Can Stoic Bodies be rescued from the Growing Argument?

by Stephen Pickering

The Growing Argument

The Growing Argument of the Academics holds that an object's identity cannot survive change to its substance or powers. Yet, intuitively, objects do maintain their identity, despite such changes. The Stoics argued that the identity of each object (a 'peculiarly qualified individual') resides in one or more unique, unchanging powers. But are there such powers? It seems that only haecceity is both unique and unchanging, but haecceity is not a power. The Stoic 'unique power' account of identity therefore failed to answer the Growing Argument. However, unique powers are not essential to a Stoic account of identity, or of bodies. I argue instead for bodies that have shared powers bound by 'tenor' to a unique substrate; that identity is the sole inherent property of the substrate; and that identity is not a causal power. This provides a better answer to the Growing Argument, while remaining consistent with Stoic ontology.

Bodies alone exist

The Stoics believed that, at the observable level, only bodies exist but, at the unobservable level, the world is a uniform continuum of 'matter'. The Stoics therefore have to explain, firstly, how physically distinct bodies emerge from the continuum (by interaction of two 'principles') and, secondly, how bodies acquire their divergent properties (from 'elements' and 'tenor').

Bodies alone have causal powers

The Stoic concept of bodies is that bodies alone can exist and interact because bodies alone have causal powers[1], and that causal powers *are* bodies. Thus, not only everyday objects are bodies, but their causal powers are also bodies. Are everyday objects simply the sum of their powers? If so, why do those powers cohere rather than disperse? The Stoic's answer: powers cohere because they are bound to a substrate. Bodies therefore comprise (a) a substrate - a discrete 'something' formed from part of the continuum and (b) causal powers that are somehow attached to the substrate. The substrate itself is not a material substance that exists in the Stoic sense i.e. it has no inherent powers. Substrate can therefore host change without itself changing. And having a constituent of the body without powers, i.e. immune to causal interaction, is not only possible, but necessary if Stoic bodies are to maintain their identity over time.

The origin of bodies

Individual bodies arise from the action of an active principle on a passive principle. The active principle is called 'god', or 'designing fire'[2]. The passive principle, i.e. the material continuum, is called: 'matter' or 'unqualified substance'[3]. Of bodies as substrate we can say only that they are plural, and hence distinct, and therefore have numerical identity. Hence, the only property of a body as substrate is its identity. But identity is not a causal power, and substrate itself is not a material body, because if it were we would interact with it, i.e. we would observe identity as a causal power directly, in the same way we observe causal powers such as size and shape. And because causal powers alone can interact, changes to a body's causal powers cannot change the substrate, and hence cannot change the bodies identity. Only a change to the substrate could change a body's identity, and that would require a change in 'tenor'.

How bodies acquire causal powers

Bodies acquire causal powers by mixing of the active principle with the passive in a process of 'total blending', analogous to mixing wine with water[4]. A substrate permeated by the active principle is said to be 'qualified', i.e. it is a body with causal powers. But how can the active principle give rise

to the variety of causal powers that we see in bodies? The Stoic's answer is that the active principle becomes differentiated both in its nature and in degree. First, its nature changes by condensation into the four elements: Fire, Air, Water and Earth. The four elements are present in different proportions in all bodies. Second, the active principle in bodies has four possible degrees of 'tenor' (tension); and progressively greater degrees of tenor in a body characterise it as inanimate, living, sentient or rational.

Fire, Air, Water and Earth

The elements condense from the active principle in the following order: Air, Water, and then Earth. However, the condensation of Earth from Water leaves Fire as a residue, a 'thin part', which is 'elemental fire', and not the 'designing fire' that is the active principle[5]. Elemental fire is the fire that destroys by combustion, whereas the designing fire 'causes growth and preservation'[3]. Fire and Air are the active pair, called 'breath' (*pneuma),* whereas Water and Earth are passive and must be 'sustained' by participation in *pneuma*. This participation takes the form of a kind of simultaneous inward and outward motion called 'tenor'. The outward motion produces quantities and qualities in a body, and the inward one unity and substance[6].

Tenor

Tenor can be present at one or more of four discrete levels, each of which imparts a particular quality to the body. At its most basic (*hexis* or 'cohesion') tenor is a force that preserves bodies over time by binding them together so that they do not spontaneously dissipate. Without tenor, a body would cease to exist. The second degree of tenor is *phusis* or 'physique' which imparts life to plants and non-sentient life-forms. A still higher degree of tenor is *psuchē* or 'soul' which imparts consciousness to animate life forms. The highest degree of tenor is *logikē psuchē* or 'rational soul' which imparts rationality to humans. Thus, the active principle, manifest as *pneuma,* has one degree of tenor in rocks, two degrees in plants, three in animals, and four in humans.

Tenor sustains the elements

Why did the Stoics opt for four discrete degrees of tenor rather than a continuous range? One single degree of 'cohesion' for inanimate bodies is insufficient to account directly for differences in the strengths of materials. Why can a knife spread butter, but butter cannot spread a knife? Postulating different levels of cohesion in the two materials could have provided an explanation - indeed one that would still be considered basically correct today. Perhaps they were concerned that postulating variable levels of tenor would blur the distinction between minerals and living things, between plants and animals, and between animals and humans. In fact, it seems that 'cohesion' refers only to the cohesion of the elements to the substrate, in which case the Stoics must account for 'commonly qualified' causal powers such as the hardness of iron in terms of the amounts of the four elements present in the body, and which are sustained by tenor[7]. Tenor therefore does not directly determine the causal powers of a body; instead it serves to sustain them.

Bodies change, yet remain the same

The Stoic ontology of principles, bodies, elements and tenors seems overly complex unless its purpose is to account for our intuition that a thing can change yet remain the same thing, namely, that *body as qualified by the elements* tends to be sustained over time by tenor, but can change as a result of causal interactions with other bodies, whereas *body as substrate* remains unchanged, thereby maintaining the body's identity, because substrate does not interact causally with other bodies. Only when the degree of tenor changes, or is no longer present, does the body change or lose its identity. Thus, substrate provides the body with synchronic identity, and tenor preserves the substrate through time, thereby ensuring the body's diachronic identity.

Is the Growing Argument refuted?

If Stoic bodies endure because identity resides in substrate rather than in causal powers, then the Growing Argument is refuted – regardless of whether Stoics actually argued that way (they didn't). Thus a person remains the same person from birth to death regardless of physical changes as long as that person's substrate retains its four degrees of tenor. But the loss of just one degree of tenor (loss of the rational soul) suffices for a person's substrate, and hence the person, to lose their identity. That seems intuitively correct. Conversely, the substrate of the statue, and hence its identity, remains the same as that of the lump of bronze, because there is no change to its one degree of tenor. To account for our intuition that the statue loses its identity when melted down, a fifth degree of tenor, corresponding to form, would be necessary. The Stoic account of identity therefore succeeds in the difficult case of persons, but fails in the simpler case of inanimate objects.

The dual nature of Stoic bodies therefore explains *how* a body retains its identity over time despite changing its properties. Moreover, we can *know* whether a body retains its identity, despite having no empirical knowledge of the substrate, because we can distinguish between the various classes of animate objects, and the inanimate.

Conclusion

By underwriting a metaphysical and epistemological account of identity based on substrate rather than unique properties, Stoic bodies refute the Growing Argument; but that account fails to explain our intuition concerning the identity of inanimate objects.

References

References are to sections in: Long, A.A and Sedley, D.N., *The Hellenistic Philosophers,* Cambridge University Press, 1987.
1. Nemesius: 45.C, p.272.
2. Stobaeus: 46.D, p.275.
3. Diogenes Laertius: 44.B, p.268.
4. Diogenes Laertius: 48.A, p.290.
5. Diogenes Laertius: 46.C, p.275.
6. Nemesius: 47.D, p.282 and 47.J, p.283; Plutarch: 47.G, p.282.
7. Plutarch: 47.M, p.284.