

The Stoics on Identity

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A useful corrective to the increasingly ahistorical approach in much contemporary philosophy is an appreciation of the fact, often neglected these days, that many of the themes currently at the centre-stage of philosophical discussion were not merely raised by the Greeks but dealt with along lines that ring familiar to modern ears. A case in point is the issue of individuation in contemporary analytic metaphysics, in particular as it arises in connection with the problem of change. It will emerge that various moves in the recent literature have affinities with and indeed were anticipated by the Stoics in their treatment of puzzles of mereological change.

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The physical world is marked by constant change. Commonsense takes it that objects can survive some changes but not others. So for example, a tree is thought to be capable of surviving the loss of a leaf, but not of being chopped down for firewood. That is, the world is relatively stable even though variable. For Heraclitus by contrast, the fact of change meant that the physical world was radically unstable. For he did not share the commonsense view that an object could survive change. Impressed by this, Plato accorded the physical world a spurious kind of existence, locating reality outside the changing flux of space-time in the world of the immutable Forms. By contrast, the Stoics shared the commonsense opinion that objects can endure through change. Indeed, their criterion of existence was the capacity of something to produce or *experience some change*, which of course presupposes that one and the same object endures through that change. And as materialists, they considered this criterion to be satisfied only by three-dimensional material bodies (See A. A. Long 1986:153).

It is well-known that the Academic sceptics engaged in constant critical dialectic with the Stoics. Under Carneades, the Academics formulated an argument that in effect directly challenged both the Stoic criterion of existence and the tenability of the notion of endurance through change. The Growing Argument, (*Auxanomenos Logos*), as it came to be called, was reported by Plutarch (*Comm. not.* 1083 B-C) as follows:

- (a) All individual substances are in flux and motion, releasing some things from themselves and receiving others which reach them from elsewhere.
- (b) The numbers or quantities which these are added to, or subtracted from, do not remain the same but become different as the aforementioned arrivals and departures cause the substance to be transformed.

Chrysippos (c. 280–c. 207 BC).

(c) The prevailing convention is wrong to call these processes of growth and decay: rather they should be called generation and destruction, since they transform the thing from what it is into something else, whereas growing and diminishing are attributes of a body which serves as substrate and remains.

(Sedley, 1982:256)

Clearly, if we add an extra F to a pile containing n Fs, we do not say that the number n has grown; rather, we say that it has been replaced. By parity of reasoning, the sceptics urged, we should say that a material object that has gained or lost a part should be said not to have grown or diminished, but to have ceased to exist, replaced by a numerically distinct object. As Sedley rightly points out, the question is whether material objects and numbers do behave alike in respect of individuation (Sedley, 1982:257). If material objects are indeed individuated by their components, that is, if they can be regarded as fusions of their parts, then any change in components constitutes a change of identity. Hume certainly thought this to be the case (Hume, 1978, 1.4.6). More recently, Roderick Chisholm (Chisholm, 1976), David Lewis (Lewis, 1986) and David Armstrong (Armstrong, 1980) have joined him. Chisholm's response is to ascribe a conventionalist fictionality to three-dimensional continuants, whereas Lewis' and Armstrong's own realist response is to make objects *four-dimensional* fusions of temporal parts. (The Stoics, it will be recalled, considered objects to be three-dimensional: they had spatial parts, but not temporal parts; the idea of temporal parts was alien to their way of thinking.)

The Academic principle of individuation amounts to the claim that sameness of parts (material composition) is both sufficient and necessary for sameness of identity. If the Academics are right, then since fusions are individuated by their parts, it would seem that given the fact of change, material objects cannot be *three-dimensional* fusions. This holds true whether these parts are themselves physical objects, or properties, in the manner of bundle theories. Now among contemporary metaphysicians we find the increasingly popular view of material objects as three-dimensional fusions whose logic is governed by systems of mereological logic. In response to the Growing Argument, these philosophers adopt a *temporally relative* parthood relation. That is, they reject the implicit presupposition of the Growing Argument that object x existing at t1 and object y existing at t2 are identical just where x's parts at t1 are the same as y's parts at t2. Instead, on a temporal relativisation of the parthood relation, three-dimensional x is identical with three-dimensional y just where for all times t, they have the same parts at t.¹

Notwithstanding the temporal relativisation of the parthood relation, there is a problem that the three-dimensionalist fusion theorist faces. It arises in the

¹ One reservation about this approach is that its ontology seems to involve substrata.

context of David Wiggins' thought experiment concerning Tibbles the cat (Wiggins, 1968). Consider a cat called "Tibbles", and imagine that portion of her which includes everything but her tail. Call that portion "Tibs". Clearly, Tibbles and Tibs do not have all their properties in common at that one time. For one thing, their spatial boundaries do not coincide. So, by the indiscernibility of identicals, they are non-identical. (The indiscernibility principle relevant here reads: If $x=y$ then for all t , x is F at t if and only if y is F at t .) Now suppose that Tibbles' tail is removed. Tibbles and Tibs now coincide spatially after the caudal ablation. Intuitively, Tibbles endures, and does so as a cat. It would seem that Tibs has also endured, and is now a cat. But they are numerically distinct cats, in virtue of having different histories. (For one thing, Tibbles underwent a caudal ablation, but Tibs never had such a part.) In short, we have two cats in the same place at the same time. Indeed, the argument can be rerun with a slight modification to show that we have thousands of cats coinciding exactly. (Take all of Tibs except for one hair on her tail. Take all of Tibs except for another hair on her tail. etc.) This seems just wrong.

On a four-dimensionalist picture, there is no such problem. What we have is a situation where four-dimensionalist Tibs shares a temporal part with four-dimensionalist Tibbles. In short, the problem is one for the three-dimensionalist, and arises independently of the temporal relativisation of the parthood relation.

Wiggins is of course a three-dimensionalist. The moral he draws is that we should simply learn to live with coincidence. Now Wiggins took the Tibs-Tibbles example from Peter Geach, who himself took it from William of Sherwood. Ultimately, it originated with the Stoics under Chrysippos. Chrysippos' original puzzle involves a man rather than a cat, but is otherwise exactly the same puzzle. Take a man, Dion. Let "Theon" name that portion of him which includes everything except his left foot. That is, Dion corresponds to Tibbles, Theon to Tibs, and the foot to Tibbles' tail. If we then cut off the foot, we get numerically distinct objects, Dion and Theon, composed of exactly the same matter at the same time. And intuitively, this seems absurd.

Now this seems to hoist the Stoics with a petard of their own making. Yet, according to Sedley, Chrysippos uses the Dion-Theon example to stand the Growing Argument on its head (Sedley, 1982:270). For according to Chrysippos, it is the Academic principle of individuation that has landed us with the coincidence problem. The principle, we recall, amounts to the claim that sameness of material composition is both sufficient and necessary for sameness of identity. This problem can be avoided by rejecting the principle in both respects. Firstly, if it is to be Dion who survives then sameness of material composition cannot be *necessary* for sameness of identity. Secondly, to avoid coincidence of distinct entities, one of them will have to disappear. To save the three-dimensionalist notion of a continuant, this requires that Theon perish once the foot is amputated. That is, sameness of material composition cannot be *sufficient* for identity.

According to Chrysippos, as reported by Philo of Alexandria, it is Theon that perishes (Sedley, 1982:268). But what, independently of his motivation to salvage the notion of a continuant, entitles Chrysippos to this claim? Without regard to this motivation, isn't it just as reasonable, if not more so, to insist that Dion perishes, and that Theon alone survives? The Academic sceptics would certainly say that this is what really happens. Now, in consigning Theon to post-amputation oblivion, Chrysippos anticipates the move made by Michael Burke in a series of papers in the 1990s (See Burke, 1994). The main objection to this sort of move is that Dion's loss of a foot is a purely extrinsic change in Theon, yet is supposed to signify his destruction. This is counterintuitive.

Furthermore, it is inconsistent with the Stoic's own views in epistemology. Sedley explains how the Stoics sought to make a case for knowledge on the basis of their doctrine of infallible cognition (*katalepsis*) (Sedley, 1982:263ff.). According to this doctrine, we have perceptual knowledge because some perceptions are such as to guarantee their veracity. This was coupled with a commitment to the Leibnizian notion of the identity of indiscernibles. For the Stoics, this meant in practice, that even identical twins will have to carry some empirically accessible feature sufficient to distinguish them perceptually. That is, every material object has a unique perceptual marker, which characterises them for the duration of their existence, and indeed is essential to their identity. But this undermines the Burkean move made by the Stoics.

For before the amputation, Theon is a proper part of Dion. Hence, all of Theon's properties will be a proper subset of Dion's. This means in particular that should Theon have some essence, this essence won't be unique to him: Dion will have it too. So, by the Stoic's own principles, Theon does not even qualify as a genuine material object. He simply does not exist before the amputation. There can thus be no talk of his ceasing to exist *after* the operation. That is, rather than falling into Burke's camp, Chrysippos ought by his own views on epistemology to fall into Peter van Inwagen's camp. Van Inwagen is of course the leading exponent of a view that denies the existence of arbitrary undetached parts (See Van Inwagen, 1981).

Sedley acknowledges that Chrysippos himself should never have accepted at the outset that Dion and Theon are numerically distinct. In order to rescue Chrysippos from inconsistency, he concludes that the paradox of Dion and Theon is not built on Stoic premises at all. Instead, noting that Chrysippos concocted it in a work on the Growing Argument, he *speculates* that it was his dialectical rejoinder to the Growing Argument, and that it borrowed its premises from the Academic puzzle as a *reductio* of the Academic thesis that material growth and diminution are fatal to any idea of enduring identity. That is, by way of counterexample, Chrysippos borrows the Growing Argument's own presuppositions to concoct an instance in which material diminution is actually a *condition* of enduring identity: it is the undiminished Theon who perishes, while it is the diminished Theon who survives (Sedley, 1982:269–70).

I find Sedley's speculation problematic. I consider it more likely that it was the Academics who devised the case of Dion and Theon, rather than the Stoics. They devised it to show the absurdity of the notion of endurance through diminution. (The absurdity being of course that two objects come to occupy exactly the same place at a time.) If Chrysippos had devised the puzzle, and if he really had been aware that by his own lights, pre-amputation Dion and Theon could not count as numerically distinct individuals, and that it is Dion who perishes with the loss of his foot, then the only option available to him would have been to rule that Theon did not exist *until* the amputation of Dion's foot. But how then can this ruling be squared with Philo of Alexandria's account of Chrysippos' position, on which Theon *remains* with the amputation of Dion's foot? Now if he remains, then he existed at the outset, and continued to exist later on. But if he exists at the outset, he is surely *distinct* from Dion then. Proper parthood does not constitute identity, no matter how great the overlap.

Admittedly, Philo of Alexandria is openly hostile to Chrysippos in the passage in question (Sedley, 1982:267). But the hostility is to Chrysippos' choice of Theon as the survivor, and Sedley accepts Philo's representation of Chrysippos' position. So I doubt that a case could be made for the claim that Philo simply got it wrong when he said that Chrysippos chose Theon as the survivor. In short, I doubt that Chrysippos was aware of the inconsistency of which Sedley is trying to clear him. That is, in responding to the Academic puzzle of Dion and Theon, Chrysippos conceded the Academic assumption that Theon existed before the amputation, not realising that this conflicted with his own views on individuation as derived from Stoic epistemology. Sedley tries to make Chrysippos consistent by making him a van Inwagenian, but it seems more likely that he was a Burkean, and inconsistently so.²

In any case, the observation that Chrysippos should have been a van Inwagenian and not a Burkean leads to another *ad hominem* in the Stoic position. The Stoics, like Aristotle,³ rejected the notion of atoms in the void. For them, the physical world was a single unified material continuum, pervaded by the cohesive force of *pneuma*, a composite of fire and air. Sambursky explains how material

² I thus find implausible Sedley's conjecture that Chrysippos' solution to the Growing Argument provided independent support for Stoic epistemology, in particular, the thesis of infallible recognition, resting as it did on the thesis that every individual has its own uniquely individuating feature. (Sedley, 1982:265–6) For if Chrysippos really was concerned to provide metaphysical support through the case of Dion-Theon for his doctrine of infallible recognition, then he hardly would have held pre-amputation Dion and Theon to be *distinct* individuals. Elsewhere, I find interesting Sedley's conjecture that the Stoic doctrine of categories originated at least partly in response to the Growing Argument, and that its invocation in effect of relative identity had affinities with Locke's own position (Sedley, 1982:259).

³ But see the paper in this volume by Alan Chalmers, who argues that while Aristotle rejected the Democritean conception of atoms, he accepted a weaker version of atomism.

objects figured in this scheme as local distributions of different *pneuma*, that is, of fire and air in varying proportions. It is these varying proportions that made for qualitative diversity (Sambursky, 1959:18). The important point to register for our purposes is that local objects are just *proper parts* of the one unified continuum. But we have just seen that proper parts do not have an essence distinct from the whole of which they are part. This means that local objects, the medium-sized dry goods of everyday experience, do not qualify as genuine objects. While van Inwagen could agree with this, he does acknowledge the genuine ontological status of fundamental particles and organisms (See Van Inwagen, 1990). But it seems now that the Stoics couldn't acknowledge even these. In fact, it seems now that the only genuine object that there could be for them is the physical world as a whole. This in effect leads the Stoics to a radical monism, where the only thing that is capable of change is the physical universe, considered as a single entity.

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