



# Telling the Truth

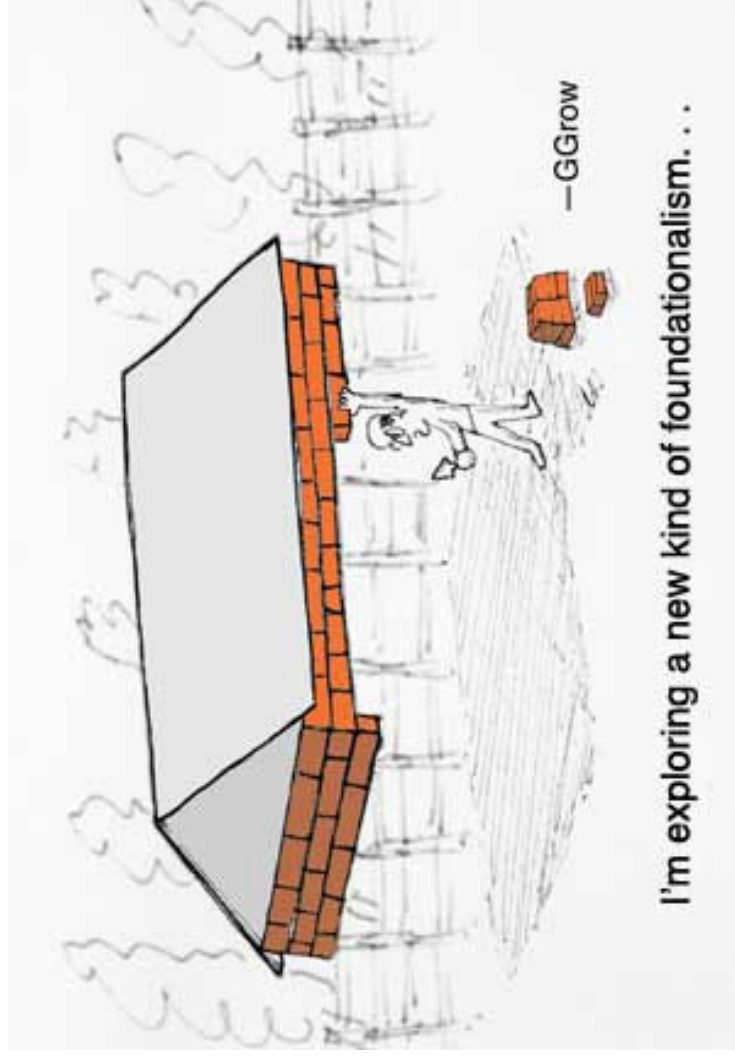


## The Problem of Relativism and the Teaching of TOK

### Part One

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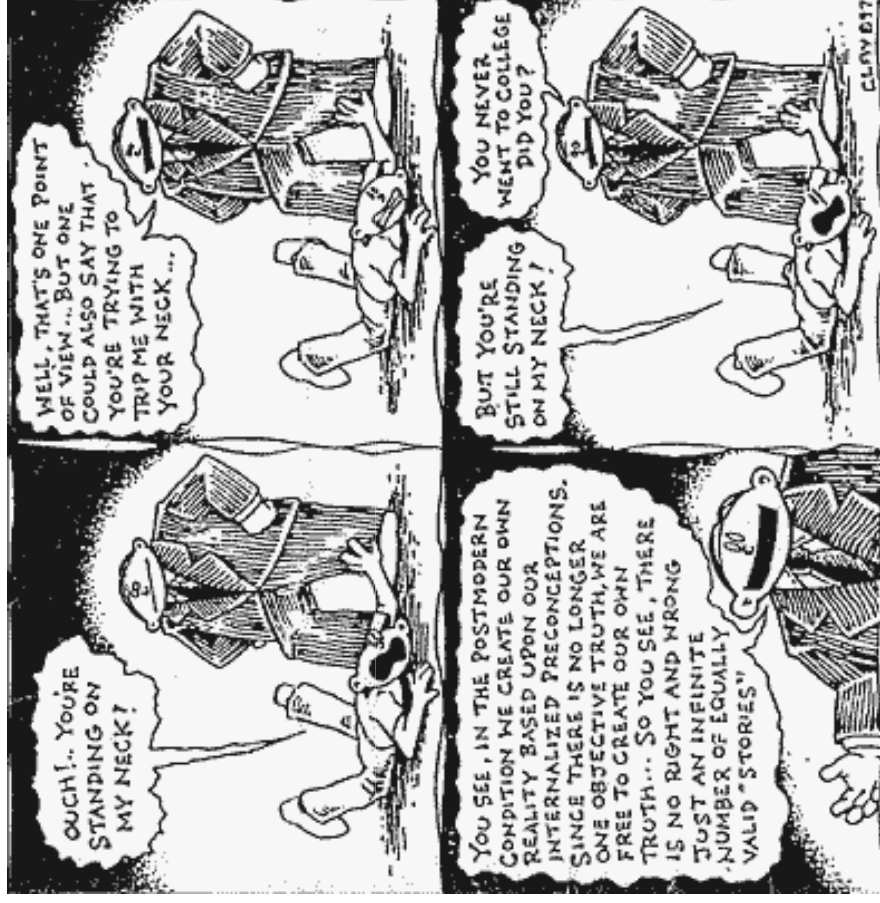
# Modernism and the Project



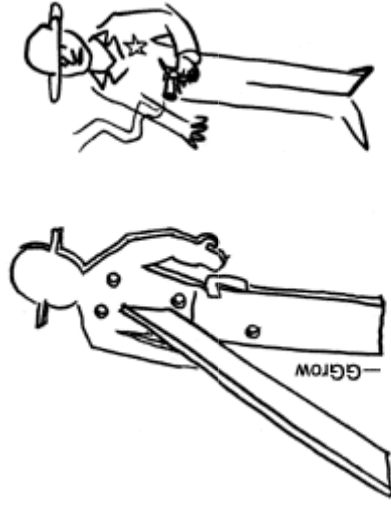
# It's all about foundations

- **First Principles: Discovering The Essence**
- **Building the complete system**
- **Achieving absolute certainty**
- **Reason without limits**
- **Progress without limits and the Correspondence Theory of Truth**

# Postmodern Relativism



# It's all about challenging foundations



Problems with the  
correspondence theory of truth.

`` We should listen to  
the intertextual,  
multivocalities of  
postcolonial others  
outside of Western  
culture in order to learn  
about the  
phallogocentric biases  
that mediate our  
identities'' .

## Two Points of View

- Richard Rorty argues that secondary education "can be ceded to the cultural conservatives, to produce culturally literate young people, who are familiar with what their elders take to be **true**. Socialization, after all, must come before individualization."

- The purpose of education is not to give people a sense of a coherent history of the progressing of the “human spirit” or to lead the journeying subject toward the unification of all truths and resolution of all difference. Rather, its aim is precisely **to reveal the self as lost**, beyond recovery of some authentic self it once thought it was, and without an internal coherence of unity. The self only finds itself in the play of difference, in being different from others...

The Pragmatic Turn: It's all about rejecting false choices

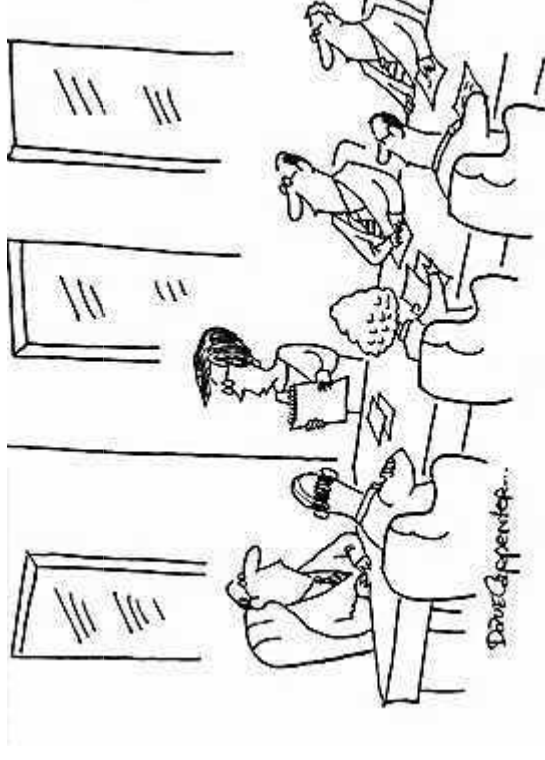
- To say that everything is **relative** is not to say that everything has **equal** value.
- Relativism does not by **necessity** lead to reductionism or the **leveling** of perspective and values.

# Pragmatism in the Real World

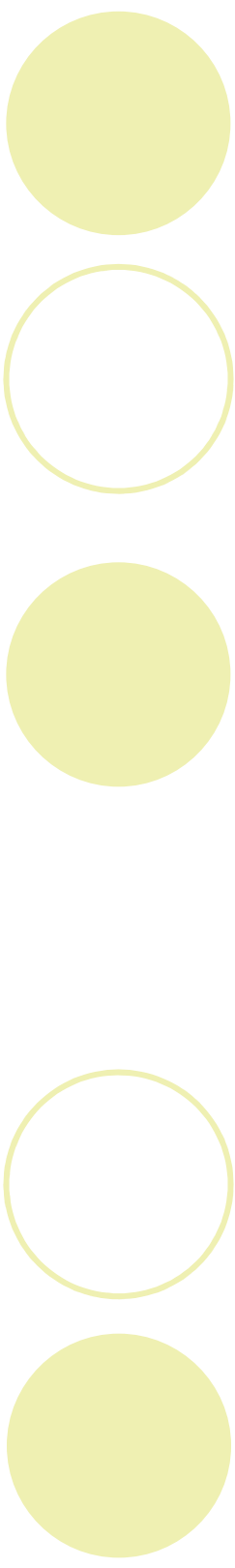
- Instead of choosing between absolute certainty and truth on the one hand and postmodern relativism and isolated subjectivity on the other...

**We might consider the value of**

- **Consensus building** based on the notion of inter-subjectivity... Collections of individuals coming together, and from mutual interests, through rational discussion, reaching agreements, and solving problems arising from **real-life situations**.



"AND THE VOTE TO HAVE A UNANIMOUS CONSENSUS PASSED FIVE TO TWO."



# Areas of Knowledge and the Six Traps

# The Science Trap: Paradigms

Frank and Ernest



# The Science Trap: Paradigms

Thomas Kuhn and "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions"

- We only see what our **models** (our assumptions, paradigm) allow us to see.
- Science is thus **self-referential** and culturally bound and therefore not objectively rational.

- The most we can say is that scientific knowledge might be useful in that we can **predict** within acceptable margins of probability but it does not follow that scientific research leads to truth with any **certainty**.
- Correlation is not necessarily causation
- Predictability is not a necessary indication of truth or even correspondence.

# Reality Check

Abraham Lincoln asked "If we agree to call the tail a leg how many legs would horses have?" His answer was: "four, because you can't change how many legs horses have by changing the way we use words." This was surely the correct response. One cannot change the nonlinguistic facts...by changing linguistic ones.

# Mathematics Trap: Axioms



# The Mathematics Trap: Axioms

- Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems in effect **undermine** any foundational approach. (Stated here in nonmathematical terms.)
  1. We can never find an **all-encompassing** axiomatic system which is able to prove all mathematical truths, but no **falsehoods**.
  2. If an axiomatic system can be proven to be **consistent** and complete from within itself, then it is **inconsistent**.

# Implication for any Mathematical Knowledge Claim\*

- Axioms are supposed to be the **fixed** and **certain** foundations of mathematical arguments.
- As it turns out axioms, rather than being true or untrue, are instead uncontroversial or controversial (more relativism) and they are used to move proofs built on them from the controversial toward the uncontroversial.
- **Truth seems almost irrelevant.**

\* K. Easwaran, *The Role of Axioms in Mathematics*  
([www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~easwaran/papers/axioms.pdf](http://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~easwaran/papers/axioms.pdf))

## Russell's Two Cents\*

- Russell compares the axioms of logic and mathematics with the laws of nature, so that the axioms need not necessarily be evident in themselves, but rather their justification lies (exactly as in physics) in the fact that they make it possible for certain conclusions to be deduced; . . . This view has been largely justified by subsequent developments.

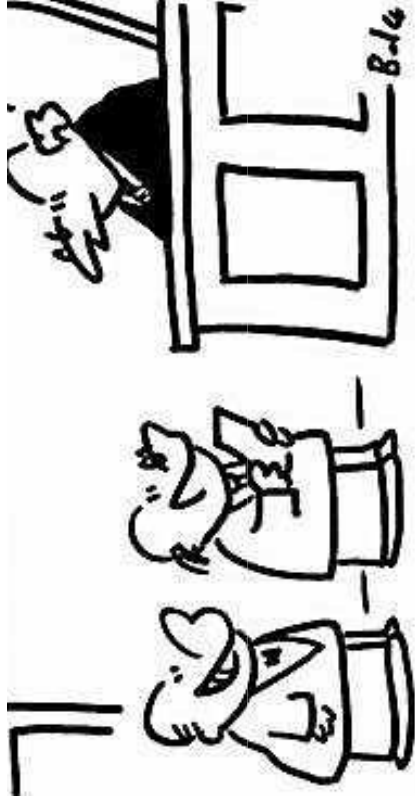
... Of course, under these circumstances mathematics may lose a good deal of its "absolute certainty;" but, under the influence of the modern criticism of the foundations, this has already happened to a large extent. (Gödel, paraphrase)

\* Easwaran

## Reality Check

- Everyday our students take advantage of technological and engineering **accomplishments** that are made possible only though the successful application of **mathematical** principles.
- Have them list several examples from their own lives and then ask them to reconcile their arguments against mathematical certainty with their nearly **blind** confidence in the **enduring** certainty of these principles.

# The Human Sciences Trap: Cultural Relativism



"Your Honor, my client pleads not guilty by reason of cultural relativism."

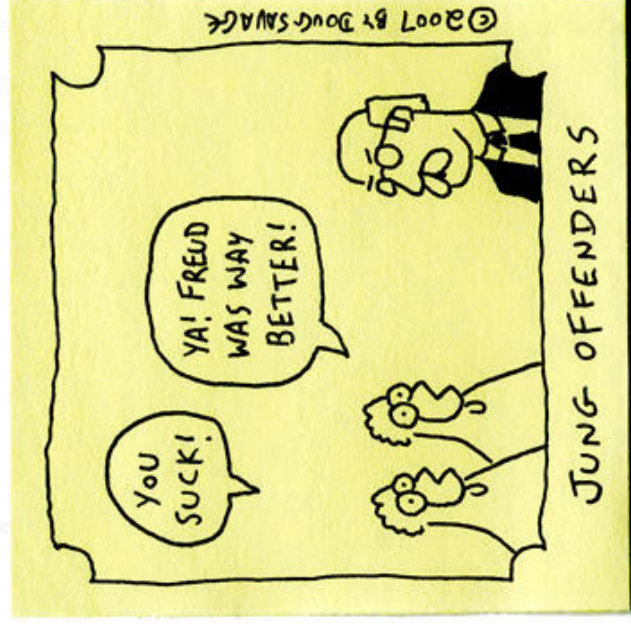
The Human Sciences Trap: Ethnocentrism on the one hand, Cultural Relativism on the other

- Research in the Human Sciences is **undermined** by conscious and unconscious ethnocentrism.
- Because Cultural Relativism demands that all cultures have equal claims to **legitimacy** there can be no judgments regarding the relative merits of each.

# The Psychology Trap: Perspectives

*Savage Chickens*

by Doug Savage

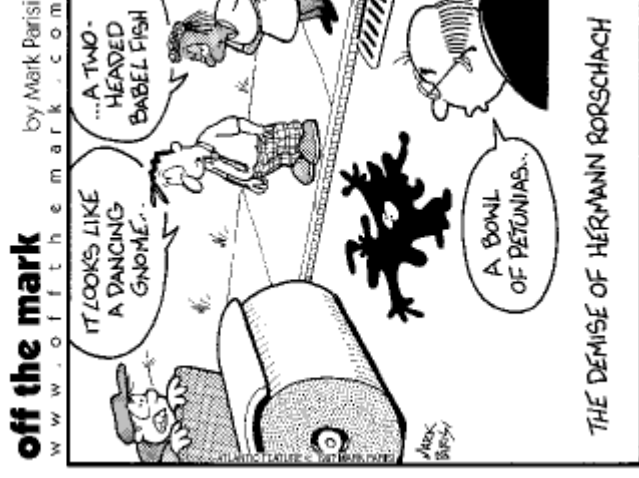


# The Psychology Trap: Perspectives and Falsification

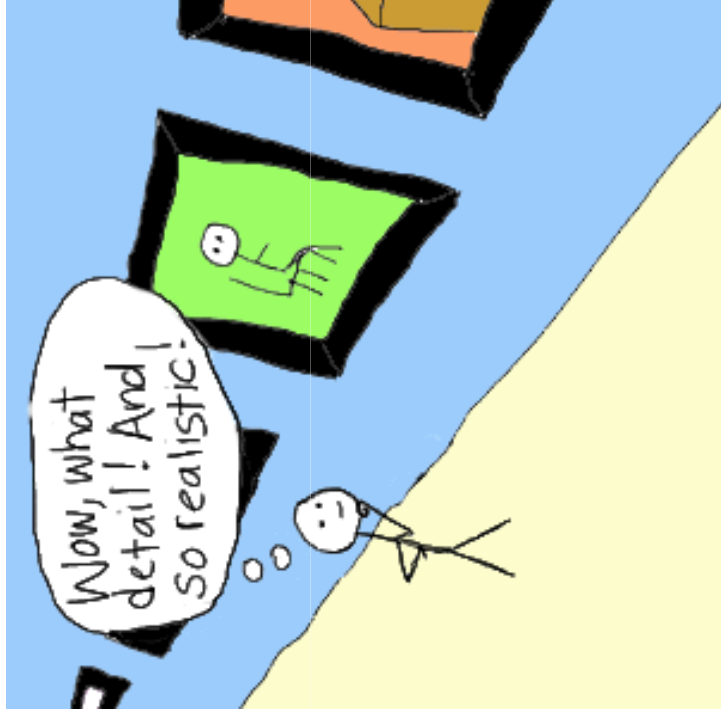
- Because all psychological theory is by nature **paradigmatic**, which is simply to say that each model or perspective carries with it certain **assumptions** about the nature of human behavior
- And because these assumptions for the most part are not **falsifiable** (thus unproven)

# The Psychology Trap

- Psychology is more like a **guessing game** than **legitimate science**. (Which explains in part the strong move to the **biological** perspective in recent years.)



# The Arts Trap: Subjectivity



## The Arts Trap: Subjective/Emotional/Contingent

- Artists create **exclusively** from and are limited to their own experience (Subjective/private)
- Artistic creation is **entirely** emotion-based (not rational, no viable/credible knowledge claims)

# The Arts Trap

- All appreciation of art is **subjective** as well
- All analysis of art is historically and culturally **contingent**
- Art has **no intrinsic value**

## Reality Check

- Nearly **everyday** of their lives teenagers will privilege their emotions over reason.
- We see this particularly in their love of music, movies, sports and video games.
- It is clear to me that these kids have **implicit trust** in the arts, **a strongly held belief** that **music** certainly is able to capture and express important even vital truths about their lives.

# Reality Check

- Yet in essay after essay I am confronted with the **categorical dismissal** of the arts as nothing more than irrational, unreliable, personal fantasy.

SOON YOU WON'T BE ABLE  
TO WALK DOWN THE STREET  
WITHOUT BEING RECOGNISED.



Chris Madden  
www.chris Madden.co.uk

# Human Sciences are Dehumanizing The Arts are Private and Emotional

- **Title 5** from the year 2008 serves as an excellent example to reveal the kind of simplistic reductive reasoning our students utilize so often in these two AOK.
- "...we will **always learn more** about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology." Chomsky  
To what extent would you agree?

## The Argument: A Standard Dichotomy

Novels: emotion/individual/subjective

A novelist writes **only** from experience and **only** emotionally. Novels are treated collectively. There is no attempt to explain what a novel is or what a novelist might be trying to do.

Human Sciences: reason/universal/objective

The human sciences are cold, rational, objective, in a word: **dehumanizing**. It studies rats in cages and has contributed nothing to our understanding of human beings because we are not rats.

Students rarely offer any support for these claims.



So then...

- Our students **dismiss the arts** as too soft, too emotional, lacking in seriousness because nothing an artist says or does can be tested or proven.
- Our students **dismiss the human sciences** as too cold, too rational, indifferent to individual perspectives and private feelings.

## A no win for the Human Sciences

- The Human Sciences oddly enough are seen as **both** lacking in objectivity (that is, limited by perspectives) and having too much of it (that is, too cold and detached).

## Reality Check: The Arts

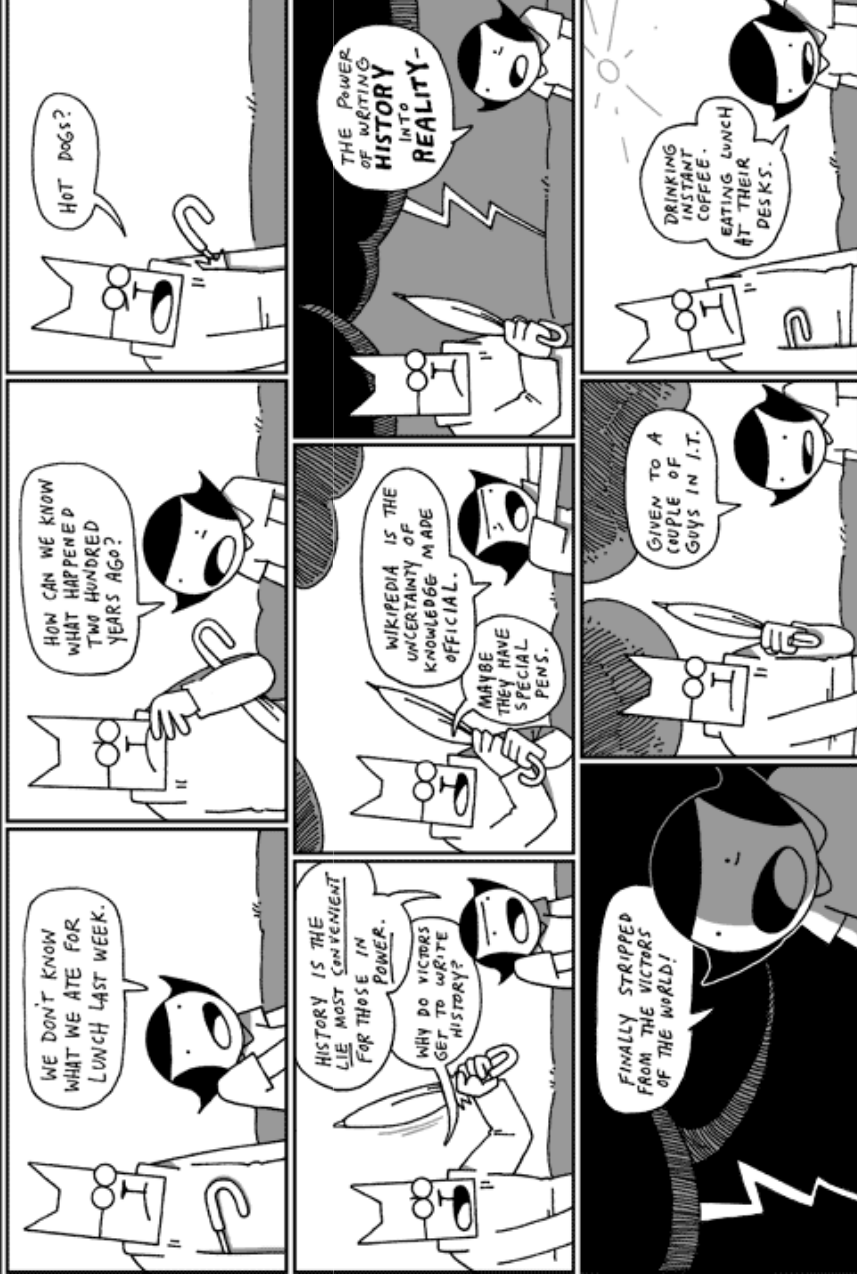
- In their IB courses, students will spend a great deal of time **discussing, analyzing and writing** about the ideas (themes) expressed in novels and plays.
- But for this title nearly every student suggests that novels are exclusively about **emotion and emotional connection**. There is rarely any mention of analysis, theme or the expression of ideas in fiction.

## Reality Check: Human Sciences

- One need not look long or far to observe the obvious (certainly excessive) **deep respect** our students have for men and women in **white coats!**

# The History Trap: Bias

**Those Who Forget History Are Doomed to Repeat That Joke About Repeating History Class.**



# The History Trap: Bias

- Historical investigation is by nature **reductive**.
- The process of selection is idiosyncratic, subjective, limited by cultural and historical contingencies beyond the control or even awareness of any one historian.

(One student suggests that the facts historians select are chosen according to **their own needs and bias**. Apparently, not only is selection not rational, it is political and self-serving as well!)

# The History Bias

- All historical conclusions are then problematical and therefore controversial.

(Several students have gone so far as to suggest that because historical writings are so completely compromised there is little value in studying them at all!)

## Phony Examples

- We are told that a historian of 2008 would interpret the 1901 Federation of Australia differently from a historian of 1918. We are not provided an example of how this might be so. The omission suggests the student is just making this claim up.
- We are told that an Italian writing on the life of Mussolini might be subject to bias because she/he is Italian. We are provided with no examples to show how this might in fact be the case.

## Historical Bias: David Irving\*

“Until 1988, Irving seemed torn between a desire to be **taken seriously as an historian** and a desire to associate with those he seemed to share an **ideological affinity** with.”

\* The following information is from wikipedia

## More On Irving

- British historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper expressed severe doubts about Irving's **methodology**.

"He seizes on a small, but **dubious** particle of 'evidence'; builds upon it, by private interpretation, a large general conclusion; and then overlooks or re-interprets the more substantial evidence and probability against it. Since this **defective method** is invariably used to excuse Hitler or the Nazis and to damage their opponents, we may **reasonably** speak of a consistent **bias**, unconsciously distorting the evidence."

## Trevor-Roper adds

When an historian relies mainly on primary sources, which we can not easily check, he challenges our confidence and forces us to ask **critical questions**. How reliable is his **historical method**? How sound is his **judgment**?

# Trevor-Roper ends by writing

"He may read his manuscript diaries correctly. But we can never be quite sure, and when he is at his **most original**, we are likely to be **least sure**."

# Perspective is better than bias

- **Bias** suggests **intention**, irrationality, even bigotry or worse.
- **Perspective** suggests only that **varying** points of view exist.
- Perspectives allows for the possibility that two historians looking at the same data can in fact reach different conclusions using an **acceptable rational** methodology.

# Historical Perspectives

Gore Vidal and Clive James on the subject of American Myths surrounding WWII

- "FDR deliberately provoked the Japanese into attacking us at Pearl Harbor." **Vidal**
- "Japan was provoked into the war by the Japanese army." **James**

# The Ethics Trap: Moral Relativism



# The Ethics Trap: Moral Relativism

- There are no **fixed** moral standards
- There is no **absolute** truth
- The enduring but **nonexistent Amazonian** tribe that **slaughters** its young.



BUT AS WE ALL KNOW, VALUES ARE RELATIVE. EVERY SYSTEM OF BELIEF IS EQUALLY VALID AND WE NEED TO TOLERATE DIVERSITY. VIRTUE ISN'T "BETTER" THAN VICE. IT'S JUST DIFFERENT.



# Ethics and Absolute Truth

- The argument can lead to the hopelessly illogical contention that **absolute truth exists** but it is different for everyone.

This idea seems to be an **ideal** position for our students to take

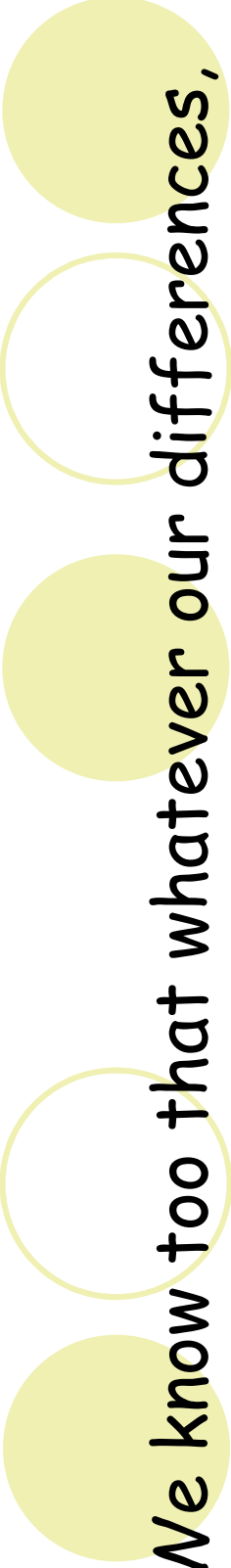
- Truth exists but only in a **contextualized** way. Because truth refers to reality and reality is clearly the context of truth, both truth and context exist in some sort of **co-contextual** way, (which apparently does not **compromise** the **existence** of truth)

## Reality Check: Morality/Reality between the margins of the extreme

Though it is clearly difficult to argue philosophically for the existence of **moral absolutes** in the classroom, it is **not difficult** to see that societies do in fact attempt to formulate and abide by a basic set of moral principles that are generally more alike than different.

We are more often together than  
apart...

"There is no doubt that the very nature of faith means that some of our beliefs will **never** be the same...But no matter what we choose to believe, let us remember that there is no religion whose central tenet is **hate**. There is no God who condones taking the life of an innocent human being. **This much we know.**"



" We know too that whatever our differences, there is one law that binds all great religions together...It is, of course, **the Golden Rule** — the call to love one another; to understand one another; to treat with dignity and respect those with whom we share a brief moment on this Earth."

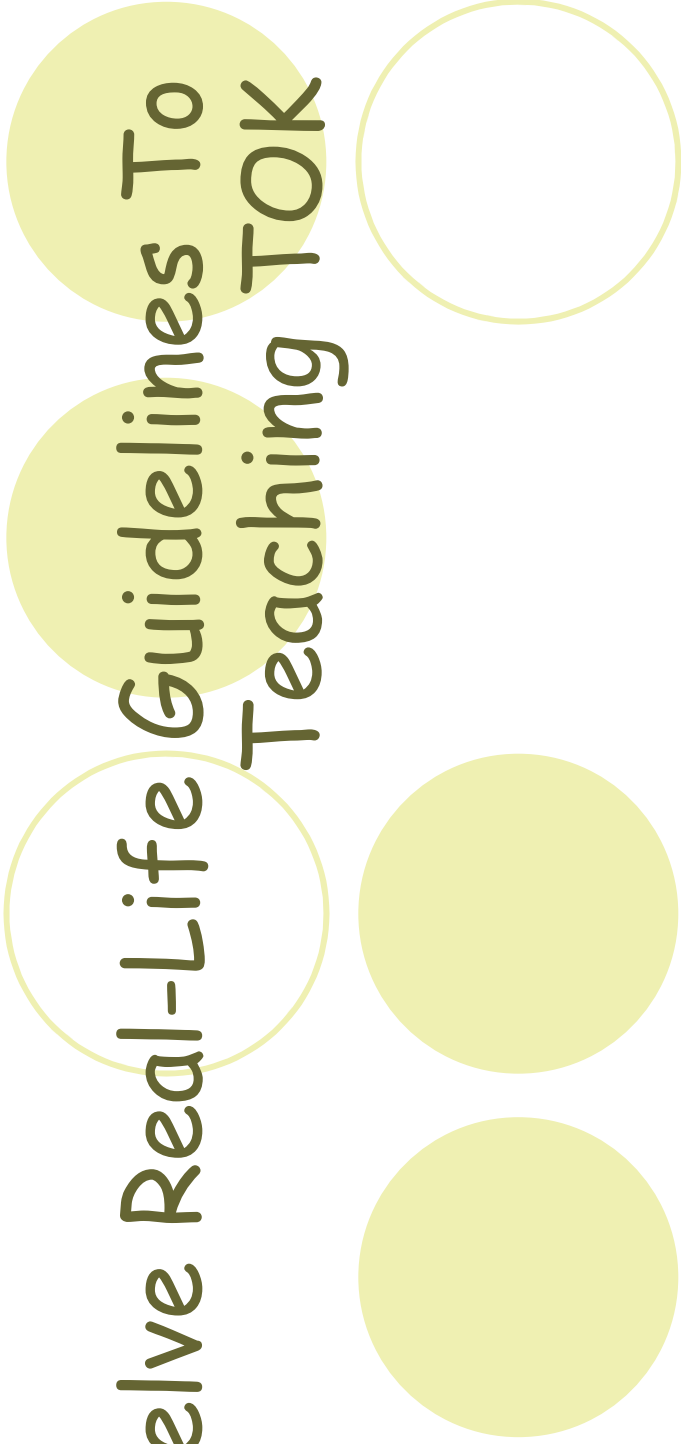
Barack Obama

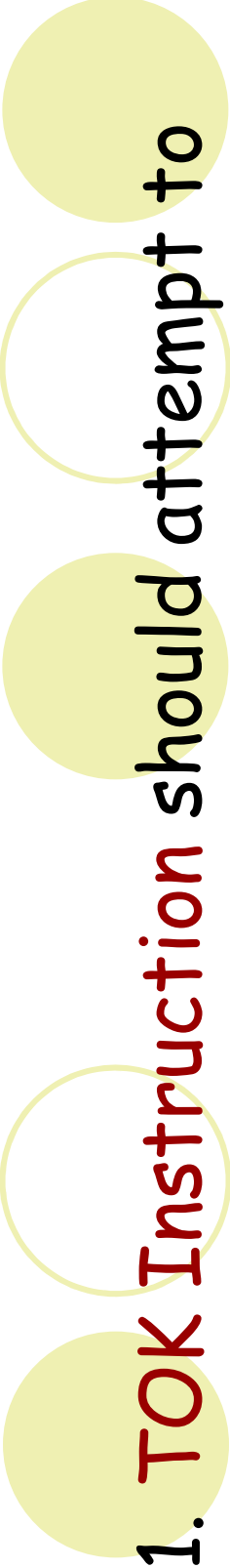
# Real Difficulties

- I am not arguing that the problems associated with establishing a fixed set of moral principles that ensure the fair and equal treatment of all members of a given society are not **complex and difficult** to resolve.

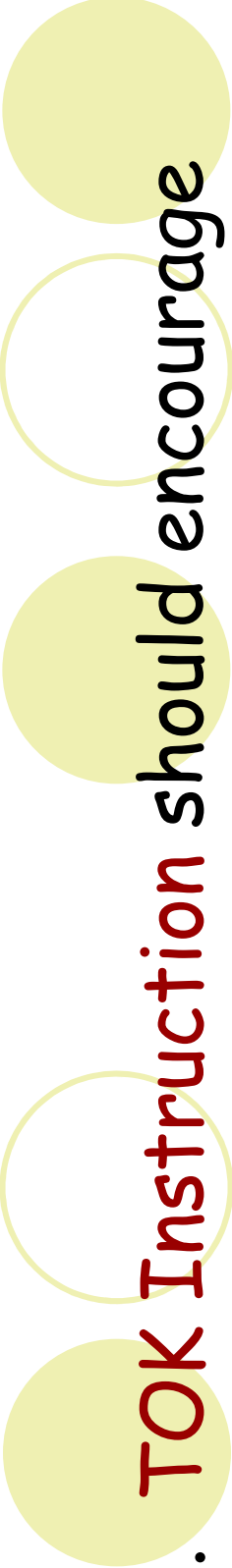
- What I am saying is that in the TOK classroom we can spend so much time focusing on the **limitations** associated with each ethical system that we end up leaving the students with the general impression that human beings, having **no moral dimension at all**, rational or otherwise, are entirely at the mercy of impulse and raw aggression, which is simply not the case as even a  **cursory view** of modern societies around the world would show.

# Twelve Real-Life Guidelines To Teaching TOK



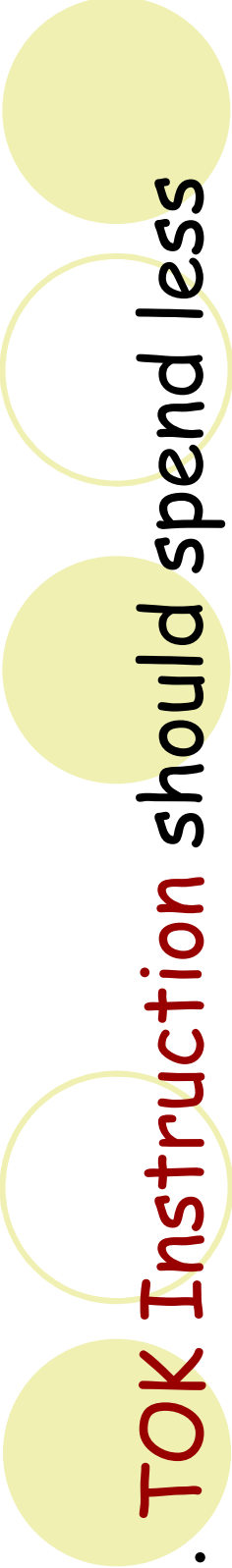
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1. **TOK Instruction** should attempt to emphasize what can be known as opposed to what cannot. It should attempt to pursue questions (knowledge issues) that open doors of inquiry instead of pursuing questions that close them (knowledge problems).

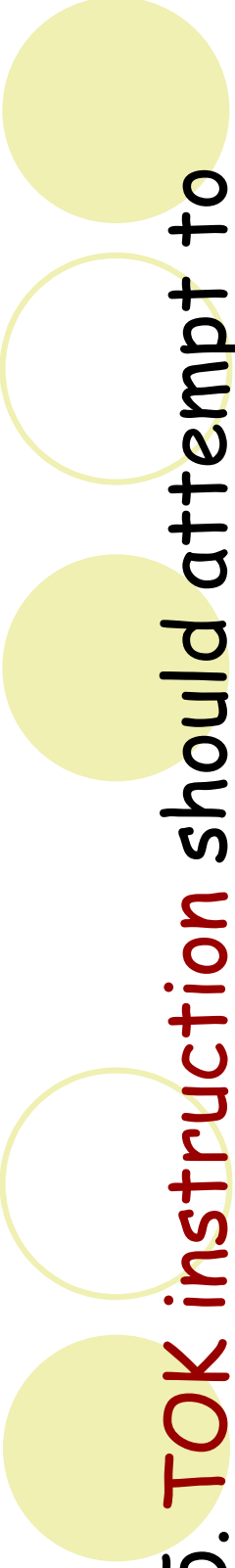


2. **TOK Instruction** should encourage students to see the goal of absolute certainty as merely historically interesting and that beyond losing its usefulness in the present day has become a troublesome obstacle to nearly all forms of intellectual debate.

3. TOK Instruction should likewise encourage students to see relativism in all of its forms as in part the inevitable historical response to the pursuit of absolute certainty and should likewise begin to see that in its extremist forms it has also become a troublesome obstacle to nearly all forms of intellectual debate.



4. **TOK Instruction** should spend less time focusing on failed attempts to discover universal foundations and more time focusing on successful attempts to communicate ideas that have led to the gradual reduction of cruelty and increased freedom and greater equality among people.

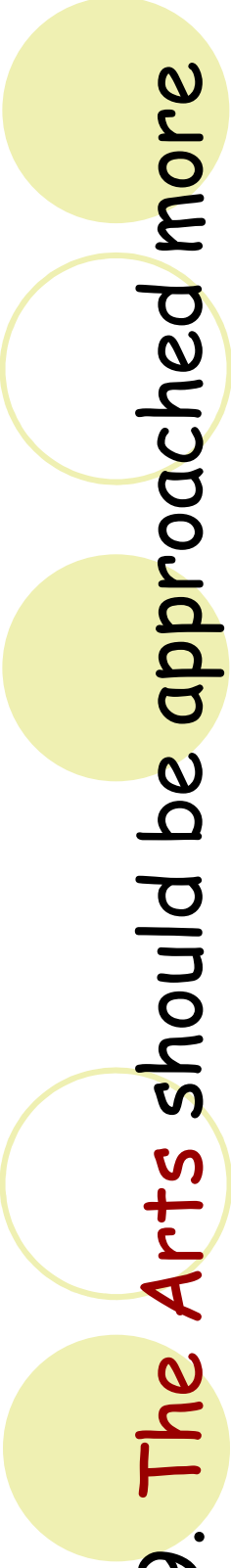


5. **TOK instruction** should attempt to encourage students to see knowledge as an end (value) that can lead to that most elusive of experiences, intellectual pleasure, and not simply as a means to personal wealth, power, and status.

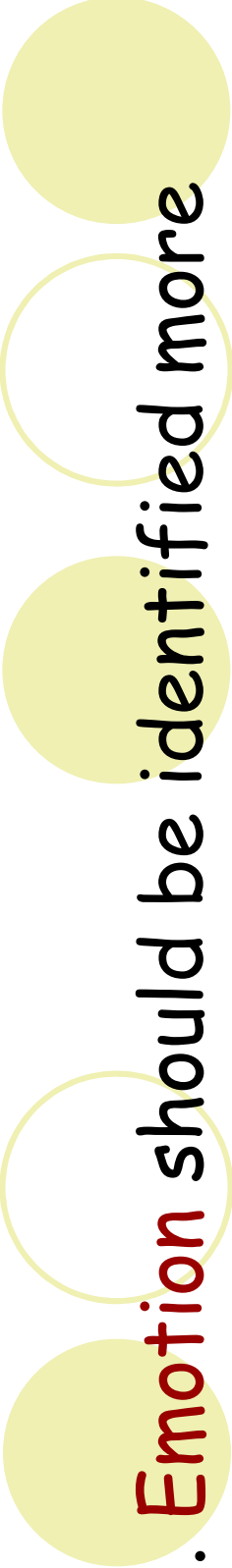
6. **Critical thinking** should be seen as a method more often leading to the refinement of knowledge than the undermining of it.

7. **Modern Historical Writing** should be approached honestly and accurately as more often a story of competing perspectives or narratives arrived at through proven rational methodologies than a story of personal bias, and untrustworthy, shoddy scholarship driven by greed, vanity or ideology.

8. **Ethics** might be approached more accurately as a story of social consensus with real-life application and consequence than a history of self-defeating relativism that can comfortably identify practices that are universally acceptable (tolerance), but refuses to identify practices that are universally unacceptable (female infanticide).




9. **The Arts** should be approached more honestly, and due credit given to the importance of the creative process that is grounded firmly in all four ways of knowing and is instrumental in shaping cultural and personal identities.



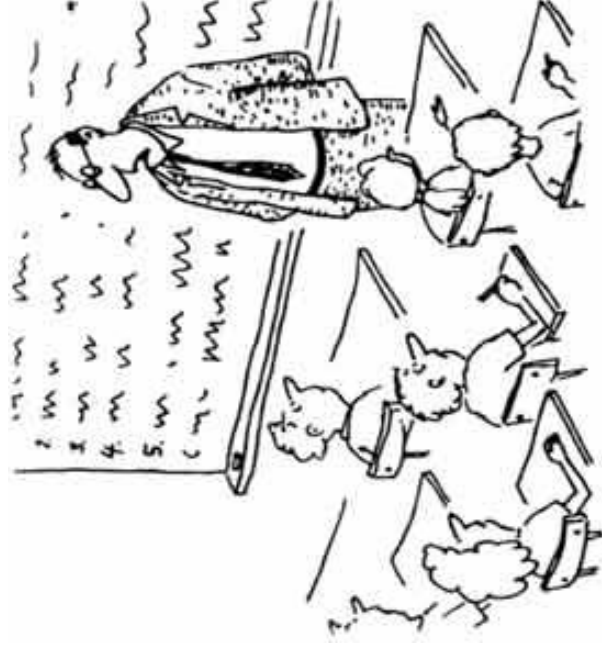
10. **Emotion** should be identified more honestly and accurately as a genuine and profoundly formative way of knowing, that each of us at some point in our lives has experienced in clear moments of insight, inspiration, and deep feeling.

11. **Language** should be discussed more honestly as not merely social construction but as the product of, and which allows for, social consensus, meaningful communication, understanding and reflection across a variety of symbolic pathways both public and private.

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12. **Students** should leave a TOK classroom ideally excited about the prospect of contributing to a vast and growing body of knowledge, rather than convinced that nothing can be known with certainty and that consequently all pursuits of knowledge, to the extent they have any value at all, are merely self-serving.

In the end it's really the TOK  
classroom teacher who makes the  
difference...



*“I expect you all to be independent, innovative,  
critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say!”*