

# [Theseus’ ship](https://assignbuster.com/theseus-ship/)

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The Ancient Identity Crises The transitivity of identity is a question often contemplated by philosophers through philosophical puzzles of change. A popular version of the puzzle includes a man named Theseus and his ship. A ship in which has undergone a gradual change where all of the lumber was replaced by the new cargo of lumber it carried. The question then remains, is this still the original ship of Theseus? Philosopher John Locke attempts to answer this question by stating that identity is a subjective matter rather than objective.

He begins by separating the idea of a substance, organism, and a person and the different criteria used to determine each type of identity. Naturally we would agree with Locke that a ship is a not a living thing capable of thought and assume that it can only be talked about in reference to matter. However, Locke proposes that a substance like the Ship of Theseus can be talked about with reference to a conscious subject’s beliefs towards it.

This is based off the fact that a concept of the ship’s identity could not exist without human consciousness. Locke also provides a further suggestion that two things should not be questioned as whether or not they’re simply the same. The reason for this being that criteria differs among concepts so we must be careful in specifying “ the same what” when making comparisons. Therefore, Locke concludes that the idea belonging with the ship is the identity of the ship itself.

In other words, identity is a relative aspect rather than absolute, one that heavily depends on context. Identity can be defined as the distinct characteristics by which something is recognized. In other words, identity is an idea created by and for people and does not exist without them. This directly links with Locke’s idea of relative identity, as the perception of an idea is a relative concept depending on what, where, when, and whom you are asking.

We must also keep in mind that just because things are qualitatively identical in sharing similar properties, it may not mean they are numerically identical as one and vice versa. It is ultimately up to whomever is answering the question from what angle to declare an objects identity. In this case, I will present a variety of explanations to the identity of Theseus’ ship through different contexts. In the context of defining a ship, the change in lumber does not interfere with the necessary criterion of the preconceived notion of a ship.

Though Theseus’ ship has undergone a qualitative change through the replacement of lumber, it still remains the same ship by definition of a large vessel that carries goods or people over sea. So the ship may not be qualitatively identical to the old one but numerically the same because it serves the same purpose as Theseus’ ship over time. Now, consider another context where after Theseus ceases to exist, somebody purchases and moves this ship onto land to serve and sell dinner on deck.

It’s then safe to say that the object does not meet the conditions of a ship, despite being qualitatively identical. Instead, the object now serves the purpose of a restaurant, causing it to retain a new identity without losing any parts at all. However, the context changes once again when we begin to consider the identity of the ship in relation to Theseus. Despite the gradual changes, there has only ever been one beginning to Theseus’ ship, so we can assume that he has no problem claiming it as his own.

But what happens when the old, original lumber is collected and used to build a qualitatively similar ship? There are now two ships that share similar properties instead of one ship that is qualitatively different, yet numerically the same over time. Theseus must then claim one ship to be the original based on the criteria he has of how his vessel should be constituted. His predetermined opinion on what conditions must be met in order for either of the ships to be the original is what essentially establishes the identity of the old ship.

In this situation, I can agree with Locke that though the old lumber is being used, the ship is still being created from a new beginning, rendering it a new ship. Though it can then be argued that if both ships match Theseus’ criteria of the original ship, this does not make it possible for them to be one numerical identity as they are clearly two. By analyzing the various contexts above, it causes us to consider identity as grey matter rather than just a simple black and white answer.

It also begins to make it clear that identity is an issue of semantics and epistemology, rather than a metaphysical one. However, while the belief of an idea within a specific circumstance is important in constituting an identity, it becomes difficult to say what is true in a world of many different perceptions. That’s when semantics might be able to step in to sort out the problem of subjectivity. Still, it’s visible that identity is a relative concept that relies on perception and context rather than something that is absolute.