

Investigating the Philosophical Dilemma of Personal Identity in the Movie *Ship of Theseus*

*Simrat Khurana

Research Scholar (Ph.D.), Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract


The philosophical issue of personal identity has been delved into by numerous distinguished philosophers like John Locke and David Hume in order to understand what precisely constitutes personal identity. The present paper is also an attempt to understand the constitution of personal identity through the famous philosophical paradox made into a movie of the same name, *Ship of Theseus*. The paper analyzes the philosophical issues presented in the movie through three interwoven stories and probes into the questions related to identity, self, consciousness, and ethics. The analysis carried in the paper will attempt to uncover if the paradox can be resolved or remains irresolvable.


Keywords: Philosophical Dilemma, personal identity, *Ship of Theseus*


Article Publication

 Published Online: 15-Dec-2021


*Author's Correspondence

 Simrat Khurana

 Research Scholar (Ph.D.),
Department of English and Cultural
Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh

 simratkhurana11@gmail.com

© 2021 The Authors. Published by
RESEARCH REVIEW International
Journal of Multidisciplinary. This is an
open access article under the CC BY-

NC-ND license 
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

The movie *Ship of Theseus* is based on the paradox of the same name. The movie begins by stating the paradox of “Ship of Theseus” in the opening title- “As the planks of Theseus’ ship needed repair, it was replaced part by part, up to a point where not a single part from the original ship remained in it, anymore. Is it, the, still the same ship? If all the discarded parts were used to build another ship, which of the two, if either, is the original Ship of Theseus?” The movie is an attempt to resolve the paradox by portraying three interwoven stories whose connections become evident only towards the end of the film. The movie explores the issue of personal identity and several other philosophical issues through the stories drawn on the paradox stated above.

The first part of the movie deals with the story of a visually impaired photographer Aaliya Kamal. Aaliya loses her eyesight due to cornea infection. After losing her eyesight, she decides to become a photographer in order to experiment and provide some meaning to her life. She is successful in her venture and gains recognition for her brilliant work as a blind but talented photographer, putting in use her other senses of hearing and touch along with technological advanced camera equipment to capture perfectly timed pictures. In a scene where she is being interviewed in a gallery displaying her work, when asked if she feels limited by anything because of her visual impairment, she answers ‘No’. But towards the end of the interview, she informs about her forthcoming surgery and says that she cannot wait to start her life anew as a photographer, downplaying her earlier claim of not feeling limited because of her sight. It means that she is hoping to start afresh as a photographer thinking she will get better at her craft after her surgery. But the things don’t turn out as expected.

Aaliya gains back her eyesight after undergoing cornea transplant. But to her surprise she finds it difficult in adjusting to her newfound circumstances and her ability to take good pictures deteriorates instead of improving. In her desperate attempts to take good pictures again she starts blindfolding herself to imitate her previous situation. She feels that she needs some sort of inspiration and decides to take a trip to a hill station in order to get close to nature. On her way to airport she has a discussion with her boyfriend pondering upon the fact whether there is some kind of inspiration involved while taking pictures or is it just about clicking the camera at the right time. Vinay, her boyfriend, responds that there must be something beyond taking pictures meaning the actual experience of that particular moment. In the closing scene of the first part of the movie, Aaliya is seen sitting on a bridge above a lake amidst majestic mountains. While attempting to click a picture, the cover of her camera lens falls into water. She, then, puts her camera in her bag and is seen sitting there, witnessing the beauty of nature, and experiencing that moment.

This first part of the movie deals with the issue of personal identity. Aaliya is seen having difficulties in adjusting after her cornea transplant. This raises the question whether the identity of a person actually changes after the replacement of a body-part. If one looks at the aspect of physical body alone it can be inferred then that Aaliya is the same person even after the surgery. Even the cells of a person's body keep regenerating from time to time but that does not necessarily result in changing the physical identity of a person. However, complications arise if one brings into focus the aspect of psychological identity. Now, even in psychological identity if one looks at the aspect of memory alone then Aaliya's surgery is not of the type resulting in memory loss or breaking the chain of memory or thoughts thereby raising doubts about the change in the psychological identity of a person. Nevertheless, if one pays attention to the personality and behavioral traits, then, a clear change is visible in Aaliya's character post surgery. Aaliya herself believes that her ability to take good pictures got affected after her surgery, which results in her mood changes and outbursts of anger on not seeing the results she expected to get. She earlier believed that she would be able to become much better in her craft after regaining her eyesight but contrary to her belief the results left her disappointed.

John Locke was of the view that, "consciousness makes personal identity" (319). He further elaborated "self depends on consciousness, not on substance" (325). For him, the cutting of a finger or a limb of body would not necessarily erase the consciousness of that part. Similarly, it can be inferred that transplantation of a particular body part would not result in changing the personal identity of a person because of the continued consciousness of the person. The continued existence of Aaliya's body and her continuous stream of thoughts make it difficult to resolve the issue of her identity as the same person. But, perhaps the issue is not the one that needs to be necessarily complicated. It could be the case that Aaliya just requires some time to adjust to her new found sense of sight or she might just need a fresh bout of inspiration to rejuvenate her photography skills.

The actual transformation in the personal identity of an individual comes forth, however, in the second part of the movie, which deals with the story of an erudite monk who belongs to some fictional religious order. His identity as a monk, his beliefs and values, his thought system, and his own sense of his identity and being comes into question after he develops liver cirrhosis. The issue of personal identity gets complicated further in this case as the same consciousness continues in the protagonist but his sense of self seems to have altered. John Locke said, "Idea of identity suited to the idea it is applied to . . . it being one thing to be the same substance, another the same man, and a third the same person, if person, man, and substance, are three names standing for three different ideas" (316). In the case of the second part the issue of personal identity gets problematized further as the protagonist continues to be the same man but seems to be altered as a different person altogether by the end.

Maitreya, the protagonist of the second part is a monk belonging to a fictional religious order, which looks partly inspired by Jainism, in the movie. He travels barefoot, lives by begging alms, and does not settle at one place and remains on the move like other members of his religious sect. Maitreya comes out strong in the opening scene where he walks up early, walks barefoot in rain in his dhoti to the high court of Mumbai. In the corridor of the court he is seen saving a caterpillar from getting quenched under the shoes of fellow passerby by

lifting it on his affidavit and leaving it on a plant. There he meets Charvaka, the young lawyer assisting on Maitriyea's case and it is through Maitriyea's and Charvaka's conversations that many philosophical questions come forth in the movie.

Maitreya has filed a petition in the court to stop testing of chemicals on animals. He is against the torture inflicted on animals by conducting tests and experiments by various pharmaceutical and cosmetic companies. He develops liver cirrhosis but refuses to take medications because those medicines have been tested on animals before. The treatment available does not fall in line with his belief system and he therefore makes the choice not to follow the prescribed course of the doctor. Instead, he makes the choice of withdrawing from life by starving himself, going by an ancient custom in his religion in which one withdraws from life if suffering from an incurable disease. His liver cirrhosis, however, is curable, but not in a way, he prefers. However, after suffering from severe pain and realizing his time has not come yet, he agrees to get himself treated. There comes a visible transformation in him in arriving at this decision and this transformation can be seen to be partly resulting from his conversations with Charvaka.

In the first meeting with Charvaka in the court, Charvaka describes that his parents named him Madhav after the famous theologian Madhava Acharya but as he grew up he decided to switch sides with atheism and therefore the name Charvaka after the famous materialist and hedonist Indian philosopher. Charvaka is of the view that filing a petition in the court cannot be a solution. He thinks that the problem of animals can be solved by providing bigger cages and better conditions. But then according to him even this does not matter as the animals are to be butchered in the end. Maitreya, however, holds a different opinion. He thinks that just because the animals are marked for slaughter does not mean that the animals should be tortured for life.

Charvaka is further of the view that the intention behind testing chemicals on animals is not wrong. According to him the intention behind the action is not of harming animals but the welfare of humanity. Mr. Gupta, the senior advocate, then tells Charvaka that Maitriyea's world view is not limited. It does not just contain humanity but encompass all the creation existing out there in the world. The ethics of the situation can be judged on the basis of consequentialist as well as non-consequentialist ethical theories. If one looks at the intention behind the testing in order to judge the ethics of the situation then a theory like that of Utilitarianism of J.S. Mill might justify the action of testing chemicals on animals. It would justify the action because the task is ultimately aimed at the greater benefit and welfare of a larger number of human beings aiming at eliminating pain for them while using pharmaceutical and cosmetic products. But, on the other hand, if the deontological principle of Immanuel Kant is kept in my mind the action then seems unjustifiable as it cannot be made into a universal principle.

This part of the movie, through the character of Maitreya, raises a number of important questions. Is it morally and ethically right to torture animals for the benefit of human beings? Does the happiness of mankind justify the heinous torture of animals? These questions also bring into focus flaws in certain philosophical theories. Does the intention justify an action if the consequences are not favorable and if the consequences are favorable but the means adopted wrong, then is the action justifiable? Does the greatest happiness of greater number justify the sacrifice of an individual? Philosophical theories like those of Kant take into account the dignity and worth of an individual human being but fail to include the entire creation, excluding creatures other than humans.

The non-consequentialist theories like Divine Command Theory and Natural Law theory, on the other hand, would definitely criticize this action as being against the divine and natural order. Nevertheless, even that would vary according to the divine order of different religions and natural order of different cultures, tribes, or societies. One religion might allow the sacrifice of animals whereas another might not. Also, these theories can only be considered if one believes in the existence of a divine or natural order.

Charvaka, in the movie, however, does not believe in the existence of such an order. He asks Maitreya how does it matter if he takes medicines or not. For him one's actions are inconsequential in the greater scheme

of things. Maitreya, however, holds a different opinion. He believes that every action of man has an effect on every single atom of the universe; otherwise, there is no meaning in anything.

Maitreya's beliefs, however, comes into doubt when he decides to withdraw from life. He refuses to take medicines and therefore suffers severely. He is unbent on his resolute decision even after the attempts made by everyone else to convince him for treatment. Mr. Gupta attempts to convince him by looking at the relativistic views of his own religion. He tells him that no universal law can bind everything and he needs to look at the relativity of things. But, Maitreya does not budge from his decision resulting in worsening of his condition. In constantly deteriorating condition, when asked by an old man whether the soul really exists, Maitreya answers by saying that he does not know, making him question his own beliefs.

Charvaka tells Maitreya that man himself invented the concept of God, afterlife, and soul to cope up with the idea of an absolute end. Maitreya after suffering physically and yet failing to arrive at a meaning vents out of his anger one night. He asks for how long will this suffering continue. He asks how much time is still left. When he wakes up in the morning, he says that he is ready for treatment as his time has not come yet. What makes him change his mind? Does he experience some sort of divine encounter at night telling him about his days left on earth? Or is it the result of his beliefs being shattered? No answer is provided in the movie. In the closing scene of the final section, however, Maitreya is seen dressed up like a common man, giving up his clothes of a monk. Does the experience of liver cirrhosis and resulting liver transplant actually change his personal identity specifically his psychological identity. No answer is given. It is left for the viewers to decide but Maitreya's story hints at the relativity of concepts of identity, truth, ethics, and morality.

The third story points to the sociological problem of poverty in India along with related philosophical concerns. It deals with Naveen, a young stockbroker, who has recently undergone a kidney transplant. While in a hospital taking care of his grandmother he learns about a case of organ theft of a poor laborer Shankar. Naveen fears that his new kidney was stolen from Shankar but after arguing with the hospital staff he learns that the actual recipient of Shankar's kidney lives in Sweden. He decides to meet the receiver and help Shankar out. Shankar, on the other hand, prefers a financial settlement with the receiver instead of going through the trials and tribulations of courtroom. Naveen's grandmother who is earlier unhappy with him because of his materialistic nature, is glad to witness the transformation in him while trying to help Shankar. The transformation of thinking about others and understanding his responsibility towards others and the world occurs in Naveen. Naveen, however, feels disappointed when Shankar prefers money over his kidney. He tells his grandmother that he could not do anything to which she replies that the effort alone matters and this much is sufficient.

The third part of the movie raises the question of moral and social responsibility of an individual towards his fellow beings and the debate of ethics over money. The question of personal identity also comes in, asking if Naveen's regard for Shankar is the result of physical change i.e. kidney transplant of his body. Is the psychological transformation of Naveen resultant of the physical change?

The final section of the movie present Aaliya, Maitreya, and Naveen sitting in the same room along with various other people; revealing that they all received organs from the same individual who died of an accident. The paradox however remains unresolved. It gets summarized in Naveen's conversation with his friend, Mannu, but still remains unanswered. Naveen tells his friend that we all are made up of several organs and these organs are what constitute us. To this Mannu replies that there must be something else also inside us, otherwise a person would change if the organs are replaced. What is this 'something else' that constitute a person? Is it the consciousness or something divine like soul? David Hume in his *A Treatise on Human Nature* stated, "A ship, of which a considerable part has been changed by frequent reparations, is still considered as the same; nor does the difference of the materials hinder us from ascribing an identity to it" (402). It is, therefore, not the replacement of a part or an organ, that changes the personal identity of an individual. Also, if the consciousness and thinking continues in an individual then what is it that is responsible for determining the change in personal identity?

In the final scene of the movie all the organ recipients are seen watching a clip of their donor. Their donor was a cave explorer. A clip is shown in which the donor is seen inside a cave with only his shadow visible on the surface of the cave. It can be viewed as an allusion to Plato's allegory of cave. One can interpret that the donor has perhaps not experienced something higher and is just like the captives of Plato's cave who consider shadows to be real. The recipients, on the other hand, especially the three protagonists, are like the ones who came out of the cave and actually experienced reality. They are the ones who come to a newer understanding of their selves through the process of physical and psychological transformation.

The movie explores various philosophical and ethical issues. It challenges certain philosophical theories and raises various ethical concerns. The movie brings forth the questions on identity but provides no concrete answers. It is left for viewers to obtain their own answers. Charavaka at one point in the movie says that humans are obsessed with getting final solutions but here it could be deducted that perhaps even the solutions and answers are relative only. David Hume has very well summarized the problem of personal identity by saying, "all the nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided, and are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties" (410). The paradox of personal identity raises several questions and issues but thereby remains unresolved.

Works Cited

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. The Floating Press, 2009.

Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Pennsylvania State University, 1999.

Ship of Theseus. Directed by Anand Gandhi, UTV Motion Pictures, 2013.