

# Douglas Todd: Why say 'inappropriate' when we mean 'wrong'?

Literature professor provides evidence from school curricula around North America that words such as “just,” “decent” and even “important” have been suppressed and replaced with pallid jargon, such as “appropriate.”

[Douglas Todd](#)

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UBC literature professor emeritus Dennis Danielson finds most young people are embarrassed to talk about meaning, morality and purpose, but that learning to do so is crucial to the future of our species. So he dedicated his lively short book, *The Tao of Right and Wrong*, to his granddaughter, Ebba. PNG

Anybody who feels repelled by the word “inappropriate” is a friend of mine.

It is an increasingly over-used term in public education, health and academia, a bit of bland jargon that is supposed to fill in for actions that used to be called “immoral.”

It’s fine to talk about how it is inappropriate for a man to don a muscle shirt for a gala dinner, since that is referring to mere etiquette. But it is not helpful to claim it is inappropriate to spread malicious gossip about a classmate, sell drugs tainted with fentanyl or wantonly pollute a creek.

Dennis Danielson, professor emeritus of English at the University of B.C., explores abuse of the word “inappropriate” as he builds a comprehensive case for bringing terms such as “right,” “wrong” and “should” back into the public sphere in Canada and the U.S., where such traditional concepts are deemed suspicious. If not inappropriate.

In a brilliant 80-page essay titled *The Tao of Right and Wrong* (Regent College Publishing), Danielson writes about how “moral realism” can move us beyond the core curricula in use in B.C., Ontario and most U.S. schools, which insinuate that students and teachers who have convictions about good and evil can be brushed off with: [“But that’s just your opinion.”](#)

Danielson begs to differ. And he offers “The Tao” as shorthand for the way to counter-act the confusing moral relativism that pervades secular education at virtually all levels. Danielson borrows the term, the Tao, from Eastern philosophy to describe the trans-cultural entity from which all moral judgment flows. He makes a convincing argument it’s real. And it matters.

It’s important, he recognizes, to have an ultimate ground for our ethical convictions, whether we’re trying to figure out how to treat strangers, to respond to climate change, to deal with global wealth inequality, to solve housing unaffordability or to combat racial discrimination and scientific data fudging. The Tao can provide direction.

But first, a few more words about the weasel word “inappropriate.” The literature professor considers it part of our “pale modern vocabulary,” which has infected the public realm, including politics, replacing words like “should,” “ought” and “good.”

Danielson, author of [The Book of the Cosmos: Imagining The Universe From Heraclitus To Hawking](#), provides evidence from school curricula around North America that words such as “just,” “decent” and even “important” have been suppressed and replaced with pallid jargon, such as “appropriate.” Even vicious behaviour is simply described as “not up to expectations.”

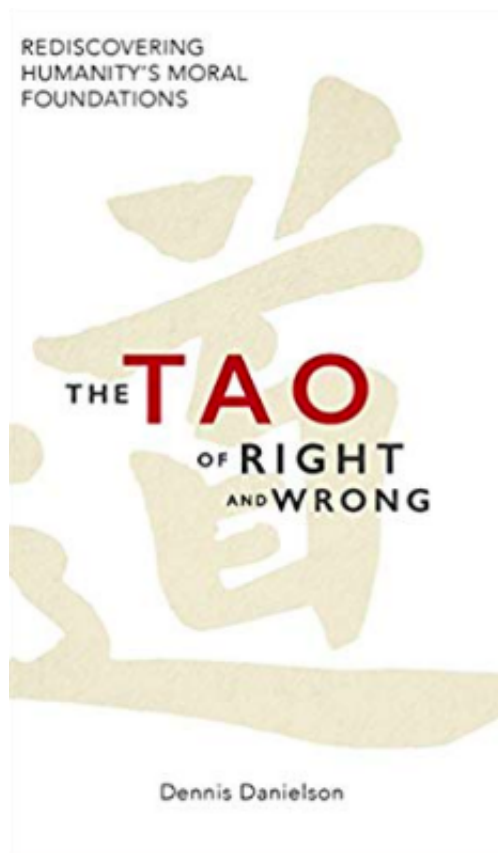
Danielson, who has been receiving cancer treatment, said he recently went through education ministry documents from across Canada, such as *Diversity in B.C. Schools*. He found the “authors clearly desire to promote worthwhile things, but just can’t bring themselves to use scary vocabulary like ‘right’ (as distinct from ‘rights’), ‘wrong,’ ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ ‘evil’ or ‘virtue.’ Of course ‘appropriate’ is all over the place! There’s something pathetic about

this.”

While Danielson doesn’t want to be seen as a naysayer — he respects how many teachers are trying to promote citizenship — he maintains in *The Tao of Right and Wrong* that the crucial piece many are missing is a sense of the ultimate reality that supports meaning and ethical behaviour.

That reality is pointed to in virtually all wisdom traditions, whether ancient Greek, Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Confucian or Taoist. Even though humans will always be imperfect in their understandings of what Plato called “the right and just,” Danielson follows the lead of C.S. Lewis in using the concept of The Tao as a kind of umbrella term for the ultimate source of “goods and shoulds.”

He draws a parallel with mathematics to explain how we can commit to the “obvious” truth of universal admonitions, for instance, to treat others the way we would like to be treated, and to view all humans as brothers or sisters. Even though “obvious” can have a subjective dimension, Danielson cites how “most mathematicians agree that, once we thoroughly understand the terms of a mathematical axiom or theorem, its truth is self-evident, or obvious.”



UBC literature prof emeritus Dennis Danielson adopts the concept of The Tao as a kind of umbrella term for the ultimate source of ‘goods and shoulds.’

In this cynical era in which [“values-free” educators](#) teach that every attempt to define meaning is merely “socially constructed” — or, worse, an attempt to exert power over others — many will criticize Danielson’s approach as absolutistic or even black and white. But it’s not. It’s meaty and nuanced. He takes seriously that all human declarations are provisional, even while

maintaining sacred values exist to which all can attune themselves.

What are some of those ultimate purposes, which used to be considered virtues? Danielson rightly promotes the classical values of courage, prudence, self-control and fairness.

Wouldn't it be refreshing to see such virtues exhibited more often from trendsetting celebrity commentators, either conservative or liberal, who often lead the mob in trash-talking on Twitter, attempting to ostracize those who use moral reasoning to disagree with them? (The tragic irony of "values-free" education is it produces people with no skills in applied ethics; so when they do express opinions they often adopt a hectoring, self-righteous tone.)

I appreciate how Danielson, along with philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, places these classic virtues above what he calls "secondary" truths. And it's no coincidence a key example of such secondary truths is something many multicultural Canadians contradictorily elevate into an outright absolute: Tolerance.

"Tolerance is clearly a virtue — until it is not. Innumerable codes of conduct across varying school systems — as well as government, law, health care and so on — today declare unapologetically that harassment, bullying, vandalism, violence, possession of illicit drugs, and the like 'will not be tolerated,' " Danielson says.

"Well and good. But the problem is that teaching materials in those same school systems offer scant wisdom that might help young people or educators discern where the line should be drawn between virtuous tolerance and a principled refusal to tolerate."

Why has Danielson felt compelled to write *The Tao of Right and Wrong* at this stage of his life? He believes the most important things facing the rising generation are questions of morality, meaning, virtue and purpose. But he believes many of the young are embarrassed to talk about them.

"There are a lot of voices out there calling these things merely vacuous, ultimately made up, 'constructed' ," he said.

"But with every fibre of my being I think that those things are real and significant — and when it comes down to it, are much more than just arbitrary or culturally specific. I think our future as a species very much depends on our treating them as real and significant. So, hoping to make a modest contribution to that recognition, I wrote this little book — and dedicated it to my youngest granddaughter."

I could offer that I find Danielson's motive for writing this new book to be quite "appropriate." But I'd prefer to try to be true to the Tao and refer to it as right and good.

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**MORE READING:** American philosopher David Ray Griffin takes a related approach to this subject

in his new book, [Process Theology](#), in the chapter titled *Theism and the Crisis in Moral Theory*

