

The Growing Argument

The Plutarch (LS28A) and Stobaeus (LS28D) passages puzzled us. Here is an attempt to clarify the issues.

Plutarch mentions Epicharmus as the source of this argument. He was a comic playwright (early 5th century BCE), and one of his jokes was that someone who owes money today might not owe it tomorrow, since by then he will be a different person (and hence could not be held responsible).

The argument about growth aims to show that given a certain view of the identity conditions of a person, growth and change is impossible. But this conflicts with our everyday experiences. The argument has three steps:

0. According to common opinion, substances grow and decay.
1. Every particular substance (*οὐσία*, *ousia*) is in constant flux and motion, releasing some things and receiving others. This is change.
2. These arrivals and departures (changes) transform the substance, just as in the case of numbers: when we add or subtract from a number, it cannot remain the same but becomes different (*μη̄ διαμένειν ἀλλ' ἕτερα γίνεσθαι, μέ diamenein all' hetera ginesthai*). Example: $2 + 1 = 3$, and $3 \neq 2$.
3. So, changes transform a thing from what it is into something else. Therefore, the common opinion is wrong: things cannot grow and decay. Growing and diminishing are affections of a body which serves as substrate and persists (*πάθη σώματος ἐστὶν ὑποκειμένου καὶ διαμένοντος, pathê sômatos estin hupokeimenou kai diamenontos*). Change is impossible because change presupposes a persisting thing that *undergoes* change. But if constant flux means the continuous transformation, there is no such persisting thing.

Perhaps this is not such much of an 'argument' as a puzzle of paradox, i.e. a set of inconsistent propositions. The puzzle concerns the diachronic identity of an object that undergoes change yet remains the same. But how is it possible that constantly changing things remain the same?

Things have identity conditions. This means they have conditions that determine what counts as one (the same) thing, and to mark it out as a distinct entity different from others, as the very thing it is (what makes Fido *Fido*), and also as an instance of a certain sort or kind (what makes Fido a *dog*). Entities with (determinate) identity can be picked out, and re-identified at different times; entities without identity could not be picked out at all. (Hence Quine: 'no entity without identity'.) Identity criteria can be either synchronic or diachronic.

The identity in question here is (strict) numerical identity. For instance, the chair here is the same chair that was there a moment ago: one chair, two places. We can take matter to be the criterion of identity or individuation: a change in matter amounts to a change in identity. So, if I break a leg off the chair, or mark it with a felt pen, it is a different chair. (For a discussion of this, see Locke, *Essay* II.27).

The Stoics accepted the principle of the identity of indiscernibles: if x and y have all their properties in common, then $x = y$. Any ‘two’ things that share all their properties, are in fact *one* thing. As Leibniz says, ‘no two substances are entirely alike, and only differ in number’ (*Discourse on Metaphysics*, §9). In other words: qualitative sameness (indiscernibility) excludes numerical difference (a difference in number); or, which says the same, qualitative sameness entails numerical sameness.

The converse of this principle is at play in the growing argument: the non-identity of discernibles. This simply means that two things that do not share their properties are different things. So, I had a certain number of hairs on my head just now; but having teared out one of them, I now have a different number of hairs on my head, and hence, strictly speaking, I am a different person now, just as premise 2 suggests. But this is counter-intuitive: it looks as if matter cannot be the identity criterion for persons, and perhaps other things.

So, here is the growing argument again, in a nutshell: any minute material change creates a new individual, and since there is no persisting subject of change, there could be no growth.

The Stoics can resolve the puzzle. The substance (*οὐσία*, *ousia*) is not the subject of change (growth and decay); considered as a material body, I constantly change, and do not endure at all, just as premise 1 suggests. But considered as a ‘peculiarly qualified individual’ (*ἰδίως ποιός*, *idiôs poiôs*; cf. handout 2), as *me*, I endure throughout my life. So, every identifiable thing is such a peculiarly qualified entity, and thus has a feature, or features, that mark it out as the subject of change. Since qualities are bodies for the Stoics, it makes perhaps sense to think of these identifying qualities as DNA (for living things), or fingerprints¹ and iris patterns (for humans). Hence the common opinion can be right after all.

1 See Sedley, D. (2005). *Stoicism*. Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
<https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/stoicism/v-2/the-categories>.

