

A Philosophy Lesson

BY A. BARTON HINKLE

As a young newspaper editorial writer many moons ago, I once dashed off a fairly pompous screed denouncing the habit of treating feelings as arguments. Feelings aren't facts, was the point of the piece, and acting as though they are is a sign of epistemological degeneracy.

That last phrase raised eyebrows around the office. Epistemology isn't normally the sort of subject you shoehorn in between "Dear Abby" and recipes for Jell-O salad. My editor gently suggested that before I again commenced, like a latter-day Ignatius J. Reilly, to write a lengthy indictment against our century, I might wish to hold forth on the merits of fixing the burned-out stoplight on Broad Street.

And yet. Casting an eye afield, one can't avoid concluding many of the country's current ills derive from an insufficient grounding in ethics, metaphysics, and whatnot. Especially whatnot.

Take a bill recently signed into law by Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer. It prevents private homeowners' associations from forbidding residents to fly the Gadsden flag. The flag, with its coiled snake and its "Don't tread on me" legend, protests government oppression and so has become a standard among Tea Party types, some of whom apparently think (or at least feel) they should not be held to the deals they signed. So they have appealed to heavy-handed government to protect their flags protesting governmental heavy-handedness.

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A primer on the social contract — or elementary logic — could have avoided that mess.

Elsewhere the confusion is ontological. According to a notice from the World Paddle Association (yes, there is such a thing), the U.S. Coast Guard now classifies stand-up paddleboards — essentially, large surfboards — as vessels. Henceforth those operating said vessels must abide by federal navigation rules: paddlers will have to wear personal flotation devices and carry whistles, a visual distress signal, a navigation light, and so on. Claims for damage to cargo presumably may be filed under the Carriage of Goods by Sea Act.

This is known as a category error: a paddleboard is not an ocean liner. Of course, a three-inch toy rifle is not a firearm, either. But try telling that to officials at Gatwick Airport. When Ken Lloyd and his wife tried to take a lump of molded plastic shaped like a miniature SA80 with them on a flight this January, they were denied. No guns allowed! Philosophers tussle with the problem of Theseus' ship: If you replace all the planks one at a time, is it the same ship at the end or a different one? The answer is not nearly as inscru-

table as the mystery of how a solid piece of plastic becomes a projectile-firing weapon.

Category errors are especially common at airports and schools. Last January, Transportation Security Administration screeners confiscated cans of Play-Doh belonging to three-year-old Josh Pitney, whose grandmother had given them to

him as a Christmas present. Or consider New Jersey second-grader Kyle Walker, who was suspended from school for drawing a gun. By that, I don't mean he unholstered a Glock. No, he sketched on paper a stick figure holding a pistol. This ostensibly violated — ready for it? — his school's no-weapons policy. (There's no word of whether little Kyle's parents could pay their school tax by mailing in a picture of a stick figure handing over a sack of money.)

Time after time, children have been sanctioned because administrators cannot, or will not,

distinguish between toys and weapons, aspirin and heroin. Four years ago Kilmer Middle School in Vienna, Va., banned hugs, high-fives, and all other physical contact. Kilmer's principal explained there are "shades of gray" between different kinds of touching.

We could dismiss all of these tales as examples of stupid bureaucrats. But that's to miss the larger problem: the public wants airtight public safety and the political system is hell-bent on showing it's serious about providing that safety. In such a world, convenience, discretion, and common sense take a back seat — if they're even in the car. What once was a difficult choice between Type-1 and Type-2 errors — whether to let a child take his Play-Doh on the plane because it's probably exactly what it looks like or seize it because it might be plastic explosive planted by a clever terrorist — has morphed into a policy that Type-1 errors don't matter, at least, not when their costs are borne by children and other political weaklings. That's why we ban high-fives and treat a schoolchild taking an aspirin for a headache as if she'd just shot heroin in the hallway. **R**