

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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00040-230

"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.

This statement suggests that history is a fluid form of knowledge where ideas are constantly changing resulting in the erosion or undermining of traditional, orthodox beliefs about knowledge whilst introducing ideas that would have previously been regarded as heresy. In this essay, I will use explore the extent to which this claim appertains to history as well as science and ethics. I will also consider how the dynamics of these disciplines are affected by external factors.

History is often regarded as a subject that is seemingly set in stone. But historical knowledge relies on a justified interpretation of the primary sources available such as diaries, statistics and photographs and as my IB History course has taught me, it is possible for two historians to study the same body of evidence and come to differing conclusions. The situation is compounded, as both are generally able to justify their positions. This is possibly because the interpretation of history involves the selection of evidence by a historian to support his particular argument. Absolute certainty is therefore an elusive concept in history. Its epistemological weaknesses also allow it to incorporate multiple approaches and interpretations giving history its dynamic quality. When studying the origins of World War Two, I came across the historian AJP Taylor's, 'The Origins of the Second World War' published in 1961.¹ Using the availability of new sources of information, he challenged the accepted portrayal of Hitler as a madman who caused World War Two by highlighting the faulty policies of other European countries. While many of his arguments were hotly contested, it did spark off fresh debates in new channels such as the causes of hyperinflation in Germany in 1923. Thus history does fulfil the requirements of the claim at hand as re-interpretations frequently break the traditional barriers of beliefs about past events and allow for the growth of further debate and interpretation.

Differences in historical interpretations can also be influenced by contextual changes over time. It can be argued that in hindsight we are able to look back on events and re-evaluate them objectively. I have seen first hand how generational differences influence the way people perceive history. For example, my grandparents' attitudes towards the British and their colonisation of India differ greatly from those of my parents. My grandparents engaged actively in India's independence movement; their view of British colonialism is heavily coloured by an emotive, nationalist mindset. My parents, born after independence, view this era in a more detached and balanced manner. Personally, I am able to retrospectively evaluate British colonialism without any of the emotional connections that my grandparents hold on to. Perceptions thus change over time and allow history to be repeatedly cross- examined by various historians thereby allowing it to be "always on the move".

Nevertheless, there are limitations when we evaluate the extent to which the statement is relevant to history. Firstly, history does not exist as a single, solid unit of knowledge. Historical accounts and perspectives vary from country to country. A common example of this is the different perspectives held by the Chinese and

¹ Ruth Henig, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 2nd ed. (Lancaster: Routledge, 2005), 54.

May 08

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Japanese regarding the Nanking Massacre.² Here, conflicting interpretations inflame cultural sensitivities and create a historical impasse instead of progress.

Equally, this process is often rendered stagnant by outside factors such as political censorship, the inaccessibility of certain government archives and existing mindsets. Propaganda generated during Stalin's regime meant that photographs and literature were often manipulated to enhance Stalin's prestige.³ Statistics during the Five Year Plans were similarly doctored to suggest greater industrial output than was actually the case. This censorship also meant that most works by Soviet historians produced during this period were heavily one sided in their praise of Stalin and the success of his policies.⁴ Even today, many government archives are classified and thus we are prevented access to potentially significant information. The concept that "history is always on the move" is therefore debatable as external factors can inhibit it and thus history can fail to truly break out of "today's orthodoxy".

This claim can also be applied to other areas of knowledge such as science. Science attempts to systematically study the physical and natural world through observation, experiment and reason. Its reliance on empirical data to substantiate its theories allows scientific experiments to be replicated unlike history where it is impossible to recreate past conditions and events. Breakthrough discoveries often give rise to a significant paradigm shift amongst scientists. For example, in the 19th century, scientists generally believed in the existence of ether, an all pervasive medium through which light was thought to propagate. Aided by science's capacity to test theories using experiments, the concept of ether as a medium was disproved by the Michelson Morley Experiment in 1887. This eventually led to the development of Einstein's special theory of relativity.⁵ This example shows how science is able to undermine fundamental orthodox thinking and allow for the development of newer truths.

It can be argued that science is more "on the move" than history particularly when considering the rapid increases in scientific knowledge over the past century. This rise can be attributed to the greater trust currently placed on science ahead of other areas of knowledge. Our faith in scientists' abilities to know the 'truth' was highlighted recently when Pluto, a planet for 37 years, was demoted to a dwarf planet leaving our solar system with eight planets.⁶ By and large, the public accepted the esoteric decision of the International Astronomical Union, a relatively unfamiliar body, to change our knowledge about the solar system. This is in contrast

² Chris Hogg, "Japan-China talks on shared past," British Broadcasting Corporation, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/6209283.stm> (accessed December 10, 2007).

³ Terry Fiehn and Chris Corin, *Communist Russia under Lenin and Stalin*, 5th ed. (London: Hodder Murray, 2006), 151.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁵ Douglas C. Giancoli, *Physics: Principles with Applications*, 5th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998), 796

⁶ International Astronomical Union, "IAU 2006 General Assembly: Result of the IAU Resolution votes," International Astronomical Union, <http://www.iau.org/iau0603.414.0.html> (accessed December 10th 2007).

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to people's outrage when the historian David Irving denied the Holocaust.⁷ The repercussions were immediate; Irving was sentenced to prison for espousing anti-Semitic sentiments and his work as a historian was thoroughly discredited. While the differences in reception have much to do with the sensitivity surrounding the second issue, it is interesting to note the willingness to accept change from a scientific body rather than a historian. Therefore, the relative ease with which a discipline can erode orthodoxy and in doing so make way for heresy is affected by the perceived reliability of that discipline.

However similar to history, science's erosion of today's orthodoxy can be hampered by other factors. Religion, which also makes claims about the nature of our world, often directly contradicts the findings of science. Embryonic stem cell research, often hailed as holding great potential in treating life-threatening diseases such as Parkinson's, is heavily restricted in America based on ethical and religious grounds.⁸ Another example of religion impeding the spread of scientific knowledge is the attempts at teaching Intelligent Design, arguably a form of creationism, in American schools. Despite the success of the Dover Trial of 2004 in preventing a school in Dover, Pennsylvania from teaching intelligent design, evolution is still not completely accepted in many other high other schools.⁹ In both these examples, science's ability to transcend orthodox barriers to reveal new knowledge is compromised by the conflicts between science and religion and ethics. Thus science's ability to be "always on the move" is limited by its conflicts with other areas of knowledge.

Consider ethics, which constitute the moral principles governing an individual's or a group's behaviour. When determining the morality of an action, we use both reason and emotion to arrive at a personally satisfactory answer. Ethics are also strongly influenced by cultural and religious values and therefore tend to vary significantly between groups. The numerous inputs that go into forming an ethical framework as well as its highly personal nature mean that ethics is arguably a relatively fluid area of knowledge. An example of a change in ethics is the attitude towards sati, the former Hindu practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband's pyre. Previously, sati was thought to be the duty of any good, faithful wife by certain communities in India. However, the government of India now strictly bans it and people regard it as a cruel and appalling practice. Changes in ethical thought have thus superseded old beliefs and brought about significant changes in behaviour that would have previously been condemned as unnatural.

Having said that, the extent to which ethics adheres to the requirements of the claim is debatable as changes in people's behaviour and attitudes are often curtailed by faithfulness to the tenets of the past. Whilst most countries are increasingly tolerant

⁷ Andrew Walker, "Profile: David Irving," British Broadcasting Corporation, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4449948.stm (accessed December 10 2007).

⁸ Mike Allen and Ceci Connolly, "House Defies Bush on Stem Cells," The Washington Post, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/24/AR2005052400938.html> (accessed December 10, 2007).

⁹ Anna Badkhen, "Anti-evolution teachings gain foothold in U.S. schools," San Francisco Chronicle, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2004/11/30/MNGVNA3PE11.DTL> (accessed December 10, 2007).

May 08

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of homosexuality, the orthodox mindset still lingers in Singapore and Section 377A of the Constitution brands homosexuality as being a criminal act.¹⁰ In this case, we can see how the ethics of a particular community fails to "[erode] today's orthodoxy" and "[make space] for yesterday's heresy." Hence, the progress of ethics can also be stalled by society's attachment to orthodox mindsets.

In conclusion, the claim that 'history is always on the move, slowly eroding today's orthodoxy and making space for yesterday's heresy' is relevant not only to history but also to science and ethics. In all three areas of knowledge, we can see how past ideas about truth are inverted and new ideas formulated. I also found that this dynamic process could be temporarily stagnated by external factors such as censorship or when differing areas of knowledge such as science and religion come into conflict with one another. It can also be affected by the perceived reliability of that discipline or existing social mores. Therefore the concept that such disciplines are 'always on the move' is contestable but over time, all three demonstrate that they have the ability to erode established orthodox thought and bring about significant changes in people's attitudes and approaches to knowledge.

¹⁰ Singapore Statutes Online, "Offences Affecting The Human Body," Attorney-General's Chambers, http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_getdata.pl?actno=1872-REVED-224&segid=888373002-001939 (accessed December 10, 2007)

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