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Step Around, Step Aboard! Invitation to a Cruise on The Ship of Theseus

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Abstract: The story of „The Ship of Theseus" lay at the foundation of one of the most intriguing paradox of any perspective of ego, self and identity. In this article, the story is told and retold in many different ways. Broadly, the story has three narrators: Plutarch (who fueled at least six variations and another three competitors of the main theme), Thomas Hobbes (whose readings of the story ignited the search for solutions to this paradox – solutions that are mainly logical) and I, Gabriel R. Suciu: my version shifts the question from „How to present the paradox?" and „How to solve the paradox?", to „How to build a paradox?". It's worth mentioning that a fourth version is also told, at the beginning of the article – the story told by the ship itself.

Keywords: *Paradox; Ship of Theseus; Ego; Self; Identity.*

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1. My story

I was born a long time ago on an island.

Although it was a time of peace, the inhabitants of that island had a dark secret: in one of its palaces there was a creature of royal breed. Thirsty for blood, she demanded a sacrifice of girls and boys once a year. It was at that moment that a hero sailed there.

This was my father. His deeds of weapons were sung by many bards at parties long after he left the earth to live forever with the gods. At the center of these acts of arms are countless stories about the confrontation between my father and this creature who filled with terror that island.

Coming out victorious, I was conceived shortly.

I yearn so much to know my mother even though this wasn't possible. For, after my birth, my father took me on a trip back to his native kingdom. At that time since, my mother was a memory and a dream for him.

With us traveled also a princess that my father had fallen in love with and who would soon, also, become a memory and a dream. Unlike my mother who I know nothing about, I found some stories about the fate of this princess, stories told by some of her intimates and stories that had several versions.

All versions agree that the princess was abandoned, although the reasons are different. After some the two were separated by a storm; after others by another woman; finally there is a version in which the two were separated by gods.

In the turmoil of these events, my father would have sworn to a great god that, if he would arrive safely to his kingdom, along with his men, he will give a royal decree by which the god will be offered sacrifices, in his temple, every year, until the end of the world.

And so it came to happen that, despite many obstacles, I, my father and his soldiers reached the shores well. And after that I was entrusted with keeping my father's swear and with the sacrifices to this powerful god.

***

The time went by and, even my father had long gone into the world of gods, I remained responsible for the annual ritual.

So important I was that even the man who was believed the wisest in the world, feeling his death near, wanted to see me one last time before his last breath.

In one year, while offering sacrifices to the god, I was foretold the future in his temple by his priestess. She told me that "The times will pass by and they will come back. People will remember and forget. You are and not. One and many. You'll become and remain. New in everything old and old in everything new. Although you know who you are, others wouldn't they will".

Step by step my story took shape and now it is well known through three sources. The first documents were written by a historian, contemporary with me. Based on what he wrote, others have shown that the world is enchanted, being filled with stories either similar to mine, or that rival to my own.

The second story was put down by a philosopher when I was no longer in this world. His writings were the basis of what is called the disenchanting of the world: basically those who lived in his spirit tried to show the logic, mechanisms and pulley of my life.

Finally, the third source belongs to a Romanian writer.

2. The three sources of my story

If the ship of Theseus would be alive and would had a life of its own, it would be more than certain that the story just told would be the story of the ship itself. In fact, the story so far presented is the story told by the ship of Theseus. However, this story is not the only one about the events happened so many years ago. At least three other sources presented variants about it: Plutarch, Thomas Hobbes and Gabriel-Remus Suciu.

Parenthetically, the difference between these three sources is the boundaries – namely, where does the story begin and where does it end? As time passed by, these borders have been named in many different ways – for instance "frames" (Milton Erickson, as cited by Rosen, 1982, p. 144), "brackets (Husserl, 1952, p. 111), etc – and their role is to distinguish between what is important and what is not, between what is figure and what is not, between what is shown and what is not… in short, between "what is" and "what is not".

2.1. The fist story: Plutarch

Plutarch tells the story of how the Ship of Theseus was replaced plank by plank. Thus, over time, each plank of the ship was replaced with a new plank. And certainly, the planks that made up the Ship of Theseus at the beginning were different from the planks that made up the same ship as years passed by:

„*The ship on which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned in safety, the thirty-oared galley, was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel.*" (Plutarch, 1967, p. 49)

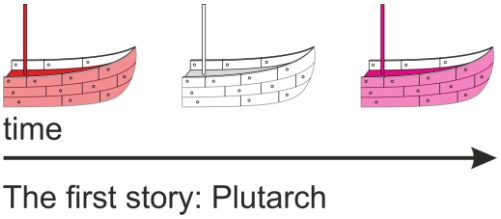


Figure 1.

2.2. The second story: Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes starts from Plutarch's story to arrive to a totally new story. Certainly, over the years the Ship of Theseus was worn out and each old plank was replaced with a new one. Till there it is the Plutarch's story. But Hobbes adds that the old planks have not been destroyed. But, in turn, they were kept in a barn. And when the last plank was replaced, someone made the decision to reassemble the old planks. And there it is… at this moment Theseus had two ships: a new one, and an old one, and he didn't know exactly what his ship was of both of them…

„*For if, 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, 1969, pp. 136-137)

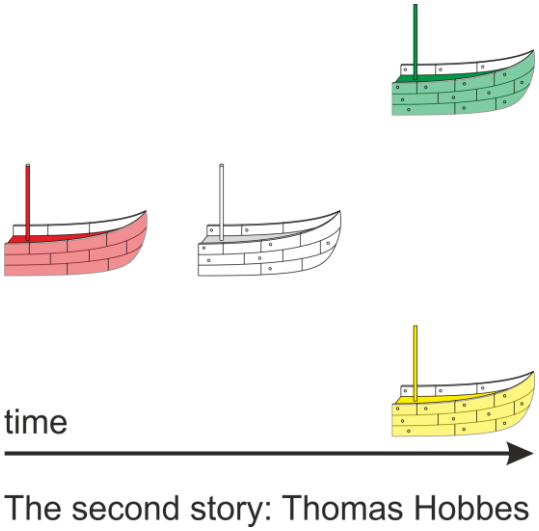


Figure 2.

2.3. A new story of the Ship of Theseus

However, a new story of the Ship of Theseus can be said. A story that begins before the story told by Plutarch and ends after it. I have to mention that the end of this story is the same as the end of Hobbes' story. And, therefore, the element of novelty is to be found at the beginning of the story. So, before the Ship of Theseus was built, it was decided that this hero would have two ships, both of them similar in the smallest details. One of the ships was assembled and let go on the sea, while the other was kept in the form of planks in a barn. And when one of the planks of the ship at sea was worn out, it was replaced with the appropriate plank kept in the barn. And, with the passage of time, each plank was replaced with a new one. And the floating ship was made up of planks that were once stored in the barn. And the ship that once floated had the worn out planks stored, now, in the barn. Both were the ships of Theseus. And every Athenian knew what ship was stored in the barn, and what ship was floating on seas…

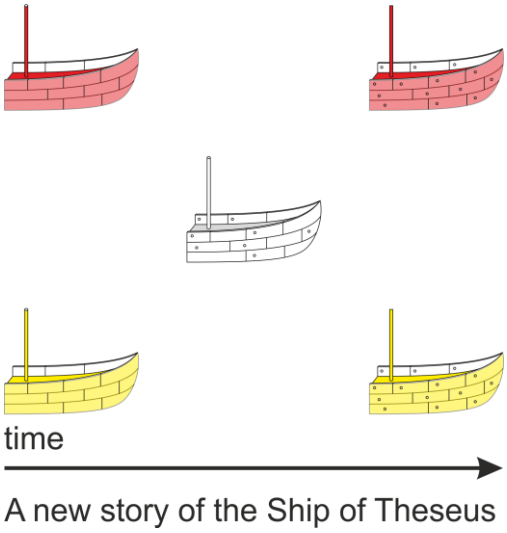


Figure 3.

So, let's see where the three sources leads? And the following lines are in fact the presentation of the implications of each of them.

3. The Plutarch story

For a better understanding of the phenomenon of the story of the ship of Theseus as told by Plutarch, below it will be collected a string of six variations of this paradox. Also, it is interesting to note that these variations have their rivals or competitors. In fact, three more paradoxes are in sharp contrast with the paradox of the Ship of Theseus and its variations.

3.1. Six variations of the ship of Theseus paradox

These are some variations of the ship of Theseus' paradox…

Heraclites' river. Guthrie, in "A history of Greek philosophy", presents at least three sources – Plato, Aristotle and Plutarch – mentioning the ideas of Heraclites. Heraclites remained memorable saying that things flow like a river (panta rei) and no one can walk in the same river twice. (Guthrie, 1991, p. 489)

Nagasena's name & Milinda's chariot. In "Milinda's questions" (1991), there are two dialogues between King Milinda and the wise Nagasena. First, the king says Nagasena does not exist. And as an argument, he asks the wise to tell whether "*the hair, the nails, the teeth, the skin, the flesh, the bones, the kidney, the heart, the liver, the spleen, the lungs, the intestines, the ball*" and so on, are Nagasena. To which the Nagasena admits that neither of these are

him. This is the reason why Milinda concludes that there is no Nagasena, although this is contradictory to reality…

However, then Nagasena follows the same argument and says that Milinda is lying when saying he have come with the chariot. For, as the king admits, the chariot is not "*the pole, the axle, the wheels, the body of the chariot, the flag-staff, the yoke, the reins, and the goad*". So, Milinda haven't come with any chariot since it didn't exist. And so, Milinda is lying saying he have come to him, to Nagasena. (Guthrie, 1991, pp. 35-37)

Sir John Cutler's stockings. John Cutler was a wealthy merchant of London whose avarice was immortalized by the anecdotes of Alexander Pope – for instance in "*The works of Alexander Pope, Esq. In verse and prose*". In one of these anecdotes, Pope says that "*Sir John Cutler had a pair of black worsted stockings, which his maid darned so often with silk, that they became at last a pair of silk stockings*" (Pope, 1806, pp. 134 - 135)

Grandfather's axe/ knife. There is a widespread anecdote, whose author has remained unknown, about the identity of a cutting object – an ax (Graves, 1944), or a knife (Ramanujan, 1991). This object is and isn't the same. It has been kept from generation to generation, for "*my father fixed it with a new stock and I have fixed it with a new head*" (Graves, 1944, pp. 370-371). Therefore, although the object has changed several times – it had a new handle, then a new blade – it "*is the same knife*" "*for generations*" (Ramanujan, 1991, p. xx)

Tin Woodman's body. Tin Woodman, the Baum story of the book "*The Tin Woodman of Oz*" goes on, wasn't always made of tin for "*in the beginning I was a man of flesh and bone and blood and lived in the Munchkin Country of Oz*" (Baum, 2000, p. 20). At the beginning, he felt in love with Nimmie Amee who was the handmaid of a wicked witch. Discovering that he wanted to marry Nimmie, the witch charmed Tin Woodman's ax. And, while he was in the woods, the ax cut his leg, then the other leg, then an arm, and the other too, the body, and finally his head. After each witched accident, Tin was helped by a tinsmith friend who replaced the cut with a new wooden part. And finally, from the man made up of flesh, bones and blood, Tin Woodman came to be made of only wood… (Baum, 2000, pp. 22 – 28)

Van Tricasse family. Among all the books written by Jules Verne, there is one named "*Dr. Ox's experiment*". The reader who opens it would find the story of Van Tricasse family which could be easily called the Jeannot family. True, it is known that Jeannot had a knife that remained the same thanks to a double operation: the replacement of the handle when it was worn out and the replacement of the blade when it became worthless. And a similar phenomenon happened to the Van Tricass family from 1340 on.

Thus, between the spouses of this family there was always a considerable difference in age: when the older spouse died, the surviving spouse married another partner, much younger. And when the time was due, and when the surviving spouse died also, the younger partner, now much advanced in age, married another spouse, again, younger than him/ her. And so on, until to our days… (Verne, 1874, p. 9)

3.2. Three competitors of the ship of Theseus paradox

Three other paradoxes are competing with the ship of Theseus paradox. Even if they aren't contemporary-as-time, in fact they are contemporary-as-vision of the world.

The growing argument (the paradox of increase). The first information about this paradox comes from a play written by Epicharmus of Syracuse, play that was mentioned in a commentary of Plato's Theaetetus. In this play, a character – be it A – owe another character – be it B – a sum of money: A borrowed the money for a banquet that would take place in the near future. However, after the banquet, not having the money, A explained to B he is no longer the one who borrowed the money, for in the meantime he has changed and hence he can't be held responsible for the amount due. Exasperated by this reasoning, B hits A. Being in the position to motivate his deeds, B said he is no longer the man who hit A and therefore can't be held responsible for his blow… (Olson, 2006; Sedley, 1982)

The body-minus argument. This paradox is attributed to Chryssipus of Soli who told it in his work "*On the growing (argument)*". The paradox, being reformulated several times till our days, has two characters – be they two Athenians (Dion and Theon), be they two cats (Tibbles and Tib). For simplicity, I'll tell the story with the two Athenians. Thus, Dion and Theon are similar, even identical, with one distinction: Dion has two legs, but Theon has one – namely the left one. So, if someone cuts the right leg of Dion, then Dion will disappear, or Theon will disappear? (Burke, 1994; Wiggins, 1968)

The Lumpl/ Goliath argument. This paradox of ancient origins was introduced by Allan Gibbard in the article "*Contingent identity*". Its story lasts for three days, during which a sculptor is watched in his work. In the first day, the sculptor makes two pieces of clay – one representing the top of Goliath, the other the lower part of Goliath. On the next day, he joins the two pieces in one – and this new piece of clay could be called Lumpl – and let them dry to form the statue called Goliath. So, in the final day, the third one, unhappy with his work, the sculptor breaks and smashes the statue

made of clay… And now it's time to wonder if Goliath (i.e. the statue) is the same as Lumpl (i.e. the two pieces of clay)? (Gibbard, 1975)

4. The Thomas Hobbes story

It is a well known fact that the Ship of Theseus paradox is grounded on five assumptions. So, below you'll find some space to read that, starting from the five assumptions and, more specifically, starting from which of the five assumptions is denied, three solutions have been crystallized to these paradoxes.

4.1. Five assumptions of, and three solutions to, the paradox of the ship of Theseus

The paradox of the Ship of Theseus, and especially the version told by Thomas Hobbes, knead the minds of contemporary writers and this is the reason they discovered three solutions to it.

a) The identity assumption

This assumption is defined as follows: for any objects x and y, if x and y hold the same parts, at the same time and space, then x is identical to y (Rea, 1997, p. xviii)

To solve the paradox of Ship of Theseus, there were some thinkers who denied this assumption is true. Of these thinkers I can mention: David Wiggins, Frederick Doepke, Judith Jarvis Thompson, Mark Johnston, Ernest Sosa (Rea, 1997).

Starting from the denial of identity assumption, these thinkers state the following solution: at the beginning of story there were two ships collocated; the first was dismembered and then rebuilt; the second survived these two processes – dismembering and rebuilding; therefore, the Ship of Theseus (also known as S1) is different from the ship dismembered and rebuilt (i.e. the ship named S2); and it is different, also, from the surviving ship (i.e. the ship named S3)

This solution has the following formula:

$S1 \neq S2 \neq S3$

b) The necessity assumption

The definition of the necessity assumption is as follow: whatever two objects x and y, if x is identical to y, then x is necessarily identical to y (Real, 1997, p. xviii).

If this assumption is denied, then a new solution appears for the paradox of the Ship of Theseus, a solution that can be found at such authors as: Allan Gibbard, David Lewis, George Myro (Rea, 1997).

This group of authors stating the solution to the paradox says that the S2 (which was dismembered and rebuilt) and the third ship, S3 (the survivor of the S2 transformation) at the beginning of the story are identical: but clearly they are not identical at the end of the story; therefore, S1 – or the Ship of Theseus – is identical to S2 and S3. But this identity is only at the beginning, not the end, of the story.

And here's the formula for this solution:

S1 = S2 = S3

a. One, two or all of the following assumptions are false: the existence assumption, the essentialist assumption and the alternative compositional possibilities assumption

There is a third solution to the paradox of Ship of Theseus. The solution is grounded on three assumptions:

- The existence assumption: there is an F and there are some ps that compose it; therefore F is the whole and ps are the parts of this whole (Rea, 1997, p. xxi)
- The essential assumption: whatever ps are, they enter the composition of a thing called F such that necessarily if these parts enter into the composition of F at one point, then they enter into its composition every time and in any moment (Rea, 1997, p. xxi-xxii)
- The assumption of alternative compositional possibilities: whatever ps, ps enter in the composition of a thing called F so that some parts ps may enter the composition of F at one point, but do not enter into the composition of F at another moment (Rea, 1997, p. xxii)

Below I'll list some authors who have stated solutions to the Ship of Theseus paradox based on the denial of one, two or all of these assumptions:

- Peter Unger denies the existence assumption;
- Roderich Chisholm denies the assumption of alternative compositional possibilities;
- Peter van Inwagen and Michael Burke deny two assumptions: the essential and the alternative compositional possibilities assumptions;
- Finally, Frances Howard-Snyder denies all three assumptions

For a more thorough presentation see the book edited by Rea (1997).

The authors just mentioned argue something like these: if the assumption of existence is denied, then there is no doubt that there are several ships or the fact that the ships are composed of planks; if the essentialist assumption is denied, the Ship of Theseus (S1) is identical to the ship that was dismantled and rebuilt (S2); and if the alternative compositional possibilities assumption is denied, the Ship of Theseus (S1) is identical to the new ship (S3), resulting from the dismemberment of the first ship.

These solutions have the following formulas:
S1 V S2 V S3; F ≠ ps (for the denial of the assumption of existence)
S1 = S2 (for the denial of the assumption of essentiality)
S1 = S3 (for the denial of the assumption of alternative compositional possibilities)

5. The Gabriel-Remus Suciu story

I think my story about the ship of Theseus shows something – namely, how can a paradox be constructed?

5.1. How to build a paradox?

The paradox is made up of finite and infinite, of time and eternity, being perfect and imperfect.

In fact, in Antiquity it was considered that what was "finite" was perfect, and what was "in-finite" was non-perfect, imperfect. So, the ancient man was a finite man. Later, with the advent of Christianity, the idea that God is "infinite" took central stage. So, He is perfect. And eternal. And man is "finite" – so, imperfect and ephemeral. Therefore, the difference between these distinctions remained, but they were re-coupled and re-considered.

Starting from the distinctions between "finite/ infinite", "time/ eternity" and "perfection/ imperfect", below are the necessary ingredients needed to build a paradox:

- An event cut off from the flow of time – therefore, an event that has a beginning, a climax and an end.
- The end is such that if it is followed by the beginning, it will make sense, being a whole – so the two of them (the end and the beginning) must have continuity not only in one direction, but also in the other one.
- The existence of a loop to indicate that the end must continue with the beginning and that the beginning must continue with the end.

These ingredients are found in the three sources of the paradox of the ship of Theseus: 1) an event is cut off from the time and presents a ship (the beginning) having some changes (the climax) to become another ship (the end); 2) from there anyone could continue the story in both directions (from one ship to another ship; and from the another ship to the one ship); and 3) finally, not only one can continue the story in both direction, but the story must continue in both directions through a loop (the event unfolds again and again, being a whole, even if it is repetitive)

6. Instead of concluding, found out what the hedgehog told his fox

There was once upon a time a hedgehog and he was a teacher of sciences in the woods. This hedgehog, with gray spines, just finished reading a text written by an author from a fanciful country – named Romania.

Trough his mind came the thought that in an hour he will meet his mate in the glade. So, he combed his spikes, took his cane and, with his hat on, closed the den's door.

He was happy, very happy. And silly scientific questions – like: how do two hedgehogs feel when they hug? – had become just an illusion. For, it was like now they would be together.

But, suddenly, out of the blue, the goody fox appeared. It was that time when the hedgehog teacher was at the heights of his happiness.

- Ooooh, my dear professor. What an honor! And what a joy! For meeting you right now… when I'm so hungry!

The hedgehog freezes in fear…

- Darling, before you'll become my dinner, do you have anything to say? Said the fox with her big eyes and licking her lips.

Then, then… the hedgehog replied:

- Yes. Please, if anyone asks about me… tell her the following:

"There was once upon a time a hedgehog and he was a teacher of sciences in the woods. This hedgehog, with gray spines, just finished reading a text written by an author from a fanciful country – named Romania.

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< "There was once upon a time a hedgehog and he was a teacher of sciences in the woods. This hedgehog, with gray spines, just finished reading a text written by an author from a fanciful country – named Romania.

Etc, etc, etc…">

My dear reader, I'm firmly convinced that if you'd travel to that spotty forest, you'd find the hedgehog talking to the fox. Don't rush to go right now. You can leave on a minute, or two, or more… or many, many more. A thing is certain: whenever you'll please, you'll find them there… talking!

Acknowledgements:

Currently, I'm an independent researcher. No grant was offered whatsoever for writing this article. So, I assume full responsibility for all the errors as well as all the benefits of this article.

I have created all the pictures of this article. There is no exception of picture borrowed from other authors.

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