

THE LAW OF IDENTITY

Talking points:

1. The Law of Identity concerns the fact that a thing, any thing, is what it is at a particular point in time and, in retaining its identity over a period of time, its nature is, in some important respects, fixed and constant over that period of time. The notion that a thing is what it is at a point in time relates to the law of non-contradiction: a thing cannot both be what it is and, at the same time and in the same respect, be something other than what it is.

We implicitly use this law in everyday conversation wherein we use words to signify things that maintain some sort of identity over a period of time. A person might casually comment that “Our teenage daughter Emilia is quite obstinate; she has been that way since she was four.” Here, the implicit identity claim is that the teenage Emilia is, in some respect, the same person as the four-year-old Emilia. Although we use The Law of Identity naturally in everyday conversation, philosophically we might ask in what respect a *thing* is the same as itself across time. In what respect(s), for example, are the two Emilias the same; after all, the teenage Emilia is in numerous respects very different to the four-year-old Emilia. The identity of persons and things is examined in Chapter 5 (see SE pp. 118-119).

2. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus (~ 500 BCE) insightfully noted that everything we observe around us is in a constant state of change (or flux, giving rise to the notion that the observed world is in a *Heraclitean Flux*). He said, for example: “It is impossible to step twice into the same river ... it scatters and regathers, comes together and dissolves, approaches and departs.” What he means by this is that a river is constantly changing from one moment to the next, so the moment one steps out of and then back into a river, it is no longer the same river; it fails to retain an identity as *that particular river* over time. If this were true for all things, then the law of identity would fail. But imagine if this were the case! The world and everything in it would be morphing all the time—in such a world, we would not be able to have a conversation about anything since no single thing, from one moment to the next, would retain its identity. This assertion, however, depends on the level of specificity by which we define a thing. If we focus on all its minute details, then a river is never the same from one moment to the next. But if we stand back and look at a river more generally as, for example, a flow of water through the Grand Canyon (e.g., the Colorado River), then it does retain an identity and it is something we can converse about. The law of identity, then, is important to language itself.

Questions for discussion:

1. Is it possible for a thing to be both what it is and, at the same time and in the same respect, something else? Why or why not?
2. If things change from one instant to the next, as captured by Heraclitus’ idea of flux, how we pin things down in order to describe and talk about them?
3. Is there a difference between the law of identity and the law of non-contradiction? Or is one law implied by the other?

