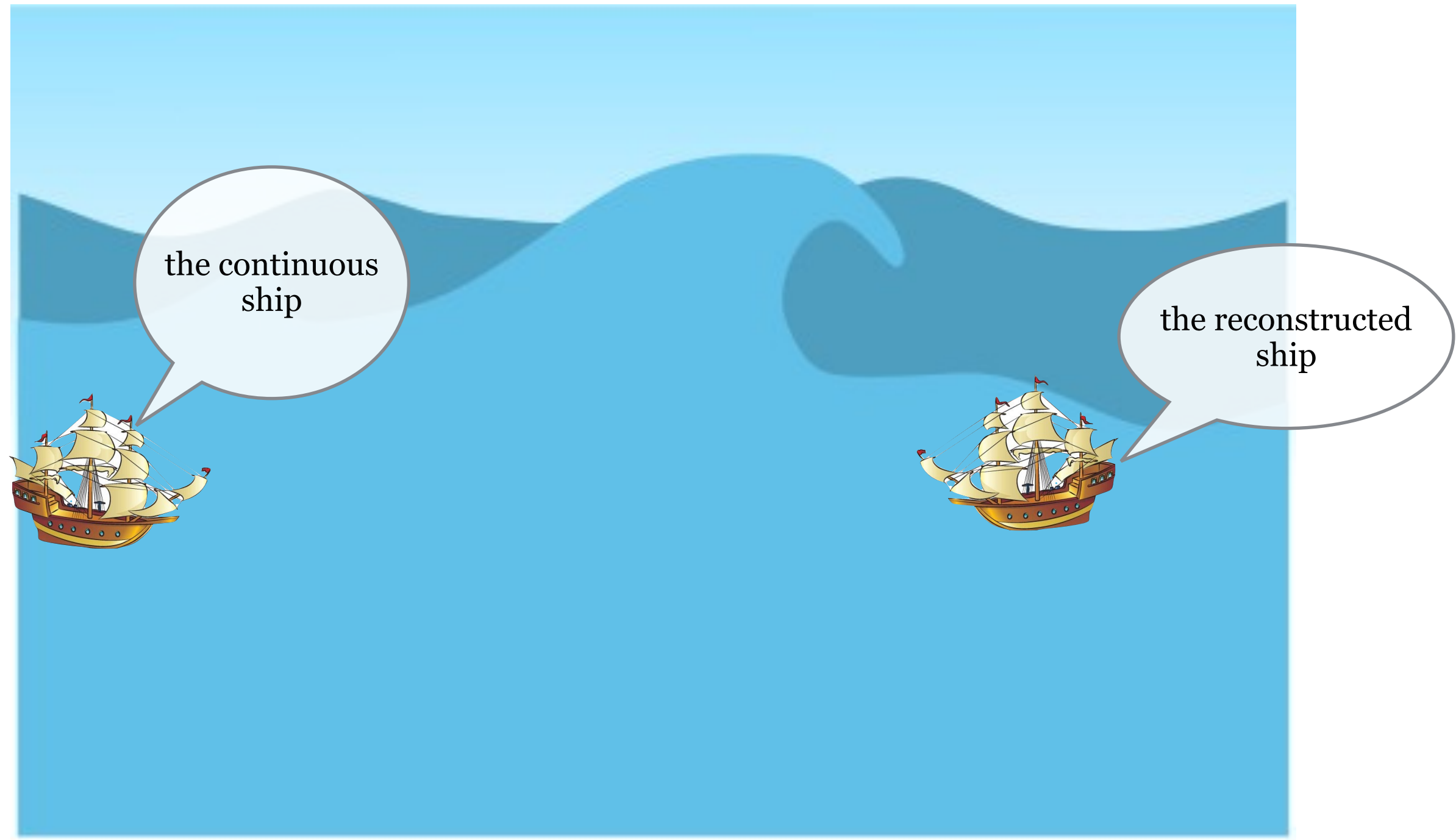
Original Ship = Reconstructed Ship

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



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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?

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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.

We might state this view of the conditions under which material objects continue to exist as follows:

**The small changes view**  
X is the same material object as Y just in case X is casually connected to Y by a series of small physical changes over time.

It looks like both the materialist and the proponent of the combination view can accept the small changes view, and make sense of the evident fact that you and I have existed for more than a few moments.

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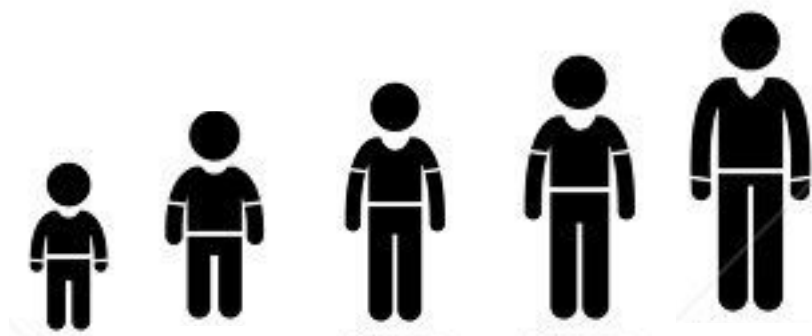
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## The small changes view

X is the same material object as Y just in case X is casually connected to Y by a series of small physical changes over time.

Consider, for example, your body when you were 5 years old and your body now. These two bodies are clearly not qualitatively identical. But if the small changes view is correct, they might still be numerically identical.



This is because these two moments in the life of your body are connected by many, many others. And from one moment to the next, one stage of your body is caused but the previous stage, and at each such step only small changes take place.

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We now have two views of survival on the table.  
Here's an example, due to Derek Parfit, which seems  
to make trouble for both the organism and  
combination theories of survival.

“Suppose first that I am one of a pair of identical  
twins, and that both my body and my twin's brain  
have been fatally injured. Because of advances in  
neuro-surgery, it is not inevitable that these  
injuries will cause us both to die. We have  
between us one healthy brain and one healthy  
body. Surgeons can put these together.

If all of my brain continues both to exist and to  
be the brain of one living person, who is  
psychologically continuous with me, I continue  
to exist. This is true whatever happens to the rest  
of my body. ...”

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We now have two views of survival on the table.  
Here's an example, due to Derek Parfit, which seems  
to make trouble for both the organism and  
combination theories of survival.

In this example — which we will call **Brain  
Transplant** — your brain survives a car crash  
undamaged, while your body is destroyed, and your  
brain is transplanted into the healthy body of a  
passenger, whose brain was destroyed in the crash.

Parfit's view is that the person who would survive  
this surgery is you. Is he right about that? Why does  
he think that?

Suppose that he is correct about that. Does that  
pose a problem for our theories of survival?

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Suppose that he is correct about that. Does that pose a problem for our theories of survival?

**organism**

**survival:** X is me  
just in case X is the  
same organism as  
me

Consider first organism survival. On this view, the passenger survives just in case the organism which she is survives. But it looks like in the case of Brain Transplant, the organism does **not** survive, at least if the small changes view of the existence of material objects is true. After all, the only part of it that survived was the brain — and that is not a small change!

**combination**

**survival:** X is me  
just in case X is the  
combination of my  
soul and my body

Consider next combination survival. On this view, the passenger survives just in case the combination of her soul and body survives. But it looks like in the case of Brain Transplant, the body does not survive. As above, the only part of it that survived was the brain — and having all of the body removed other than the brain is not a small change.

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How should our two theories respond to the case of Brain Transplant? Let's look first at the organism theory, which makes no use of immaterial souls.

One option is to stick with the idea that we are material things, but change their view about which material things we are. A natural idea is for the materialist to say that the example of Brain Transplant shows that we are not organisms; instead, we are brains.

**organism**

**survival:** X is me just in case X is the same organism as me

**the organism**

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

**the brain view:**

I am a brain, a kind of material thing

**brain survival:**

X is me just in case X is the same brain as me

One might then endorse the small changes view of what it takes for a material object, like a brain, to continue to exist.

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**the brain view:** I  
am a brain, a kind of  
material thing

**brain survival:** X  
is me just in case X  
is the same brain as  
me

One might then endorse the small changes view of what it takes for a material object, like a brain, to continue to exist.

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.

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**the brain view:** I  
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1. I weigh more than 100  
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2. My brain does not weigh  
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C. I am not my brain.

**brain survival:** X  
is me just in case X  
is the same brain as  
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1. I walked to class  
today.  
2. Brains can't walk.  
-----  
C. I am not my brain.

There is thus the worry that the brain view handles the case of Brain Transplant, but at the cost of failing to respect the sorts of facts which made materialist views seem promising in the first place.

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What should the proponent of the combination  
view say?

**the combination  
view:** I am a  
combination of a  
soul and a body

**combination  
survival:** X is me  
just in case X is the  
combination of my  
soul and my body

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What should the proponent of the combination view say?

One option is to simply modify the combination view to say that I am, not a combination of a soul and a body, but a combination of a soul and a brain. That would run into the same problems with the easy arguments.

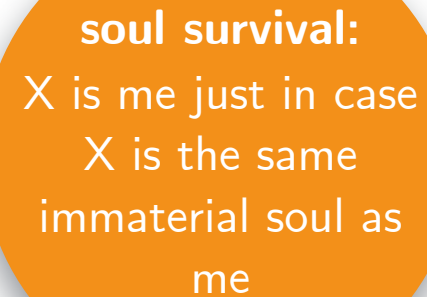
But there is also a second option for the believer in immaterial souls. They might say that you are, essentially, **just** an immaterial soul. Yes, that immaterial soul has a special connection to a certain material body. But you are essentially an immaterial thing, and for you to continue to exist is just for a certain immaterial soul to continue to exist.

**the soul view:** I am  
an immaterial soul

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



**the soul view:** I am  
an immaterial soul



**soul survival:**  
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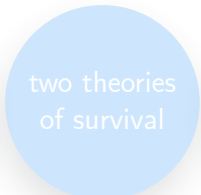
Obviously, this view of what we are is open to the easy arguments. Immaterial souls do not walk or have a height; so, if the present view is true, you do not walk or have a height.

A second potential weakness of this view is that it is committed to the existence of immaterial souls. Is there any reason to believe that there are such things? We have all seen bodies and brains; but none of us have ever seen an immaterial soul.

So far we have been focusing on views — the organism view and the combination view — which say that a certain kind of physical continuity is required for survival. Next time we will ask whether there is any reason to believe that there are such things as purely immaterial souls, and whether we might be among them.




two  
questions  
about the  
self



two theories  
of survival



the Ship of  
Theseus



the Brain  
Transplant