



KISS Fans, Kiss the Ship of Theseus Goodbye!

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by Shane J. Ralston

The American rock band KISS is notorious. Its notoriety derives not only from the band's otherworldly costumes and masks (except for, of course, during the unmasked period), the fact that they were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, their numerous hit records or the amazing stage theatrics and pyrotechnics of their live shows. It's also related to the band's constantly changing makeup (and I don't mean the kind on their faces!). Of the four members, only Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons were fixtures. With so many changes to its composition, has KISS always remained the same rock band?

Some see this head-scratcher as roughly similar to a conundrum in philosophical metaphysics (that's the area of philosophy addressing problems of existence): the puzzle of Theseus's ship (go to heavymetalphilosopher.blogspot.com and search for "The Ship of Theseus"). If you change one plank in the ship of Theseus, is it still the same ship? Two? 50? 100? When an object has any, most or all of its parts replaced, does it remain the same object?

Is its core identity preserved intact or does it become a different object altogether? Many famous philosophers—Heraclitus, Plato, Thomas Hobbes and Roderick Chisholm, to name a few—have contemplated different versions of the puzzle. It's left to us to answer the metaphysical question of whether KISS is still the same object, the best rock band ever, after so many band member changes, and granted that its most iconic version (Stanley, Simmons, Frehley and Criss) no longer exists.

A Ship by Any Other Name

Greek historian Plutarch wrote the following about Theseus's ship:

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same. (Vita Thesei 22-23 at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/theseus.html>)

From Plutarch's account, we can imagine two puzzling scenarios:

Scenario 1: Theseus's original ship, call this ship B, is composed of 100 planks. It takes 100 years to rebuild it with all new planks (one per year). The philosophers' "logical question"—whether it is the same ship—can be asked at any point, from the first to the hundredth year. Most people agree that replacing one plank doesn't make a difference. It's still Theseus's ship! But at what point does its identity change . . . 50 planks, 51 or all 100? Or does it always remain the same ship?

Scenario 2: All 100 planks of Theseus's ship are replaced with new ones, resulting in what we'll call ship A. The old planks are salvaged, stored in a warehouse and then a second version of the ship is constructed out of the old planks, called ship C. The next

question is a real zinger: Are ships A and C both the same as Theseus's ship, B? (This is Hobbes's version of the puzzle, see his *De Corpore*).

Depending on the assumptions made, different conclusions follow (so pay close attention to the reason for each):

1. **Assumption 1:** Objects endure gradual change → **Conclusion 1:** A is the real ship of Theseus. (**Reason 1:** No matter how many original parts change, the identity of the object persists, that is, it's still Theseus's ship A=B.)
2. **Assumption 2:** An object is the same as its parts → **Conclusion 2:** The salvaged version is the real ship of Theseus. (**Reason 2:** So long as the totality of the original parts are preserved, the object they compose is the real deal, that is, C=B)
3. **Assumption 3:** The law of transitivity is true (that is, if A=B, B=C, therefore A=C) → **Conclusion 3:** A and C are the same ship because they are both identical to Theseus's ship, B. (**Reason 3:** logic.)

But how could two ships built at two different times in two separate locations with entirely distinct parts be the same ship? Sometimes metaphysics is logical, but not common-sensical!

The Band is Breaking Up, Long Live the Band!

So, let's exit the weeds of logic and metaphysics for a moment to consider how KISS changed over time. The band's membership has been in a state of flux for at least 35 of its 45 years of existence. For the first nine years—from KISS's founding in 1973 until Criss and Frehley left in 1982—the band was relatively stable (if you don't count Criss being fired in 1979). Each of the band members assumed their iconic roles with instrument, costume, hair and makeup: Paul Stanley as the Starchild (vocals and rhythm guitar), Gene Simmons as the Demon (vocals and

bass), Ace Frehley as the Spaceman or Space Ace (vocal and lead guitar) and Peter Criss as the Catman (vocals and drums).

Musician Eric Carr (assuming the stage name, persona, makeup and costume of the Fox) replaced Peter Criss in 1980. That year Criss was fired during a band meeting when Stanley and Simmons voted for his ouster with Frehley against. For the next two years, Frehley would back off from his involvement with the band (he says because of creative differences, but the fact that he kept getting outvoted in band decisions didn't help), disappearing entirely by the time of the 1982 *Creatures of the Night* tour. Vinnie Vincent (role and makeup of the Ankh Warrior) took his place. Gene Simmons denied that Vincent was ever an official member because of his penchant for self-destruction. (He also refused to sign up for the band's liability insurance, which was probably related to him being a danger to himself and others). Besides the *Creatures of the Night* album, Vincent also appeared on the 1983 *Lick It Up* record and co-wrote the 1992 *Revenge* album. In 1983 (not long after Frehley's departure), KISS started performing without makeup, which would last for an entire decade. Even though Simmons claimed that Vincent was never a band member, he was fired and replaced by Mark St. John in 1984. St. John didn't stick around for long. He appeared on one album, *Animalize* (1984), before being diagnosed with Reiter's Syndrome and leaving the band. Besides Vincent, another on-again-off-again band member was guitarist Bruce Kulick who, after joining in 1984, appeared on multiple albums before his permanent exile from the band in 1997 (his last album was *Carnival of Souls: The Final Sessions*, which came out in the same year he left). In 1996, the original band reunited with nostalgic makeup and costumes. After Criss and Frehley departed again, Singer returned as drummer and a new band member, Tommy Thayer, was added on guitar. Singer and Thayer assumed the identities of Catman and Spaceman, respectively.

With all these changes to the band, Stanley and Simmons remained constants in the whole equation. Admittedly, both had personal problems requiring musicians like Vincent and Kulick to temporarily come on board. The saying “The king is dead, long live the king” suggests one plausible reason why the band endured so many changes. The idea behind the saying is not simply that there is always an heir to the throne in waiting. It’s also that the symbol and significance of the king outlasts whoever happens to be the living king. Indeed, the royal bloodline ensures that the death of a king, even a great king, does not end the royalty altogether. The same could be said about KISS: “the band is dead, long live the band!” Even when Frehley and Criss were no longer members of the band, the symbol and significance of KISS lived on in their absence.

Is KISS Really the Ship of Theseus?

Following a blog post about the issue of band membership flux, and despite a flurry of comments about the Ship of Theseus, philosopher Greg Stadler denied that the puzzle bears any relation to the issue except in one remote situation:

. . . what I was writing about focused on the identity of a band in terms of its membership, and the “Ship of Theseus” is a classic puzzle about a whole and its constituent parts. But as I pointed out to those commenters, that puzzle really has to do with a different kind of case.

It’s not as if there aren’t some bands, though, to which the “Ship of Theseus” issue would apply. [. . .] Simply put, the Ship of Theseus bears upon cases where none of the constituent parts of a whole are original to it. In terms of bands, this means we would be focused on bands that contain *none* of their original members. (heavymetalphilosopher.blogspot.com)

While there are cases where a band is reduced to no original members, KISS is not one of them. So, perhaps the changing membership of the band has nothing to do with the Ship of Theseus puzzle. If that’s true, and Professor Stadler is right, then we can kiss Theseus’s ship and all its logical/metaphysical headaches goodbye!

However, Professor Stadler's claim that the puzzle only pertains to "bands that contain *none* of their original members" is limited to a single version of scenario one and scenario two, specifically when there is full replacement of all of the ship's planks. It doesn't apply to scenario one when at some point between the first year and the hundredth year (not including the hundredth year) the ship's identity changes because of the replacement of a single plank. Then Theseus's ship is relevant to KISS. Why? Imagine we decide that the next plank after replacing 50 planks changes the identity of Theseus's ship to another ship completely. It could be objected that this number (51) is arbitrary. Then someone might respond that it's not arbitrary because the principle is clear-cut: Replacing any more than half of an object's parts destroys its original identity, transforming it into something altogether new.

In the case of KISS, half of the band members stayed and the other half were in flux. On one interpretation, the band's identity was preserved purely in virtue of staying below this threshold mark (two or 50-percent). Replacing three out of four members would have changed the band's identity. The band would have no longer been KISS. It would have become another band completely! On a second interpretation, it was not simply the quantity of band members replaced, but also their quality. In other words, Stanley and Simmons were two of the best and hardest to replace members of the band. Of course, Vincent and Kulick sometimes performed as substitutes. But this is only a minor distraction. Why? The best version of the band was always the original four. Also, Vincent and Kulick were never full members with voting privileges in band decisions. The truth of the matter probably resides somewhere between the quality and quantity interpretations. Having two powerhouse musicians—Stanley and Simmons—always in the band preserved the core identity of KISS. Their constancy allowed the band's identity to persist despite the many changes in lead guitarists and drummers. What's also possible—as

Stanley argues in his book *Face the Music: A Life Exposed* (2014) and similar to the notion that “the band is dead, long live the band!”—is that the idea of the band transcends time, place and persons. No matter who the band members happen to be, the fans will always cling to the transcendental idea of KISS!

Will the Real KISS Please Stand Up?

Since KISS’s farewell tour is supposed to end in 2021, it’s easy to imagine a time when there will be zero original band members remaining. Philosophers like to use hypotheticals, thought experiments or imagined situations to work out the full implications of a problem and its solutions. So, imagine—hypothetically-speaking, of course—that a bunch of the original band members’ relatives form a band under the KISS name in 2022. Putting aside the legal questions of trademark, imagine too that in 2025 the original band members decide to make a comeback as KISS and launch another tour. Two KISS bands would seem to exist simultaneously! Will the real KISS please stand up? Then we would have a situation analogous to scenario two which clearly satisfies Professor Stadler’s requirements for a Ship of Theseus puzzle.

The easy answer to this conundrum is that there are two ships of Theseus or two KISS bands, but they are not same. Following Roderick Chisholm, we can only say that the two are “identical” in a very “loose and popular sense” (see Chisholm’s 1976 book *Person and Object*). Philosopher Ted Sider offers a more complicated solution. Professor Sider claims that time and space extend and partition into four dimensions. Any object is the sum of all its spatio-temporal parts—what Sider calls a “space-time worm” (see his 1997 essay “Four-dimensionalism” <http://tedsider.org/papers/4d.pdf>). So, objects like Theseus’s ship or the band KISS, even multiple versions, can persist as the same entity, while differing in distinct “time slices.”

However, it's still problematic when they appear in duplicate within identical time slices. Will the real KISS space-time worm please reveal itself? The move to four-dimensionalism lands us right back in the weeds of common-sense defying metaphysics! Ultimately, and this is Chisholm's point, it's a very practical matter which ship is Theseus's or which band is truly KISS, a matter probably better left for courts of law or the court of popular opinion, not armchair philosophers, to decide. On that note, it's about time we hit play on "Kissin' Time," turn up the volume and kiss the ship of Theseus goodbye!¹

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