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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.

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If the truth I am taught at school will later be eroded, then what is the point in learning? (K1)

The knowledge issue in this claim is to what extent we can trust a claim to truth if this claim will simply be eroded later. 'Orthodoxy' is established and accepted truth, reached by consensus. 'Heresy' is truth which differs from the dominant theory or practice. Thus it does not correspond to the coherence theory of truth: that a proposition is true if it fits in with a generally held of beliefs. The claim, however, states that this accepted truth is constantly in a state of gradual change. (up clear)

History is the study of humanity's past in as objective a manner as possible. We can only understand the past to the extent that we have evidence. Indeed evidence is one of the two general criteria for any reasonable knowledge claim. History relies on inductive reasoning, going from the particular to the general. Since, unlike observable scientific phenomena, historians cannot experience past events, they must take what is known from existing evidence and make an inductive inference. This can cause problems, however, when studying events where there is little evidence. For example, if studying diet in Stone Age Britain a historian might generalise from human tooth marks on the rare intact remains of the Cheddar Man skeleton that cannibalism was practised at the time.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, when more evidence comes to light a historian might be forced to revise or even discard theories in a similar way to the natural sciences.

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<sup>1</sup> Estling, Ralph. "Forum: They Don't Eat People in Somerset - Leastways, Not Any Longer, Says Ralph Estling." New Scientist. 29 June 1991. 13 Feb. 2008  
<<http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg13017756.900-forum-they-dont-eat-people-in-somerset--leastways-notany-longer-says-ralph-estling-.html>>.

Historians are also affected by the values and attitudes of their times and this impacts their analysis of past events. To a British historian in 1904 the idea that Caucasians were racially superior could be a sufficient explanation for the dominance of European imperialism in Africa during 19<sup>th</sup> century. For a modern day historian such as explanation would rightly be shunned as ignorant and racist and instead he might look to economic or environmental explanations. Hence this becomes orthodoxy and the racist explanation heresy, the subsuming of the title is reversed. ed.

Thus theories of history do indeed change with time as evidence grows and the perspective of the historians change too. On the other hand this claim is only applicable to history as our interpretations of past events. After all the actual events themselves cannot be changed, and in this sense are completely objective. ✓

A scientist is very similar to a historian in method; both offer tentative explanations of their subjects in the form of theories. These can then be tested against hard evidence in the form of primary sources for history and experimental data for science; they use the correspondence theory of truth. V

The title could be equally applied to the area of knowledge of the natural sciences. A science is best defined by the scientific method, based on inductivism. According to Karl Popper, when a scientist posits a hypothesis to explain a scientific phenomenon this is a

conjecture.<sup>2</sup> A conjecture is only scientific if it is falsifiable and can thus be refuted if it fails to stand up to repeated testing by experiment. In fact Popper's theory proposes that concepts such as 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' should not exist in science at all but rather that if a conjecture shows resistance to concerted efforts to falsify it, it can be provisionally accepted. In addition, there is no 'slow erosion' of orthodoxy but rather it is rapidly revised or discarded if it is proved false but once.

In 1616 Harvey proposed that, contrary to Galen's accepted model of the arterial and venous systems as two separate entities, they were in fact one circular structure. Within his lifetime his theory was to be accepted and Galen's discarded. Kuhn (1922-96) proposed that science had undergone paradigm revolutions throughout its history in which the old 'orthodoxy' was completely overthrown in favour of a new theory. During periods of stable science the paradigm worked well and scientists occupied themselves with filling in details rather than questioning the whole paradigm. A theory that contradicted the accepted paradigm was the 'heresy' that is described in the claim, its truth thus rejected by coherence theory. Anomalous observations and problems still occurred though and 'slowly eroded' the 'orthodox' paradigm until they reach a critical mass, at which stage a new paradigm was put forward.<sup>3</sup>

) back  
examples

Kuhn's theory implies an important difference to the statement, however, as it suggests that the actual changes in science are in the revolutionary and dramatic paradigm 'shifts'

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<sup>2</sup> Lagemaat, Richard. Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 235-239.

<sup>3</sup> Lagemaat, Richard. Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 235-239.

in which the 'orthodoxy' is rapidly and completely overthrown in favour of the heresy. In these periods our understanding of science leaps forwards. For example, Australian physician Dr. Barry Marshall proposed 20 years ago that peptic ulcers were caused by bacteria and could be treated using antibiotics. At that time the 'orthodox' paradigm of physiology taught that ulcers were caused by stress and his claims were dismissed as 'preposterous'. However, researching with Dr Robert Warren he was eventually able to isolate the malicious bacteria called *Helicobacter pylori*. Treatment using antibiotics in this new paradigm was extremely successful and their discovery was incorporated into the body of medical knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

✓  
'Eroding', however, does not necessarily imply a complete overhaul of the original knowledge. Thus, although a bacterial infection is now accepted as the root cause of a peptic ulcer, this does not mean that stress does not play a factor. This process is known as the Hegelian dialect: a thesis is opposed by an antithesis.<sup>5</sup> The debate that ensues ultimately produces a synthesis of the two ideas which can then be taken as a new thesis and the process repeated. This method ensures that ideas are honed and improved as time progresses. Thus a historian studying the origins of World War One in the 1960's suggests that the assassination of Arch Duke Franz Ferdinand was the cause of the war. Thirty years later a revisionist historian might argue that the causes had already been set in motion before that point by the opposing networks of alliances that had developed in Europe in the prior decades. A synthesis could then emerge from these two theories: the

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, Paul. "Science Can Be Just as Corrupt as Any Other Activity - the Spectator." The Spectator. 5 Nov. 2005. 10 Jan. 2008 <[http://www.spectator.co.uk/the-magazine/columnists/14428/part\\_2/science-can-be-just-as-corrupt-as-any-other-activity.thtml](http://www.spectator.co.uk/the-magazine/columnists/14428/part_2/science-can-be-just-as-corrupt-as-any-other-activity.thtml)>.

<sup>5</sup> Baird, Robert M. "Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel." MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia. 10 Jan. 2008 <[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761552560/hegel.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761552560/hegel.html)>.

assassination was the spark for a domino effect of countries declaring war on each other due to their alliances. Thus the causality of the title is too generalized and absolute; here is a marriage rather than a gradual divorce.

Although the example of the peptic ulcers is a scientific one, and the dialectic process does occur in science, it is much more widespread in historical interpretation. This is mainly because historical interpretations are often based on inductive inferences which are inherently unsure and cannot be tested by experiment as in science. Knowledge claims in science are empirical propositions, testable against evidence. The same can be true of historical events; 'Led Zeppelin's debut album was released in January 1969' is an empirical statement and can be tested against historical records. By contrast interpretations of historical events are value judgments. A historian will suggest that certain factors had greater importance in the outcome of an event than others. Ultimately this means that, provided there is sufficient evidence for the knowledge claim, history has to hold a relativistic attitude towards it. Thus the article 'Decline of the Roman Empire' on Wikipedia features no less than 14 different theories as to the explanations for the decline, all supported by eminent Historians. No interpretation is more 'true' than another; the heresies become alternatives rather than orthodoxies.

I agree to an extent with this statement, and think that it expresses a positive concept. History itself can teach us of the dangers of dogmatism, blind subscription to the established truth results at best in intellectual stagnation and at worst in ideological imperialism like that of the Catholic Inquisition. In the arts the Dada movement

Ref.

epitomized heresy as they strove to raze the existing art orthodoxy which emphasised traditional aesthetics and appeal to sensibilities embracing instead chaos and irrationality, ugliness and offensiveness. They opposed the traditional cultural values and intellectual conformity which had led to the atrocities of World War One. Yet, ironically, in time it was to develop into surrealism whose hero Dali, was to become the orthodox wall décor for any university student. *lucy*

I think, however, that the applications of this statement are limited and to imply that all truth is merely fleeting theories is misleading. For example, I believe in the theory of evolution, I think it is well-formulated, intelligent and justified by the evidence that exists. Ultimately I cannot know for certain whether it is true. Perhaps, in the future, a biologist will develop a radically new and improved explanation of our origin.

Nevertheless I still believe that evolution is in fact true and will not be usurped or eroded with the passage of time but, if anything, reinforced by an accumulating body of evidence. Moreover, examples abound of orthodoxies which have yet to be seriously challenged, 23 centuries later and Euclid's five axioms still form the basis of all geometry. *generally*  
*not likely*

Thus as a synthesis we can say that one should maintain a healthy scepticism when dealing with 'orthodox' knowledge claims that are based on human assumptions and be willing to impartially evaluate a reasonable knowledge claim that differs from the established belief. On the other hand, we must not fall victim to blanket 'idiot scepticism' which leads to the same outcome as dogmatism: intellectual paralysis. Instead I would

suggest that each revolution, synthesis or alternative perspective on an issue brings us closer to an ideal of truth which, although it may never be fully attained, is still worth pursuing.