

Edited by

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JUST THE ARGUMENTS

100

**of the Most
Important
Arguments
in Western
Philosophy**

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The Ship of Theseus

Ludger Jansen

Hobbes, Thomas. "De corpore," in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, Vol. 1, edited by Sir William Molesworth. London: John Bohn, 1839.
Plato. *Phaedo*, in *Five Dialogues*, 2nd edn., translated by G. M. A. Grube, revised by J. M. Cooper, 93–154. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002.
Plutarch. "Life of Theseus," in *Lives*, translated by Bernadotte Perrin, vol. 1, 1–87. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967.

The "Ship of Theseus" is an intriguing puzzle about identity through time. It is based on the custom of the Athenians to send Theseus' ship each year on a sacred voyage to Delos, because it was believed that Apollo once saved the lives of Theseus and his fourteen fellow-travellers. The ritual was annually repeated for a long time, and hence the ship needed continual repair, new planks being substituted for the old ones. Plutarch relates to us that already the Athenian philosophers had discussed whether the ship is still the same ship although it consists, after a while, entirely of new planks (Plutarch, "Life of Theseus" §22–3; cf., Plato, *Phaedo* 58a–c). Hobbes put a sophisticated twist to the story: Suppose, he said, that someone collected the old planks and put them together again in the end, thus restoring the old ship. The same ship, then, seems to exist twice, which is absurd. Hobbes used this argument to support his version of relative identity: the original ship T1 and the restored ship T2 share the same matter, whereas the original ship and the repaired ship T3 share the same form.

[I]f, for example, that ship of Theseus, concerning the difference whereof made by continual reparation in taking out the old planks and putting in new, the sophisters of Athens were wont to dispute, were, after all the planks were changed, the same numerical ship it was at the beginning; and if some man had kept the old planks as they were taken out, and by putting them afterwards together in the same order, had again made a ship of them, this, without doubt, had also been the same numerical ship with that which was at the beginning; and so there would have been two ships numerically the same, which is absurd. (Hobbes Chapter 11, 136)

P1. T1 is identical with T2.

P2. It is not the case that T2 is identical with T3.

P3. T3 is identical with T1 (assumption for *reductio*).

C1. T3 is identical with T2 (transitivity of identity, P1, P3).

C2. T2 is identical with T3 (symmetry of identity, C1).

C3. It is not the case that T2 is identical with T3 and T2 is identical with T3 (conjunction, P2, C2).

C4. It is not the case that T3 is identical with T1 (*reductio*, P3–C3).