

1



Tom Murray



all

Start Date: 02/04/07



hide

Introduction

Enter general or emerging thoughts and responses here. Start new Topics to organize ideas and responses to them.



2 Jeff Meyerhoff

02/24/07 3:29PM



hide

Regarding Laszlo piece.

It's a little hard to respond because the piece is more a promissory of a future view rather than a view itself. I think the results forecasted are very unlikely but since it doesn't exist yet I wouldn't want to thwart anyone's attempt at it.

But since we are directed to comment on it, I'd say that this idea that the information that structures all things in the universe is "out there" and that finding the TOE which is the "fundamental nature" of things is highly unlikely and runs counter to a different trend in contemporary thought, one of which is the undermining of foundationalism in philosophy and the broader social sciences. Analytic philosophers - the most rigorous practitioners of reason -- have generally abandoned foundationalism.

But Laszlo is proposing that science - or a new science - with an informational perspective can create this TOE that will explain it all, have predictive capabilities and tell us what's meaningful.

One reason I think this won't happen is because part of the contemporary anti-foundationalism is due to the view that when we enter the realm of the human sciences - treating humans as humans as opposed to other animals or physical objects - we enter the realm of values and morals, interests and perspectives. The objects of inquiry have their own view of the theories about them and can change, individually and socially, their behavior to thwart the theories about them.

In contrast to the physical world there are no laws of social and individual human life because the subject matter doesn't yield to laws.

If the model of the natural sciences is able to prevail, it will be by not understanding humans and their actions in many of the ways we think they should be understood. The humanity will need to be removed in order for regularity and predictability to be accomplished. As the failures at prediction in economics, psychology, sociology and other social sciences has shown this probably can't happen.



private



3 Mark Edwards

02/25/07 9:17AM



hide



I have a question...



In response to [Jeff Meyerhoff \(2\)](#)

Geoff some questions,

1. If nothing is fundamental, how do you decide what is a preferred condition. By this I mean why isn't your proposition that there is no such thing as a TOE itself a TOE, for example,
2. Why is this not a TOE?: "[People] can change, individually and socially, their behavior to thwart the theories about them."
3. Many times during 2003 I predicted that on November 4, 2004 many millions of your fellow citizens will be engaging in a strange ritualistic behaviour called voting. I was proved correct. Why doesn't the success of my prediction prove that generalities and population based regularities exist in human behaviour and that such regularities can form the basis of a TOE.

mark



private



4 Sara Ross

02/25/07 12:10PM



What is "foundationalism"?

In response to [Jeff Meyerhoff \(2\)](#)

Welcome, Jeff!

For me to get on board with what your post begins with, would you give a definition of what foundationalism is/means? I tend to need extra help when it comes to understanding -isms!

thanks!
Sara



private



5 Alan Kazlev

02/26/07 8:19PM



Mark asked:

Why is this not a TOE?: "[People] can change, individually and socially, their behavior to thwart the theories about them."


hi Mark

This is an interesting question because it gets to the heart of what a "theory" is, or is not. (e.g. are Samkhya or Neoplatonism "theories"?) If I may throw my 2 c in, I would say that for me, a "theory" has to be a self-consistent, logical, intellectual-mental statement (as opposed to visionary, trans-mental, so Neoplatonism is not a "theory"; although Samkhya still may be), based on observations (whether "objective/empirical" or "subjective/phenomenological"), that can be used to explain, and ultimately predict, phenomena. In this context, both Wilber's AQAL and Laszlo's A-Field are theories, whereas statements based on direct enlightenment, such as Advaita or Kabbalah or Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, are not. But saying "People can change their behavior to thwart the theories about them." is a generalisation that may or may not be true, but is not a consistent hypothesis like AQAL or the A-Field



private

 6 Jeff Meyerhoff

03/02/07 1:36PM 

hide

In response to Mark's questions:

1. If nothing is fundamental, how do you decide what is a preferred condition. By this I mean why isn't your proposition that there is no such thing as a TOE itself a TOE, for example,

I think we take or adopt a view of what's fundamental in the world, for example, matter, consciousness, information, love and then we build an understanding around it, or vice versa, we adopt certain beliefs and methods and find that they presuppose a belief that this or that is fundamental. I don't think anyone can prove that their fundamental thing is THE fundamental thing - what's fundamental to the world whether we humans are here or not, or, what is objectively fundamental. Philosophically, we focus too much on getting things as they are instead of focusing on understanding things in ways that help us do what we want. So I'm arguing for something more pragmatic.

So everyone's perspective is going to have the parts of it that are fundamental, the question is how do they regard those fundaments? Are they representations of the world as it is in itself or are they the working assumptions that our presently preferred perspective presupposes?

2. Why is this not a TOE?: "[People] can change, individually and socially, their behavior to thwart the theories about them."

It's not a TOE because it is a limited observation about the way things seem to work based on prior experience. But maybe we mean something different by TOE. I thought it was an all-encompassing, synthesizing theory which explained how everything works together and allows predictions and meaning-making, like Laszlo says. Maybe that's asking too much of it and there is a more moderate definition.


3. Many times during 2003 I predicted that on November 4, 2004 many millions of your fellow citizens will be engaging in a strange ritualistic behaviour called voting. I was proved correct. Why doesn't the success of my prediction prove that generalities and population based regularities exist in human behaviour and that such regularities can form the basis of a TOE.

A smart friend of mine use to ask psychology researchers with a pretensions to making psychology a science, name a result that psychology has proved that is neither trivial nor common sense. No one's come up with a satisfactory answer. Sure [...more...](#)



private

 7 Sara Ross

03/05/07 11:15AM 

hide



re Jeff's post

1. Jeff, you wrote: "But since we are directed to comment on it, I'd say that this idea that the information that structures all things in the universe is "out there" and that finding the TOE which is the "fundamental nature" of things is highly unlikely and runs counter to a different trend in contemporary thought, one of which is the undermining of foundationalism in philosophy and the broader social sciences. Analytic philosophers - the most rigorous practitioners of reason -- have generally abandoned foundationalism."

1.1 I believe it is inaccurate to portray the idea as merely "the information that structures all things in the universe" and that it "is 'out there.'" I think we have all agreed that the general limitation here is that the brief article we are working from is too short, and too intro-level, and does not supply us with a shared starting point or depth. So, this item 1.1

is just to mark my view that your sentence does not describe the idea well.

1.2 Given that all of us here are developmentalists to varying degrees, what can we infer from your observation that "Analytic philosophers...have generally abandoned foundationalism"? I am betting that you are not positing that the worldview(s) that have abandoned foundationalism (as they have conceived and defined it) are the "final word" on what worldviews are possible. In other words, I doubt that just because one view is supplanting another, we should assume that the emerging view is the only possible remaining view.

1.3 Your next point fleshes this point out a bit more.

2. (Thanks for this explanation, first of all.) You wrote: Foundationalism is the belief in philosophy that we can ground knowledge or morality or aesthetics with a rationally argued or rationally determined foundation. You usually start with postulates, or self-evident truths or rational intuitions and build on them to create a proof or argument for why what we believe is certain or the way things really are. Or, you try to provide rational arguments for why science provides true knowledge, or is so successful. A lot of work in philosophy in the last forty years has created fundamental doubts of this being possible and so is called anti-foundational. So Laszlo's talk of finding a "fundamental nature of all the things" or tending ...more...



private

8 Edward Berge

revised 03/05/07 2:54PM



I see your points Sara and have suggested that perhaps we can have a cross-paradigmatic take on it but that it still includes, while transcending, anti-foundationalism. I have suggested this in regard to Derrida's work, for example, at Open Integral. I am also opening this exploration in the Anderson forum.

Revision: After posting the above I realized I did not express what I wanted to say well. I don't think anti-foundationalism, in itself, necessarily arises only within a systemic level of hierarchical complexity. Anti-foundationalism *might* still be expressed at every level beyond the systemic yet take on different "complexities." Perhaps anti-foundationalism is a watershed change at the systemic level that is included thereafter, like self-reflection is a watershed at the formal operational, yet stays with us thereafter through new permutations?



private

9 Mark Edwards

03/05/07 9:02PM



In response to Alan Kazlev (5)

Yes Alan, this is an excellent point,

i guess i should ask Jeff why his general statement about people's behaviour is not a form of foundationalism rather than a "theory" (i meant it in the "naive theory of everything" sense :-). The point of course being that for us to actually hold a conversation means that there is some foundation that we all share. That there are universal regularities that resonate amidst all the relative goings and comings. Of course regularity doesn't mean predictive certainty. It means, among other things, probability which is really the core meaning of scientific prediction these days anyway.

And unfortunately, as those Skinner boxes called casinoes, show us, psychology has many unfortunate nontrivial and non-common sense implications for the way we live today. If only we had the common sense to evade the reinforcement schedules,

reframing spins, subliminal ads, primacy-recency effects, nag effects, targeted codes, etc etc that we are bombarded with from the wool-pulling advertisement execs, PR firms, branding agents, political spin doctors every minute of everyday. Maybe they want us to believe that psychology never came up with anything non-trivial that wasn't common sense. "They" (the Clotaire Rapaille types) want us to believe that so they can keep quietly doing their thing with us.



private

10 Edward Berge

03/06/07 10:24AM



In response to my comment #8, look at Nagarjuna. What level of hierarchical complexity is his thinking? And he is an adamant anti-foundationalist. For example see Ewing Chinn: Nagarjuna's fundamental doctrine of Pratityasamutpada. "Nagarjuna contends that the doctrine of Pratityasamutpada (dependent origination), properly understood, constitutes the philosophical basis for the rejection and avoidance of all metaphysical theories and concepts (including causation). The companion doctrine of sunyata constitutes the denial of metaphysical realism (or "essentialism") but does not imply an anti-realist, conventionalist view of reality (as Jay Garfield maintains)." from Philosophy East and West Jan 2001 Vol. 51, Iss. 1
<http://www.thezensite.com/MainPages/nagarjuna.html>



private

11 Tom Murray

03/07/07 12:43PM



Foundational foundationalism

Hi, catching up on readings and jumping in near the end here. Hope its not the last word though!

RE JM: "the contemporary anti-foundationalism is due to the view that when we enter the realm of the human sciences - treating humans as humans as opposed to other animals or physical objects...". Not sure about how it breaks down in social vs. physical sciences, as fundamentalist assumptions are in disrepute on all fronts, but certainly more so for the human/social sciences. I think the issues break down along the lines of epistemology vs. metaphysics, i.e. can we really come to truths by identifying foundational ideas and building upon them strictly logically; is the world itself actually made of or governed by some essential elements that can be humanly identified. All fields fall prey to the epistemological attacks. Physical science holds up much better than social sciences on the metaphysical attacks.

RE SR: "You seem to be describing the transition in the philosophical discourse from the rational-mental stage of formal operations to the systematic stage" -yes, and also up through vision-logic or dialectical thinking (including metasystematic). Foundationalism assumes that truths come from a logical scaffolding of arguments based on fundamental truths. Vision-logic understands that epistemic indeterminacy pervades knowledge, and sees logic as one tool (one with limits) rather than the only tool. Once we acknowledge the limitations and flaws in logical reasoning, we no longer need to, or even can, pretend that truths have to be based on fundamental assumptions.

RE EB: "Perhaps anti-foundationalism is a watershed change at the systemic level that is included thereafter, like self-reflection is a watershed at the formal operational, yet stays with us thereafter through new permutations?" yes, this sounds quite right.

RE JM: "The point of course being that for us to actually hold a conversation means that there is some foundation that we all share. " Yes, but I think there are several senses of foundationalism going here, psychological, epistemological, and metaphysical. Yes, we

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use and share foundational assumptions that go unquestioned. And any theory based on logical reasoning (as they all must be) must posit some foundations (that's how logic works). But the post-modern attitude toward theory itself leads most philosophers to [...more...](#)



private



12

Tom Murray

03/07/07 12:46PM



In response to [Sara Ross \(7\)](#)

RE SR: "Why would we discount the possibility of a TOE that relates, compares, synthesizes, and builds upon multiple systems and metasystems? ...a paradigmatic (or cross paradigmatic) TOE?"

Unfortunately we lack a standard vocabulary to talk about some of these subtleties. The way I understand some of the arguments being made, there is the question of whether a TOE is theoretically possible, and the separate question of whether it is pragmatically useful to advance knowledge in the direction that a TOE points to (and in the case of Wilber and Laszlo, go even further to call what you are doing the TOE project). I would not discount attempts to build ever more complex, elegant, and/or adequate theories explaining as much of the lifeworld as one can. But, personally, I discount, on a theoretical basis, the possibility of a single theory that truly predicts, or even *explains* everything. One can attack such a concept on many many levels, but why bother--- Wilber or Laszlo are modest enough in their writing to acknowledge that they are nowhere near such a thing.



private



13

Sara Ross

03/07/07 11:36PM



Foundational foundationalism

Man oh man how did I never hear of this term foundationalism and why oh why is it so hard for me to feel sure that I grok what people mean when defining "-isms"? Yikes!

Pasted from Tom's post, bit by bit:

RE SR: "You seem to be describing the transition in the philosophical discourse from the rational-mental stage of formal operations to the systematic stage" Tom: yes,

Okay, so far so good. The rejection of foundationalism that Jeff introduced is referring to the different "take" that the next stage, systematic, has. If foundationalism is mental-rational, "formal operations" reasoning, then this makes sense to me.

...and also up through vision-logic or dialectical thinking (including metasytematic).

But here, you don't mean still in transition, do you? Do you just mean that "...up through..." stages beyond systematic that foundationalism is rejected, period (but you mean it's not about a transition, rather it's about a fixed stance that remains)?

Foundationalism assumes that truths come from a logical scaffolding of arguments based on fundamental truths.

Is there another way to word whatever you mean by "fundamental truths"? I am having a horrible time with the term. At any stage, different people or cultures or sciences may believe there is a "fundamental truth." Now, I guess usually they are at the starting point, not the end point. From what you say here, a "fundamental truth" is generated by a logic people feel 100% sure about. Is that right? Like, what? Is an example something like: "Once upon a time humans "knew" that the sun/universe revolved around the earth, and

later on, humans knew the there were empirical proofs that resulted in the fundamental truth that the earth revolves around the sun"? If that example misses the point, what kind of example might someone have to help me out here?

Vision-logic understands that epistemic indeterminacy pervades knowledge, and sees logic as one tool (one with limits) rather than the only tool. Once we acknowledge the limitations and flaws in logical reasoning, we no longer need to, or even can, pretend that truths have to be based on fundamental assumptions.

This is where I get (more, if that's possible) confused about what "fundamental truths" are asserted by foundationalists. What kinds [...more...](#)



private



14

Bonnitta Roy

revised 03/08/07 7:58AM



In response to Sara Ross (13)

OK. I'm gonna take a stab at this, although I feel like the fly accepting the spider's invitation :-)) I hope this stab is not a distraction to your meaningful ideas. If so, just delete. (I think you administrators can do that, right?)

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Tom, I think Sara is making a distinction that you are missing. I think that Sara is saying that there is the kind of fundamentalism we think of when we talk about the Blue level, for example. Which is pre-rational. It is a mythic level. Then there is the kind of "fundamenatlism" that Sara is saying persists even into the Rational and upthrough the higher levels. Is this where the confusion is?

If so, then I think I understand what Sara is pointing out. She may be saying that even though one is capable of taking a starting point and arguing logically (rational level) to a conclusion, or taking a starting point and describing meta-systemically (system level and higher) a complex set of relations, ... or taking a starting point and envisioning (vision logic) a set of novel choices ... underneath both the starting point and the cognitive process that is utilized, might be a kind of embedded myth or foundational assumption that is a hidden ideology or assumption of foundational "truth"... that makes the higher levels of reasoning a kind of rube-goldberg device for what is basically, another variety of fundamentalism.

Is that what you are trying to say, Sara? Or is that my own projection?

Now, on the other hand, Tom might be questioning the above, because for him, "rational" means the absence of a mythic foundation, and "systemic" means that the starting point is already included in the inquiry, and "vision logic" means that epistemological indeterminacy is already factored in.

In this case, for Tom, the higher levels exclude the possibility of fundamentalism, because they are defined by their having transcended that problem.

Is that what you are alluding to, Tom?

Yet, going back to Sara, in each case, one can define the level not only by what it transcends, but by its blind spot-- or the foundational "truth" (i.e. "myth") it is embedded in. So, for example, one can say that the rational level's myth is the myth of empirical "truth"; the systemic level's has foundational myths based on meta-systemic principles like emergence (which relies on [...more...](#))



edit



15

Edward Berge

03/08/07 9:29AM





Yes, I agree...

hide

Bravo Bonnie. You're getting at one of the points I'm trying to discern in the Derrida thread, the hidden foundations or "traces" that are inherent in the very structure of the premises. And this would require a re-examination of those traces of foundationalism still lingering in our notions of development.

But for me one of the questions that arises is how do we posit, or make affirmative statements, about anti-foundationalism itself, when any such statement can be seen to be a performative contradiction? I've provided how Nagarjuna and Derrida answered this in the Derrida thread, as they are, quite frankly, far better at this than I am.



private



16

Bonnitta Roy

revised 03/09/07 6:30AM



hide



In response to Edward Berge (15)

Edward,

I don't know if we can make positive statements about anti-foundationalism. I don't think we can outdo the likes of Nargajuna or Derrida at that level. What is interesting to me, though, is that the energy for "getting around it" somehow, doesn't reside. It's like being caught in a kind of whirlpool and there is a circular strange-attractor that keeps sucking our ideas back into the same starting point.

For me, the problem revolved around Habermas and his critique of instrumental reasoning. That behind all rational arguments was not only a hidden foundational assumption, BUT ALSO A STRONG WILL TO POWER from it. That means all rational argument was merely rationalization-- the instrument or tool utilized by this will to power. And now that I am remembering this, it would be interesting to go back and read him again. Because he did try (unsuccessfully so, I think) to outwit his own circular argument. Shopenhauer had a similar worry about this will.

You are a taiji man, so I think you will understand this metaphor. What I try to do is take that energy, and transform it into an entirely new direction. Now, the sucking mechanism is gonna try to tell me "but then you will only be stuck with a different kind of foundationalism". And so I say "fuck you, so what! I don't want all my energy sucked down that hole of yours no mo." (that's my street talk).

For me, that meant starting over, and looking for what might be the underlying process that is responsible for setting foundations -- or to speak less pejoratively of this process -- the process of establishing a basis. Perhaps if we can understand the process, then we can still establish bases, without being subject to their biases in the same way as foundationalism. That is when I found Jason Brown, and his theory of cognitive microgenesis. He talks about a process where value is laid down at a very very primary stage in cognition. He says that the primary value is "existence". That what arises *for me* already has a primary value over what doesn't arise for me, and maybe comes up for you. For example, the infrared colors of the dandelions don't arise for me as does for the bee; but the bee is not concerned that the grass needs to be mowed. At a very primordial level, what arises as objects, what arises as the very ...more...



edit



17

Edward Berge

03/09/07 10:12AM



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Yes, it feels like a cosmic whirlpool far beyond my measely human capacity and it sucks

me in and down, down, down into its insatiable abyss. One thing I've learned from all this is that I need to spend a lot more time getting sucked off than sucked in.



private

18 Jeff Meyerhoff

03/09/07 7:35PM



hide

Re SR #7

1.1 I didn't realize people agreed that the Laszlo article lacked depth. I agree.

1.2 Right, that's why I said "highly unlikely" to work and said that people should pursue it if they think it might work. I'm recommending a course of action that looks more promising.

2.1 Sure, what I'm proposing could be left behind and what you're proposing could reign, or a neo-foundationalism could take over and become dominant for a time. I'm placing doubt on the idea that a large scale developmental model like the one your suggesting could reign in academia in the way the Neo-Darwinian synthesis reigns in evolutionary biology.

3. I wouldn't "discount the possibility" of the TOE that you suggest, but I would doubt the probability of it, because of the difficulty in incorporating the human or social sciences and humanities for the reasons I suggested. My guess is that perspectivalism - that we have differing perspectives related to our differing needs, values, standpoints, histories - would undo any such large-scale attempt to synthesize systems and paradigms.

To ME: Yes, we all have foundations of our thought if foundations are just the endpoints of our reasoning - "I just think cruelty is the worst thing you can do", "If I experience it then its real to me", "people are basically good inside" - but I'm suggesting we not push them too far and try to show why our foundation is THE foundation, the one that grasps the world as it is, gives us the "fundamental nature" of things, or finally connects us with what is "out there".

There are certainly regularities that we can assume we share. These may change from conversation to conversation depending on what is being discussed. But which regularities will be valued the crucial ones to point to and base one's views on for any given topic? We couldn't discuss unless with shared regularities or assumptions or criteria, but we wouldn't be disagreeing if we weren't ordering the importance of this or that regularity differently.

Re EB: Yes, Nagajuna's anti-essentialism speaks against (and for?) talk of "fundamental natures", but Sara's developmental TOE could be justified pragmatically - it explains enough for certain useful purposes.

Re TM #11: I'm not sure science holds up better on metaphysical attacks, except that because the [...more...](#)



private

19 Sara Ross

03/11/07 12:01PM



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In response to [Bonnitte Roy \(14\)](#)

Unfortunately delayed in getting back here... to chime in at least briefly in response ...

Snippets of Bonnie's post following Tom's following mine following... (darn, we should be using the thread feature, in retrospect. anyway...)

Bonnie: "Tom, I think Sara is making a distinction that you are missing. I think that Sara is saying that there is the kind of fundamentalism we think of when we talk about the Blue level, for example. Which is pre-rational. It is a mythic level. Then there is the kind of

"fundamenatlism" that Sara is saying persists even into the Rational and upthrough the higher levels. Is this where the confusion is? If so, then I think I understand what Sara is pointing out. She may be saying that even though one is capable of taking a starting point and arguing logically (rational level) to a conclusion, or taking a starting point and describing meta-systemically (system level and higher) a complex set of relations, ... or taking a starting point and envisioning (vision logic) a set of novel choices ... underneath both the starting point and the cognitive process that is utilized, might be a kind of embedded myth or foundational assumption that is a hidden ideology or assumption of foundational "truth"... that makes the higher levels of reasoning a kind of rube-goldberg device for what is basically, another variety of fundamentalism. Is that what you are trying to say, Sara? Or is that my own projection?"

Sara: This would have been one of the paths I would have taken, depending on how Jeff or others specifically helped me grok the meaning they give to "foundationalism." When I posted, I was sincerely trying to find out the meanings, hoping to explore any assumptions under meanings, whatever came up. The unpacking you have done on this path is great, and yes, the dynamics you describe are on target. This is the very nature of the beastie that is us languaged meaning-making organisms.

Bonnie: "Now, on the other hand, Tom might be questioning the above, because for him, "rational" means the absence of a mythic foundation, and "systemic" means that the starting point is already included in the inquiry, and "vision logic" means that epistemological indeterminacy is already factored in. In this case, for Tom, the higher levels exclude the possibility of fundamentalism, because they are ...more...



private



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6 Jeff Meyerhoff

03/02/07 1:36PM



In response to Mark's questions:

1. If nothing is fundamental, how do you decide what is a preferred condition. By this I mean why isn't your proposition that there is no such thing as a TOE itself a TOE, for example,

I think we take or adopt a view of what's fundamental in the world, for example, matter, consciousness, information, love and then we build an understanding around it, or vice versa, we adopt certain beliefs and methods and find that they presuppose a belief that this or that is fundamental. I don't think anyone can prove that their fundamental thing is THE fundamental thing - what's fundamental to the world whether we humans are here or not, or, what is objectively fundamental. Philosophically, we focus too much on getting things as they are instead of focusing on understanding things in ways that help us do what we want. So I'm arguing for something more pragmatic.

So everyone's perspective is going to have the parts of it that are fundamental, the question is how do they regard those fundamentals? Are they representations of the world as it is in itself or are they the working assumptions that our presently preferred perspective presupposes?

2. Why is this not a TOE?: "[People] can change, individually and socially, their behavior to thwart the theories about them."

It's not a TOE because it is a limited observation about the way things seem to work based on prior experience. But maybe we mean something different by TOE. I thought it was an all-encompassing, synthesizing theory which explained how everything works together and allows predictions and meaning-making, like Laszlo says. Maybe that's asking too much of it and there is a more moderate definition.

3. Many times during 2003 I predicted that on November 4, 2004 many millions of your fellow citizens will be engaging in a strange ritualistic behaviour called voting. I was proved correct. Why doesn't the success of my prediction prove that generalities and population based regularities exist in human behaviour and that such regularities can form the basis of a TOE.

A smart friend of mine use to ask psychology researchers with a pretensions to making psychology a science, name a result that psychology has proved that is neither trivial nor common sense. No one's come up with a satisfactory answer. Sure there are a lot of general predictions you can make, but your example above doesn't really tell us anything. You can use the "D'uh" test to determine if it is a meaningful prediction. Tell an ordinary person your prediction above about voting and if their response is, "D'uh, tell me something I don't know." then you haven't made a scientifically useful or interesting prediction. Why were political scientists, sociologists and economists so caught off guard by the fall of the old Soviet Union? That's a pretty big event not to be able to predict if your sciences, which have been around for at least one hundred years, have any predictive value.

For Sara: Foundationalism is the belief in philosophy that we can ground knowledge or morality or aesthetics with a rationally argued or rationally determined foundation. You usually start with postulates, or self-evident truths or rational intuitions and build on them to

create a proof or argument for why what we believe is certain or the way things really are. Or, you try to provide rational arguments for why science provides true knowledge, or is so successful. A lot of work in philosophy in the last forty years has created fundamental doubts of this being possible and so is called anti-foundational. So Laszlo's talk of finding a "fundamental nature of all the things" or tending towards it, is I think doubtful. On the one hand we have the extraordinary success of science and on the other we have the uncanny power of reason and history and multiple perspectives to undermine what we think of as the way things really are. To undermine even the idea of "a way things really are".

My experience with spirituality and psychotherapy and in philosophy make me think that there is a fathomlessness to existence and our human mental productions can never get it all right as whole, although we get parts right for our local purposes.

Alan raises the problem of what a theory is and the word has gotten very elastic over the years. He suggests this definition "theory" has to be a self-consistent, logical, intellectual-mental statement (as opposed to visionary, trans-mental, so Neoplatonism is not a "theory"; although Samkhya still may be), based on observations (whether "objective/empirical" or "subjective/phenomenological"), that can be used to explain, and ultimately predict, phenomena." The problem with this definition is that it excludes a lot of what these days is called theory. For example there's the field of "literary theory." But they don't "predict phenomema", although it fits with the other aspects of the definition. Another problem with the definition is that Buddhism might fit since it does all the things mentioned including predict when it says that you'll find everything is impermanent, or your attachment will lead to suffering. But maybe Alan accounted for that with his mentioning "Samkhya", but I don't know what that is.

But I agree that my observation that "[People] can change, individually and socially, their behavior to thwart the theories about them." Is more of an observation or generalization, as Alan says. It doesn't really explain anything, although there is a predictive element to it since it's making a prediction about what will inevitably happen to TOEs.

7 Sara Ross

03/05/07 11:15AM



close

**re Jeff's post**

1. Jeff, you wrote: "But since we are directed to comment on it, I'd say that this idea that the information that structures all things in the universe is "out there" and that finding the TOE which is the "fundamental nature" of things is highly unlikely and runs counter to a different trend in contemporary thought, one of which is the undermining of foundationalism in philosophy and the broader social sciences. Analytic philosophers - the most rigorous practitioners of reason -- have generally abandoned foundationalism."

1.1 I believe it is inaccurate to portray the idea as merely "the information that structures all things in the universe" and that it "is 'out there.'" I think we have all agreed that the general limitation here is that the brief article we are working from is too short, and too intro-level, and does not supply us with a shared starting point or depth. So, this item 1.1 is just to mark my view that your sentence does not describe the idea well.

1.2 Given that all of us here are developmentalists to varying degrees, what can we infer from your observation that "Analytic philosophers...have generally abandoned foundationalism"? I am betting that you are not positing that the worldview(s) that have abandoned foundationalism (as they have conceived and defined it) are the "final word" on what worldviews are possible. In other words, I doubt that just because one view is supplanting another, we should assume that the emerging view is the only possible remaining view.

1.3 Your next point fleshes this point out a bit more.

2. (Thanks for this explanation, first of all.) You wrote: Foundationalism is the belief in philosophy that we can ground knowledge or morality or aesthetics with a rationally argued or rationally determined foundation. You usually start with postulates, or self-evident truths or rational intuitions and build on them to create a proof or argument for why what we believe is certain or the way things really are. Or, you try to provide rational arguments for why science provides true knowledge, or is so successful. A lot of work in philosophy in the last forty years has created fundamental doubts of this being possible and so is called anti-foundational. So Laszlo's talk of finding a "fundamental nature of all the things" or tending towards it, is I think doubtful. On the one hand we have the extraordinary success of science and on the other we have the uncanny power of reason and history and multiple perspectives to undermine what we think of as the way things really are. To undermine even the idea of "a way things really are".

2.1 Correct me if I am misinterpreting? From your description, it sounds like you are describing the same developmental progression that has been occurring in most discourses that I am aware of (a la Gebser's observations, for instance). Discourses go through stages of developing increasing complexity, just as individuals and societies do. You seem to be describing the transition in the philosophical discourse from the rational-mental stage of formal operations to the systematic stage. I have analyzed a number of discrete discourses in areas of social science, and see the same progression. And I also see that in most discourses, there are people employing metasystematic reasoning in their contributions to the discourse. As others grapple with and try to incorporate those more complex lines of reasoning, we can expect the overall discourse to gradually evolve more complexity. At some point, we could expect the discourse in philosophy to leave behind the worldview you describe, just as that worldview left behind what it calls foundationalism.

3. If this progression is consistent with our understandings of developmental patterns and how increasing complexity emerges, then I would ask: Why would we discount the possibility of a TOE that relates, compares, synthesizes, and builds upon multiple systems and metasystems? In other words, why would we discount the possibility of a paradigmatic (or cross paradigmatic) TOE? It seems inconsistent to me. I do not know if this short post does a very good job of explaining where I see the inconsistency. Feedback?

 [return to Jeff Meyerhoff \(6\)](#)

11 Tom Murray

03/07/07 12:43PM



close

**Foundational foundationalism**

Hi, catching up on readings and jumping in near the end here. Hope its not the last word though!

RE JM: "the contemporary anti-foundationalism is due to the view that when we enter the realm of the human sciences - treating humans as humans as opposed to other animals or physical objects...". Not sure about how it breaks down in social vs. physical sciences, as fundamentalist assumptions are in disrepute on all fronts, but certainly more so for the human/social sciences. I think the issues break down along the lines of epistemology vs. metaphysics, i.e. can we really come to truths by identifying foundational ideas and building upon them strictly logically; is the world itself actually made of or governed by some essential elements that can be humanly identified. All fields fall prey to the epistemological attacks. Physical science holds up much better than social sciences on the metaphysical attacks.

RE SR: "You seem to be describing the transition in the philosophical discourse from the rational-mental stage of formal operations to the systematic stage" -yes, and also up through vision-logic or dialectical thinking (including metasystematic). Foundationalism assumes that truths come from a logical scaffolding of arguments based on fundamental truths. Vision-logic understands that epistemic indeterminacy pervades knowledge, and sees logic as one tool (one with limits) rather than the only tool. Once we acknowledge the limitations and flaws in logical reasoning, we no longer need to, or even can, pretend that truths have to be based on fundamental assumptions.

RE EB: "Perhaps anti-foundationalism is a watershed change at the systemic level that is included thereafter, like self-reflection is a watershed at the formal operational, yet stays with us thereafter through new permutations?" yes, this sounds quite right.

RE JM: "The point of course being that for us to actually hold a conversation means that there is some foundation that we all share. " Yes, but I think there are several senses of foundationalism going here, psychological, epistemological, and metaphysical. Yes, we use and share foundational assumptions that go unquestioned. And any theory based on logical reasoning (as they all must be) must posit some foundations (that's how logic works). But the post-modern attitude toward theory itself leads most philosophers to hedge any theory by including something like "its just a theory...not the truth...all theories of course have limits..." etc. Perhaps we could call the notion that foundational arguments are completely valid "founational foundationalism" :-), and note that that is pretty much invalid in the post-modern context.

13 Sara Ross

03/07/07 11:36PM



close



Foundational foundationalism

Man oh man how did I never hear of this term foundationalism and why oh why is it so hard for me to feel sure that I grok what people mean when defining "-isms"? Yikes!

Pasted from Tom's post, bit by bit:

RE SR: "You seem to be describing the transition in the philosophical discourse from the rational-mental stage of formal operations to the systematic stage" Tom: yes,

Okay, so far so good. The rejection of foundationalism that Jeff introduced is referring to the different "take" that the next stage, systematic, has. If foundationalism is mental-rational, "formal operations" reasoning, then this makes sense to me.

...and also up through vision-logic or dialectical thinking (including metasystematic).

But here, you don't mean still in transition, do you? Do you just mean that "...up through..." stages beyond systematic that foundationalism is rejected, period (but you mean it's not about a transition, rather it's about a fixed stance that remains)?

Foundationalism assumes that truths come from a logical scaffolding of arguments based on fundamental truths.

Is there another way to word whatever you mean by "fundamental truths"? I am having a horrible time with the term. At any stage, different people or cultures or sciences may believe there is a "fundamental truth." Now, I guess usually they are at the starting point, not the end point. From what you say here, a "fundamental truth" is generated by a logic people feel 100% sure about. Is that right? Like, what? Is an example something like: "Once upon a time humans "knew" that the sun/universe revolved around the earth, and later on, humans knew there were empirical proofs that resulted in the fundamental truth that the earth revolves around the sun"? If that example misses the point, what kind of example might someone have to help me out here?

Vision-logic understands that epistemic indeterminacy pervades knowledge, and sees logic as one tool (one with limits) rather than the only tool. Once we acknowledge the limitations and flaws in logical reasoning, we no longer need to, or even can, pretend that truths have to be based on fundamental assumptions.

This is where I get (more, if that's possible) confused about what "fundamental truths" are asserted by foundationalists. What kinds of things are they talking about? Or is the critique simply about the limitations of logic and its errors when it thinks it has constructed a "fundamental truth" as compared to just some more mundane conclusion?

Help!?

 [return to Tom Murray \(11\)](#)

14 **Bonnitta Roy**

03/08/07 7:58AM



close



In response to Sara Ross (13)

OK. I'm gonna take a stab at this, although I feel like the fly accepting the spider's invitation :-)) I hope this stab is not a distraction to your meaningful ideas. If so, just delete. (I think you administrators can do that, right?)

Tom, I think Sara is making a distinction that you are missing. I think that Sara is saying that there is the kind of fundamentalism we think of when we talk about the Blue level, for example. Which is pre-rational. It is a mythic level. Then there is the kind of "fundamentalism" that Sara is saying persists even into the Rational and up through the higher levels. Is this where the confusion is?

If so, then I think I understand what Sara is pointing out. She may be saying that even though one is capable of taking a starting point and arguing logically (rational level) to a conclusion, or taking a starting point and describing meta-systemically (system level and higher) a complex set of relations, ... or taking a starting point and envisioning (vision logic) a set of novel choices ... underneath both the starting point and the cognitive process that is utilized, might be a kind of embedded myth or foundational assumption that is a hidden ideology or assumption of foundational "truth"... that makes the higher levels of reasoning a kind of rube-goldberg device for what is basically, another variety of fundamentalism.

Is that what you are trying to say, Sara? Or is that my own projection?

Now, on the other hand, Tom might be questioning the above, because for him, "rational" means the absence of a mythic foundation, and "systemic" means that the starting point is already included in the inquiry, and "vision logic" means that epistemological indeterminacy is already factored in.

In this case, for Tom, the higher levels exclude the possibility of fundamentalism, because they are defined by their having transcended that problem.

Is that what you are alluding to, Tom?

Yet, going back to Sara, in each case, one can define the level not only by what it transcends, but by its blind spot-- or the foundational "truth" (i.e. "myth") it is embedded in. So, for example, one can say that the rational level's myth is the myth of empirical "truth"; the systemic level's has foundational myths based on meta-systemic principles like emergence (which relies on the assumption of something called "supervience" -- the "truth quotient" of which is still argued about in the philosophy of logics)-- and vision logic relies on foundational beliefs of choice and agency (versus intuitive listening and allowing) ...

For example, can one can give a metasytemic description of reality and still have strong realism as a foundational myth? Isn't that what Wilber accuses Laszlo of?

If the above is the crux, then for me, the question becomes "Is it possible for one to somehow score at rational, systemic, or vision-logic level, and still have a world-view that is pervaded by embedded foundational assumptions that function like myths?" And if so, how does that change our understanding of the cognitive development?

Bonnie

16 **Bonnitta Roy**

03/09/07 6:30AM



close



In response to Edward Berge (15)

Edward,

I don't know if we can make positive statements about anti-foundationalism. I don't think we can outdo the likes of Nargajuna or Derrida at that level. What is interesting to me, though, is that the energy for "getting around it" somehow, doesn't reside. It's like being caught in a kind of whirlpool and there is a circular strange-attractor that keeps sucking our ideas back into the same starting point.

For me, the problem revolved around Habermas and his critique of instrumental reasoning. That behind all rational arguments was not only a hidden foundational assumption, BUT ALSO A STRONG WILL TO POWER from it. That means all rational argument was merely rationalization-- the instrument or tool utilized by this will to power. And now that I am remembering this, it would be interesting to go back and read him again. Because he did try (unsuccessfully so, I think) to outwit his own circular argument. Shopenhauer had a similar worry about this will.

You are a taiji man, so I think you will understand this metaphor. What I try to do is take that energy, and transform it into an entirely new direction. Now, the sucking mechanism is gonna try to tell me "but then you will only be stuck with a different kind of foundationalism". And so I say "fuck you, so what! I don't want all my energy sucked down that hole of yours no mo." (that's my street talk).

For me, that meant starting over, and looking for what might be the underlying process that is responsible for setting foundations -- or to speak less pejoratively of this process -- the process of establishing a basis. Perhaps if we can understand the process, then we can still establish bases, without being subject to their biases in the same way as foundationalism. That is when I found Jason Brown, and his theory of cognitive microgenesis. He talks about a process where value is laid down at a very very primary stage in cognition. He says that the primary value is "existence". That what arises *for me* already has a primary value over what doesn't arise for me, and maybe comes up for you. For example, the infrared colors of the dandelions don't arise for me as does for the bee; but the bee is not concerned that the grass needs to be mowed. At a very primordial level, what arises as objects, what arises as the very structures of cognition, are laid down as a values scheme.

I guess I am trying to stop fighting the whirlpool, and see it for the fascinating process it is. And try to understand how it generates so much energy!

Bonnie

 [return to Bonnitta Roy \(14\)](#)

18 Jeff Meyerhoff

03/09/07 7:35PM



Re SR #7

1.1 I didn't realize people agreed that the Laszlo article lacked depth. I agree.

1.2 Right, that's why I said "highly unlikely" to work and said that people should pursue it if they think it might work. I'm recommending a course of action that looks more promising.

2.1 Sure, what I'm proposing could be left behind and what you're proposing could reign, or a neo-foundationalism could take over and become dominant for a time. I'm placing doubt on the idea that a large scale developmental model like the one your suggesting could reign in academia in the way the Neo-Darwinian synthesis reigns in evolutionary biology.

3. I wouldn't "discount the possibility" of the TOE that you suggest, but I would doubt the probability of it, because of the difficulty in incorporating the human or social sciences and humanities for the reasons I suggested. My guess is that perspectivalism - that we have differing perspectives related to our differing needs, values, standpoints, histories - would undo any such large-scale attempt to synthesize systems and paradigms.

To ME: Yes, we all have foundations of our thought if foundations are just the endpoints of our reasoning - "I just think cruelty is the worst thing you can do", "If I experience it then its real to me", "people are basically good inside" - but I'm suggesting we not push them too far and try to show why our foundation is THE foundation, the one that grasps the world as it is, gives us the "fundamental nature" of things, or finally connects us with what is "out there".

There are certainly regularities that we can assume we share. These may change from conversation to conversation depending on what is being discussed. But which regularities will be valued the crucial ones to point to and base one's views on for any given topic? We couldn't discuss unless with shared regularities or assumptions or criteria, but we wouldn't be disagreeing if we weren't ordering the importance of this or that regularity differently.

Re EB: Yes, Nagajuna's anti-essentialism speaks against (and for?) talk of "fundamental natures", but Sara's developmental TOE could be justified pragmatically - it explains enough for certain useful purposes.

Re TM #11: I'm not sure science holds up better on metaphysical attacks, except that because the physical sciences are so successful - the periodic table of elements, what could be more elemental! - we assume a metaphysical reality, instead of just a physical reality, to the entities the natural scientists investigate, but scientists don't do, or they're not supposed to do, or aren't the experts given the societal task of, determining what's metaphysically true.

And in your reply to Sara, you speak of concepts as "tools" rather than reality representing truths, which is a pragmatic shift I like.

And in replying to Mark (but maybe you misnamed JM): Yes, we could name absolute foundations and relative foundations.

Re TM #12: Right, the pragmatic/theoretical or pragmatic/absolute foundational is important for avoiding problematic metaphysical and ontological questions. But even beyond this I'd still have doubts about the potential for success of systems thinking for the human/social

sciences

Re SR # 13: I would say a fundamental truth is one that is truth for eternity, a truth that tells us the way in which things really are.

Re EB and BR: I'm not sure that there is a problem with making affirmative statements about anti-foundationalism, the problem may be making non-contradictory statements about ultimate things when one thinks of, or experiences, ultimate things in a Nagarjuna-like way, which is experiencing them as ineffable. The philosopher Graham Priest has a book call "Beyond the Limits of Thought" where he argues that the contradictions we encounter when we try to gain consistent foundations of our understandings should be thought of as true contradictions. For example, describing or "effing" the ineffable.

BR: I'm not sure what the whirlpool or strange attractor is for you, but it could be "the need to finally get it right" or "grasp things as they are" or "Know the Truth". It could be that our biases are inherent in our bases. That a base we choose to adopt carries an array of biases because it is a viewing of things this way rather than that way. The word "bias" only has its bad connotation relative to some conception of objectively true or good, a conception that anti-foundationalism puts into doubt. When I was a kid "bias" meant prejudice and was a bad thing you could correct, but these days people refer to "my bias" as if it's a part of everyone's belief system.

In response to Mark's question:

1. If nothing is fundamental, how do you decide what is a preferred condition. By this I mean why isn't your proposition that there is no such thing as a TOE itself a TOE, for example,

I think we take or adopt a view of what's fundamental in the world, for example, matter, consciousness, information, love and then we build an understanding around it, or vice versa, we adopt certain beliefs and methods and find that they presuppose a belief that this or that is fundamental. I don't think anyone can prove that their fundamental thing is THE fundamental thing - what's fundamental to the world whether we humans are here or not, or, what is objectively fundamental. Philosophically, we focus too much on getting things as they are instead of focusing on understanding things in ways that help us do what we want. So I'm arguing for something more pragmatic.

So everyone's perspective is going to have the parts of it that are fundamental, the question is how do they regard those fundamentals? Are they representations of the world as it is in itself or are they the working assumptions that our presently preferred perspective presupposes?

2. Why is this not a TOE?: "[People] can change, individually and socially, their behavior to thwart the theories about them."

It's not a TOE because it is a limited observation about the way things seem to work based on prior experience. But maybe we mean something different by TOE. I thought it was an all-encompassing, synthesizing theory which explained how everything works together and

allows predictions and meaning-making, like Laszlo says. Maybe that's asking too much of it and there is a more moderate definition.

3. Many times during 2003 I predicted that on November 4, 2004 many millions of your fellow citizens will be engaging in a strange ritualistic behaviour called voting. I was proved correct. Why doesn't the success of my prediction prove that generalities and population based regularities exist in human behaviour and that such regularities can form the basis of a TOE.

A smart friend of mine use to ask psychology researchers with a pretensions to making psychology a science, name a result that psychology has proved that is neither trivial nor common sense. No one's come up with a satisfactory answer. Sure there are a lot of general predictions you can make, but your example above doesn't really tell us anything. You can use the "D'uh" test to determine if it is a meaningful prediction. Tell an ordinary person your prediction above about voting and if their response is, "D'uh, tell me something I don't know." then you haven't made a scientifically useful or interesting prediction. Why were political scientists, sociologists and economists so caught off guard by the fall of the old Soviet Union? That's a pretty big event not to be able to predict if your sciences, which have been around for at least one hundred years, have any predictive value.

For Sara: Foundationalism is the belief in philosophy that we can ground knowledge or morality or aesthetics with a rationally argued or rationally determined foundation. You usually start with postulates, or self-evident truths or rational intuitions and build on them to create a proof or argument for why what we believe is certain or the way things really are. Or, you try to provide rational arguments for why science provides true knowledge, or is so successful. A lot of work in philosophy in the last forty years has created fundamental doubts of this being possible and so is called anti-foundational. So Laszlo's talk of finding a "fundamental nature of all the things" or tending towards it, is I think doubtful. On the one hand we have the extraordinary success of science and on the other we have the uncanny power of reason and history and multiple perspectives to undermine what we think of as the way things really are. To undermine even the idea of "a way things really are".

My experience with spirituality and psychotherapy and in philosophy make me think that there is a fathomlessness to existence and our human mental productions can never get it all right as whole, although we get parts right for our local purposes.

Alan raises the problem of what a theory is and the word has gotten very elastic over the years. He suggests this definition "theory" has to be a self-consistent, logical, intellectual-mental statement (as opposed to visionary, trans-mental, so Neoplatonism is not a "theory"; although Samkhya still may be), based on observations (whether "objective/empirical" or "subjective/phenomenological"), that can be used to explain, and ultimately predict, phenomena." The problem with this definition is that it excludes a lot of what these days is called theory. For example there's the field of "literary theory." But they don't "predict phenomema", although it fits with the other aspects of the definition. Another problem with the definition is that Buddhism might fit since it does all the things mentioned including predict when it says that you'll find everything is impermanent, or your attachment will lead to suffering. But maybe Alan accounted for that with his mentioning "Samkhya", but I don't know what that is.

But I agree that my observation that "[People] can change, individually and socially, their behavior to thwart the theories about them." Is more of an observation or generalization, as Alan says. It doesn't really explain anything, although there is a predictive element to it since it's making a prediction about what will inevitably happen to TOEs.

 [return to Edward Berge \(15\)](#)

19 Sara Ross

03/11/07 12:01PM



close



In response to Bonnitta Roy (14)

Unfortunately delayed in getting back here... to chime in at least briefly in response ...

Snippets of Bonnie's post following Tom's following mine following... (darn, we should be using the thread feature, in retrospect. anyway...)

Bonnie: "Tom, I think Sara is making a distinction that you are missing. I think that Sara is saying that there is the kind of fundamentalism we think of when we talk about the Blue level, for example. Which is pre-rational. It is a mythic level. Then there is the kind of "fundamentalism" that Sara is saying persists even into the Rational and up through the higher levels. Is this where the confusion is? If so, then I think I understand what Sara is pointing out. She may be saying that even though one is capable of taking a starting point and arguing logically (rational level) to a conclusion, or taking a starting point and describing meta-systemically (system level and higher) a complex set of relations, ... or taking a starting point and envisioning (vision logic) a set of novel choices ... underneath both the starting point and the cognitive process that is utilized, might be a kind of embedded myth or foundational assumption that is a hidden ideology or assumption of foundational "truth"... that makes the higher levels of reasoning a kind of rube-goldberg device for what is basically, another variety of fundamentalism. Is that what you are trying to say, Sara? Or is that my own projection?"

Sara: This would have been one of the paths I would have taken, depending on how Jeff or others specifically helped me grok the meaning they give to "foundationalism." When I posted, I was sincerely trying to find out the meanings, hoping to explore any assumptions under meanings, whatever came up. The unpacking you have done on this path is great, and yes, the dynamics you describe are on target. This is the very nature of the beastie that is us languaged meaning-making organisms.

Bonnie: "Now, on the other hand, Tom might be questioning the above, because for him, "rational" means the absence of a mythic foundation, and "systemic" means that the starting point is already included in the inquiry, and "vision logic" means that epistemological indeterminacy is already factored in. In this case, for Tom, the higher levels exclude the possibility of fundamentalism, because they are defined by their having transcended that problem."

Sara: On this path, it sounds like the meaning assigned to foundationalism or fundamentalism is assumed to be anchored and unchanging. If so, this reasoning works too. It's all in how we define our term and assume others mean them. One reason, I suppose, that inquiry seems so vital to me, to unpack what any given term *means in the context it is used in*.

Bonnie: "If the above is the crux, then for me, the question becomes "Is it possible for one to somehow score at rational, systemic, or vision-logic level, and still have a world-view that is pervaded by embedded foundational assumptions that function like myths?"

Sara: Yes. The difference from stage to stage - within any specific domain, not generalized across the "whole person" - is that the "myth" (operating assumptions) are structured more complexly if a person's behavior and reasoning in that domain is also

more complex.

Bonnie: And if so, how does that change our understanding of the cognitive development?"

Sara: Hoo boy, do we ever need to change some of the understandings of cognitive development!! A big theme of mine. And multiple understandings are out there, so we should not assume there is only one understanding of this, either :).

 [return to Jeff Meyerhoff \(18\)](#)