

## A TOK BASIC: Is truth absolute?

Fundamental to almost every TOK debate is whether “truth” is **Absolute, Relative, or Subjective**. The earlier you begin this debate in your class, the more useful it will become throughout.

### Absolute:

Truth never changes. What is, is, regardless of human **perception or emotion**. The Earth was always round, whether man knew it or not. If the tree falls in the forest, sound waves will always be present whether man hears them or not.

- **Ethics** – The rules of the way we ought to live never change. [Killing for one’s own gain is always wrong. The ten commandments are set in stone.] (see Kant’s Categorical Imperative)
- **Mathematics** – Axioms of math are constant and irrefutable.
- **Natural Science** – Scientific research leads to truth. Paradigm shifts are only reflections of man’s ability to get closer to the truth. (see Peirce)
- **History** -- History is an accumulation of reliable data from the observers. Certain events took place in certain years as recorded by historians.
- **The Arts** – Experts determine what should be considered Absolute beauty. (see Plato’s ideal forms)
- **Logic** – Pure logic is cold and irrefutable. The syllogistic system has not been improved since Aristotle.

### Relative:

Truth is relative to the time and culture of those who seek it. Therefore, **perception and emotion**, which are in part determined by culture, help determine truth. **Language** also plays a key role since certain concepts exist only in certain cultures. In turn, mankind’s **reasoning powers** are affected by a combination of these.

- **Ethics** – The rules of the way we ought to live change from culture to culture. [Cheating to get ahead may be damned in one culture, but encouraged in another.] Ethics are situational. (see Spinoza, Mill)
- **Mathematics** – Time has proven that axioms do change. Euclidean geometry is no longer applicable in a multi-dimensional universe.
- **Natural Science** – Scientific investigations are tainted by the availability of the instruments at hand. [Some now think the Earth may be oval in shape.] A current paradigm is the best we can hope for.
- **Human Science** – Paradigms are critical to current belief systems. Although theories may be studied for long periods of time [Freud], universal agreement is not possible. Since natural science plays a key role [current brain theory for psychology], the human sciences are also dependent on resources available.
- **History** – History is written by the victors. The truth cannot be known absolutely because the story of history depends upon the writer’s

perception. It cannot also be rewritten to align itself with current ways of thinking. Language differences and the translation of documents are significant [*conquest* vs. *invasion*]. At best, history teaches overall trends.

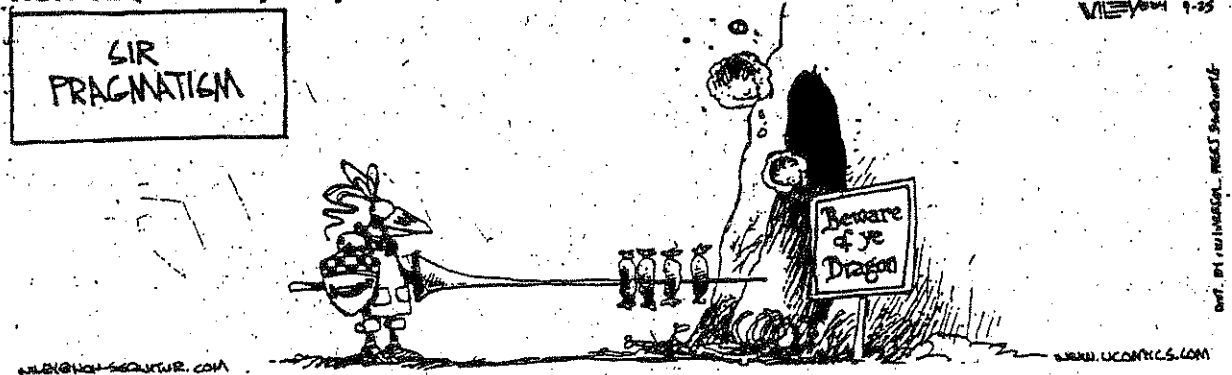
- **The Arts** – Beauty varies according to time and culture. [The model female of 2000 weighs 75 pounds less than the model female of 1900. Artists are seldom considered great at the time they are painting.]
- **Logic** – Clear thinking can be logically manipulated through language. Language differences cause the basic fallacies to vary.

### Subjective:

Truth depends solely on the perception of the individual. If the tree falls in the forest, and no one hears it, it does not make a sound. Truth depends upon the individual's belief systems. Pragmatic and existential truths are valid. (see James, Sartre)

- **Ethics** – The way we ought to behave is determined by each individual. Circumstance and individual belief systems weigh into what is right or wrong. [Pre-marital sex is okay for me because I am in love.] Human reason leads to right behavior.
- **Human Science** – Every individual is different. There cannot be hard and fast rules about why we behave the way we do. Our reasoning powers are determined entirely by our perception and emotion. (see Locke)
- **History** – History takes place in the year "I read." This suggests that history is meaningless until the individual reads it and applies individual, visual interpretation. Influences on the individual reader of history become primary.
- **The Arts** – Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. An expert cannot determine an individual's aesthetic judgment.
- **Logic** – Since brains vary, reasoning powers also vary. Since the individual is primary, individual belief systems are primary.

NON SEQUITUR By Wiley Miller



## 'Town Destroyer' Versus the Iroquois Indians

Forty Indian villages—and a powerful indigenous nation—were razed on the orders of [REDACTED]

By *Johannah Cornblatt U.S. World News and Reports*  
Posted June 27, 2008

By [REDACTED] had already earned the famous moniker [REDACTED]. But the Iroquois Indians of the time bestowed on [REDACTED] another, not-so-flattering epithet: *Conotocarious*, or "Town Destroyer."

A 1796 engraving of an Iroquois.

This lesser-known title also had its origins in 1779, when [REDACTED] ordered what at the time was the largest-ever campaign against the Indians in North America. After suffering for nearly two years from Iroquois raids on the Colonies' northern frontier, [REDACTED] and Congress decided to strike back. From his headquarters in Middlebrook, N.J., [REDACTED] authorized the "total destruction and devastation" of the Iroquois settlements across upstate New York so "that country may not merely be *overrun* but *destroyed*."

The Iroquois, whose tribes had lined up on both sides of the conflict, were too distracted by their own internal divisions to see the crisis coming. By August, the expedition was moving through Iroquois country, meeting almost no resistance. In keeping with explicit orders from [REDACTED], the Americans set ablaze every village in their path. "I am well persuaded," John Sullivan, the leader of the venture, bragged to Congress afterward, "that, except one town situated near the Allegana, about 50 miles from the Chinessee, there is not a single town left in the country of the Five nations." The campaign defeated the loyalist Iroquois army, burned 40 Iroquois villages to ashes, and left homeless many of the Indians, hundreds of whom died of exposure during the following frigid winter.

**Crushed power.** The Iroquois Confederacy, arguably the strongest Indian government during the colonial period, would never recover. "It was disastrous to the Iroquois," says Barbara Graymont, author of *The Iroquois in the American Revolution*. "It actually crushed their military power." While individual Iroquois tribes continued to launch raids over the next few years, the [REDACTED] War broke the power of the Iroquois as a political unit.

SATURDAY, JULY 4, 2009

### "Merciless Indian savages" and the "Town Destroyer"

When he met with [REDACTED] 11 years after the devastating campaign, Chief Cornplanter, who headed the Seneca tribe of the Iroquois, stressed the durability of "Town Destroyer" as the [REDACTED] nickname. "And to this day when that name is heard, our women look behind them and turn pale, and our children cling close to the necks of their mothers," Cornplanter said. But the title stuck even tighter than the Seneca chief could have imagined. To this day, "Town Destroyer" is still used as an Iroquois name for the [REDACTED]

I was left thinking about the Indian's side of the story. I wrote a book in the early '90s that features a Mohawk Indian ironworker I met in Cheyenne, Wyoming. To flesh out what little I learned about this man in our brief time together, I did bookwork on the Mohawk. That was when I encountered the tradition among the Iroquois, a confederacy that included the Mohawk, describing ██████████ as the "Town Destroyer".

██████████ didn't write The Declaration of Independence, of course. He didn't even sign it, though he had it read to his troops in New York ██████████ to rile up the men and recruit more militants. It's safe to say ██████████ concurred with this brutal depiction of Indians, accepting it either as true or as effective rhetoric, given the revolutionary situation at hand - it was time to make people mad enough to pick up the gun and go.

Did ██████████ deserve the moniker of "Town Destroyer," any more than the Native peoples deserved Jefferson's characterization of them as "merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare, is undistinguished destruction"?

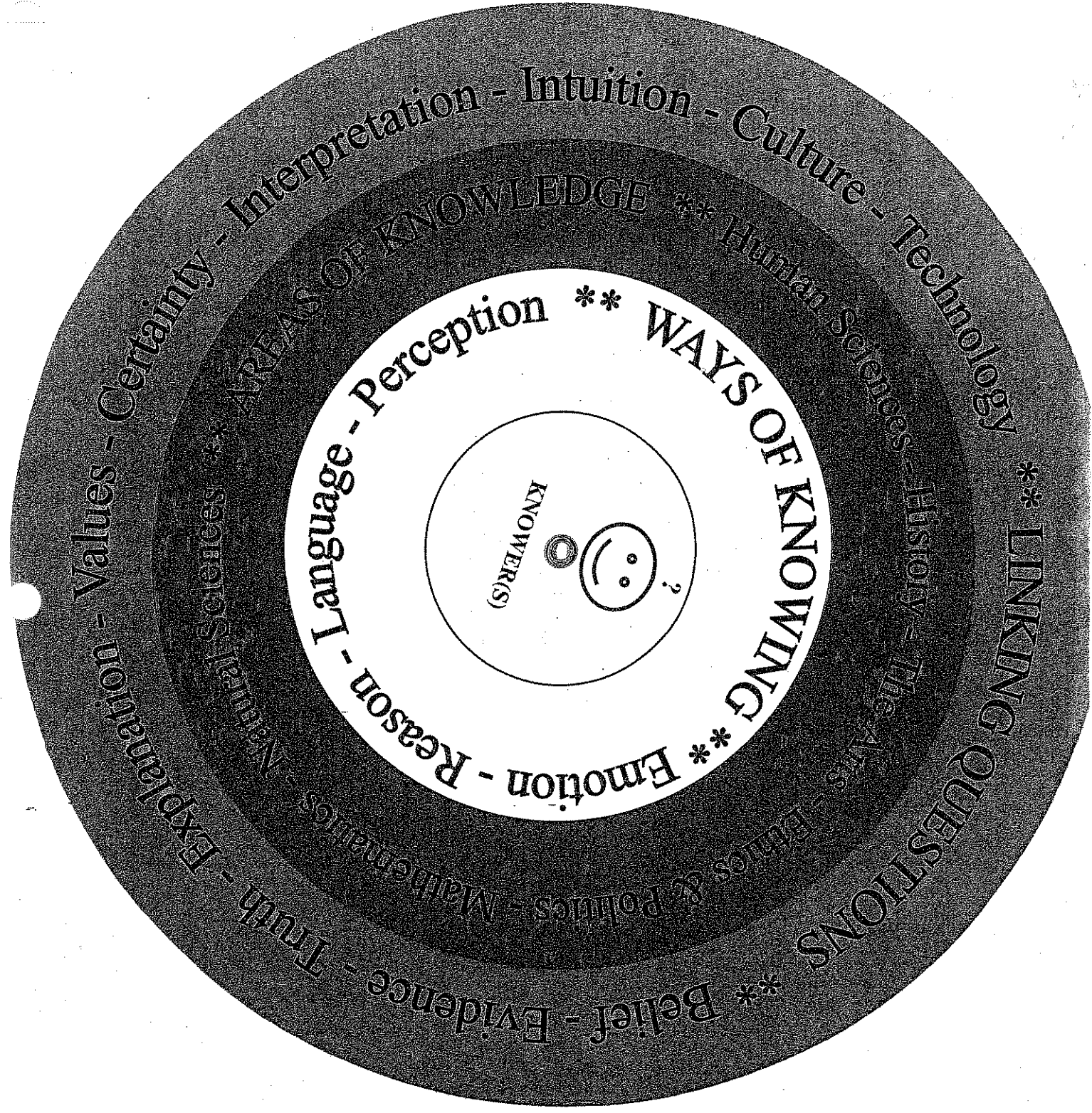
██████████ earned his reputation as "Town Destroyer" largely by proxy, in the depredations in Indian country wrought by General John Sullivan and his troops in their expedition against the Tories and Iroquois. But Sullivan and his men were only acting under orders - orders issued unmistakably by Washington on May 31, 1779:

The Expedition you are appointed to command is to be directed against the hostile tribes of the Six Nations of Indians, with their associates and adherents. The immediate objects are the total destruction and devastation of their settlements, and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible. It will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more.

I would recommend, that some post in the center of the Indian Country, should be occupied with all expedition, with a sufficient quantity of provisions whence parties should be detached to lay waste all the settlements around, with instructions to do it in the most effectual manner, that the country may not be merely overrun, but destroyed.

But you will not by any means listen to any overture of peace before the total ruinment of their settlements is effected. Our future security will be in their inability to injure us and in the terror with which the severity of the chastisement they receive will inspire them

The language all but quotes Jefferson's description of "merciless savages" in The Declaration, but in this case ██████████ is directing American rebel troops to conduct themselves in this way.



KNOWER(S)

WAYS OF KNOWING

AREAS OF KNOWLEDGE

Language - Perception \*\*

Reason - Emotion \*\*

LINKING QUESTIONS

Human Sciences - Technology

History - The Arts

Ethics & Politics - Mathematics

Natural Sciences

Values - Certainty - Interpretation - Intuition - Culture

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History - The Arts

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Natural Sciences

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## The Theory of Knowledge (TOK) Wheel

The TOK Wheel is designed to spark discussion and insight into (1) ways of knowing, (2) justifications of knowledge, (3) limits of knowledge, (4) problems of knowledge, and (5) interconnections between different subject areas.

The Center of the TOK Wheel represents the knower as an individual or as a member of a group. This is the place to which all knowledge comes, or from which all knowledge emanates.

The first circle represents the ways of knowing: One gains knowledge via (1) perception, (2) hearing or reading language, (3) feeling emotion, or (4) reasoning.

The second circle represents the major subject areas of knowledge that a student learns in school. These areas could also easily be replaced with the non-school elements of a person's life when seeking insight or pursuing items of discussion.

The third circle lists a number of linking considerations. These headings help the knower to further develop discussion generated in the first and second circles of the TOK Wheel.

Example, spin the wheel and line up these terms:

*Knower - Emotion - History - Evidence*

Discussion points apt to arise would include:

- How legitimate is emotion as a form of knowledge?
- How do you as an individual value emotion as a source of knowledge?
- How large a role does/should emotion play in interpreting history in general?
- What constitutes evidence in history, as opposed to evidence in art?
- Can history ever really be known?
- Can a person be objective in interpreting history?
- How is certainty in history similar/different than certainty in science?