

3. "History is always on the move, slowly eroding today's orthodoxy and making space for yesterday's heresy." Discuss the extent to which this claim applies to history and at least one other area of knowledge.  
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*"History is always on the move, slowly eroding today's orthodoxy and making space for yesterday's heresy." Discuss the extent to which this claim applies to history and at least one other area of knowledge.*

History has a constant effect on our daily lives; the past created by those who preceded us, or the actions that we once took, define the ever-shifting world of concepts that surrounds us. These concepts incessantly metamorphose, taking on new characteristics in response to the challenges that new experience provides. One such concept is morality, or the "code of conduct that is put forward by a society."<sup>1</sup> Morality is central to our lives, as it defines acceptable behavior, and yet extremely flexible, changing drastically within relatively short periods. The terms "orthodoxy" and "heresy" are morally based, diametrically opposed and mutually dependent - neither can exist without the other. "Orthodoxy" can be considered common convention, and is often considered correct because it is custom. "Heresy," on the other hand, breaks with custom and therefore has more negative connotations. We tend to turn to the past to define "heresy" and "orthodoxy," as in order to adhere to the "code of conduct" it is necessary to be familiar with it – something possible only through the teachings of authority. Such past conceptions are then defied, and it is here that Thomas Kuhn's scientific Revolutionary Theory applies beyond its subject's boundaries. The "paradigms" he speaks of pervade society, as "consensus gentium", or mass approval, determines what the majority of a society will base itself on. Heuristic knowledge, or knowledge gained through first-hand experimentation, has taken a backseat, and much is accepted on the basis of authority alone. As radicals become leaders, society follows, albeit slowly. Therefore, the claim that "History is always on the move, slowly eroding today's orthodoxy and making space for yesterday's heresy" applies completely to Western society, in areas of knowledge ranging from science and history to ethics.

Thomas Kuhn's Revolutionary Theory, which clearly illustrates the ousting of paradigms so characteristic of science, history and ethics, was first published in 1962, under the title The Structure of Scientific Revolutions<sup>2</sup>. It establishes that "paradigms," or the framework of ideas under which a community functions, are overthrown when enough anomalies present

<sup>1</sup> Gert, Bernard. "The Definition of Morality." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2005. 09 Oct. 2007 <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-definition/>>.

<sup>2</sup> "Thomas Kuhn." Emory U. 20 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/Kuhnsnap.html>>.

May 08

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themselves. A paradigm is generally considered to be true until a sufficient amount of inconsistencies surface, indicating that the paradigm cannot be completely accurate, and therefore is not worthy of mass approval. The process of discrediting a paradigm is arduous, as it involves convincing everyone who lives by this structure of ideas that it is incorrect – no easy feat – in addition to restructuring the paradigm itself. If one set of ideas is outdated, another must replace it. The conversion from the axiomatic belief that the earth was flat to Pythagoras's conception of a spherical earth is the iconic example of a scientific revolution, overused as it may be.

Thomas Kuhn's revolution is infinite in the scientific sense because scientific reasoning is based on empirical knowledge, which never ceases to accumulate. If the rest of knowledge is based empirically, and I would argue that it is, change will never end in areas of knowledge such as ethics and art either. I agree with Locke and his concept of the *tabula rasa*, attributing the beginnings of all knowledge to the perception of sensual experiences. I also agree with Kant, who argued that this sensory data is then taken to the next level, and converted into ideas and concepts – however, I would add that these ideas and concepts are united by paradigms. It must be taken into account that empirical input never ceases, and therefore, the paradigms we elaborate in relation to the world are constantly challenged. Paradigms exist in two stages – they first unite various thoughts into one coherent whole in an individual's mind, and then unite a society of individuals through a common belief.

Due to the nature of their development, paradigms are rarely independently fabricated – they are often taken on the basis of authority. Authority is not necessarily the most trustworthy source of knowledge, as one is subjected to bias and possible errors on the part of its human origins. Ideally, only experts in every field would create paradigms – although this is possible in science, a supposedly objective practice, it is impossible in ethics, due to the subjective nature of morality. In principle, it would also be recommendable for whoever receives the knowledge to go on and heuristically determine whether it is viable. Critical thinkers take these paradigms, deconstruct them through experience, and then reconstruct them through time and mediation. An example, rooted in personal history: my father is extremely religious, and insisted that we attend church regularly when I was a child. I had no reason to doubt religion. However, anomalies accumulated over the years, and I began to question its truth. I have deliberated greatly, and have yet to reach a solid conclusion; both sides make a strong case, and any time I finally take a stand,

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a new anomaly pops up that I must accommodate into my mindset. What I may have considered "heresy" at the age of eight – which ranges from failing to attend church to being friends with a boy – has become routine occurrence. In the case of religion, my father provided the previous paradigm, the authority, my starting point in a search for personal truth.

As all paradigms are established empirically, they base themselves in history, the "aggregate of past events."<sup>3</sup> History itself, however, is not entirely reliable. This extends beyond the memory of those who recount it, which is fallible due to its subjective nature; it can be influenced by emotion, leading in some cases to an inaccurate portrayal of the past. Even academic, or collective, history, considered more reliable because of its communal nature, sometimes appears extremely rigid – especially at an elementary level – and is in fact flexible. Assuming that events are recorded accurately, the links between them are determined by each individual historian, and argued accordingly. In the words of Lee Simonson, "any event, once it has occurred, can be made to appear inevitable by a competent historian".<sup>4</sup> In addition, only socially acceptable history is ever published and widely distributed, which makes history culturally biased. For example, American independence will hardly be portrayed in the same manner in England and the United States – the difference between a reprehensible rebellion and the greatest expression of patriotism is marked, and the latter is likely to receive greater emphasis in the country's collective history.

It is disturbing to realize that history, the basis for a great majority of human decisions, is open to interpretation. A person in a position of power can mold history to their advantage; use it to excuse their actions. In the novel 1984, George Orwell illustrates the past's malleability to the extreme. History is constantly altered to prove the "Party," who rules unequivocally, right – making the accumulation of anomalies impossible and giving the population no reason to doubt them. Those in a position of authority successfully deceive the masses by removing all parameters for comparison. One of the Party's slogans reads, "He who controls the past, controls the future; and he who controls the present, controls the past."<sup>5</sup> And so, a skewed interpretation of events can determine present "orthodoxy," "heresy" – setting an artificial base for future

<sup>3</sup> "History." Def. 5. The Concise Oxford Dictionary. 5th ed. 1964.

<sup>4</sup> Prochnow, Herbert V. Public Speaker's Treasure Chest. HarperCollins Ltd, 1975.

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"paradigmatic" revolutions. Perhaps the distorted past is not our greatest tool in determining ethical issues; perhaps it is preferable to determine right and wrong through personal experimentation. Kant was of the opinion that morality was both inherent and universal, and that no ethical norm was derived without reference to "a priori" morality.<sup>6</sup> This would purge morality of the need for revolution, because it would be intrinsically pure. Any distortion of it, any "orthodoxy" or "heresy" that is capable of change must be socially constructed.

Jazz was considered the "music of the devil" when it came into existence, as was rock and roll. These forms of musical expression are now the norm – even considered antiquated by some. The rebels, or "heretics," of past generations become authority figures and creators of contemporary reality. This can be seen in the context of maturity; the insubordinate adolescents become parents, world leaders, architects of "consensus gentium." They determine policy, and what was once abnormal merges into the quotidian mindset through a "paradigmatic" revolution analogous to Kuhn's scientific revolution. Though concepts such as "heresy" and "orthodoxy" may have no true moral standing in terms of "a priori" morality, their fabrication on the part of a few select individuals, and their subsequent application on a large scale, has a strong impact on society. History, in its personal and collective forms, completely determines the course of the human race due to its malleable nature, which allows for the radical ousting of established paradigms, ethical or otherwise. The claim that "History is always on the move, slowly eroding today's orthodoxy and making space for yesterday's heresy" applies completely to the areas of history and ethics in the Western world due to their revolutionary natures.

**Word Count: 1455**


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