

# The Use of Fiction as a Didactic Tool to Examine Existential Problems

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Recent geopolitical events have changed the naïve way in which many teenagers view the world. In particular, it has called into question many of the moral and ethical foundations we take for granted as norms of a functioning society. In the wake of these events, it is important for teachers to allow students, in particular the gifted, to voice their thoughts and critically examine issues pertinent to society and life. The study of literature through the prism of critical thinking can allow the student to experience its cohesiveness to life. Literature can be practical, inspirational, appealing, stimulating, and educational if approached with this purpose in mind. In this paper, we describe how gifted high school seniors at a rural Midwestern public school discerned the nature of “truths” about society and life by critically examining a simple contemporary novel. Vignettes of student discussions that illustrate critical thinking and express “controversial” views are presented along with commentaries. We also discuss the implications of using fiction as a didactic tool to examine existential problems in the high school classroom.

*“Truth is a pathless land.”*  
—J. Krishnamurthi

Ideally, the goal of learning is to extend vision, to broaden perspective, and to bring out coherence and unity among the disciplines. A student whose learning experiences in school involve the mindless regurgitation of facts, figures, and formulae that lack meaning and do not add beauty to the world experiences an existential void. The standard rationale that education means fulfillment begs the question: How can education fill the void experienced by students in the wake of recent catastrophic geopolitical events, especially gifted students who are capable of thinking critically? It is well known that gifted individuals are highly skilled at processing information by separating relevant from irrelevant information, combining isolated pieces of information into a unified whole, and drawing inferences from the newly acquired information (Lipman & Sharp, 1980; Paul, Binker, Martine, & Adamson, 1995; Sriraman, 2003; Sternberg & Wagner, 1982). Dewey (1933) said

the purpose of education should be to allow students the capacity of active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends. (p. 118)

It is very often the case that instruction in the regular classroom is not differentiated to meet the gifted student’s capacity for higher level thinking (Marland, 1972; Sriraman, 2002; Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Salvin, 1993). Most regular instructional settings rarely provide a forum or a platform through which gifted students can express their critical thinking abilities. In our experience as classroom teachers and gifted coordinators, high school teachers who claim to differentiate the curriculum in their classrooms usually find it hard to add substantial depth to the content being covered. This may be attributed to the lack of general interest in a mixed-ability classroom, curricula and classroom logistics, and lack of proper teacher training in the area of gifted education (Passow, 1982; Winebrenner, 1992). Gifted students in

the regular high school classroom setting are also prone to hide their intellectual capacity for social reasons and identify their academic talent as being a source of envy (Massé & Gagné, 2002). For instance, expressing a controversial, but well-reasoned, viewpoint in a literature classroom discussion can result in the spread of malicious rumors about the gifted individual, thus creating a negative social environment for him or her in school (Neu, 1980). Krishnamurthi (1981) recognized this dilemma faced by many gifted students and criticized conventional education: "Conventional education makes independent thinking extremely difficult. Conformity leads to mediocrity. To be different from the group or to resist environment is not easy and is often risky" (p. 1). There are numerous examples in recent history that support Krishnamurthi's claim. Brower (1999) presented more than 50 examples of eminent writers, moral innovators, scientists, artists, and stage performers who were jailed because of society's fear of ideas that are "out there," but powerful enough to create paradigmatic shifts in people's mindsets.

In light of the preceding arguments, we claim that the regular classroom environment is an inappropriate setting for gifted students to voice their thoughts and opinions about existential problems and controversial topics. Therefore, we adopt an approach that is different from conventional differentiation. In this paper, we have three explicit objectives. The first objective is to demonstrate the critical thinking abilities of gifted students given the forum to express themselves. The second is to show the use of literature as a powerful didactic tool to examine the mores of society. The third is to discuss the implications of our findings for the high school classroom.

### Critical Thinking in Literature

The study of literature can be practical, inspirational, appealing, stimulating, and educational if approached through critical thinking, which in turn can allow the student to experience its connections to life. Beyer (1985) defined critical thinking as the ability and tendency to gather, evaluate, and use information effectively. Philosophers, on the other hand, view critical thinking as the use of reasoning in the pursuit of "truth." Critical thinking makes implicit use of logic in order to draw inferences, make comparisons, or both. In *The Apology*, Plato (trans. 1999) said that one should not blindly accept a persuasive argument without being aware of the reasons why the argument is persuasive. In other words, a critical thinker must be able to examine the validity of the logic used in an otherwise eloquent and persuasive argument. For the ancient Greeks, critical thinking not only involved an examination of eloquent words and actions of other people, but also an examination of one's own thoughts and actions.

Some philosophers have criticized these traditional constructs of critical thinking as being "a narrow way of thinking, excessively centered on reasoning and argumentation" (Smith, 2001, p. 349), which does not take into account imagination or intuition and does not nurture the creative (generative side) of thinking (Walters, 1994; Yinger, 1980). Another criticism of the traditional view of critical thinking is that the excessive focus on formal logic, rhetorical ploys, fallacies, and argument construction makes students view critical thinking as merely an arduous mental exercise without any wide-ranging applicability (Adler, 1991; Baron, 1988; McPeck, 1984).

Given these criticisms of the traditional definitions of critical thinking, we adopt a modified view of critical thinking as propounded by Ennis (1991) that is compatible with our beliefs, where critical thinking is defined as "reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 6). In addition, we add the requirement that critical thinking be connected to real life and should enable the student to understand the cultural and instructional influences on accepted thought. True critical thinking occurs when bias (Bacon, 1620/1902) no longer controls thought or action. Our definition of critical thinking is very similar to that of Paul (1990), who states that a critical thinker is

someone who is able to think well and fair-mindedly not just about her own beliefs and viewpoints, but about beliefs and viewpoints that are diametrically opposed to her own. And not just to think about them, but to explore and appreciate their adequacy, their cohesion, their very reasonableness in contrast to their own. . . . A person who thinks critically is not just willing and able to explore alien, potentially threatening viewpoints, but she also desires to do so. She questions her own deeply held beliefs, and if there are no opposing viewpoints ready at hand, she seeks them out or constructs them herself. (p. ii)

We also adapt the approach of Simpson (1996), in which critical thinking is initiated by replacing low-level questioning with an alternative approach that stimulates students to reflect on problems.

In order to illuminate our approach to create a forum for critical thinking, we demonstrate the use of a simple contemporary novel as a didactic tool with gifted high school seniors, where students voice their critical thinking and inferences on "truths" about society and life. In order to create such a forum, we first use Bacon's (1620/1902) powerful metaphor of "the idols of the mind" to set up a "marketplace of ideas" and then justify the need for a didactic tool in such a marketplace.

## A Philosophical Framework for Studying Critical Thinking: The Idols of The Mind

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) is a particularly controversial figure in the history of the sciences. There is a burgeoning section of science historians who now argue that Bacon's rejection of the Aristotelian tradition and formulation of the inductive method for science should rightly place him as one of the fathers of modern science. We focus primarily on his treatise *Novum Organum*. It can be argued that Newton's *Principia* and *Opticks* reflect the use of inductive arguments as a methodological principle (Davis, 1994; Sargant, 1994) carefully spelled out by Bacon in the *Novum Organum* nearly 60 years earlier. The reason why Bacon's seminal contributions went unacknowledged were because he simply didn't "belong" or "conform" to the rules of 16th-century England. In particular, Bacon was vociferous about religion, superstition, and the enslavement of the mind to dogma, cult, and creed as hindering the progress of science. Baconian science took the radical leap of suggesting a "probabilistic or fallibilistic criterion of knowledge which went on par with the emergence of probability in Pascal's time" (Perez-Ramos, 1996, p. 319).

In *Preliminary Discourse*, John Herschel (1830) encapsulated the Baconian contribution to science in the following quote.

[To] our immortal countryman we owe the broad announcement of this grand and fertile principle; the development of the idea that the whole of natural philosophy consists entirely of a series of inductive generalizations, commencing with the most circumstantially stated particulars, and carried up to universal laws or axioms, which comprehend in their statements every subordinate degree of generality. It is not the introduction of inductive reasoning, as a new and hitherto untried process, which characterizes the Baconian philosophy, but his keen perception and broad, spirit-stirring, almost enthusiastic announcement of its paramount importance, as the alpha and omega of science. (pars. XLVI, CV, and XLV)

Although the limits of Bacon's inductive method have been revealed by the peculiarities of quantum mechanics, he must rightly be credited for formulating the scientific method of systematic observation in order to generate scientific principles inductively. Besides his contributions to science, Bacon also contributed to methods of critical thinking by pointing out the nature of human biases.

In the *Novum Organum* (1620/1902), Bacon warned about blind observance to so-called "truths" by using the metaphor of "the idols of the mind." There are four classes of idols that

beset men's mind, namely, idols of tribe, idols of cave, idols of marketplace, and idols of theater. Titus (1994) described Francis Bacon's "idols" metaphor in the following words:

Bacon has given us a classic statement of the errors of thinking. These are first, the idols of the tribe. We are apt to recognize evidence and incidents favorable to our own side or group (tribe or nation). Second, there are the idols of the cave. We tend to see ourselves as the center of the world and to stress our own limited outlook. Third, the idols of the marketplace cause us to be influenced by the words and names with which we are familiar in everyday discourse. We are led astray by emotionally toned words—for example, in our society, such words as communist or liberal. Finally, the idols of theater arise from our attachment to parties, creeds, and cults. These fads, fashions, and schools of thought are like stage plays in the sense that they lead us into imaginary worlds; ultimately, the idols of theater lead us to biased conclusions (p. 171).

Bacon's metaphor of the idols of the mind has often been misinterpreted to mean that *all* bias is bad in critical thinking. On the contrary, Bacon was simply pointing to the fact that bias plays a role in human reasoning. "The concept of bias is central to any attempt to devise methods for the evaluation of argumentation, both inside and outside scientific contexts of use" (Walton, 1999, p. 338). Bacon's metaphor should be correctly interpreted to mean that bias is not necessarily bad. The idols of the mind help one become aware of one's biases, while the real obstacle to critical thinking is being unaware of one's biases (Blair, 1988; Kienpointner & Kindt, 1997).

## Using a Contemporary Novel as a Didactic Tool

The use of story as a didactic tool has found a prominent place in the history and evolution of moral ideas. Western society has embraced many thinkers like Rumi, Kabir, Tagore and Kahlil Gibran, whose stories, poems and parables go beyond the realm of rational or critical thinking. The liberal arts curriculum at most universities makes use of such literature as didactic tools in their courses. These literary works are simply intended to instruct or morally instruct without getting into the quagmire of formal logic or complicated rhetoric. The superficial simplicity of such stories often yields deeper meanings upon further reflection.

We chose a recent work of fiction by Grisham (2001) as the didactic tool for examining the metaphor of "the idols of the mind" (Bacon, 1620/1902). Conceivably, there are readers

at this juncture who are philosophically challenged by our choice and are thinking that this piece of fiction is too simplistic or “light” for gifted seniors. This is precisely the point we are trying to make with this deliberate choice of literature. In other words, even a light piece of fiction can be used as a didactic tool with gifted students because of their natural capacity to examine and reflect beyond the superficialities of the story and at a deeper level of complexity by making connections to existential problems. By existential problems, we mean questions that pertain to the meaning, value, and purpose of life, such as “Why do we exist?”

The book was simply a didactic tool to provide scaffolding for a deeper discussion of existential questions and to allow gifted students to voice their critical thinking about traditions and value systems. Time and scheduling conflicts with the students were also instrumental in the use of a contemporary and light work of fiction, as opposed to using something more traditional such as Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. The book was read during the last 4 weeks of the school year.

While it is generally true that gifted students show an affinity for philosophical discussions, our observation of this group of students over the school year indicated that some were unwilling to voice their thoughts and opinions on randomly posed existential questions (e.g., “What is the meaning in life?”). However, given the context of a reading, many of these students were willing to generalize their thoughts from the reading to life. Because such discussion can be controversial, teachers need to be sensitive about the high school environment, which includes other students and the administration. If we invite our gifted students to a forum and ask them to express their viewpoints, there is a possibility that their viewpoints may be misconstrued and taken out of context by others. If remarks taken out of context make their way through the grapevine to administrators who start to question the proceedings of such meetings, then the context of a book essentially protects both the teacher and the gifted students’ controversial viewpoints from being misconstrued. Thus, it was crucial for us to have a book serve as scaffolding for the discussion.

Grisham’s (2001) *Skipping Christmas* is a retelling of Charles Dickens’ timeless fable *A Christmas Carol* with contemporary characters facing contemporary problems. Using life in suburbia as his backdrop, Grisham weaves his tale of Luther “Scrooge” Krank and his dream of skipping Christmas and all the baggage this holiday carries. Using all the usual traditions as his canvas, Grisham paints the hazardous tale of Luther’s decisions. The book’s subplot involves the traditional value system that has become part of the American canon or code. Family, love, cooperative spirits, concern and love of neighbor, respect for the beliefs of others, equality of birth, sharing, and finally the rights of all of us—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—are just some of these values.

To us, it seems that the novel is an appeal to past values. In the world of Luther, values have become passé, signifying our modern world of “me-centric” existence. Students have also borne witness to the skewed views of honesty and truth by the political and business leaders of the past few years, depriving our youth of a continuity of values and an ethical inheritance. Thus, the deadly existential void has become apparent that no thing, person, ideal, or code can fill. We believe that the young do seek the values and security of the past. We contend that teachers, through discussion of this (or a different) short novel, have the opportunity to review the basic values of our democracy. By using *Skipping Christmas* as a critical thinking didactic tool, literature teachers can provide opportunities for gifted students to fill the existential void they may be experiencing. The role of the teacher in this process can be thought of as that of an eye specialist, rather than that of a painter. A painter tries to convey to us a picture of the world as he or she sees it; the eye doctor tries to enable us to see the world as it really is. It is crucial that teachers not be propagandists or try to indoctrinate students. The teacher’s role through critical thought extends the visual field of the student so that the whole spectrum of potential meaning becomes visible.

With this philosophy of interpretation in mind, students can be exposed to the novel. There are various strategies teachers can use to allow students to express their critical thinking. For instance, a literature teacher can use an anticipatory questionnaire using student answers for discussion. The anticipatory questions must be designed so as not to cause a specific pattern of thought. This can range from particular questions to general views about the subject matter. Ideally, one needs to upset the natural biased way of interpretation by using questions that call for reflection. In literature, various interpretations can lead to critical thought actually arrived at by the student, rather than “I have found what you—the teacher—are thinking.” The student’s thought combined with the teacher’s thought reaches a valued conclusion. This, of course, must be tested in the “marketplace of ideas.” Though this approach may seem simplistic, we are convinced of its power.

### Bacon’s “Marketplace of Ideas”

Over the course of the school year, 12 gifted seniors at a rural Midwestern public high school met twice monthly on Monday mornings from 7:00 to 7:50 with one of the authors, who was the gifted coordinator of this high school. The school district had identified these seniors as gifted in their freshman year. Identification was based on a confluence of factors such as IQ scores (over 124), the Stanford Achievement Test (95th percentile), and teacher and counselor recommendations. The purpose of these morning meetings was to discuss and analyze

books that were read by the gifted group, which were different from readings in the regular curriculum.

Eight of the 12 seniors agreed to participate in the discussion of the novel *Skipping Christmas*. The following general anticipatory questions were framed in order to use the book as a didactic tool and create a forum for discussion of personal value systems, existential problems, and values in general. The book was discussed in a series of three weekly meetings with one of us acting as the facilitator. For each of the questions, students were asked to defend their position by using concrete examples either from the book or from their experience. Students were also encouraged to write reflective summaries on these questions.

1. Are traditional values the true guide to living?
2. Is honesty always the best policy?
3. Are the Ten Commandments (or similar commandments in other religions) old-fashioned?
4. Is there ever a time when it is okay to lie?
5. Is our view of reality our own or similar to those with whom we live?
6. In our daily lives in school with others, do we think before we judge or do we simply portray a knee-jerk reaction to others?
7. Are we governed mostly by the values of church, parents, social life, economic conditions, political views, and friends' views, or do we form value systems of our own?
8. Are some values better than others?
9. Should one always protect oneself?

### Examining the Idols of the Mind

Student responses from the discussion and reflective writings is now presented in edited vignette form. However, we include sufficient detail in the vignettes for the reader to get a good glimpse of the discussions. The vignettes will reveal that the above questions were not sequentially discussed because this would create a contrived forum. Instead, student responses dictated the flow of the discussion and were used by the facilitator to pose other questions that seemed most natural as a follow-up. (In all vignettes, A = Facilitator, S# = Students).

#### Vignette 1

- A: Do you think that traditional values are the true guide to living?
- S1: Traditional values can be divided into religion and morals. Religion has nothing to do with morality, save in speech only. In the history of mankind, the greatest perpetrators of immorality have adhered to some religious institution.

Take the Crusades, the Inquisition, current rationale for terrorism, witch-hunts, etc. Religion has also hindered the intellectual progress of mankind by suppressing the Copernican model, with malice toward Darwinism, rejection of controversial medical research. For me, morality is defined as "virtuous behavior," and virtue is a predisposition to do Good. The greatest reason why religious adherents perform actions that they profess to be moral is out of fear, usually of eternal punishment, although some fear disdain by some religious institution.

- S2: I think it depends on the definition of "traditional values." If they refer to ideals such as obeying your parents, don't lie, and work hard, then I think that traditional values alone are not the true guide to living. . . . I think they are good rules to obey, but not because they are traditional.

- S3: I don't see anything as the "true" guide to living. If there were a true guide, human value systems (including religious doctrine) would be null and void.

- A: How would they be null and void?

- S3: We humans could just open up the "guide to true living," read it, follow it, and have a perfect life. Values are learned behaviors and views that humans hold because we are human. All values are variable and depend on culture, upbringing, society, religion, etc. Therefore, all values are not the same. If they were, then wouldn't human society be invariably perfect?

- A: Would anybody like to take a different position and refute this argument?

- S4: I would. I believe the main reason behind society's problems today is that we have strayed too far from these basic or traditional values. Ideals such as "treat others as you would want to be treated" are universal, but are hastily disregarded, while ways to make oneself successful take over, no matter what the toll.

- S1: I still think we need to draw a clear distinction between religion and morality. One can be moral without being religious. I reject the traditional value of religion as a truthful guide to living. I equate morality with virtue, willing good for mankind, and truth. We can easily critique things that are traditionally perceived as moral. Take, for instance, actions traditionally called "immoral" such as hatred and adultery. Hatred is the absence of love, and to love is to will good, which is part of our criterion of truth, making hatred wrong. Adultery is more complicated. It involves

dishonesty between one and one's spouse, therefore it is against truth and therefore not good. Thus, one can be moral without being religious. In the context of the book, it is clear that Luther is not religious. However, one cannot take his disdain for Christmas to draw conclusions about his morals or his will to do good.

S6: Everyone's values are different. As a Christian, I think my values are the true guide to living, but there are other people who think that their values are the true guide to living. Everyone tries to instill their values on other people. Like Luther convinces his wife that it is perfectly okay to skip Christmas.

S8: I agree with (S6). I don't think we are in any position to judge Luther's actions. Christmas is meaningful only if you are a Christian. If you celebrate it purely for traditional reasons without recognizing the deeper meaning, you may as well skip it. . . . I think the answer can be very simple from a personal viewpoint. From a Christian viewpoint, the answer is very simple. Many people, Christians included, get caught up in following traditional values without recognizing the theological foundations of their beliefs in the first place. Believing in a benevolent God who is kind and loving to us necessitates that we be kind and loving to others, as well.

A: Would anybody like to respond to this?

S7: I am not Christian, or any other religion for that matter, but common sense tells us that it is wrong to kill people or belittle your parents. I like the Ten Commandments simply because they put into writing what you should already know.

#### Commentary on Vignette 1

This vignette reveals several interesting existential themes. What do we mean by traditional values? Does one need religion in order to have traditional values? What is the relationship between religion and morality? Is the reader of *Skipping Christmas* in a position to judge the actions of the protagonist?

The students expressed a variety of viewpoints. Some students (S1 and S2) raised the need to define terms to ensure that everyone was talking about the same thing. Student 1 insisted that it was necessary to make a distinction between religion and morality and supported the need for this distinction by citing examples of immoral actions carried out by religious institutions to hinder the intellectual (scientific) progress of humankind. His eloquent argument echoes the

- "The greatest reason why religious adherents perform actions that they profess to be moral is out of fear, usually of eternal punishment."
- "Values are learned behaviors and views that humans hold because we are human . . . are variable and depend on culture, upbringing, society, religion."
- "Many, Christians included, get caught up in following traditional values without recognizing the theological foundations of their beliefs."

Figure 1. The Idols of Theater

views of Brower (1999) and Krishnamurthi (1981), as well as that of the scientific community. Other students (S3 and S6) recognized the relativism inherent in what are termed "values" by pointing out the influence of upbringing, society, and religion.

Students 7 and 8 appealed to common sense as being the true guide to living. They were willing to declare their religious bias before making their point. In Vignette 1, the "idols of theater" (Bacon, 1620/1902) were brought to the surface when students realized that the blind acceptance of traditional values often lead to biased conclusions. Students acknowledged the need to examine value systems instead of accepting them blindly. The quotes in Figure 1, which were taken from the preceding vignette, reveal that the students were aware of the bias that arises from our affiliations to cultural, social, and religious institutions. In other words, the "idols of theater" were acknowledged as those leading to biased conclusions.

#### Vignette 2

The last comment from Vignette 1 naturally led to the following question, which relates to questions 2 and 4.

- A: Are human beings hardwired to being virtuous? Are we predisposed to do good? Don't we all tell white lies?
- S5: It's not okay to lie, but you don't have to spill the beans and be brutally honest. That doesn't always go over well.
- S3: The government has to indulge in using lies to keep the harmony. If the government disclosed everything they knew about the current war on terrorism, for example, there would be chaos. During the Civil War, Lincoln had to suspend the writ of *habeas corpus* to keep the peace. This, like some lies, was a necessary exception. I don't see how this could be tied to being immoral.

S1: We need to define “honesty.” “Honesty” is defined as that which pertains to truth. In general, it is good to be honest, as it facilitates truth, which is the object of man’s highest mode of being, which is reason. The supreme criterion for living is to will good for mankind. In some instances, being honest is detrimental to mankind. For instance, if a small child told fantastic stories that have nothing of actual “truth” in them and readily accepted them as having happened. This I do not object to. It can be argued that, though the stories are not honest, they are “truthful” for being creative and beautiful. Only in instances where good does not come to mankind should honesty be questioned.

S7: No, as bad as it sounds, honesty can get people into trouble. Now, you would think that, if a person is lying, he or she is trying to cover up something bad. Honesty should be used often, but carefully.

A: That is a very interesting view of honesty. Isn’t honesty the best policy, as that old maxim says? Nobody here sees this simply as black or white?

S6: I do. Honesty is always the best policy. Good things almost always come out of telling the truth. You gain trust and respect. Under no condition should you lie. People always admire an honest person.

S2: I do not agree (with S6). What if honesty endangers people who are innocent? Take, for instance, Germany during the Nazi period. Many Germans who were hiding Jews lied to the authorities, even under the threat of torture, because being honest would have endangered the people they were hiding.

S8: I think honesty hurts very much, but if you lie to satisfy people, that can be hurtful to yourself and to the people you lie to later on.

S4: There are times when it is okay to lie. Take Santa Claus, for example. It’s okay because a child’s innocence is at hand. Another possibility is government matters and the general public. We don’t really need to know how many countries have nuclear warheads pointed at us until it is extremely necessary. People need to be able to live their lives peacefully, rather than in constant fear or paranoia like today.

### Commentary on Vignette 2

This vignette reveals many moral dilemmas. What is virtue? Can honesty be seen in black and white terms? Are hon-

- “The government has to indulge in lies to keep the harmony.”
- “In general, it is good to be honest, as it facilitates truth, which is the object of man’s highest mode of being, which is reason . . . [but] if a small child told fantastic stories that have nothing of actual ‘truth’ in them . . . this I do not object to.”
- “There are times when it is okay to lie . . . because a child’s innocence is at hand.”
- “What if honesty endangers people who are innocent. Take, for instance, Germany during the Nazi period.”

Figure 2. The Idols of Marketplace

esty and truth equivalent? Is there a hierarchy to truth? Is honesty an emotion, a learned behavior, a virtue?

During the discussion on honesty, the “idols of the marketplace” (Bacon, 1620/1902), surfaced when students acknowledged the conflict between their ideal perception of honesty versus how it plays out in reality. The discussion revealed the troubling nature of defining “honesty.” Many were aware of the “necessary lies” in which institutions have indulged for the sake of the greater good. Bacon himself found the “idols of marketplace” to be “the most troublesome of all because of the emotive meanings—that words’ definitions are loaded with, and even when philosophers redefine them, there is inevitably an argumentative spin to one side or another of the dispute.” (Walton, 1999, p. 386). Half of the students (S4, S5, S7, S8) pointed out that it was okay to lie if others’ feelings were at stake. Only one student (S6) was willing to define honesty in black and white terms. Several students (S2, S3, S4) also cited political conditions, such as times of war and living under oppressive regimes, that called for the use of necessary lies, or lies that saved people’s lives.

One student (S1) connected honesty to her definition of Good, as that which results in an outcome of “greater good” for mankind. Other than Student 6, none of the students saw honesty in absolute terms. There was an awareness of the “idols of the marketplace”(see Figure 2). This was evident in the recognition that political and religious rhetoric, as well as emotionally toned words used by those in authority, could lead one astray. All the students (except S6) had a relativistic view of honesty dependent on the particular situation in which they would hypothetically find themselves, independent of religious doctrine or political affiliation.

### Vignette 3

The preceding discussion led into the following question, which relates to questions 5, 8, and 9.

A: Is honesty a value? Does it have to do with various religious commandments? Or are we honest just because our parents tell us to be honest?

S1: Values don't have anything to do with religion, nor does morality. Adopting the values of older people is a foolish thing to do. For example, we don't have to agree with the policies of our government just because they consist of older people who supposedly are more experienced.

S3: I think people adopt values that are convenient and suit them. Who hasn't heard a politician contradict himself? It has to do with what is convenient for people. Take Luther's case for example. He wanted to skip Christmas because it was convenient to do so . . . it had nothing to do with religion or morality. When it became inconvenient, the Kranks decided to celebrate it after all.

A: So, you are essentially saying that people are selfish and they basically protect themselves no matter what.

S7: Not necessarily. Human beings have altruistic tendencies. I used to watch a cartoon where the heroine never thought of her own safety, only the safety of her loved ones. I think this is a good idea. If I had to choose between saving myself or my best friend, I would save her and it would be worth it unless I had to stay alive to save the whole world.

S8: If you had a loved one in a burning building, wouldn't you run in to save him or her?

S2: We have countries that are burning right now, and I don't see us running in there trying to save the people. We claim that democracy is the best political system, yet there are other political systems that have been around longer that think otherwise. Take the Confucian system of government, which has been around for over 2,000 years and looks at people not in terms of what their rights are, but more in terms of duties or responsibilities of people. . . . We tried to impose our system in Vietnam . . . by disguising it as our supposed altruistic tendency. . . to protect the Southern Vietnamese from communism. It didn't work . . . even if some people are not willing to admit it. The bottom line is usually some materialistic vested interest. I think even nations are clannish in a sense and protect their self-interest.

S4: Luther and Nora ended up trying to protect their daughter. But, in a different sense, they were trying to protect her from seeing their selfishness.

S3: I don't think that Luther was being selfish.

S1: I think we ought to protect ourselves only if it is good for mankind. Take the example of Socrates, who suffered the death sentence in order not to disobey the law, which would have been detrimental to mankind.

A: Yes, but is this a natural way of thinking?

S2: No, it is not. S1 is always looking at ideal situations. Look around you. For instance, 9/11 happened because of a clash of value systems. We cannot impose our values on others. You only need to travel to other countries to get a glimpse of reality and know how ignorant we are.

S6: Our view of reality is unique. What I see is what someone else sees, but the way I perceive those things is a different story. It is really hard to view things objectively; it would be almost having total control of one's subconscious thought as an observer, which I think is impossible.

### Commentary on Vignette 3

In Vignette 3, students examined selfishness from local and global points of view. Students perceived the "idols of the tribe" (Bacon, 1620/1902), which state that we are apt to recognize evidence and incidents favorable to our own side or group (tribe or nation). Students recognized the vested interests present in the individual (the Kranks), society (the Greeks, in particular, Socrates), and nations. Bacon further argued that the "idols of the mind" taint or skew our thinking (see Figure 3), resulting in flaws in our understanding about the true nature of things. In other words, Bacon was saying that our understanding maps on to the "idols" our minds have created *a priori* as a result of being conditioned to recognize events favorable to our group. Student 6 pointed this out eloquently by saying that, to be completely objective, one would have to somehow consciously monitor the subconscious, which was deemed as being impossible. Several students (S1, S2, S3) argued that social conditioning taints our perceptions about events. Student 1 argued that Socrates' sacrifice was to protect his idealism of the Law as being the supreme criterion for living. Student 2 referred to recent and past geopolitical events to make the case that nations' perceptions of those events were tainted by vested interests (of their tribe). Other students (S7 and S8) argued that people were not selfish by nature and referred to our altruistic tendencies to buttress their argument.



#### Vignette 4

The last comment from Vignette 3 triggered a discussion of factors that influence value systems, seen in questions 7 and 8, and views of reality, seen in question 5.

S7: Values are based on religion and beliefs.

S1: I don't quite agree. Values are dictated by institutions. Ideally, one should consider all possibilities and use one's intellect in judging what befits most the truth as to matters of value. One cannot judge the characters of the book because they had their own motivations for acting the way they did. Luther's actions weren't really hurting anybody; but, society, which is a kind of institution, wouldn't leave him alone. Commonly, our values to lofty matters are formed by influences such as parents and society; there is no logic to this. A particular view is not correct simply because it is taught or held by some so-called authority.

S6: I believe some values are better than others. My values may be the complete opposite of others. So, then, they think that their values are better than mine. From a mathematical viewpoint, they cancel out. So, in essence, no values are better than others. But, we being stubborn think our values are the right values to the point of war.

S3: Well, if there is a universal system of right and wrong, then certainly some values are better than others. However, all values as we know are subjective and vary by culture. It is difficult to say that some are better than others. Invariably, each culture deems its value system as the best. But, who is right? It is quite impossible for us to know. If, indeed, there is a universal set of rights and wrongs, then something must eventually give. I'm of the firm belief that there is some sort of universal ethical direction.

S8: I think values depend on the person's age. For the most part, children follow the rules set by their parents and develop values similar to their parents. As teenagers, we are governed by our social lives and go with the flow. But, our friends don't have a whole lot of experience . . . so I think it's wiser to adopt the values of older people who have experienced more in their lives. I personally follow the ideals of the Christian church.

#### Commentary on Vignette 4

In Vignette 4, the "idols of the cave" became apparent in the discussion of the clash of value systems and the tendency of people to favor their value system over others. We

- "We don't have to agree with the policies of our government just because they consist of older people who supposedly are more experienced."
- "The bottom line is usually some materialistic vested interest. I think even nations are clannish in a sense and protect their self-interest. "
- "People adopt values that are convenient and suit them. Who hasn't heard a politician contradict himself? It has to do with what is convenient for people."
- "[H]aving total control of subconscious thought as an observer . . . I think is impossible."

Figure 3. The Idols of Tribe

feel that the preceding vignette has some self-evident statements revealing that the students were aware that people tend to see themselves as the center of the world (see Figure 4). Therefore, we do not see the need to make any further commentary.

### Implications

As the vignettes reveal, class discussion using anticipatory questions and the answers of students as guidelines is a powerful forum for critical thinking. This method allows the teacher to introduce philosophical perspectives to moral questions and students to express their views. These perspectives, combined with the student's views, lead students to examine codes of behavior and biases.

There were numerous instances in the preceding vignettes that conclusively show that gifted individuals are capable of examining their own biases, or the "idols of the mind." Vignette 1 revealed the "idols of theater" when students realized that the blind acceptance of traditional values often leads to biased conclusions. Students acknowledged the need to examine a system of thought instead of accepting it blindly. In Vignette 2, during the discussion on honesty, the "idols of the marketplace" surfaced when students acknowledged the conflict between their ideal perceptions of honesty versus how it plays out in reality. Many were aware of the "necessary lies" in which institutions in for the sake of the greater good. In Vignette 3, students examined selfishness from local and global points of view. Students perceived the "idols of the tribe" when they recognized vested interests present in the individual, society, and nations. Finally, in Vignette 4, the "idols of the cave" became apparent in the discussion of the clash of value sys-

- “Values are dictated by institutions . . . our values to lofty matters are formed by influences such as parents and society; there is no logic to this.”
- “Invariably, each culture deems their value system as the best. But, who is right?”
- “Children follow the rules set by their parents and develop values similar to their parents.”

Figure 4. The Idols of Cave

tems and the tendency of people to favor their value systems over others.

The vignettes, commentaries, and figures reveal striking instances of critical thinking. In general, the various vignettes reveal that gifted students are capable of critical examination. They can think in the abstract and make intricate connections between ideas. In particular, they reveal that our biases can be brought to the surface and examined, thus validating Bacon's (1620/1902) argument that “bias” is not necessarily bad. The value of the discussion lies in the fact that students became aware of their biases, which allowed critical thinking to manifest (Blair, 1988; Kienpointner & Kindt, 1997).

Another unusual aspect of this experiment was that the discussion spanned a period of 3 weeks, with intermittent breaks that allowed for students to *reflect on* what was being said. This allowed them to better frame their ideas, as is evident in the lucidity of some of the arguments. In this respect, we were successful in adapting Simpson's (1996) approach of replacing low-level questioning by one that stimulated the students to reflect on problems. The value of using a book as a didactic tool was evident in the fact that many of these students were willing to generalize their thoughts from the context of the reading to life (Ennis, 1991; Paul, 1990). The general questions that we re touched upon were easily constructed from the particular context of the book. The real value lies in the fact that the context of the book allowed some of the shyer students to express viewpoints that they otherwise would not have and connect their responses from the reading to life. Although the students we re discussing the novel, there was a general inquisitiveness about a variety of issues. There was open-mindedness about conflicting views. Students were willing to listen to alternative opinions. Most importantly, they were willing to examine their own biases and prejudices. There was also a trust in the processes of reasoned inquiry (Facione, 1990). Given a didactic tool (the book) and a setting (a forum for discussion), these gifted students were willing to examine the “idols of the mind.”

As stated earlier, although we see the value of the traditional means of differentiating the curriculum in the regular classroom, we are of the opinion that the social dynamics of a traditional mixed-ability classroom setting lends itself to mediocrity (Krishnamurthi, 1981). It is a well-known fact that many gifted students are prone to hide their intellectual capacity (Massé & Gagné, 2002) and not express controversial viewpoints. In the traditional setting, it is also impossible to continue a sustained and deep discussion spanning weeks (to allow for reflection) because of the lack of general interest in a mixed-ability classroom and other classroom logistics (Passow, 1982; Winebrenner, 1992).

We recommend that gifted coordinators work with the literature teacher in the classroom to create a separate weekly forum for the gifted students similar to our approach. We find it aesthetically pleasing that many of the viewpoints expressed by these students about the conflicts between science and religion, religion and morality, political rhetoric and social conditioning, and the fallibility of value systems were similar to those voiced by Bacon (1620/1902) nearly 5 centuries ago. The teacher's role is to create a classroom atmosphere that nurtures and kindles critical thinking in students (Dewey, 1933) so that they begin to examine their biases and have the opportunity to discuss their value systems (Bacon) and their perspectives. We hope that we have conveyed to the reader the value of using a simple story as a didactic tool to create a platform for students to express their critical thinking. The critical thinking demonstrated by the gifted students in their discussion of *Skipping Christmas* indicates that they were willing to discuss questions of belief, morality, and values. This method of teaching and learning adds personal meaning to the students' school experiences, thus filling the void often felt by gifted students receiving mediocre education.

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