

The Ship of Theseus and the Philosophy of Identity

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Robert J. Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your replaceable host, Robert J. Marks. We're talking to Walter Myers. He is a principal engineering manager leading a team of engineers working with management of the Microsoft Azure Cloud. And last podcast we talked about the cloud a lot, now we're going to talk about something totally different. Walter has a master's degree in philosophy from Biola University's Talbot School of Theology. So we thought we would talk a little bit about philosophy today, specifically about the interesting question of the Ship of Theseus. Walter, welcome back.

Walter Myers:

Thank you for having me, Bob. Glad to be back.

Robert J. Marks:

This is interesting history, now. Walter and I have participated in some of the Bradley Center's COSM conferences, and Walter and I have had reversed roles. He was the one that asked the questions and I responded, and now I get to turn the tables and ask him the questions. And one of the things that he talked about, the last COSM conference, was the Ship of Theseus. That's what we're going to talk about today. It's very interesting, it has applications to the mind-body problem, what constitutes being a person, et cetera. So Walter, could you go ahead and just start and briefly explain the Ship of Theseus? It's a paradox and I'm sure that most people are unfamiliar with it so give them a tutorial.

Walter Myers:

It is an interesting paradox. The Ship of Theseus, it's a paradox and it's a thought experiment about whether an object is the same object after having all of its original components replaced over time, typically one after another. To sort of give a little background on it, in Greek mythology, Theseus is the mythical king of the city of Athens. Theseus rescues the children of Athens from King Minos of Crete after slaying the Minotaur, and then he escapes onto a ship going to Delos. So each year the Athenians would commemorate this by taking the ship on a pilgrimage to Delos to honor Apollo.

And so the thing is, what would happen was that since this was going on every year, they would have to replace parts of the ship because the ship was going to eventually get old, so those ancient Greek philosophers were asking that question, well, what if there's no pieces of the original that made up the current ship, because eventually over centuries that they're doing this, it's not the same ship, so is it still the Ship of Theseus? And if it was no longer the same, when had it ceased existing as the original ship? That is sort of the paradox.

Robert J. Marks:

This is something which have been raised by philosophers and ancient something-something. Who were the people that first posed this question, do you have any idea?

Walter Myers:

Well, the people that first, this was Greek philosophers that first posed this question, so we don't know exactly how, but it's been handed down to us from Greek philosophy. But I would say in more recent times, 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes extended sort of this thought experiment by supposing

that a ship could, let's say he was saying that what if say a ship custodian was gathering up all those decayed parts? In other words, as they replaced parts, he was taking those decayed parts and he was hiding them somewhere. Those decayed parts are replaced by the Athenians and he would build a second ship that had all the old parts.

So Hobbes posed the question of which of the two resulting ships, the custodians hidden away that at some point becomes the actual original ship was the same as the original ship? That's sort of how it's been extended over time. And so this really is applications, as you had mentioned earlier, is that it is a philosophical study of identity over time as you perdure, so there's been variety of different proposed solutions to this and contemporary philosophy of mind with respect to personal identity.

Robert J. Marks:

I think there's a similar question as to your identity. This goes a little bit in the opposite direction, but if you had your legs cut off, would you still be you? If you had your legs and your arms cut off, could you still be you? If you could have your head transplanted on a little plate and you could still have all your sensors, would you still be you? When do you stop being you? I think that that's a question of the opposite direction, isn't it?

Walter Myers:

Well, I mean, I don't think I'd ever stop being me, but Bob, I personally ascribe to Aristotle's philosophy of hylomorphic dualism.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, define that.

Walter Myers:

All right.

Robert J. Marks:

Because those are really big words.

Walter Myers:

Let's see, how do I define hylomorphic dualism? It's dualist only in the sense that the soul, or we call the intellect and the body are mutually irreducible, but the soul itself is considered immaterial. But body and soul, they're not substances on their own own right. The soul, it's the substantial form of the body that by virtue of which the substance it informs, in other words, the soul informs the body. So in the case of human beings, the body carries out the distinctive activities of the soul and the body is what provides the potential for those activities to actually occur. Human beings are conceived as a unified whole, so the Aristotelian view is that we are unified whole as rational animals, not sort of this composite of two different substances as in Descartes' just substance dualism. And the soul itself, it's just not a complete substance.

And I think it's even consistent with Christian theology of that when your body is dead and when you die, your soul goes on to heaven. But the thing is, your soul can't do anything because it doesn't have a body to actualize it. And that's even consistent with the idea of a new heaven and a new earth in the Bible, that basically you need that body because it's that soul that informs the body. Because even though it can subsist from the matter, it's not complete in the sense that when the body dies, that soul,

it needs that body. So the essence of the human being is that soul and that body that does all the thinking and the feeling and activities that the soul wants it to do, but that soul can be separable from the body even though it's in an unnatural state as a soul only. That sort of explains hylomorphic dualism.

Robert J. Marks:

I know you're a fan of Star Trek. In the original Star Trek, there was an interesting story where Captain Kirk was beamed and the beam got scrambled and two different versions of them emerged. One was a totally duplicate of the other. And the only way you could tell the duplicate is that the duplicate was evil, it didn't do nice things. I'm wondering if that is a explanation of what you were talking about. Maybe the evil one was separated from his soul. Are you familiar with that episode, by the way?

Walter Myers:

Yeah, I'm very familiar with that episode. And from what I understand of the way that transporter might work is that in fact, there was another science fiction show I saw where the person who was being replicated was left there and then they had their body on the planet where they're being transported to, but the problem was they were supposed to be killed so that you wouldn't have two of the same person. And so this person was trying to live, knowing that they had been replicated on the planet.

So yeah, I mean, I think that's a really tough one because I would presume that if you're basically going to clone someone, my question would be, would that be even work? Are we actually, really looking at something that's pretty much an impossible thing where you can basically clone someone at every single level at the cellular level and it would be some other person. I think that'd be very difficult and I think that probably is just more science fiction than anything.

Robert J. Marks:

I think it always occurred to me that if you were to clone yourself, that your clone would be like your twin brother-

Walter Myers:

Exactly.

Robert J. Marks:

That was very young. The question is would they have a soul if they cloned it? I believe they probably would.

Walter Myers:

I believe they'd have a soul, yes.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, so the big thing about the Ship of Theseus, of course, is how it relates to human identity. We replace some of our cells, not all of our cells, every once in a while. And when we're 80, we're not the same person that we were when we were 10. All of our cells have been replaced, or most of our cells have been replaced, so are we still the same person? I think that that's the core philosophical question that the Ship of Theseus raises for me. What do you think?

Walter Myers:

Yeah. Well, I mean, from a physical perspective, for example, most of the skin and gut are replaced in just a matter of months. I think the liver is every three years and the skeleton is every 10 years, and something like 40% of the heart's contracting muscles are every few years or so. But there are other cells that remain since birth, and then there are certain neurons in the brain that are never replaced. But much of you, to your point, is actually replaced. There's something called the Continued Identity theory that says-

Robert J. Marks:

The Continued Identity, okay.

Walter Myers:

That says basically as long as you are continuously and metaphysically exist under the same identity without being fully transformed at one time, then you will perdure in that sense that you will continue to be that something that you are. For example, we just recently had these wildfires. You had a house that was destroyed by a fire, right? Completely destroyed, but you rebuilt it, that's going to be a new house. But what if you had a house that say, for year one you replaced the front of the house, year two, you replaced the ceiling and so on, you replaced different parts of the house. Well, that still continues to be the same house, even though parts have been replaced over time. So what we're really looking at is that we're looking at this from a temporal perspective, and that this is something that continuously and metaphysically exists, even though its parts may be replaced in and out.

Now, a house is not the same as a human being because it doesn't have, I mean, from my view, hylomorphic view, is that that soul is what informs that body and it's separable from it. Say for example, that's why animals don't have a soul like humans do. We have a soul that's actually separable. They don't have a soul in the sense that we do, where they have this immaterial aspect of them, if you will. So it really is how does this particular object or person or this thing perdures over time and in terms of things being replaced? But again, with humans, it's that aspect of the soul that informs that body, that activates and actuates it.

Robert J. Marks:

It occurs to me that the degree and the granularity of replacement comes into play here, too. For example, I forget who said it, but it struck me when I heard it for the first time that this was remarkable, that every electron in the universe is identical. Every proton, every neutron is identical. So if you replace things at this granular level of electrons and protons, it looks like the Ship of Theseus would sail. It looks like that you would still be the same exact person because you're replacing it with an exact duplicate of that plank, but the plank now is at electron or a proton.

When you get to a higher level, say the neurons, if you replaced one neuron with another neuron and you did this gradually over time, yeah, would you still be you? Are you familiar with transhumanism? That's kind of what they would like to do. They would like to go so that they're totally silicon so that they're totally artificial, so that they can achieve immortality. Any thoughts on that?

Walter Myers:

That's an interesting thing, if you were to say, at an atomic level, replace all of the components of the human. I think one thing with respect to being human, Bob, is that what is the identity of a human? A human is someone who has memories, they have a certain personality, they have a certain way, an activity that they are in the world. And I think as long as you're a human and you have those things, that even if those components are replaced, I would say they're doing the exact same thing, presuming that

at this atomic level, you're replacing them and that they're doing an exact same thing. But when you think about that, if you replace something, are you replacing it with something that's identical?

In other words, you have a neuron or you have a set of neurons that have some sort of memory, right? Well, if you were to replace it, would you be able to actually replace the memory that's stored inside of that? Well, if you could, yes. But if you could not actually replace that memory, because how would you even know what's in it? We don't even know what's in it. Potentially at the molecular level, you could figure out, "Oh, well, this is the actual data that's being stored in this individual neuron or set of neurons that rise up but to become that entity," if you will. So I think as long as you had the memories, personality, activity of that person, as long as that will continue, you still have that immaterial part that's informing it, right?

Robert J. Marks:

Yes.

Walter Myers:

Now, if you were to do it with say, something that's inorganic versus something organic, I think that's another question. It's like if I did it with a piece, something that's organic, can the soul interact with something that's inorganic as opposed to something that's organic? I think that would be really the difficulty of that.

Robert J. Marks:

I also think that even if you assume that, well, the Ship of Theseus, if you were to replace every atom in your body, that assumes that we are materialistic people and that we are computers, if you will, made out of meat.

Walter Myers:

Exactly.

Robert J. Marks:

And there is more than just the meat. I mean, that was the purpose of the book, *Minding the Brain*, is to push back on a materialist idea that we are computers made out of meat and we do things that material things we'll never do. We love, we have compassion. Even deeper, we understand, we are creative. We have a spirit, we're spiritual beings.

Walter Myers:

Yes.

Robert J. Marks:

And that Ship of Theseus question doesn't address that aspect, which is non-material. And I think this is kind of what you're saying, is that right? Which I agree with, by the way.

Walter Myers:

Yeah. And that's why I think hylomorphic dualism works better than to say substance dualism, because what substance dualism is says that these are two distinct substances. What hylomorphic says is that, "No, they're not two distinct substances. They become a specific substance when they are together

because they are actually a unity." Even though they are separable, they're still a unity and you need to have that body to activate and actuate that soul. Yeah, that's why I just found that Aristotle's view on this was brilliant, and again, highly consistent with Orthodox Christian theology.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, that's great, that's great. Getting back to kind of a list philosophical viewpoint and talking about reality, it seems to me there have been real-world legal cases where the Ship of Theseus Paradox has been applied. Do you ever watch the television series Pawn Stars?

Walter Myers:

No, I can't-

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, you haven't watched Pawn Stars. Well, it's about a pawn shop and they bring stuff in, and sometimes when people bring stuff in and it has been an antique which has been touched up, it totally loses its value. Sometimes, on the other hand, they'll bring in an old car, they'll take it to a place that refurbishes the old car, makes it into a new car, and all of a sudden that change increases the value. And I'm just wondering about the impact, for example, of touching up great artworks. I believe that they went into the Sistine Chapel and they began to touch up the works of Michelangelo.

So if you go in and you kind of apply a little bit of dab of paint here and a little bit of dab of paint here to cover up the faded pigments, that well, is that kind of a Ship of Theseus sort of thing and is the end result exactly the same? And I think that the answer is, well, it depends on your definition of what the exact replica is and what the Ship of Theseus is. I think a lot of this actually boils down to definition.

What do you mean by the same thing? Is the ship the same thing? I think if you dug down into the definition of what the same thing means, you could actually find the answer in the definition, but I don't think anybody does. I think everybody talks about something being the same thing and everybody thinks that they know what the same thing is, but really doesn't take the time to define it.

Walter Myers:

In the case of the Ship of Theseus, it's not so much a matter of what is the actual matter. What's important is that, "This is the ship that we're taking. We get on this ship, it doesn't matter if there's a new plank where an old plank was, this is a ship we've been sailing for centuries to Delos to celebrate Apollo." I think that was the reason for it, was to celebrate Apollo and the victory of Theseus. And so it's the fact that I think, like I was talking about, sort of the home before. Even if you replacing parts of your home, you replace your roof, you replace, you change bedrooms or anything, it's still the same home in terms of what you have in your heart, applied to it. As far as it being your home, it hasn't moved, it's just changed some. It's changed some, but it's still your home.

And it's still that even though some of the matter itself has changed, it's not really so much about the matter. It's about the home itself, the location of the home and same with Theseus. We're sailing on this ship, we've designated the ship as Theseus. We don't really care about what is the matter of it, what is the matter of what happened to its old matter. What matters to us is actually that this is the ship that we continue to sail for centuries to Delos. So I think it's to your point in terms of it's more about how it actually is viewed as opposed to what is the specific matter that it is made of.

Robert J. Marks:

I think the Ship of Theseus also applies to organizations. If a company slowly replaces its employees and policies and buildings over time, is it still the same company? Very, very similar. And I think the answer is an obvious no and I think of Disney. When I was a boy, Disney celebrated family, they celebrated wholesomeness, and now they've kind of degraded themselves into a totally different company. So this is an example of things which change over time, but which maintain their identity, in this case it's the Disney company, and they've changed quite substantially. That's another example of things changing a little bit. The other thing, I think there's a psychological aspect to this, too.

Consider, for example, the Mona Lisa. I just read somewhere that it was insured for \$630 million, the Mona Lisa. Wow, imagine making an exact duplicate of the Mona Lisa down to the molecule. And on back of the original, you had a little plaque that said original, on back of the copy, you had a little plaque that said copy, and you put them on sale at Sotheby's. Which one would sell for the most? The original one. And that's because of the psychological interpretation of the Mona Lisa, the connection of it with the original painter, Leonardo da Vinci. There would be that connection there. Whereas the new one, well, it would sell for probably quite a bit, but not as much as the Mona Lisa, not the \$630 billion.

Walter Myers:

No, not as much because what's unique about the Mona Lisa, the original, is that Leonardo da Vinci painted that one. The other one that you've replicated, and obviously if you can do it once, you can do it 1,000 times-

Robert J. Marks:

Exactly.

Walter Myers:

That was not painted by Leonardo da Vinci, that was not his handiwork. That's you replicating so that's someone replicating that work, replicating that work. In other words, when you think about it, what informed the original Mona Lisa was Leonardo da Vinci. That's where he put his heart and soul, into that. And he informed and infused himself into that original. Any of the copies were not from a teleological perspective in terms of the purpose of those, because teleology is about what is the purpose of why something is actually made. There was purpose in the original Mona Lisa, there's no purpose in the others that comes from Leonardo da Vinci himself. That purpose is from people who wanted to copy it and make some money off of it. But that purpose, that original purpose is what we're after and what Leonardo Da Vinci himself infused into that painting.

Robert J. Marks:

Exactly, and I think that's the interpretation of all art, that it has to relate to the creator of the art.

Walter Myers:

The creator, yes.

Robert J. Marks:

And that's the reason that we have all of these promoters and all of these tours where you have all of this publicity. They're trying to create this expectation and the substitute just doesn't matter. A couple of final questions. Are you aware of any way that the Ship of Theseus relates to Buddhist or Eastern

philosophies? They emphasize, as I understand, in permanence, that there is kind of a fading in some sort of sense. Are you aware of any relationship that there would be here?

Walter Myers:

No, I'm not aware of any relationship in Buddhism, no. What were some thoughts you had, Bob?

Robert J. Marks:

No, no, I'm the one that's asking the questions here.

Walter Myers:

No, I'm not sure how it applies in that case.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, I have no idea, I have no idea. I'm wondering, does a Ship of Theseus have a definitive answer? And I would again say that it goes back to the definition of what you mean by, "Is the Ship of Theseus still the Ship of Theseus?" I think you have to drill down and actually define what you mean by that before you answer the question. And I think in the definition, maybe the solution will come out. Do you have an opinion on this?

Walter Myers:

Yeah, I think in that and probably any other controversial topic, it really comes down to what is your definition of turn? What do you actually mean by those things? Yeah, meaning and definitions in terms of having common definitions of vocabularies with respect to controversial subjects such as this or philosophical subjects like this really comes to us really just sort of grappling with a human condition. And as you talked about, we've been talking about the mind-brain, that's really difficult stuff, what philosopher David Chalmers calls the hard problem, right?

Robert J. Marks:

The hard problem, yes.

Walter Myers:

It is the hard problem. So I think that, yeah, it really is a matter of terms and how understand these more than anything else. And I don't think there's any type of clear and crystal explanation of the Ship of Theseus, and that's why it's a, I would say, philosophical paradox and a problem, but it's something that just us as humans and human activity, those are things we might like to do. That's part of being a human, is being curious about the world, being curious about what does it mean to be human? What is the difference between us and animals? What is the difference between us and a rock that's out in front of our house? Why do we have brains and the rock just sits there and does nothing? I think that's just a human condition and I think it's just wonderful and love talking about things like this actually more than I like talking about the cloud.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, that's the reason you got your graduate degree in philosophy, right, is because this is so fun?

Walter Myers:

It is so fun, I love philosophy of mind. I think to me, it's the most interesting thing in the world.

Robert J. Marks:

At Biola, did you have JP Morland as a professor?

Walter Myers:

Oh, I have to admit, where do you think I got some of these ideas from?

Robert J. Marks:

Is that right? Okay.

Walter Myers:

Oh, there is JP Morland and everything I speak of, JP Morland is infused in that. And there was also Gary DeWees there. Gary DeWees is very much, I don't know about JP. I think JP is Aristotelian, but I know Gary DeWees, who is another amazing and brilliant professor at Talbot, I think he's retired now, but he is Aristotelian. And so both he and JP very deeply influenced me in terms of where I've gone from a philosophical perspective. And I mean, I just owe a debt of gratitude to JP and DeWees and all the other great professors that I had at Talbot, it really is an amazing school. In fact, I just got a newsletter from Talbot saying they had the largest entering class this past year, so it just is-

Robert J. Marks:

Really?

Walter Myers:

That little school, because it has such a great faculty, it turns out some really great Christian philosophers.

Robert J. Marks:

That is really exciting, that really is. And I think actually, I wrote a column about how the web is driving people to faith, especially Christian faith. Because what happens is if you spend your time on social media, you think that the whole world is having a great time except for you and therefore, you're a loser. And you contrast this, for example, to the Christian faith, which says, "Look, just as you are, you can be a son or daughter of God Almighty and join in that family if you recognize that you're fallen, you're sinful, you need a savior and Christ is your savior, and boom, you're in the family and just as you are."

So I think that that's being used to actually usher people that are addicted to the web, into the Christian faith. We're seeing evidence of it in these revivals and I mentioned at my church, between services we had, I think it was 22, no, 42, 42 kids, which were baptized between services that were in junior high and high school. And just recognizing that the path that they were going down on all the social media and stuff wasn't working, and that Christianity was working. So I'm wondering if this is working at Talbot, too. That would be really, really great if it were. Well, Walter, thank you. This was a lot of fun, I've learned a lot.

Walter Myers:

Likewise, Bob. Hey, and I look forward to having a conversation with you in the future. Thank you so much.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, that's great. We've been talking to Walter Meyers. He's a principal engineering manager leading a team of engineers working with management of the Microsoft Azure Cloud. By the way, there was a place in COSM where, as I mentioned before, our roles were reversed, and he was asking me the question. So on the podcast notes, we'll put a link to that interview so you can see what happens when the roles are reversed. So until next time, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

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