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Better Living through Philosophy: Ways of Knowing and the Search for Common Ground

Turning of the Wheel: A Humanities Exploration & the Malcolm Renfrew Interdisciplinary Colloquium

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Outline

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Elements of the Talk

The Problem – Intercultural Misunderstanding

The Goal – Better Living in the Context of Diversity

The Method – Philosophical Reflection (no, really…)

Conceptual Background

- Ways of Knowing
- Common Ground
- Integration

Steps toward a Solution? – The Toolbox Project

- The Context & Our Problem
- The Challenge of Communicating across Disciplines
- A Philosophical Response

A Metaphorical Conclusion

Elements of the Talk

Rodney's Keynote Address

"Turning of the Wheel" Metaphor

The Power of Story

Ways of Knowing

The Unique in the Universal

Unity in Diversity

Bridge Metaphor

Philosophy

The Good Life

The Toolbox Project

Synthesis

Common Ground

The Problem

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Cultural Interaction …

- Think of a *culture* as a socially distributed set of beliefs, values, and experiences

- Cultures support different views of the world

The Problem

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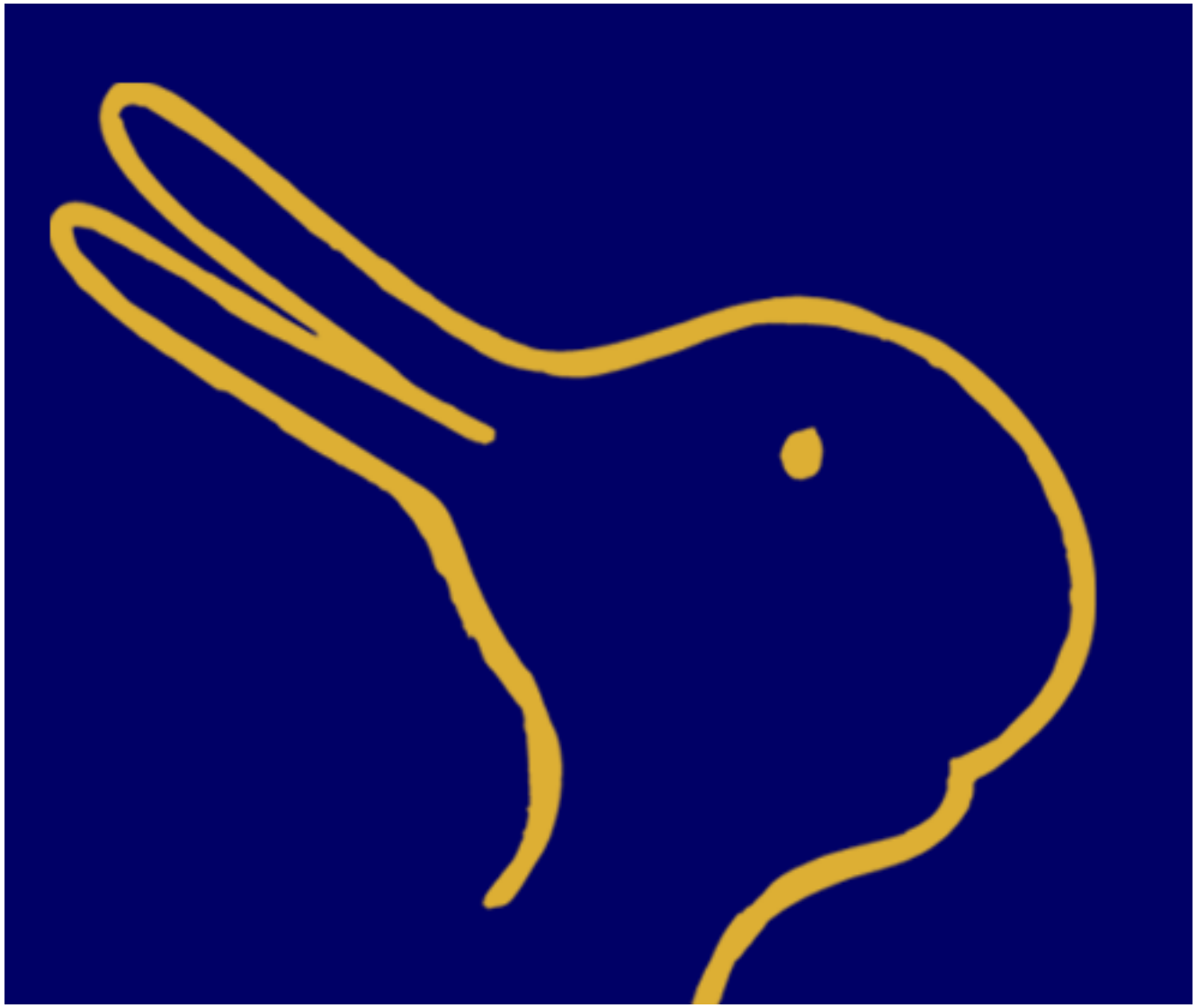

The Problem


BEVERAGES
BEVERAGES
NUTS & POPCORN
BOTTLED WATER
TWISTER
Now ir the

The Problem

… Can Lead to …

- These worldviews frame how one experiences, interacts, knows

- Example: “head knowledge” and “heart knowledge”

The Problem

… Intercultural Misunderstanding

- Cultures invariably interact, and their different worldviews can produce a problematic diversity
  - Diversity as cacophony
  - Diversity as divisiveness

- Life can be harder when some sort of unity is not achieved amidst the diversity

The Goal

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Improve Life by Finding Unity in the Diversity

- Seek not only the unique in the universal, but the universal in the unique

- This requires identifying common ground on which to stand to bridge the differences

- Unity is not *unison*, but a type of *harmony*

The Method

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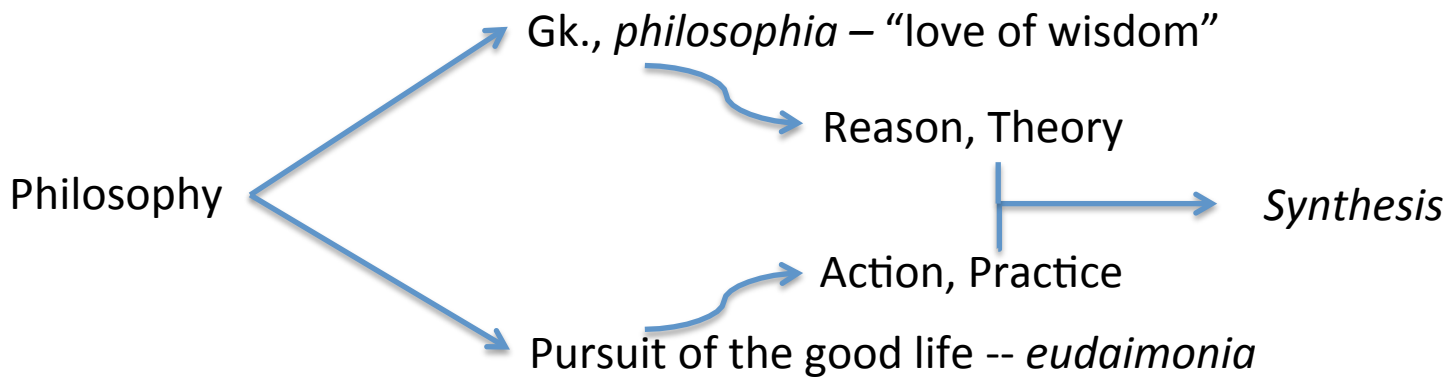
Philosophical Reflection

- Why think philosophy can help? Why think of it as relevant to better living?

- What is philosophy?



The Method

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Philosophical Reflection

- Philosophy as reframing, reconceiving, resetting

- Focus on philosophy as an effort to:

identify the unity

in the diversity

through abstraction

Ways of Knowing

- Relation to worldview: different ways of engaging the world, of becoming connected, of living in it
  - Different from ways of believing
  - There is a diversity of ways of knowing
  - *Examples*: head knowledge, heart knowledge

- Consider head knowledge:
  - Central concepts: evidence, justification, argument
  - Born in *research*

Conceptual Background -- Unity

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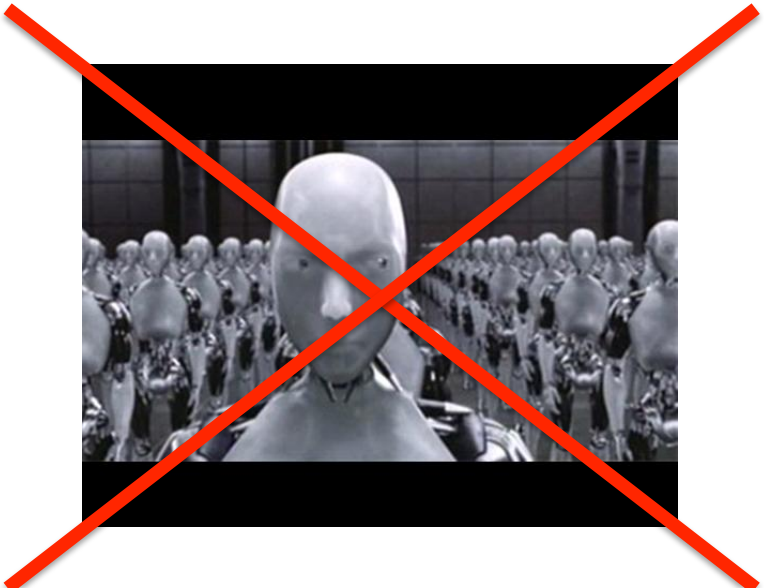
Common Ground

- Consider the metaphor: ground in common on which we stand together
  - Feet set, a mutual stake in the outcome
  - Enables participants to see the differences and similarities
  - *Not* uniformity or singlemindedness



Conceptual Background -- Unity

Common Ground

- Consider head knowledge:
  - Often cashed out in terms of shared information
  - Used in semantics and psychology of communication
  - Used in interdisciplinary theory as an epistemic (i.e., knowledge-related) condition on disciplinary synthesis

Conceptual Background -- Harmony

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Synthesis

- Seek the unity in diversity, the similarity in difference
- Aim for *harmony*, not conformity
- Philosophy as abstraction from difference to common ground, without washing out the differences
  - Respect and preserve difference
  - Conceptual harmony

Steps toward a Solution?

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Getting a Few Heads Together…

- Focus on *head knowledge* – on *research*
  - Specifically on *translational research* – research that moves knowledge out into the world (e.g., health, climate science)
  - This is an *intercultural* context, home to misunderstanding and miscommunication

- The Idea: Use philosophy to enable partners in these research efforts to bridge their cultural gaps, thereby finding some unity in their diversity -- the Toolbox Project

The Context & Our Problem

Cultural Divides and Philosophical Bridges

- Finding Unity in the Diversity:
  - *Ways of Knowing* – partners see different worlds, value different outcomes, speak different languages
  - *Common Ground* – problems and projects, but this can leave differences unseen
  - *Synthesis* – use philosophical abstraction to enable partners to transcend differences and see the world through each other's eyes

- The Principal Problem: Cross-disciplinary and interprofessional communication

Translational Communication

Communication as Fundamental to Success

- Translational collaboration confronts many challenges
- The ability to communicate effectively between collaborators and across disciplines is critical to meeting these challenges
  - Selling the science
  - Establishing and managing individual and collective identities
  - Maintaining reputation (e.g., "facework")
  - Avoiding unreasonable disagreement *and* agreement
  - Negotiating research compromises
- "At the heart of interdisciplinarity is communication—the conversations, connections, and combinations that bring new insights to virtually every kind of scientist and engineer." (Committee on Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research (2004). *Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research.* Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, p. 19)

A Philosophical Response

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Better Research through Philosophy

- The Toolbox Project focuses on understanding and improving communication about research content within collaborations
- Leading Idea:

Enhanced understanding → Enhanced communication

- A structured dialogue can reveal different fundamental assumptions that can hamper translational research
- The dialogue is more productive if *philosophical*
  - Systematically reveals research assumptions
  - Provides abstract common ground for dialogue

The Toolbox Project: Approach

An Instrument and a Workshop

- The Toolbox Instrument
  - A table of philosophical prompts that reveal fundamental assumptions about research and practice
  - These are structured into 2 categories: world and investigator
  - E.g.: "Scientific research must be hypothesis driven"
- The Toolbox Workshop
  - Begins and ends with participants scoring the Toolbox
  - 2-hour dialogue about research assumptions structured by the Toolbox
  - Various followup data collected

A Metaphorical Conclusion

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The Story of Wheels and Bridges

"How can two people so different relate so effortlessly?"

- The story of the Toolbox Project is the story of philosophy "bridging what can divide the spokes"
- Philosophy enables:
  - Common ground on which to integrate different professional ways of knowing
  - Better living for professionals and through professionals

A Metaphorical Conclusion

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The Story of Wheels and Bridges

- This is not necessarily "Kumbaya" or "We Are the World"
  - You want interdisciplinary and interprofessional partners *because* they are different
  - Differences imply disagreements, but tension can lead to resolution and insight
  - Think of negotiable disagreement as an *achievement*
- Living is *hard*, but it can be improved…

Acknowledgments

- NSF SES (#0823058) and the University of Idaho for funding
- Co-PIs Sanford Eigenbrode (UI), J.D. Wulfhorst (UI), Stephen Crowley (BSU)
- Other faculty collaborators: Christopher Williams (statistics)
- Students and Postdocs: Brian Crist, Ruth Dahlquist, Shannon Donovan, Renee Hill, Justin Horn, Chris Looney, Ian O'Loughlin, Liela Rotschy, Brianne Tice
- Project support: NSF IGERT & BEACON, USDA-NIFA REACCH PNA, USGS NW CSC, NIH ITHS
- Members of other participating projects and teams; approximately 350 participants on 64 teams
- Project advisors: Julie Thompson-Klein (Wayne State University), Frank Davis (UC Santa Barbara), Paul Griffiths (University of Sydney)

Questions

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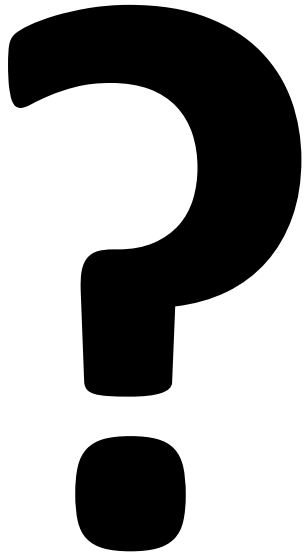

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Toolbox Module Sample

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Trust

***Core Question*: Does relevant work on climate science require partnerships between scientists and natural resource managers?**

Response:

1. The products of scientific research are often not useful for making natural resource management decisions.

   Disagree *Agree*
   1 2 3 4 5 *I don't know* *N/A*

2. Natural resource managers should trust scientists because they are experts.

   Disagree *Agree*
   1 2 3 4 5 *I don't know* *N/A*

3. Scientists should have greater respect for the complexity of natural resource management decisions.

   Disagree *Agree*
   1 2 3 4 5 *I don't know* *N/A*

4. Managers should have greater respect for the constraints on publishable scientific research.

   Disagree *Agree*
   1 2 3 4 5 *I don't know* *N/A*

5. Science should have greater influence over natural resource management decisions.

   Disagree *Agree*
   1 2 3 4 5 *I don't know* *N/*

6. In translating technical scientific language into language that a non-scientist can understand, important information is lost.

   Disagree *Agree*
   1 2 3 4 5 *I don't know* *N/A*

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