

## The Ship of Theseus

### **Case:**

In 100 BC, Theseus builds a ship made of wooden planks, possessing a very distinctive shape, whose sole purpose is to make a yearly voyage from Athens to Sparta to honor Achilles and Agamemnon. Let us call this ship the Original Ship. After a few years, the wooden planks begin to weather. Theseus and his crew replace the weathered planks with new planks before each year's voyage. After ten years (90 BC), all of the ship's original planks are replaced. Let us call this ship the Continuous Ship. The Continuous Ship has no planks in common with the Original Ship.

However, unknown to Theseus, Glaucon is collecting the weathered planks Theseus is discarding. At the end of the ten years, Glaucon has all the planks that made up the Original Ship. Glaucon builds a ship, with the same shape as the Original Ship, composed of these planks. Call this ship the Reconstructed Ship.

While Theseus is sailing the Continuous Ship to Sparta, Glaucon sails the Reconstructed Ship to Smyrna.

### **Question:**

(1) Which of the ships, if any, is numerically identical with the Original Ship?

- Only the Continuous Ship.
- Only the Reconstructed Ship.
- Both the Continuous Ship and the Reconstructed Ship.
- Neither; ships cannot survive a change in their parts. As soon as Theseus replaced the first worn plank, the Original Ship ceased to exist.
- Neither; ships do not exist.
- Other. Explain:

**Common Sense Intuitions:**

- A. There are compound material objects like ships (i.e., material objects that have parts, like the ship's planks).
- B. Compound material objects can survive the loss or replacement of some of their parts.
- C. Two material objects cannot exist in the same place at the same time.
- D. Numerical identity is transitive (if  $X = Y$ , and  $Y = Z$ , then  $X = Z$ ).
- E. One material object cannot be in two places at the same time.

**The Problem:**

These 5 common-sense intuitions lead to a contradiction:

- 1. The Original Ship in 100 BC is numerically identical with the set of original planks. (A)
- 2. This same set of planks is numerically identical with the Reconstructed Ship in 90 BC. (A, B)
- 3. Therefore, the Original Ship in 100 BC is numerically identical with the Reconstructed Ship in 90 BC. (1, 2, D)
- 4. The Original Ship in 100 BC is numerically identical with the Continuous Ship in 90 BC. (A, B, C)
- 5. Therefore, the Continuous Ship in 90 BC is numerically identical with the Reconstructed Ship in 90 BC. (3, 4, D)
- 6. But the Continuous Ship in 90 BC cannot be numerically identical with the Reconstructed Ship in 90 BC. (E)

**Question:**

- (2) In order for your answer to question (1) to be true, which of the Common Sense Intuitions would you have to reject (i.e., believe to be false)?

**Accept / Reject**

- \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ A. There are compound material objects like ships.
- \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ B. Compound material objects can survive the loss or replacement of some of their parts.
- \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ C. Two material objects cannot exist in the same place at the same time.
- \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ D. Numerical identity is transitive (if  $X = Y$ , and  $Y = Z$ , then  $X = Z$ ).
- \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ E. One material object cannot be in two places at the same time.