

Final Paper: *Metamorphosis*



*“When we are stuck inside the space of error, then, we are lost twice over: once in the world, and again in ourselves... In fact, perhaps the chief thing we learn from being wrong is how much growing up we still have to do... This is the thing about fully experiencing wrongness. It strips us of all our theories, including our theories about ourselves. This isn’t fun while it’s happening... but it does make possible that rarest of occurrences: **real change.** ”*

- Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong*, pp. 191

This class has taken a “case study” approach to Wrongology. That is, we’ve examined many situations where people got something wrong. But, as Kathryn Schulz points out, one of the hardest thing to realize you’re wrong about is **the self**. Perhaps you behaved in a way contrary to what you thought were your core principles. Or maybe you realized you weren’t as smart, or reliable or courageous as you once thought. Even being wrong about something *factual* in the external world (i.e. Nigerian fortunes, your son’s real lineage) threatens your sense of self. After all, realizing your own fallibility means admitting you were wrong about your abilities to analyze data, assess people’s character and evaluate information.

From Allan Greenspan’s admission of being “in a state of shocked disbelief” when the global economy failed, to the Millerites’ stunned reactions when the world did not end in 1844, to Michael Shermer’s conversion from born again Christian proselytizer to head of the Skeptic Society, all these people had to reevaluate their identity after admitting wrongness: Who was I? How could I have been so wrong? Who am I *now*? Who will I be *next*?

- Your final assignment is to present and thoroughly analyze a **personal case study** wherein **you** got something important really, really wrong and how this error affected your identity.
- **Compare and contrast your experience** with the processes Schulz chronicles in Chapters 9-11 and 13 using some of the questions on the reverse side to prompt your thinking.
- Finally, using your own experience, **make an argument** about whether or not you agree with Schulz’s Optimistic Meta-Induction from the History of Everything. That is, do you agree with her assertion that :

”[E]rror, even though it sometimes feels like despair, is actually much closer in spirit to hope. We get things wrong because we have an enduring confidence in our own minds; and we face up to that wrongness in the faith that, having learned something, we will get it right the next time. .. The great advantage of realizing that we have told a story about the world is realizing that we can tell a better one: rich with better ideas, better possibilities – even, perhaps, better people”. pp. 338-9

Here are some questions to consider in your paper. You likely cannot answer them all, so choose the ones that resonate most with you and will lead to them most probing analysis.

- What, exactly, were you wrong about and where do you think this belief came from? Do you think any of the error theories we've learned in class contributed to your holding this incorrect belief? Explain.
- How do you think this belief affected your actions? What *theories about yourself* did you form around this belief? Did you have any *habitual delusions* that contributed?
- What first made you begin to question your belief? Would you say you experienced a slow or sudden belief change or were you stuck for a while in the Chasm of Pure Wrongness?
- Do you think you had any "sunk costs" that made you reluctant to give up your belief? That is, how much had you already committed to this belief that made it hard to give up?
- Schulz argues that "acknowledging mistakes is an intellectual, and (especially) an *emotional* skill". Do you agree? Why or why not? If you agree, what aspects of your personality, age, gender, culture or other factors do you think made it difficult to admit being wrong initially? How did these factors ultimately influence your being able to admit wrongness?
- Once you realized you were wrong, did you engage in any of the 5 Wrong Buts? (*The Time Frame Defense, Near Miss Defense, Out-of-Left-Field Defense, Blaming Others* or *Better Safe than Sorry*) If so, why and what finally forced you to give it up?
- What role did **denial** play for you in this situation? If you were in denial, do you think you should be morally excused for this state? Why or why not?
- What ultimately led you to **accept** your wrongness? How did it feel to do so?
- Reflecting back on this process, how do you see that you have been **transformed** by this experience? What have you learned? How have you changed? If you had anything to change about the past, or your past error, what would it be and why?
- Schulz asserts that going through this process, realizing/accepting wrongness, shows us how much growing up we have to do. Do you agree with this? Explain.
- Ultimately, would you say you subscribe more to the Pessimistic or Optimistic Model of Wrongness? Do you agree with Schulz that error is much closer in spirit to hope?

Your paper should be a **minimum of 6 pages long** and of the **highest quality honors-level college writing**. I strongly suggest you use quotes from the book *Being Wrong* and case studies presented in class to illustrate your points.

Due Date: THURSDAY, DECEMBER 15 at Noon. I will be in my office that day from 8AM until Noon so you can drop off your final paper and pick up your corrected Paradigm Essay.