

ARTIFACTS AND PERSONS

by Alfredo Lucero-Montaña

1. Introduction

This article shows that the concept of artifact as well as of person are social constructions, namely, that society shapes in a certain manner — at least partially — the identity of artifacts and persons.^[1] This thesis assumes that what a person is depends on the interpretation that other members of that society make of his features. What is a person is a question of interpretation, and not merely that something — "a further deep fact" — is discovered. Thus, there is no such thing as "an essential reference to human beings as they really are", as if this "as they really are" could be understood independently of the social context and the conceptual frameworks according to which human beings see themselves as persons, and are seen by others as such kind of persons.

Here we will understand the notion of conceptual framework as the set of theoretical and conceptual means, norms and values, that persons have at their disposal to explain and understand the world, and also to act within it, including the assimilation of objects and processes in that world. At the same time, the conceptual frameworks are social constructions, that is, they are the outcome of the actions and interactions of many persons within the social group, which also explains its continuous transformations, and generally its dependence of social conditions.

We will argue why is not correct to hold that there could be a reference to persons "as they really are," if this "as they really are" is understood as independent of the conceptual frameworks that people have at their disposal to identify objects or persons, including themselves as persons. To support this thesis, we would stress the central role of conceptual frameworks, and the meaning of knowledge as well as its conditions, regarding the social context of the identity of artifacts and persons. We will deal, on section 2, with the conditions of identity of artifacts, and on section 3, we will extend the conclusions to the problem of the identity of persons in regard to what is it that makes them the kind of persons they are.

2. The identity of artifacts

The concepts that refer to artifacts determine the conditions of persistence (continued existence) in a way that completely depends of the conceptual framework in which those concepts are used. A conceptual framework underlies the beliefs and interests, the ends and values, in terms by which the artifact is conceived and created, maintained and used. Let us view how this idea functions with regard to the classical example of the ship of Theseus.

But before we begin the analysis of the example, we must clearly state that by artifact we will understand an object that is the outcome of the transformation of concrete objects by means of intentional actions. Within the concept of artifact, the network of intentional actions is oriented in an efficient manner toward the aim of a valuable outcome. In David Wiggins's words, artifacts are identified "by reference to a parcel of matter so organized as to subserve a certain function."[\[2\]](#) Artifacts then are collected and classified together "under functional descriptions."[\[3\]](#)

Wiggins has suggested that a condition of artifact identity is "the capacity to subserve whatever roles or ends the artifact was designed as that very artifact to subserve."[\[4\]](#) This condition clearly shows that the identity of an artifact depends of the roles and ends that it supposedly must fulfill as being produced through systematic intentional actions, which transform concrete objects, as well as its capacities to fulfill those supposed roles and ends.

But this means that artifact identity depends of the conceptual framework, according to which the intentional actions take place in order to achieve certain results, and of the particular conception of the world that will use the artifact and will judge about its identity. We must stress that it is possible to make judgments of identity from different points of view, from different conceptual frameworks.

Theseus' ship is a ship constructed, within a certain community, to be used as the sacred ship that will annually voyage from Piraeus to Delos. While the conceptual framework is preserved, according to which it is believed that *that* is the ship that fulfills the specific ends and roles — which conventionally has been decided it must fulfill — then *that* ship is Theseus' ship.

In this case, it is not important how many changes the ship went through, and how much material has been added or removed to the original one as it went through some transformations.

Our starting point is Hobbes' words:

Concerning the difference whereof made by a continued reparation in taking out the old planks and putting in new [...] and if some man 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.^[5]

Here obviously arises a dispute concerning what is *really* Theseus' ship: the reconstructed ship with all the original planks, which have been put in the same order and kept the same relations and proportions, or the "original" ship in which have been completely substituted all the planks.

Our proposal of solution to the problem is that the question what is really Theseus' ship is not adequately set out, because we cannot say what is really Theseus' ship. The reason is that there is no ship independently of the interests and points of view; there is no ship independently of the conceptual means, which are involved when the transformations of the ship have taken place so to continue using it for certain ends, as well as trying to answer to the question what is Theseus' ship.

There is not an independent decisive criterion from the context and interests of the men who made the transformations of the ship, as well as from the ends they pursue. Precisely, by virtue of the confrontation of interests and ends, which at the same time depend upon each point of view, the function that originally the ship should fulfill cannot constitute the decisive criterion, since that function depends of the particular point of view; otherwise the question would be begged. We can understand this better, for instance, if we consider the possibility that the community, which originally decided to ascribe certain functions to the ship, decides — before the ship went to any physical transformation — that at certain time that ship would not voyage anymore, but it would be erected as a monument. In this case, there would not be any reason to suppose that the ship that functions as a monument is not the same Theseus' ship. Certainly, the community that constructed the ship, and ascribed to it a certain role, would be the same one that will decide to change that role.

But on the other hand, the reconstruction of the ship itself, using the discarded planks of the original, could be executed with the interest of accomplishing other ends; while the ship with the new planks would continue voyaging and carrying out the original ends by which Theseus' ship was originally constructed. The reconstructed ship with the original planks could intentionally be ascribed to carry out another role, i.e., as a monument. However, the individual who reconstructed the ship, with the original discarded planks of the original ship, could precisely have wanted to have those original planks because, according to their point of view, that was the only way to have the original Theseus' ship, and not any other, in order to fulfill the ends as a monument. This artifact would not carry out the ends by which originally was conceived and constructed, but the *same* ship would carry out a different purpose, while a different ship would fulfill the original ends. With this argument, we dismiss the idea that the ship identity could be established from the mere functions that it is really carrying out or that depends upon them.

If we call A the original ship, B the ship reconstructed from the discarded planks, and C the ship that continues voyaging once that all its planks have been replaced, we can say that A and B are the same ship according to the point of view of the men that made the reconstruction with the interest that the reconstructed ship would be Theseus' ship, because it has the planks of the original ship, so it can be displayed as a monument. But A and C would be the same ship from the point of view of who someone considers that the essential identity of Theseus' ship is not the planks, but is determined by the function to fulfill the voyage from Piraeus to Delos.

Here we have a situation in which the artifact is identified from two different points of view. Could we say that we have different identities of the ship, in the same sense that we could diversely describe the same entity, but that there exists really only one ship? Our thesis is that we have two different entities, which exist as a function of the conceptual frameworks in terms of which the artifacts are identified and constituted.

Wiggins holds that we have only two different descriptions, or different uses of the term 'ship.' In effect, he maintains that for an antiquarian 'Theseus' ship' is the one that has been reconstructed with the discarded planks, and for a priest it is the one that has been continuously repaired, and functions as the sacred ship by which the annual voyage was made. "Both are stuck

with the identification *ship* but, having different interests, they seem not to mean quite the same thing by 'ship.'"[6]

We can argue that maybe Wiggins is right when he asserts that the antiquarian and the priest do not seem to say the same thing, but not because they differ in their understanding and use of the term 'ship,' rather they differ in what they mean with the term 'Theseus' ship.' The point of disagreement precisely is that both meant different things, since they identify in different ways 'Theseus's ship.' But there is no reason to believe that they differ in their understanding and use of the term 'ship.' The crux of the problem is that there is no way for them, or for us as an external observer, to compare their judgments about 'Theseus's ship' with an entity that has a real existence, and is independent of the two points of view in dispute.

Furthermore, the set of interests and ends, beliefs and thoughts, and norms and values that they assume, constitute the conceptual frameworks that inevitably form each point of view. The agents cannot voluntarily change a point of view for another, and remain being the same agents. It is not a psychological question, as if one can freely choose a point of view. The issue is that the aspects of reality that could fulfill the concept have no essential or intrinsic features, rather its features are contextually given by the relation of the ship with other objects, and to the conceptual frameworks.

This means that in an epistemological sense there is no independent reality from the conceptual means that are at stake. There is no reality that by itself is 'Theseus' ship' or that does not depend in any sense of the conceptual means involved. From the two different points of view, in function of their different beliefs and interests, the aspects of reality which are relevant to an individual are determined by the context in ways which are radically different. So we could maintain that from the two different points of view there were constructed different artifacts. Therefore, from one point of view, someone can be right to affirm that A and B are the same; and from the other point of view, someone can correctly say that A and C are the same. And from both points of view they can acknowledge that B and C are not the same.

In other words, there is no way independent from the conceptual frameworks involved, in which we can resolve the question what is 'Theseus' ship,' since such an artifact does not exist

independently of the conceptual frameworks of those who conceived and constructed, transformed and used it. The choice between one point of view and another is not just, as we already stated, a psychological question, but it could be the real difference between two different conceptions of the world. Therefore, the identity of A and B or A and C depends on the conceptual framework involved, and it is not a question of comparison with an independent reality.

Certainly, we have to acknowledge that once we choose the determinate concept, we cannot do anything to change the fact that a certain reality in a certain moment fulfills it or not. But here the issue is to admit, or not, that what is an artifact, and the conditions of its identity, are inherent to the conceptual framework. If we admit an internalist point of view of artifacts, then there could be two overlapping conceptual frameworks, and that by virtue of this overlapping it could be possible to identify, from both frameworks, A, B and C as ships. But from the priest's point of view, A and C are the same, but A and B are different; while from the antiquarian's point of view A and B are considered as the same, but A and C are different.

In sum, we can say that there is no absolute answer to the question what is really Theseus' ship, or with regard to the conditions of identity of artifacts. If our argument is right, the constitution of an artifact depends on the conceptual framework, which includes the beliefs and interests, values and ends, of the person that makes the identification.

3. The identity of persons

We have stated that persons are social constructions. We maintain that the problem of personal identity — in the sense of understanding what is that makes a person such a person — depends on what the person believes about the world, that is, the forms by which he understands and interprets it, as well as the ways of behaving within that world. We must stress that these theoretical and conceptual means necessarily come from the conceptual frameworks, to wit, that all these elements are necessary to understand the concept of person — in the sense that here it is assumed. But by no means do we contend that this line of analysis of the concept of person as a social being is the only one plausible.

To regard a person as a social being means that his beliefs and desires, needs and ends, as well as his judgements, are shaped by his interactions with other persons, and at the same time those persons are shaped by the communities and traditions that they belong to. This means that persons cannot understand themselves outside of the communicative frameworks within which the beliefs and judgements are conceived, expressed and maintained, criticized and modified.

We could state that human beings have an innate tendency to communicate and interact with other human beings. If a human being is a person, he must realize that tendency up to a point. This shows a conceptual difference between "human being" and "person." We think that these concepts are not co-extensive. We understand as a 'human being' a member of the homo sapiens species, in the strict biological sense; and 'person' as the human being that has achieved its tendency to interact and communicate by means of a language developed by a society of persons.

Thus the definition of communication between persons we provisionally assume is that "two or more people stand in a communication relation if the joint product of their displayed intentions in uttering and their uptake in hearing one or more speech-acts affords for each a common basis for relatively co-ordinated actions."[\[7\]](#) The idea that persons are social constructions means that they are, at least partially, constituted by their relations with other persons within interactive and communicative frameworks. The relevant properties of the identity of a person include the relational properties of being a member of a certain social group, which consist to have such beliefs and dispositions, to be seen by certain particular views by others in society, and to have a certain image and self-esteem.

Consequently, the thesis that we hold is that persons are constituted by the same mode as artifacts. That artifacts are constituted, in the weaker sense, means that it is not possible to decide the question 'what is really Theseus' ship' independently from the conceptual framework of the individual who makes the judgment of identity. But also, in the stronger sense, that there really is no artifact independently from the beliefs and desires, norms and values, needs and ends, of the concrete individual. In the same way, persons do not exist independently of the roles that they fulfill in their society, neither from the way they judge the actions and beliefs of others nor the way others judge them.

Muhlhausler and Harre have offered evidence for the thesis that the identity of person is strongly influenced by the conceptual framework used by the same person who identifies himself, or by the conceptual framework used by other persons who identified that same person. They particularly hold that "the use of person-indicating expressions in most languages include references to specific social relations."[\[8\]](#)

The thesis we want to stress, and that it is useful to our task, is specifically the following: "the verbal items used to create a context of communication [...] can be shown to include knowledge of the social and psychological conventions of the culture of the people that use [them]."[\[9\]](#) If this idea is right, then, we could hold that what a person is cannot be related with a set of fixed features, and that the identity of person cannot be based on an absolute identity criterion. The identity of person is grounded on the set of beliefs, values and norms of his social context, which allow him to understand and interpret the world, and shape his necessities and desires, and which constitute him as a social being.

The concept of person, on the one hand, is constructed within a social context, and his identity is shaped according to identity criteria related to the relevant conceptual frameworks of the social context. On the other hand, the identification of the beliefs, values and ends is necessary to the identity of a person. At the same time, all these elements constitute the person as a social entity.

Therefore, persons are social subjects. Human beings are constituted as persons by the same society in which their personhood is deployed. The concept of person is of an individual human being constituted as person within a social context. Every human being potentially is a person, but some of his capacities must be exercised, and some of his potentialities must be realized within his social context so that he becomes a person. In Wiggins' words, "person is a 'social' concept with identity criteria of an adaptability and pliability suited to this role."[\[10\]](#)

Finally, we have to conclude that the existence of persons is partially determined by facts that are not just purely internal to the psychology of the individual. There are facts related to the social context that make an individual suitable to be treated as a person, and as such kind of person. In Locke's words, "person [...] is a forensic term, appropriating actions and their

merit”,[\[11\]](#) and in this sense the social context at least partially determines what we take into account as a person.

Footnotes

1. The following draws heavily on León Olivé, "Identidad Colectiva," in León Olivé y Fernando Salmerón, eds., *La Identidad Personal y la Colectiva*, Proceedings of México's Colloquium of the Institut International du Philosophie, September, 1991. México, UNAM, 1994, 65-84.

2. Wiggins, David. *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 90.

3. Ibid, 87.

4. Ibid, 97.

5. Hobbes, Thomas. From *De corpore*.

6. Wiggins, op. cit., 94.

7. Muhlhausler, Peter and Rom Harre. *Pronouns and People: The Linguistic Construction of Social and Personal Identity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 12.

8. Ibid, 5.

9. Ibid, 16.

10. Wiggins, David. "Locke, Butler and the Stream of Consciousness: and Men as a Natural Kind." In Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, ed. *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976), 165.

11. Locke, John. *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter XXVII, 26.

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