The Characterization
Question

Clarifying the Characterization Question

Summary

We have considered the **identification** and **reidentification** questions

1. the identification question: what properties must a being have to count as a person?

2. the reidentification question: what makes a person the same person over time?

We now turn to the **characterization question**

The characterization question: what makes a person the person that s/he is?

Kind raises several variants of the characterization question:

1.	what makes me *me* and you *you*? (p.116)

2.	what makes you who you are?

3.	what makes you who you really are? (p.114)

4.	 what are the practical concerns of an individual's personal identity? (p.114-115)

5.	what are the characteristics that are central to my identity? (p.119)

6.	what does it mean to say that a characteristic is a characteristic of a given person? (p.119-120)

7.	what are the characteristics that go toward making me who I am? (p.120)

8.	what facts must be the case to say that an action by a subject is truly an action done by that person? (p.122)

9.	what is the relation between the characteristics of a person and that person? (p.123)

10.	what are the features that constitute your identity? (p.126)

In the case of the **reidentification question** (diachronic identity), we are asking whether two people are the same person at two different times.

In the case of the **chracterization question**, we are asking whether a particular characteristic (property) belongs to a person

| Person A at t1 | | Person B at t2 |

| Property P | | Person A |

The characterization question seems to depend upon an assumption. Let's call this the **central property assumption**:

- There are properties P1, P2, P3 that can be attributed to you **but do not play a role** in defining you as the type or kind of person that you are

- There are some properties P that might go on inside (or outside) of us but are not part of who we **really** are

- On the other hand, there are properties (**the central properties**) that do play a role in defining the type of person that you are.

- We have **physical** or **psychological** properties that don't play a role in defining us as people.

- **Example 1:** We might sweat because of the heat but this is not part of who we are as a person

- **Example 2:** Tek might have a random thought about running for president, but this was outside of his control. Tek isn't a political person.

- **Example 3:** Perhaps more controversially, we might act a certain way in front of other people but think to ourselves, *this is not who I really am. I am just putting on a mask*.

Another way of putting this question is to start by noting that there are many types of people.

1. There are liars and honest people

2. There are the brave and cowardly

3. There are people who are into sports and those who are not

4. There are people who care about the environment and there are those who think other things are more important

These (and others) distinguish people from each other but also help to define (characterize) who each person is

The characterization question then asks for any person S, what characteristics or features constitute (make) S the person that he or she is?

Property P

Person A

For many of us, it is not clear how to answer the characterization question. Even for ourselves! Individuals are often **working out who they really are**.

Here are Kind's examples:

1. Luke Skywalker struggling between the goodness within him and the allure of the Dark side

2. Harry Potter's struggle to not succumb to the dark desires of Voldemort

3. "When Aang searches for a way to defeat Fire Lord Ozai, he's torn between his duties as Avatar and his own deep-seated aversion to killing" (what is this?)

More everyday examples include:

1. trying to decide whether being financially sound or doing work that is enjoyable

2. trying to decide which is more important: one's career or the relationships one has with friends and family

3. trying to decide whether you will live a life of virtue (honesty, kindness, etc.) or one of vice (lying when it suits you, selfishness, etc.)

Form a small group (1-5 people). On a piece of paper:

1. State the characterization question (as best you can)

2. Try to answer the characterization question for yourself

3. What are the properties that define who you really are?

4. What are the properties that might be attributed to you but do not play a role in defining who you are?
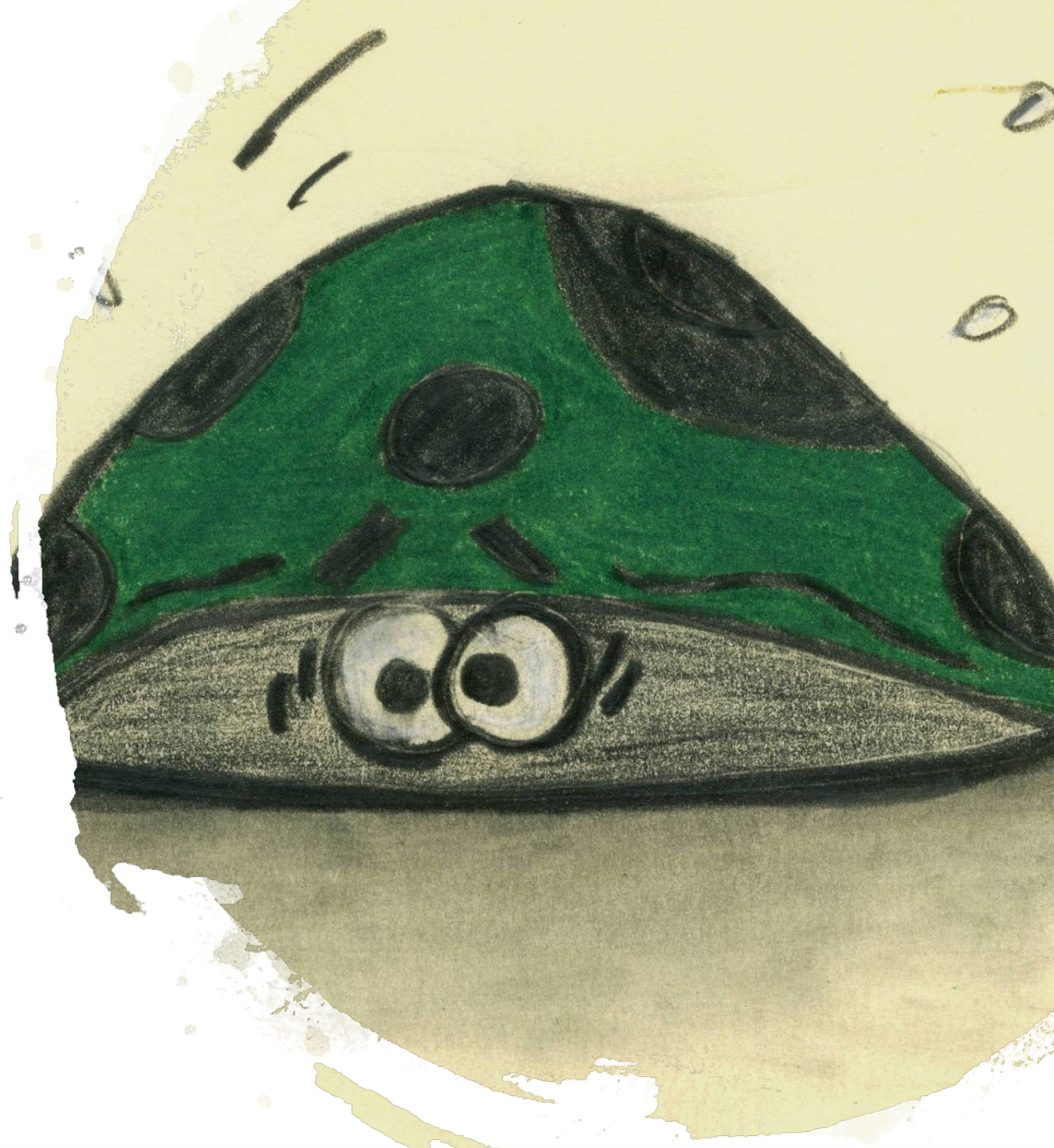
Narrative theory

Narrative self-constitution

The dominant answer to the characterization question (what makes me the person that I am) is the **narrative theory**.

1. the characteristics that go into determining the type of person that you are those that fit together in a **coherent** narrative about you.

2. You are **the role you play** in the story of your life

3. The properties that are really you are those that are **integrated** into the narrative about you
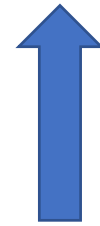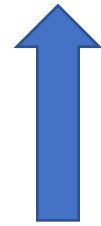
Self as object

- Static

- Exists through time

- Closed (you are who you are)

- Determinate – there is something determinate inside of you that determines who you *really* are

Self as narrative

- Dynamic

- Spread out across time

- Open-ended (you are becoming who you are)

- Indeterminate but becoming more determinate – your story (who you are) is becoming more concrete

The structure of a narrative

One claim that is made is that your life has **the same structure as a narrative**.

Narrative structure claim: The type of person that we are takes the form of a **narrative structure**
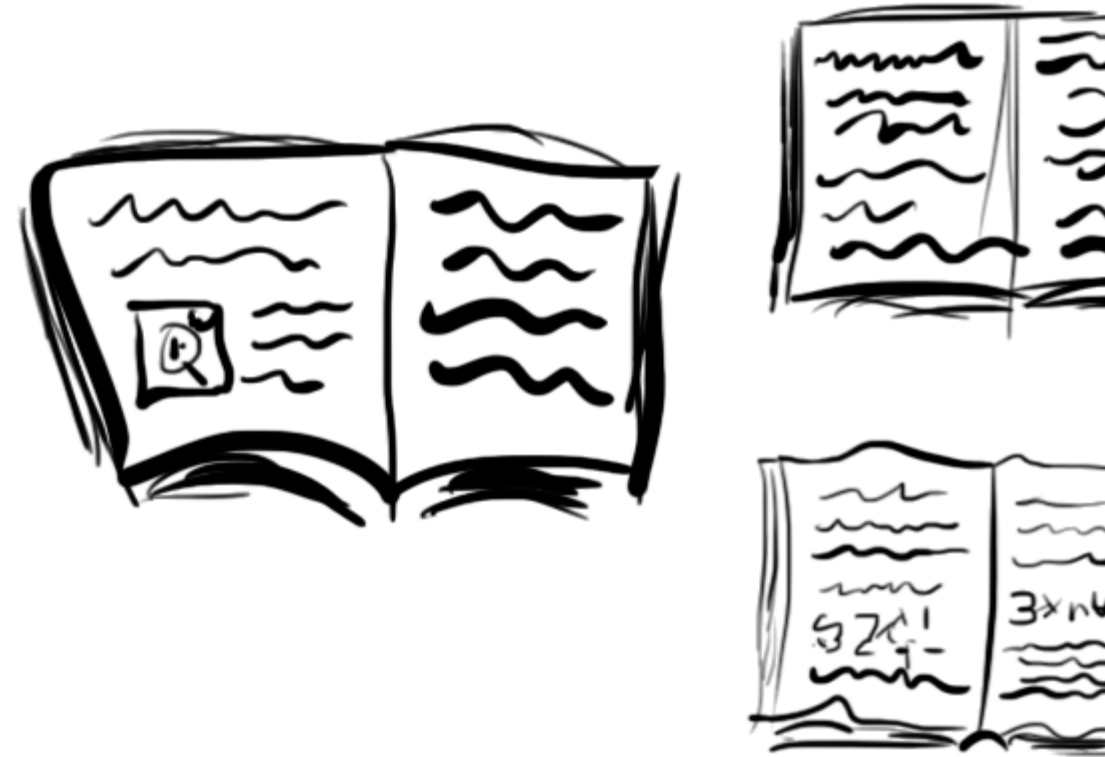
What does it mean for a set of events to be put into a **narrative structure**?

First, there appears to be an intuitive difference between **information** structured by a narrative versus information structured in other ways

- **Baseball results (Kind, p.128-129):** there is a difference between being given the *box score* of a baseball game and reading an account of the game itself.

- **Medical results (Kind, p.128-129):** there is a difference between being given a *print out* of your medical information (and labs) and hearing the account of your health from your doctor.

D	E	F	G	
Assists	AssistsPerGam	passes	PassPercentag	PassComplet
1	0.0833333333	161	71	
1	0.0625	267	73	
6	0.1621621622	673	79	
10	0.1923076923	874	78	
16	0.2857142857	962	77	
4	0.2857142857	277	75	
9	0.2	767	75	
11	0.2115384615	872	75	
11	0.2	921	76	
12	0.1904761905	1075	76	
20	0.2083333333	1742	76	
27	0.216	2266	76	
5	0.192307692	438	73	
10	0.163934426	1034	74	
17	0.191011236	1545	77	
21	0.196261682	1795	77	
28	0.235294117	2037	76.5	
24	0.218181818	2019	75.5	
36	0.211764705	3033	75.5	

There are lists, spreadsheets, enumerations of events, arguments and proofs, literal descriptions of events

- Our lives **do not** have this structure.

Then there are stories, narratives, tales, yarns, etc.

- Our lives as persons **have** this structure

Second, theorists have argued that narratives have a **distinctive structure**.

Lindemann (see Kind, p.128-130) contends that narratives must meet the following four conditions:

1. **dynamically depictive:** it must represent *events* (not merely static objects) and can do this in a way where the temporal ordering of events need not be a chronological ordering

2. **selective**: they select pieces of information rather than give a comprehensive or exhaustive account of what occurred

3. **interpretive**: they tell you what various events mean or signify or provide explanations of why things occur

4. **connective**: they connect (often in a causal way) the events together

(1) dynamically depictive: it must represent *events* (not merely static objects) and can do this in a way where the temporal ordering of events need not be a chronological ordering

- Cannot be a mere description of objects frozen in time
- Narratives often employ different orderings of events for dramatic event
- We often tell stories about our lives in a way other than chronological order
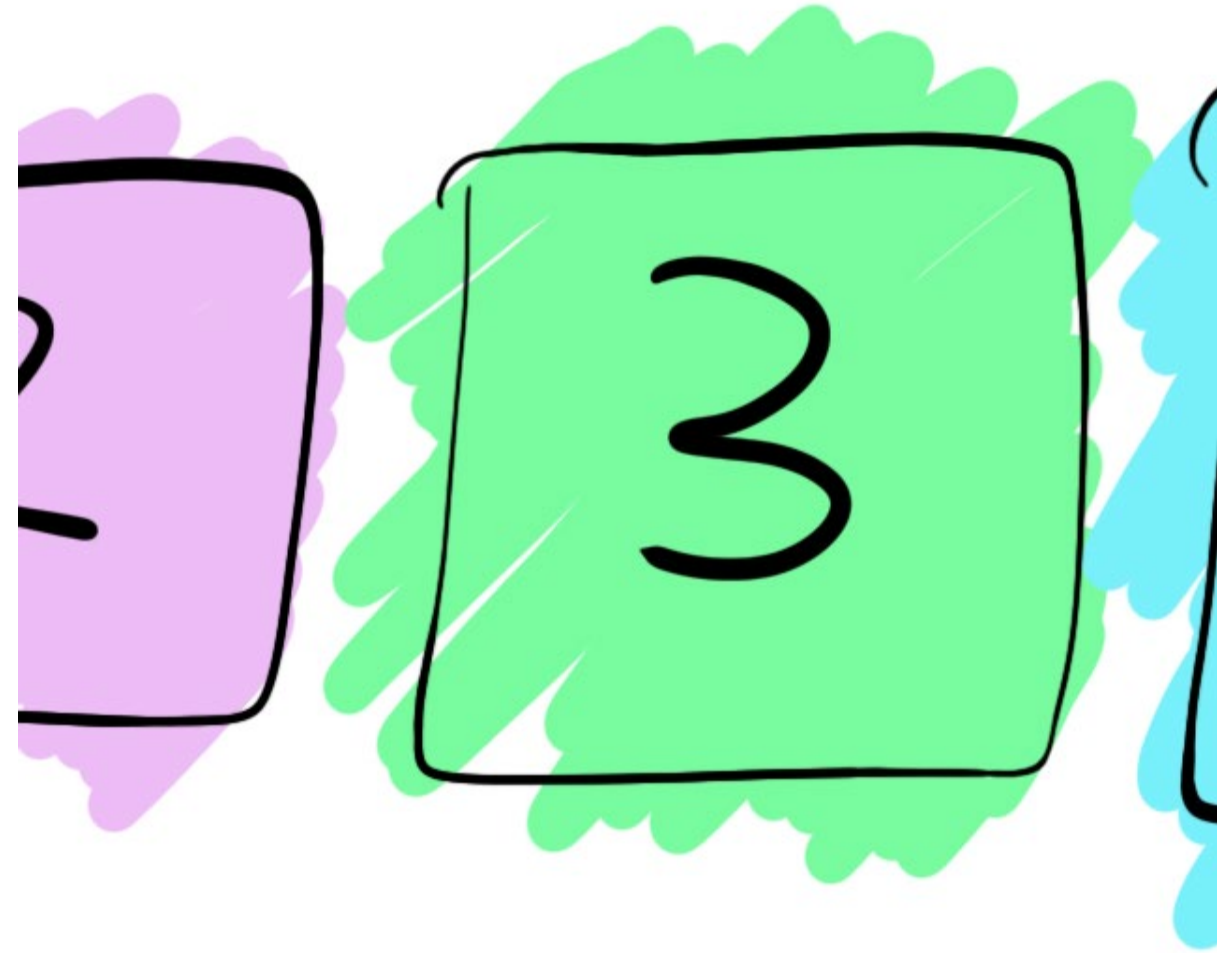
(2) selective: select pieces of information rather than give a comprehensive or exhaustive account of what occurred

- Narratives can pick portions of information taken to be **relevant** and **important**

- "How did you get that black eye?" Narrative of that event would select **key events** that lead to that event.
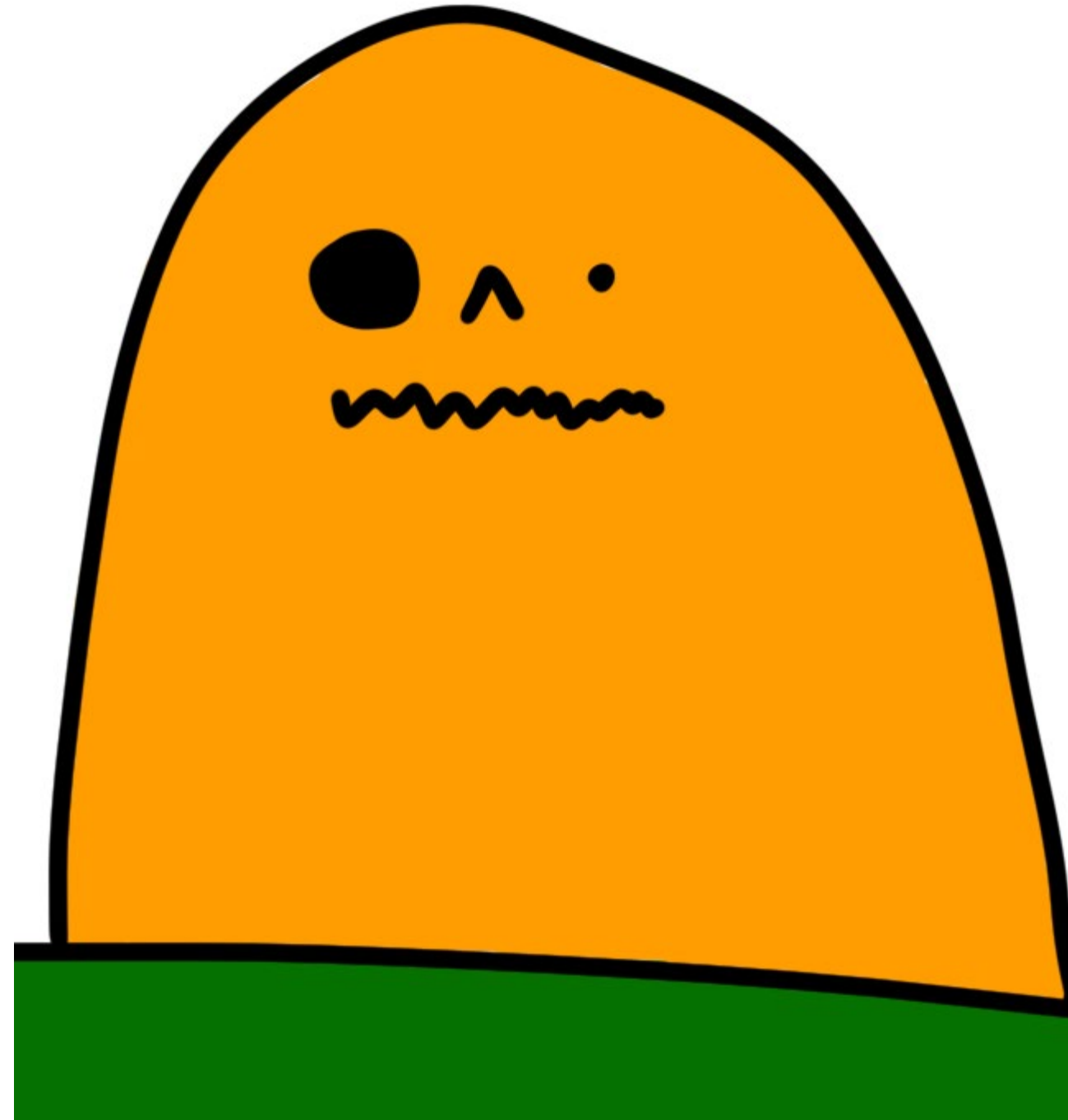
(3) interpretive: they tell you what various events mean or signify or provide explanations of why things occur

- Not mere uninterpreted data

- They provide explanations for **why things happen** (involves motivations, characters, interactions, history, etc.)

- Evaluative claims about what is important and how you should think about (or understand) certain events

(4) **connective**: they connect (often in a causal way) the events together

- Not merely an unconnected set of events

- Events are connected together, X caused Y

- I bumped someone and that caused them to punch me.

Example: narrative of an athletic event (baseball game, football game, etc.)

- **dynamically depictive:** start by describing the events: (1) end of the game, then (2) middle, then (3) beginning, then (4) back to the end.

- **selective account:** not a play by play of every single thing that happened but a *selection* of certain (relevant) events.

- **interpretive account:** account of how certain events fit into the broader context of the game or the team's season or evaluating an action. Example: team is not playing well *because* the team's captain has been absent. They need to do X to win this game.

- **connective account:** how various events relate to each other in the overall story. Example: the penalty in the box lead to a penalty kick which lead to the team losing the game.

Summary

(1) The type of person you are is what is depicted by the narrative of your life

(2) The narrative of our life takes has a specific **structure**

(3) This structure has four main features: (a) dynamically depictive, (b) selective, (c) interpretive, and (d) connective
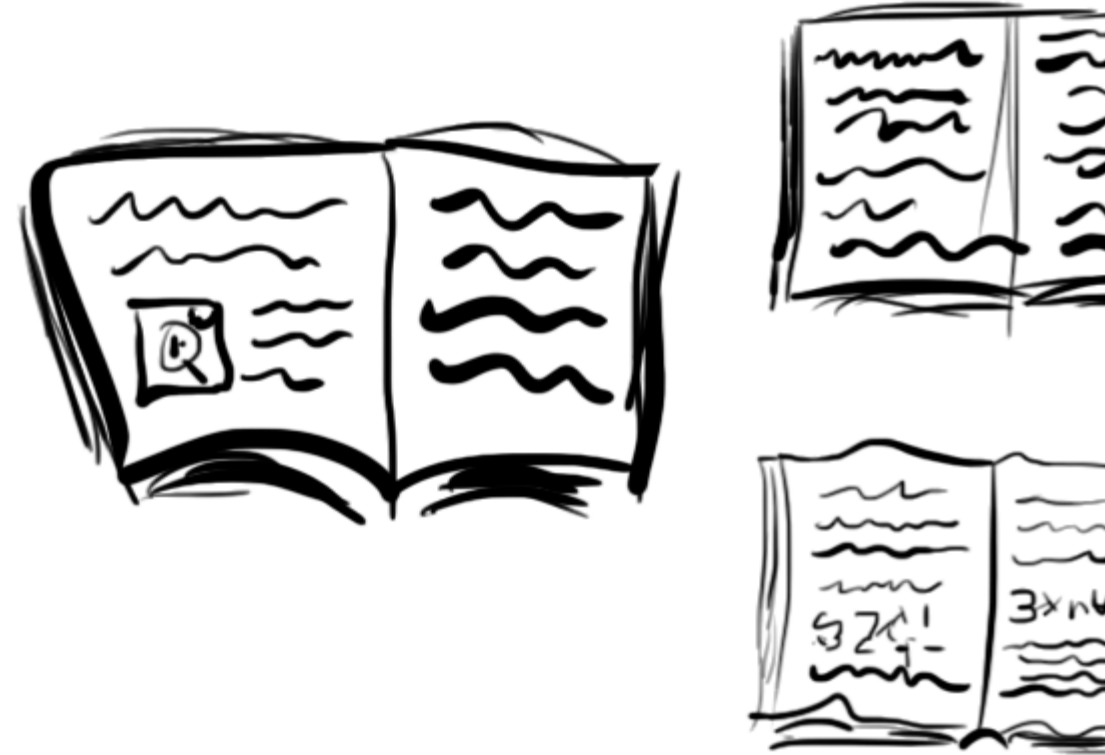
Construct a short story about an event of your choosing.

After writing out the short story, state how the story contains each of the four main structural features of a narrative.
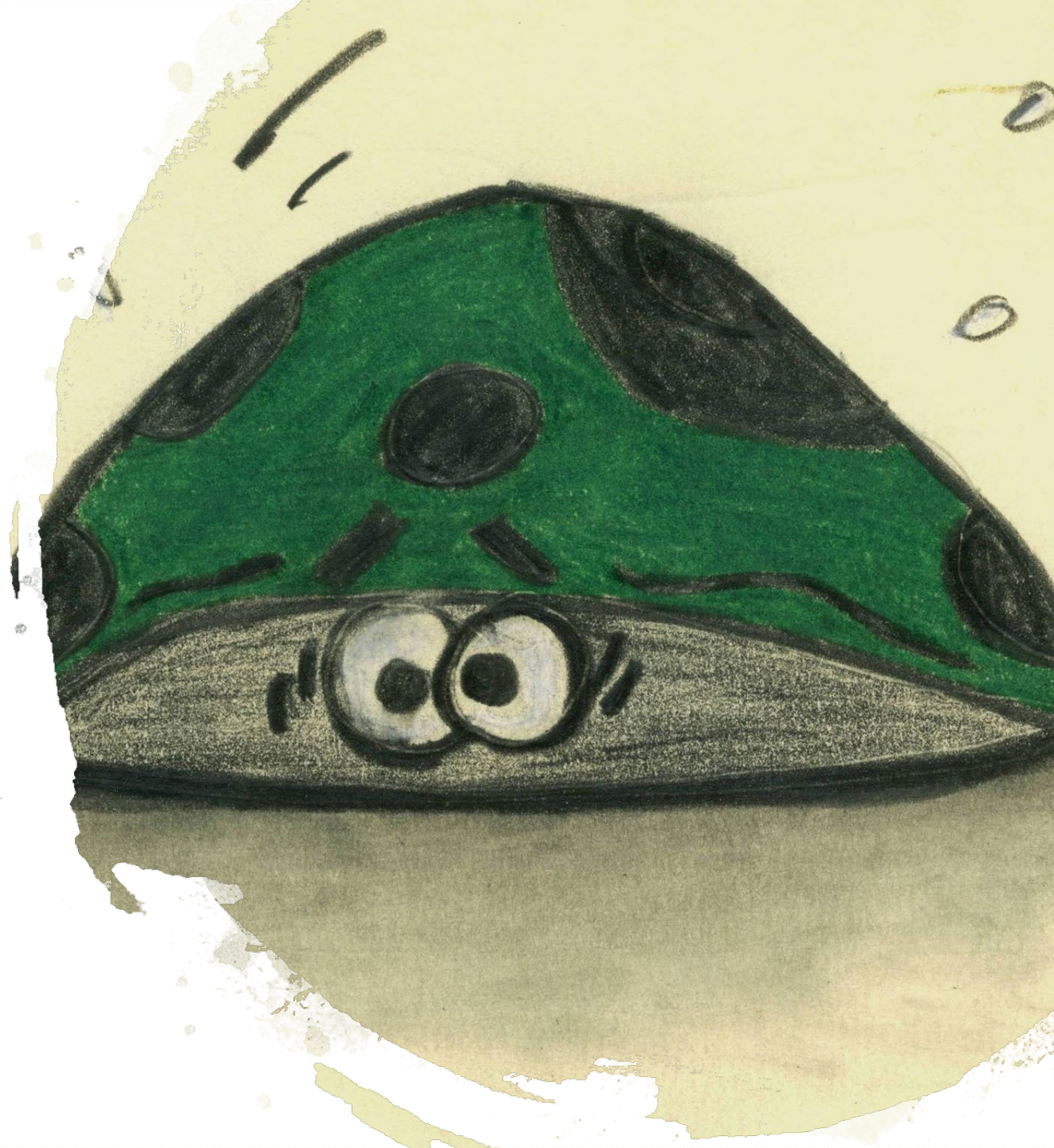
Narrative self-constitution theory

Key Claim: The properties that characterize you as a person are those that are coherently integrated into the narrative of your life

- Since we only have the structural features of the narrative (these are the constraints on the answer that can be given)
- Not the **content** of the narrative itself

There are many different stories told about us as people.

- Stories told by our enemies

- Stories told by our friends

- Stories we tell about ourselves

Which story (or narrative) depicts the type of person that we **really** are?

The self-narrative view

**Self-narrative theory of the characterization of the
self**: the characteristics that go into determining the type of person
that you are those that fit together in a **coherent** narrative that you tell
about yourself

*Put simply, the type of person that you are is determined by the
narrative structure that you give to the events of your life.*

Reason 1: Internal access

There are at least two reasons to accept the theory (over say a third-person narrative approach)

1. **Reason 1:** There are central parts of who we are that **only we have access to** (our thoughts, feelings, concerns, etc.). These private parts of our identity are important for an accurate narrative

2. **Reason 2:** there are aspects of one's personal identity that seem **self-defined** (gender, race, online identity, heritage) that only the narrative approach can handle

Internal access can be applied to the structural features of narrative.

Interpretive: Our feelings and beliefs help to interpret the meaning of our actions

Example: We might have done something bad *but for the right reason*). Only we have access to our reasons for doing an action

Reason 1: Internal access

Reason 1: Internal access

Selection: Part of who we are is determined by what is important to us and we know what is important to us.

- Example: A physical injury might (from the outside) appear to be important for defining who we are, but we might instead view it as "no big deal", "just a minor annoyance"

Reason 2: Self-defined features

Reason 2: there are aspects of one's personal identity that seem (at least partially) **self-defined** (gender, race, online identity, heritage, hobbies, affiliations) that only the narrative approach can handle

- Example 1: I'm a Democrat. Someone might deny I'm a Democrat but political affiliation seems like part of your identity that you determine

- Example 2: I love Pokémon. Defines who I am. People might deny this but only I get to determine this.
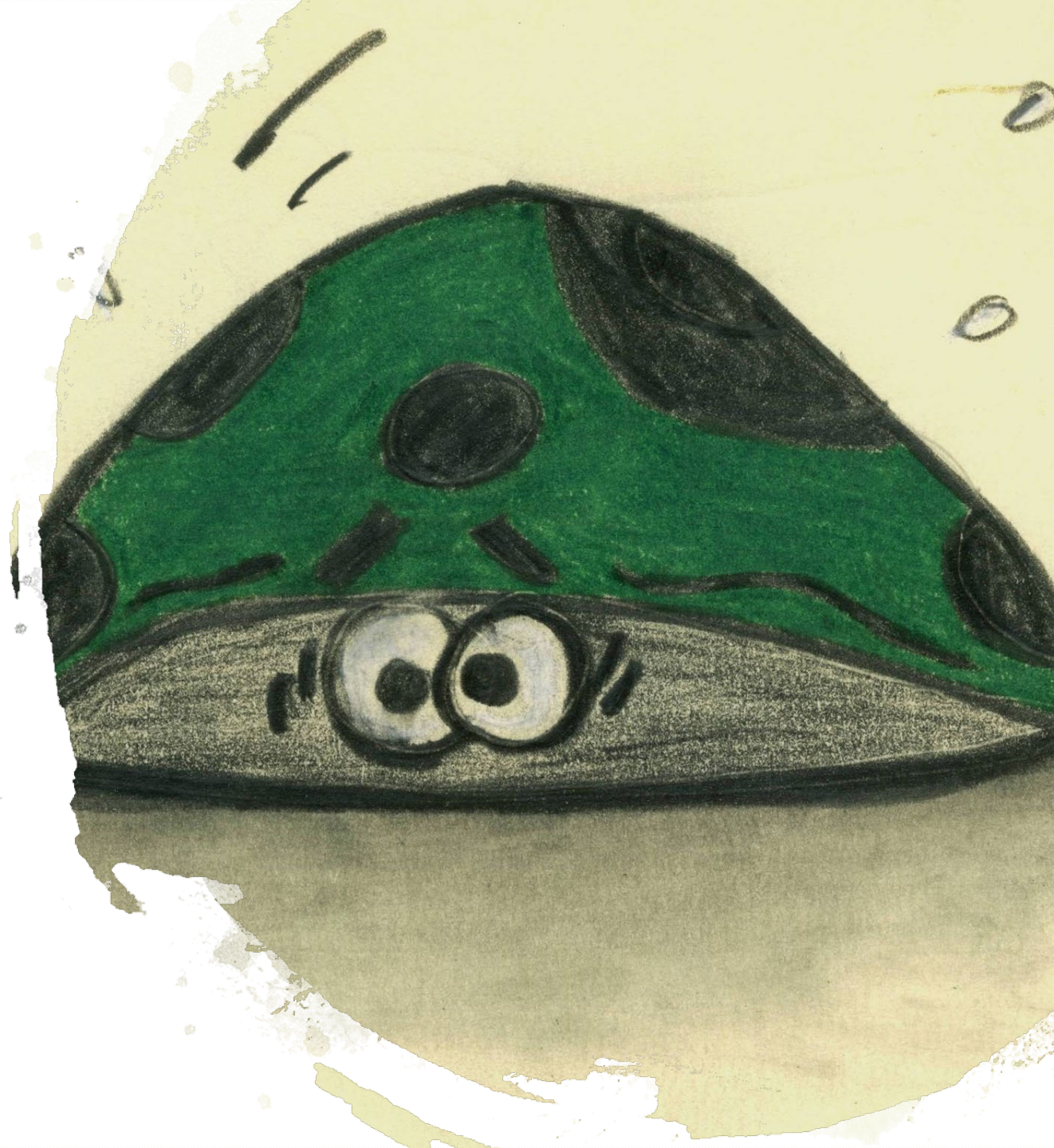
In a small group (1-5) people, complete the following RAP.

There are two reasons to privilege our own story over others

1. We have privileged access to our internal states

2. There are parts of who we are that are self-defined (we are authoritative over these parts).

Provide an example for each.

Objections

Objections to the narrative approach

Objection 1: self-construction of a self-narrative is insufficient because narrators get things wrong.

- If the self-narrative view is correct, then what makes me me is the story I tell myself about myself (the first-person construction of my self-narrative).

- My self-narrative might be grossly inaccurate

Example: I am George Washington

- It is not the case that I am George Washington even if I **understand** myself to be George Washington

- I am not George Washington even if I tell myself that I am George Washington.

- I am not George Washington even if the story of narrative has me as George Washington

Example: Self-delusion

- Suppose the story I tell of my life (who I am) is one where I play the role of a **kind, honest, loving, caring, and honest person**

- According to the narrative self-constitution theory, it follows that the type of person I am is one that has all of these features

- But I may, in fact, be a **lying, heartless, angry, and cold person.**
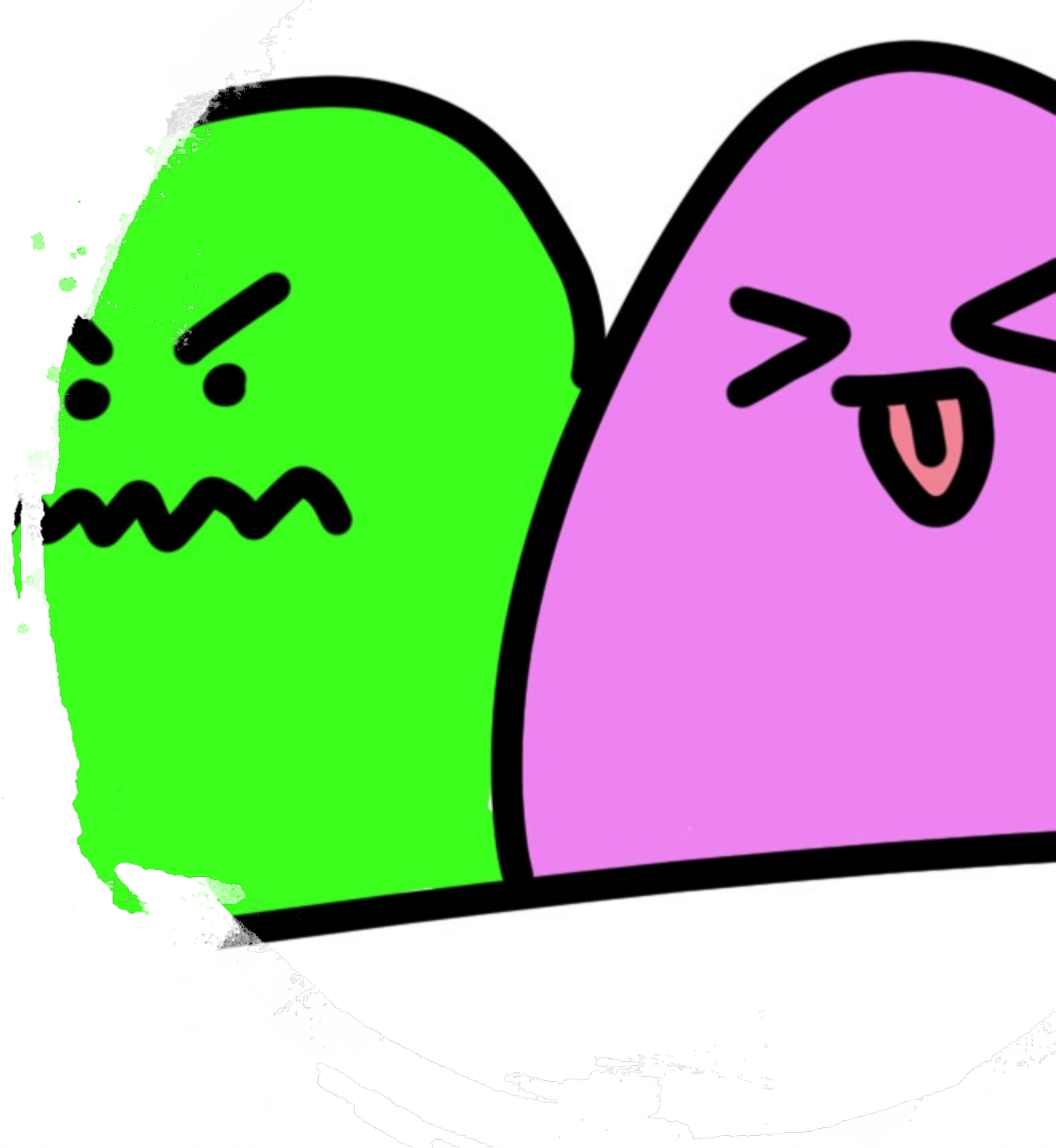
Example: Avery, the not-so-attentive mother (see Kind p.134)

Take Avery, a woman who sees herself as **attentive mother** who in fact is almost exclusively focused on her career.

- In order to see herself as a mother, she **selects** certain acts and interprets those acts as signs of her being an attentive mother while **ignoring** acts to the contrary.

- She remembers buying birthday gifts but ignores not being present at the birthday party).

- **Confirmation bias** allows her to construct a delusional narrative

- The objection seems symptomatic of a more general phenomena in narratives

- Narrators often try to **force interpretations of characters** (through selection, interpretation, etc.)

- However, we can reject these interpretations

- In movies, the narrator may try to select events or highlight characteristics of an individual (selection) so as to impress upon us that such an individual is to be disliked, deeply flawed, or to be feared.

- But, the audience may **resist this interpretation**, choosing instead to identify or **root for the villain** of the story rather than the intended hero

Go Bad guy! He the best.
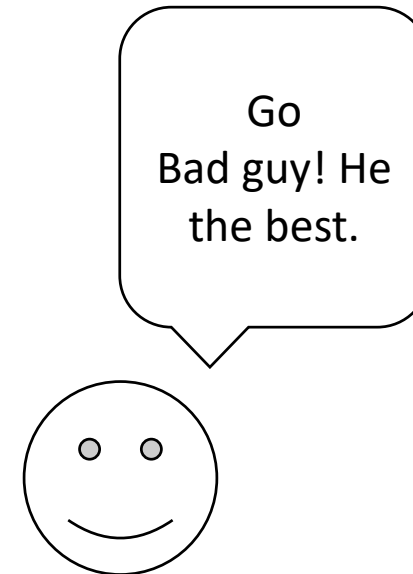
Examples
- Hannibal Lector in Silence of the Lambs,
- Tony Montana in Scarface,
- Tyler Durden in Fight Club
- The Joker in The Dark Knight (or any of the Batman movies more generally),
- Keyser Soze in The Usual Suspects
- Godzilla

Answer one of the following question

1. In what ways do people get their own narratives wrong? Come up with one example.

2. Can you think of an example from a book, media, coverage of politics, etc. where the narrative aims to get you to view certain characters in a particular light (e.g. a subject as good) but where there is resistance to that narrative?
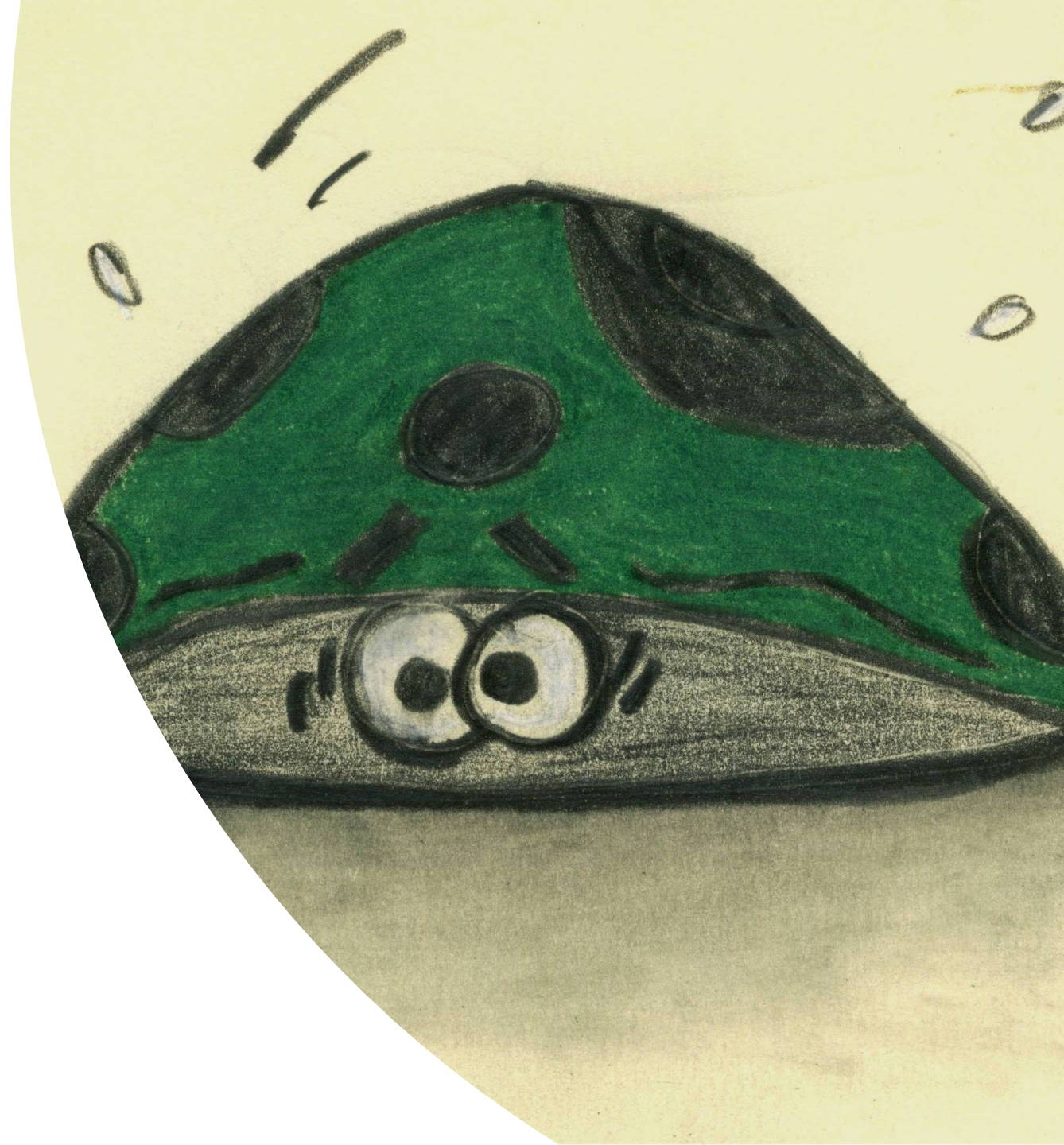
Alternatives to Self-Narrative Account

There are two alternatives to the self-narrative theory

1. **third-person (objective) narratives:** what constitutes a person's identity is the narrative that God would give to their lives.

2. **constraint approach narratives**

We'll ignore the first and focus on the second.

Constraint approach narratives: what constitutes a person's identity is their first-person narrative that meets two constraints:

1.   **the articulation constraint:** they are capable of articulating why they do what they do, believe what they believe, feel the way they feel and

2.   **Reality constraint:** needs to be more or less accurate with how others see you
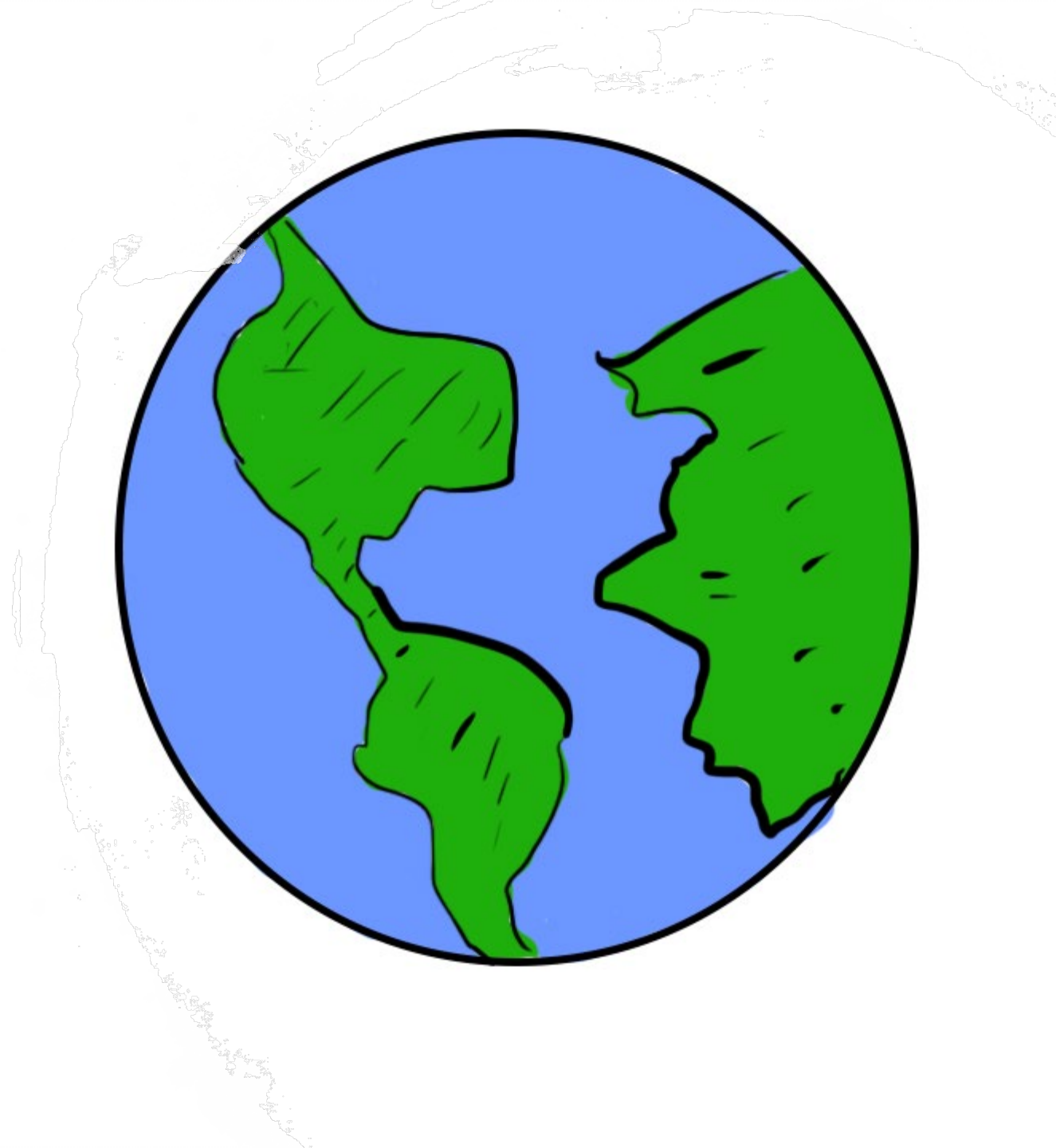
The constraint approach attempts to

(1) preserve the first-person narrative approach yet

(2) introduce some independent measures to block people from self-defining themselves in a way that is radically at odds with reality.

Objection 1: Articulation constraint is unnecessary.

- Suppose I am a nice person, intuitively feel that I ought to be nice, and others recognize me as nice, but **I lack the capacity to articulate that I'm nice.**

- **Maybe I have low self-esteem, maybe I don't introspect, maybe I lack the capacity to articulate myself**

- Per the constraints approach, *niceness* would no longer be a part of what makes me the person that I am.
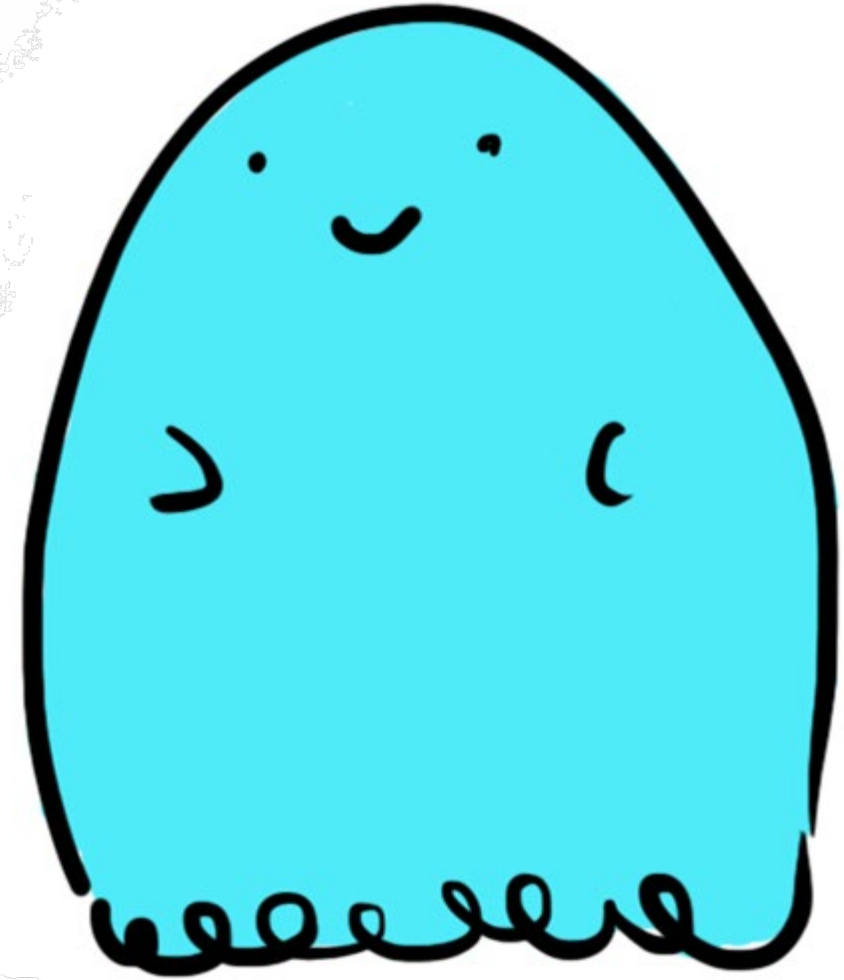
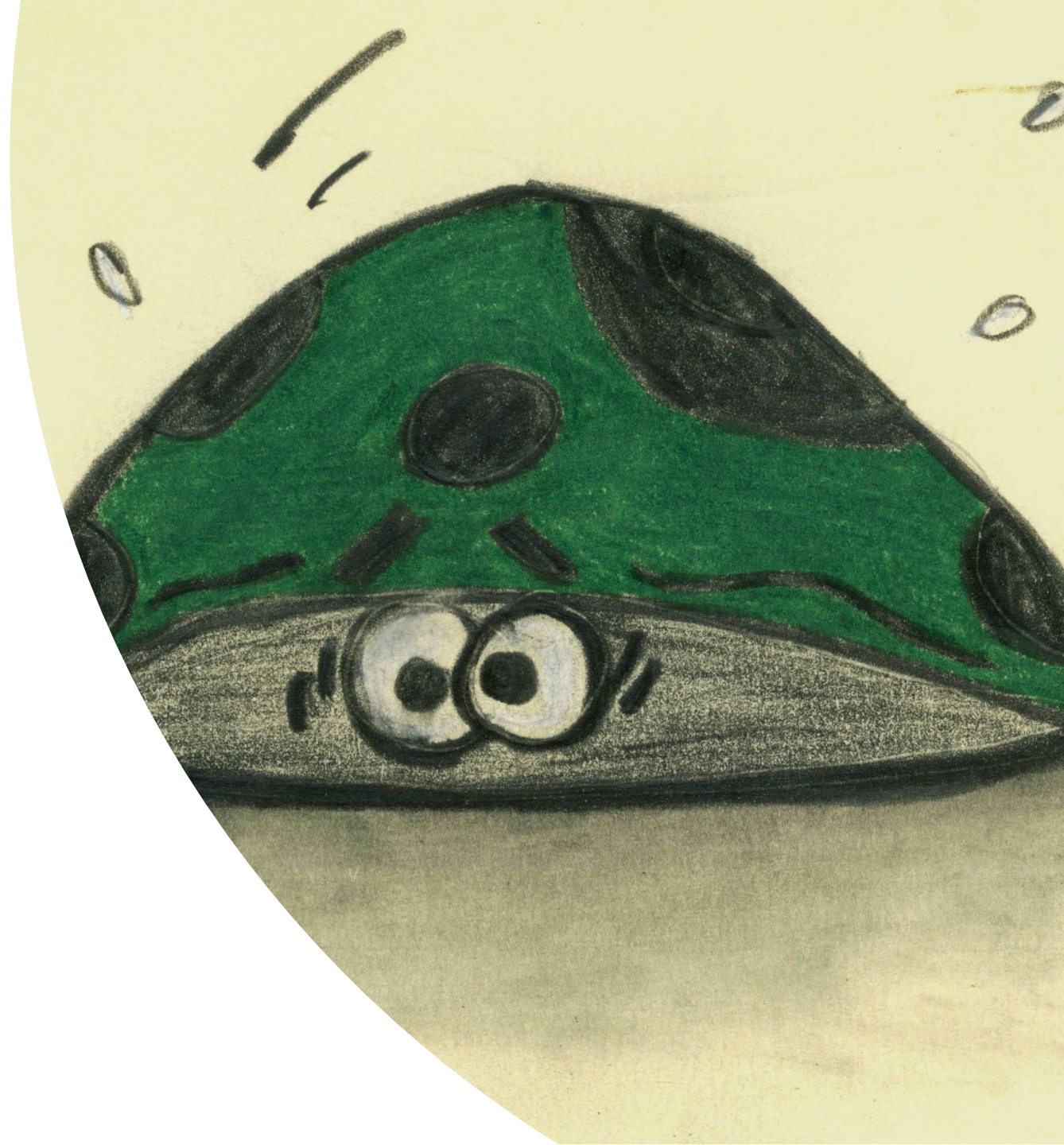**Objection 2: Reality constraint is problematic if <u>others</u> view you incorrectly**

- Suppose I'm nice. I see myself as nice, I feel that it is important to be nice

- But those around me don't see me as nice. They are narcisstic or interpret everyone as being mean.

- According to the constraints approach, *niceness* would no longer be a part of what makes me me because others do not see me as nice.

Objection - the constraint approach is problematic if <u>you and others view you incorrectly</u>

- Suppose the story you tell about yourself is that you are Peruvian. Because of this, you visit Peru, learn the language, absorb the culture

- Others meet you and you tell them you are from Peru and they impressed with your knowledge of Peru, so the stories they tell about you are that you are Peruvian.

- Just because you and others take you to be Peruvian doesn't mean you are Peruvian.

- You can think of more extreme examples of this objection
- All you would need to do is (1) convince yourself that you are X and (2) convince others that you are X, but yet (3) not be X.

1. The constraints approach has three main problems: (1) articulation constraint is unnecessary, (2) the reality constraint is problematic for others can see you incorrectly, and (3) the reality constraint is problematic since even if you and others agree, you can both get things wrong.

2. Come up with an example of each one of these problems.

Stop here.