

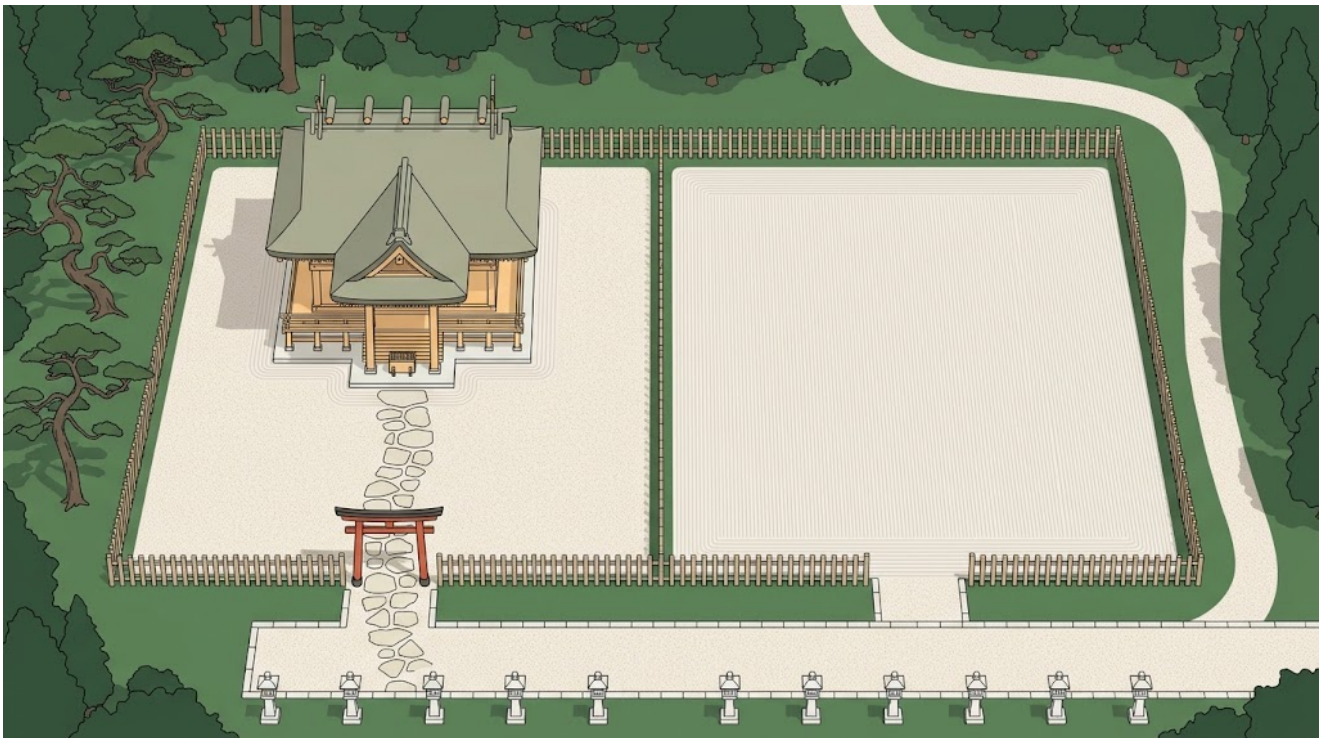
The Shrine That Is Always New

A building rebuilt from scratch every twenty years. Is it the same building?

4 min read

Before you read

- **continuity** — the quality of remaining the same thing over time
- **criterion** — the test by which something is judged
- **constitute** — to make up or compose
- **successive** — following one after another
- **intuition** — a judgement that feels obvious before it is argued for



A cypress-wood shrine building beside its empty adjacent plot, Ise, Japan

¹ At Ise, in Japan, the shrine buildings are taken down and rebuilt roughly every twenty years. The new structure goes up on an adjacent plot, in the same form, by the same methods, in fresh cypress. Then the old one is dismantled. The site has two plots for this reason: one holds the shrine, the other waits.

² Ask whether the building standing there today is the same building that stood in the eighth century and you will get a confident yes from almost everyone who maintains it, and a hesitant no from a first-year philosophy student. Both are answering honestly. They are using different criteria without saying so, and the disagreement is entirely about which criterion is the right one.

³ The puzzle is old. It reaches us as the ship of Theseus: a vessel whose planks are replaced one by one until none of the originals remain. The question is not what happened — nobody disputes the planks — but what we mean by *same*. One answer is material: a thing is constituted by its matter, so replacing all of it yields a

different thing. Another is formal: a thing is its pattern, and matter is only what the pattern is currently written in. A third is historical: a thing persists if each stage follows the last in an unbroken chain of the right kind.

⁴ Ise is a hard case for the first answer and an easy one for the other two. The matter is new. The form is exactly preserved, deliberately so. And the chain is unbroken in a particularly strong sense, because what is handed on at each rebuild is not only the design but the knowledge of how to build it. The carpenters who work on one rebuilding learn from those who worked on the last and teach those who will work on the next. The continuity runs through people as much as through timber.

⁵ The material criterion, pressed, has an awkward consequence close to home. Your body replaces a great many of its cells over your lifetime. If a thing is its matter, strict identity over a human life is difficult to maintain — and most people's intuition about themselves is firmly on the side of continuity. An argument that denies you are the person in your own childhood photograph has not discovered something shocking. It has more likely identified a defect in its own criterion.

⁶ This is what makes the question worth asking at all, and why it is not a word game. The intuitions we hold about sameness are not decoration on top of our concepts; they are evidence about what the concepts are for. We do not have a word like *same* in order to track matter. We have it to track the things we need to keep track of: responsibility, ownership, promises, grief, the person who owes you money, the shrine your great-grandmother visited.

⁷ Which does not settle it. Successive answers, each sensible, still conflict, and philosophy's useful contribution here is smaller than it first appears: not to declare a winner, but to force the criterion into the open. Once the question becomes *same in which sense, and for what purpose*, the shrine stops being a paradox and becomes what it has always been to the carpenters at Ise — a thing that is old precisely because it keeps being made new.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the answer you think is best.

1. Why does the shrine site at Ise have two plots?
 - A To allow visitors to compare the old and new designs
 - B So the replacement can be built before the old building is dismantled
 - C Because the ground must rest between rebuildings
 - D To store the timber used in construction

2. The writer says the caretaker and the philosophy student are "both answering honestly" because:
 - A Neither has studied the shrine's history
 - B They are applying different unstated criteria for sameness
 - C The question has no possible answer
 - D One is speaking literally and the other figuratively

3. Which criterion does the writer say Ise satisfies in a particularly strong form?
 - A The material criterion
 - B The formal criterion
 - C The historical or chain criterion
 - D None of them

4. The point of the childhood-photograph example in paragraph 5 is that:
 - A Memory is unreliable over long periods
 - B A conclusion this counter-intuitive suggests the criterion is faulty
 - C Human identity is unrelated to physical matter
 - D Photographs are poor evidence of identity

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences. Refer to the text where you can.

5. Summarise the three criteria for sameness set out in paragraph 3 in your own words.

6. The writer says continuity at Ise "runs through people as much as through timber". Explain what is meant and why it matters to the argument.

7. In paragraph 6 the writer argues that intuitions are evidence rather than decoration. What claim about the purpose of the word "same" does this support?

8. The final paragraph says philosophy's contribution here is "smaller than it first appears". What exactly is the writer claiming philosophy can and cannot do?

9. The essay opens with a factual description and withholds the ship of Theseus until paragraph 3. What is gained by that order?

Part C **Think deeper**

There is no single right answer here. Make a claim, then support it.

10. Is the shrine standing today the same shrine? State your criterion first, then apply it, and acknowledge what your answer costs you.

11. The writer lists responsibility, ownership, promises and grief as things the concept of sameness exists to track. Choose one and argue whether the material criterion could serve it at all.

12. A museum restores a painting until little original pigment remains. A band replaces every member over forty years. Does your criterion give the same verdict in both cases? If not, is that a problem?

13. "An argument that denies you are the person in your own childhood photograph has not discovered something shocking." Is it legitimate to reject an argument because its conclusion conflicts with strong intuition? Argue a position.

14. Would anything be lost if Ise were preserved as an original ancient structure instead of rebuilt? Say what, and why it would or would not matter.

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — the replacement is built before the old is taken down | 2. B — different unstated criteria | 3. C — the historical or chain criterion | 4. B — the counter-intuitive result indicts the criterion

Part B

5. Material: a thing is the stuff it is made of, so total replacement makes a new thing. Formal: a thing is its pattern or design, and matter merely carries it. Historical: a thing persists through an unbroken chain of appropriate stages, each succeeding the last.

6. The craft knowledge is passed from one generation of carpenters to the next, so the chain is sustained by transmitted skill, not only by repeated form. It strengthens the historical criterion, because the link between stages is active rather than merely a resemblance.

7. That the concept exists to serve practical human purposes — tracking who is responsible, who owns what, whose promise binds — rather than to track physical matter. The intuitions reveal that function.

8. It cannot adjudicate between criteria that are each coherent. It can force the criterion into the open, so a disagreement becomes a clear question about which sense of 'same' is meant and for what purpose.

9. Open. Strong answers note that the concrete case arrives before the abstraction, so the reader forms an intuition before being given the vocabulary that would steer it — which makes the later framework feel tested rather than imposed.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the conclusion.

10. The criterion must be stated and then actually applied; the strongest answers name a cost (e.g. the formal criterion struggles to distinguish a perfect replica built elsewhere).

11. Look for real engagement with practical consequences — a promise or debt surviving cellular replacement — rather than a restatement of the paragraph.

12. Mark consistency. An answer that reaches different verdicts and defends the difference by appealing to purpose is stronger than one that quietly switches criteria.

13. Either position is markable. Strong answers distinguish between intuitions that encode something real about a concept's purpose and intuitions that are merely familiar.

14. Accept answers on both sides. Look for a named loss — the transmitted craft, the practice itself, the meaning of renewal — rather than a general preference for old things.

EyeQBoost builds thinking skills in young learners through cognitive training, reading and gamified online classes. More free reading sets at eyeqboost.com/resources.