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PARTS, WHOLES, AND STILL

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We re-evaluate a medieval sophism concerning parts, wholes and identity. A reasonable analysis of this sophism is possible if we recognize that the adverb still has a non-temporal use.

In his 13th century treatise on syncategorematic words, William of Sherwood considered the following problem with parts and wholes:

Suppose Socrates is an animal. (Animal should be construed broadly enough here to include people.) Now, cut off his foot. What is left is still an animal. Thus, all of Socrates is an animal, and all of him but his foot is also an animal. But then it seems that one animal contains another as a proper part.

By this logic, we all have numerous animals inside of us. No doubt this seems a reasonable conclusion to some people, who feel them stirring even as we speak. But most people, I suspect, will agree with William of Sherwood that there is something wrong with this argument. We should try to determine exactly where it goes wrong.

William considers three possible analyses. The first analysis appeals to the collective/distributive ambiguity exhibited by phrases like all of Socrates. Translating roughly into modern terms, this phrase can either denote Socrates in his entirety (the collective reading), or it can express universal quantification over his parts (the distributive reading). Once we add the exception phrase but his foot, however, the distributive reading is forced — or so the analysis claims. Unless we have several objects to quantify over, we cannot make an exception. Therefore, it is simply false that all of Socrates but his foot is an animal, since this must mean that every part of Socrates but his foot is an animal, and we would never say of Socrates’ nose, for example, that it was an animal. In this way we eliminate the second animal that Socrates seemed to have inside himself, and our problem is solved.

William is rightly dissatisfied with this solution, on the grounds that but (praeter) does not really force a distributive reading. Instead, it can serve simply to indicate ‘diminution of a whole’, so that the phrase all of Socrates but his foot refers collectively to that portion of Socrates which excludes his foot but contains the rest of him. This seems correct; certainly in other examples showing a collective/distributive ambiguity, the presence of a but-phrase does not force a distributive reading. All of the children but John built a table, for example, allows a reading where the children other than John built a table collectively, and is not limited to the reading where each child other than John builds a table.
The second analysis William considers is the one which I want to argue for, though it is not quite as straightforward as it looks at first: In this analysis, we claim that all of Socrates but his foot is not an animal as long as the foot is attached, but becomes an animal once the foot is cut off. Thus, as long as all of Socrates but his foot is a proper part of Socrates, it is not an animal, and we can avoid the claim that one animal contains another as a proper part.

William makes an interesting objection to this analysis: We say that after the foot is cut off, what is left is still an animal. But ‘nothing is still an animal that was not earlier an animal’, and so this analysis seems incompatible with our use of the word still.

This objection, I think, can be met; but let us delay that for a short while. The third analysis William considers, and the one which he himself favors, is one which appeals to the distinction between body and soul. Call Socrates as a whole ‘A’, and all of Socrates but his foot ‘B’. Now we claim that B is an animal with respect to the soul, but just part of an animal with respect to the body. One and the same soul ‘completes’ both A and B; with respect to the soul, B is not a proper part of A at all. But it is only with respect to the soul that B is an animal, and not with respect to the body. Thus, if we hold constant the respect in which an object is judged to be an animal, we avoid having to claim that a single object is both an animal and a proper part of an animal.

There is an easy objection to this kind of analysis: The same general problem with parts and wholes obtains with inanimate, presumably soulless, objects. For example, if I remove the rear bumper from my car, what is left is still a car. But we would not want to claim that the car has a soul.

None of the analyses that William of Sherwood considers, then, seems fully satisfactory. But what can we offer in their place? I can see two main lines of analysis we might pursue.

One way of attacking our problem views it as a matter of individual identity. Somehow or another, we continue to regard Socrates as Socrates even after his foot is cut off: It seems clear that Socrates was an animal before we cut off his foot, and doesn’t stop being an animal afterwards; so it makes sense to say that he is still an animal. If we can just explain how it is that what is left after we cut off Socrates’ foot is Socrates, it seems that we will get the fact that what is left is still an animal for free.

Unfortunately, some objects seem intuitively to lose their identities, yet we can describe what is left afterwards as ‘still’ having certain properties the original object. For example, suppose I destroy a hammer, by removing and discarding the handle, heating the head until it is malleable, and then beating it into the shape of a chisel. What is left after this process is still a tool, even though the hammer has been destroyed.

Of course the metal of which the head of the hammer was composed has not been destroyed. But this is just a proper subpart of the material which comprised the hammer. If we say that this smaller portion of material is still a tool,
does that imply it used to be a tool — that the hammer contained another tool as a part?

I think the answer here is obviously no. The smaller piece becomes a tool by virtue of my shaping it into a chisel. But this leaves us with a puzzle: Why can we say that something is ‘still’ a tool, even though it was never a tool in the past?

In fact, if we take a closer look at the way the word *still* is used, I think we can find an answer.³

Suppose we are driving up a mountainside. As we get higher and higher in altitude, we reach a point where you think we must be above the tree line. But then you look out the window, and see trees all around us. In this situation, it seems natural to say ‘There are still trees here!’ Of course there had been trees at that location all along, but that is not what the utterance means. It means we are still at a point on our ascent at which trees can be found.

Or, suppose I show you a series of boxes. I tell you beforehand that the first few boxes in the series will contain gold rings, while the remainder will contain silver rings. Sure enough, you open the first box and see that it contains gold rings; likewise the second, and the third, and so on, until you reach a point where it seems reasonable to expect that the rings in the next box will be silver. You open it up, and see that in fact the rings inside are gold. In this situation it seems natural to say ‘Oh, these are still gold!’ Of course the rings in this box had always been gold, but this is not what the utterance means. What it means is that we are still at a point in the series where the rings we find are gold.

More generally, sentences of the form ‘X is still Y’ need not mean that X was Y in the past and continues to be Y. William of Sherwood was wrong to claim that nothing is still an animal that was not an animal in the past.

What do sentences of the form ‘X is still Y’ mean? As a first stab, we might say that such sentences presuppose that X is a noninitial element in some pragmatically salient series ⟨...X...⟩, that all elements prior to X in the series are Y, and that some element at least as late in the series as X may not be Y. Given that these presuppositions are satisfied, ‘X is still Y’ simply asserts that X is Y.

This semantics works well enough for atemporal examples like that of the rings in the boxes. It would be nice, however, to give a uniform analysis that can treat both temporal and atemporal examples. In order to do this, we will have to relate the elements of a series to times.

We may regard a series s as a function from some set of numbers $A_s$ into a set of individuals $U$. (Depending on the series, we might let $A_s$ consist of the first $n$ natural numbers, for some $n$; or the full set of natural numbers; or the integers; or the reals.) A temporal indexation of a series s is a function $i$ from $A_s$ into some set of times $T$. A temporally indexed series is a pairing of a series s with a temporal indexation of s. Intuitively, a temporally indexed series is just a series in which every position is associated with a time.

Now we revise the semantics for *still*. 


At a given time $t$, ‘$X$ is still $Y$’ presupposes:

(i) There is some pragmatically salient temporally indexed series $(s, i)$;

(ii) $X$ is a non-initial element of $s$; that is, for some $n \in A_s$, $n$ is not the least element of $A_s$, and $X = s(n)$;

(iii) $t$ is the time associated with $X$’s position in the series; that is, $i(n) = t$;

(iv) Every element prior to $X$ in the series is $Y$ at its associated time; that is, if $m < n$, then $s(m)$ is $Y$ at $i(m)$;

and

(v) Some element at least as late as $X$ in the series may not be $Y$ at its associated time; that is, it may be the case that for some $m \geq n$, $s(m)$ is not $Y$ at $i(m)$.

Given that these presuppositions are satisfied, ‘$X$ is still $Y$’ asserts at $t$ that $X$ is $Y$ at $t$.

Frequently, still is used to indicate that an object which had some property in the past continues to have it. For example, we can say John is still asleep, presupposing that he was asleep at all times in some set of relevant times in the past, and asserting that he is asleep in the present. In this case the relevant series has John in every position: $(\text{John}, \ldots, \text{John})$; the relevant temporal indexation associates each position in this series with a different time, from earliest to latest. This is the reading which William of Sherwood seemed to take as the only reading.

In other examples, e.g., that of the gold and silver rings, we may keep the time constant but allow a variety of objects to fall into the series. In some cases, we may have both a variety of objects in the series and a variety of times in the indexation; if we regard Socrates without his foot as nonidentical to Socrates with his foot, William of Sherwood’s original example is of this type. Alternatively, if we regard Socrates without his foot as identical to Socrates with his foot, this example can be treated in much the same way as John is still asleep.

Some people, perhaps, will find it disappointing that the analysis is compatible with either view regarding the maintenance of Socrates’ identity, since this means that we cannot use the semantics of still to decide the issue. But this would have been quite a lot to expect of a semantics for the word still.

To conclude: We can maintain that when an object of a given category $C$ loses a part, what remains is ‘still’ of category $C$, even though it was not of category $C$ prior to the separation; sentences of the form ‘$X$ is still $Y$’ do not entail that $X$ was previously $Y$.

**NOTES**

1 The discussion can be found on pp. 60-1 of Kretzmann’s 1968 English translation. The problem is reminiscent of an older puzzle posed by the stoic philosopher Chrysippus (the puzzle of ‘Deon and Theon’). For modern philosophical

2 I have rephrased the example here slightly, in order to make it sound more natural in English; William’s actual discussion used *totum* ‘whole’ rather than *all*. It is certainly questionable whether an authentic collective/distributive ambiguity exists for *whole*; but since William's counterarguments to this analysis do not depend on denying the collective/distributive ambiguity, the substitution seems harmless.

3 I set aside the issue of whether the English word *still* is completely synonymous with the Latin word *etiam* in William’s actual example.

REFERENCES


