

CHRIS'LL DEAL WITH IT

episode notes



EP 28 - Each Of Us A Ship Of Theseus

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Today's episode explores the concept of the Ship of Theseus.

It's a philosophical paradox that asks: *If you replace every component of a ship, one by one over time, does it remain the same ship?*

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes took the paradox one step further: *If you kept all of the discarded parts as they were being replaced, and used them to build a second ship, which of those ships would be considered the original?*

The paradox raises two critical questions:

1. Is the ship's identity a product of its *form* (or primary function), or the *matter* from which it is built?
2. What is the relationship between an object and the materials its made up of?

Over the years, I've found this paradox both challenging and comforting. I'd like to share some thoughts of applying these questions both to our personal identity and to our organizations

Personal Identity

- Many of us stop and ask ourselves: What am I? or Who am I?
 - Am I the flesh & bone?
 - The beating heart?
 - The brain that controls the body we move?
 - The memories stored in brain neurons?
 - A spirit residing inside a vessel of a particular form, mostly in control of the vessel, yet separate from it?
- This is a challenging, relatable paradox - which creates a wide variety of responses across all domains of our lives (especially religion).

But how can the paradox be applied to the living of our lives? Here's 8 thoughts:

1. Depending on how you answer the paradox, you can provide a framework for changes that occur in your life:
 - a. They give us greater permission & latitude to change without changing the definition of who 'we' are
 - b. Conversely, we can view changes as a journey towards becoming someone totally new.
2. The average cells in our bodies lasts about 7-10 years. Various types of cells replace themselves at different rates, and our bodies are composed of many different kinds of cells. This is a gross oversimplification, but as a concept, it's helpful to see ourselves as beings that are in a constant state of physical renewal. Each cell is no different than the plank of a ship. Therefore, we can never be a fixed, completely definable entity.

3. It can help us avoid over-defining ourselves and others. Definitions themselves can never capture anyone completely. People can and do change. What are you even trying to define in the first place?
 - a. The ship we are now?
 - b. The ship we were?
 - c. The ship we envision ourselves becoming?
 - d. Or just a notion of a ship we resemble?
4. The paradox can help us with our relationship with time:
 - a. It can be helpful to view our journey thus far by the elements that have changed.
 - b. Likewise, we can use our current ship and experience gained to chart a path ahead.
 - c. And we can ask ourselves what elements need to be addressed to sail the seas and winds of the present moment.
5. There's a concept in Buddhism where each of us is nothing more than an aspect of the universe expressing itself in the present moment. Nothing is ever the same, nothing is ever constant. All of us are literally made of star dust. This universality can provide us with a sense of awe - And help us keep perspective in a world seemingly focused on righteousness and materialism.
6. Another application is avoiding perfectionism. I'm careful to not get too bogged down with making something perfect, since it'll be affected by future changes anyway. I can allow projects to evolve, revising them after shipping previous versions out in the world.
 - a. This podcast is a great example of that. Will people focus on every tiny detail, or will they remember the highlights of the journey?
7. On the flip side of that is to avoid relying too heavily on past results. There's a trap in defining yourself by the success of something in the past. Results can be great tools to validate that you're on the course you set for yourself, but they won't necessarily keep you on it. So keep sailing ahead!

8. Lastly, the paradox helps me to understand that all elements of the ship need refreshing at various times.
 - a. If I focus too much on one side of my life, there's a risk of wearing a hole in the other side which could flood the entire ship.
 - b. It's also far easier to sail a balanced ship than one listing to one side because of the massive weight I'm putting on it.

Organizations

- What defines a company? It's a legal entity, defined by a name and some basic descriptive elements.
- But all the various elements within this entity can change over time.
 - Owners and leadership can change
 - The inputs and outputs of the company can change
 - Policies can be created, revised, and eliminated
 - Employees come and go from the ship all the time
 - Revenues and profitability will rise and fall - and the parts of those within the control of the company are always changing too
 - Parts of a ship can be sold to become parts of other ships
 - The laws governing the form and actions of a company will shift
 - Ships can be destroyed by internal and external forces, either rotting away slowly or suddenly striking an unexpected iceberg.
- All of these definitions are fluid & in constant states of flux. It's a great metaphor to help find comfort with uncertainty.
 - Nothing is guaranteed to remain the same when you join a company.
 - Nothing is guaranteed to be the same after you leave.
- These combinations of factors naturally react to ebbs and flows in the seas in which they sail. Your company's ship may be sailing warm tailwinds, while mine could be scrambling to stay afloat in rough seas.

- Consider phrases like “Glad to have you on board” and “I need to find a lifeboat out of here”
- It’s important to avoid conflating too much of our personal identity to a company: Because the ship is not us, and we are but a small transient part of the ship along its journey.
- With all this uncertainty - it’s important to value the connections between the pieces - i.e.: The network of skills, experience, and interpersonal connections within the company. There may come a day when you may find yourself aboard a totally different ship, on a totally different course, yet composed of pieces you’ve sailed with before. Or potentially even a piece of a ship you crashed into years ago.
- I want to also illustrate this a bit more, using the example of a Sports Team. And for this I’ll be specific and highlight my beloved St. Louis Blues:
 - They were founded in 1967, decades before I was born
 - For more than half a century, nearly every element related to the team has changed:
 - Ownership
 - Stadiums
 - Logo
 - Jerseys
 - Players
 - Coaches
 - Opponents
 - Fans
 - So what team am I actually a fan of? What are the persistent qualities of “Blues-ness” that I love so dearly? The team’s name is the only thing I can think of that hasn’t changed.
 - Just four years ago my team was lifting the Stanley Cup for the first time, and now there’s only a handful of players and coaches remaining as members.

- Considering all this makes me less tied to a particular identity - and more able to enjoy the journey knowing there's going to be constant change. Players I root for will move on, others will join bringing new skills and personalities. Systems will change. Jerseys, marketing, technology, and broadcasts will change. And it'll be fun to root for them, win or lose!
- Ultimately I feel my fandom is connected to a history. The memories of being a fan, more so than any tangible thing. Whether it's watching a Brett Hull slap shot, the painful sight of a point shot from Steve Yzerman in 1996, or seeing Alex Pietrangelo hoist the Stanley Cup through teared up eyes - that's the thread of fandom weaved through my life.

This leads me to the ultimate lesson of the paradox: Every Ship of Theseus is something in between the form and the matter. It's something that can't ever be fully defined, yet still interacts with the world, weaving its journey and making an impact on ourselves and each other.

Episode 28 Quote:

Today's quote comes from passage #11 of the [Tao Te Ching](#):

*Thirty spokes converge upon a single hub;
It is on the hole in the center that the use of the cart hinges.*

*We make a vessel from a lump of clay;
It is the empty space within the vessel that makes it useful.*

*We make doors and windows for a room;
But it is these empty spaces that make the room livable.*

*Thus, while the tangible has advantages,
It is the intangible that makes it useful.*

