

Cheyenne Boon:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Cheyenne Boon:

Welcome to morning prayers. Today's service will begin with a responsive reading from the Black Appleton Psalter book. Psalm number 105, found on page 53. Please rise, in body or spirit, to read responsibly by whole verse.

Cheyenne Boon:

We give you thanks, oh God, and call upon your name. We make known your deeds among the peoples.

Congregation:

We sing to you. We sing your praise and speak of all your marvelous works.

Cheyenne Boon:

We glory in your holy name. Let the hearts of those who seek you rejoice.

Congregation:

We search for you and your strength. We continue to seek your face.

Cheyenne Boon:

You spread out a cloud for a covering and a fire to give light in the night season.

Congregation:

You opened the rock and water flow, so the river ran in the dry places.

Cheyenne Boon:

For you remembered your holy word and Abraham your servant.

Congregation:

So you led forth your people with gladness, your chosen with shouts of joy.

Cheyenne Boon:

You gave your people the lands of the nations and they took the fruit of others toil.

Congregation:

That they meant your statutes and observed your laws. Hallelujah.

Choir:

(singing)

Oliver Wolf:

Good morning, everyone.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Oliver Wolf:

"We are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to disassemble it in a dock and rebuild it from the best parts." This quote is from the Vienna Circle, Philosopher Otto Neurath, but it's famous from its appearance, at the beginning of Harvard Philosopher, Willard Van Orman's Quine's 1960 book, Word and Object.

Quine liked Neurath's use of the boat analogy to attack foundationalist epistemologies.

Foundationalism, a view that goes back to Aristotle and Descartes, views our belief network somewhat like an upside down pyramid. On the foundationalist picture, our beliefs are justified through linear inferential chains. Belief A is justified through inference from beliefs X, and Y, which are themselves justified through inference from beliefs V and W and so on, until you reach first principles; fundamental self-justifying beliefs. That's how one can be said to know what she knows.

A foundationalist might think about the scientific enterprise this way as well. However, scientific insights were in fact discovered, rigorous scientific theory must be re-buildable from basic premises in this way, at least in principle. It must be amenable to rational reconstruction as Carnap called it.

The Cartesian foundationalist analogy, unlike Neurath's boat, is one of demolishing a building and starting over from the ground up. Philosophers have a clear role in this picture; to determine the first principles and to clarify the organization of scientific theory. Science is to be justified by philosophical underpinnings.

Quine didn't like this way of thinking about epistemology because it seems to require stepping outside of our theoretical framework in order to justify it. For Quine, we can never step outside of science. We can only try to make it cohere from within. As you like to say, there is no first philosophy. We only start precisifying theory after having already done a bunch of science. We can never re-build the boat from the ground up. We just have to replace rotten boards while standing on other boards. Instead of an upside down pyramid, Quine prefers the image of a web of belief, thus for Quine, philosophy is not a separate discipline that justifies science, but is in fact continuous with science, a part of science.

But I am not here to lecture you about epistemology. I chose to share this quote with you all today because I think life is kind of like this. We're just thrown in. By the time we're old enough to seriously reflect about who we want to be and what we want to do, a lot has already happened. Commitments have been made and ruts have been fallen into. Despite the claims of some self-help books, we can never truly clear the slate and start over. There is no stepping outside of ourselves. We can only improve from where we currently are.

At first, this idea might seem kind of scary. If we can never really clear the slate, does that mean that we can never fully move on from what came before? Well, in some sense, yes. But whether we like it or not, this is true of life to some extent. We are shaped by our past and in that sense, it never leaves us. On the other hand, we have great potential to break out of old habits and change ourselves. We may never be able to disassemble and reassemble the boat, but through replacing boards one at a time, we'll eventually replace them all.

The question of how to think about who I want to be, what I want to do and how to get there, is of course especially salient for me at the present moment, since my time at Harvard is almost up and I have to think about next steps but I hope Neurath's boat can be a useful and empowering image for all of you. Thank you.

Cheyenne Boon:

Please rise, in body or spirit. Let us pray.

Cheyenne Boon:

Oh God, who descend by word to speak in the prophets and live in thy son, and appoint by church to be witness of divine things in all the world, revive the purity and deepen the power of its testimony and through the den of earthly interests and the storm of human passions, let it make the still small voice of the spirits felt. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Cheyenne Boon:

And together, let us recite the prayer that Jesus taught us saying...

Congregation:

Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. The kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Cheyenne Boon:

Please join in singing Hymn Number 167, Love's Redeeming Work Is Done.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing).

Cheyenne Boon:

As we go into this day, let us bless and keep one another. Let us make peace. Let us be at peace. May it be so and may the church say, Amen.

This transcript was exported on Apr 25, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Congregation:

Amen.