

Critical thinking II:
***Authority and dissent,
and the written word***

MMUBS MRes

(slides available at cfpm.org/mres)

The fundamental problem

- One does not have sufficient time to develop/check/verify all knowledge oneself
- Thus one *has* to rely on exterior sources for most of one's knowledge
- But experience shows that sometimes these exterior sources are wrong
- Thus there is a *need* to judge sources and their content

Exercise 1: judging information

- In small groups (2 or 3)
- Look at the examples
- Decide:
 - *which* you believe
 - the *degree of trust* one might put in them
 - *why* one trusts some more than others
 - *how* one might check out the information or the source further

Indicators of a reliable paper (brainstorm)

- Recognised source
- Statistics
- Contact details, who wrote it
- Transparent goals/objectives/agenda, whose agenda it is
- Statement of ethics etc.
- Associated with an official institution
- Dispassionate/objective style of writing
- References cited
- Relevant timing of publication
- Status of publication it is in
- Where it was published
- What method it uses/presents
- Well structured
- Clearly written
- Recognised assumptions, recognised philosophy
- Clarifies the background
- Good argument
- Backed up with evidence
- Situated in existing research
- Credibility of author
- Proven impact

Indicators of a reliable paper

(brainstorm from last two years)

- Backed up by evidence
- Data present
- Sources referenced
- Where published
- Nature of the sources
- Target audience
- First person report or indirect
- Nature of subject
- Stance of authors
- How ambitious/wide is it
- How rational is it
- How contentious
- Does it make sense
- The detail and rigour of content
- Neutral point of view
- Skill at technical language
- Clear language
- Contrary indications:
 - Particular world view of readers
 - Agenda of source
 - Nature of author
 - Deliberately controversial
 - Bad grammar/bad spelling
- Where it was published
- How much cited is it, what its judged as by other academics
- Who the author is
- Consistency of style
- Backing up with References
- Type of references, where they were published
- Consistency of references
- Strength of argument
- Balance
- Age of references
- Relevance of the methodology
- Literature review
- Where you found it
- Style of language

Some questions that arise (for discussion)

- Why would any source *try* to tell the truth independent of its own immediate interests?
- How do we *recognise* a reliable source? (i.e. without further research)
- How *should* we recognise a reliable source (as academics)?
- What *should* you do to check out information and sources?
- Why should you trust anything that I (as your lecturer) say/suggest?

Why read *Journal Articles*?

- A lot of knowledge/writing is in journal papers and not in (text)books or summaries
- Almost all recent/cutting edge developments are in journal articles
- They are (almost) all accessible to you
- They tell you what your academic peers are thinking/arguing/doing
- They indicate what topics are “in vogue”, “controversial”, etc.
- Knowledge of the literature is a “marker” used to recognise a member of academia

...but it's a *mess* !

- Each paper only gives a small picture of the whole (knowledge is fragmenting & context-dependent)
- There are far too many to read
- They are not very easy to read (ranging from the merely careless to the deliberately obscure)
- They will disagree with each other about pretty well *everything* including:
 - What key words mean
 - The nature of the disagreements themselves
 - How the dispute should be settled
- They contain a fair amount of “spin”
- *You can't entirely trust them* (e.g. citations to authority, that the abstract reflects the rest etc.)

So you need to ...

- **Read** a *lot* of them (not *only* what is suggested to you by teachers, supervisors, friends, etc.)
- **Select** *intelligently* what you read
- **Persist** until you get used to reading them fairly quickly (keep records *from the start*)
- Identify and *read* **key texts** in your field (not just rely on summaries or other's reports)
- Read papers **criticising** as well as supporting what you are involved in
- Read them with a **critical** eye (*even* if you agree with their conclusions)
- **Check** their references, data, arguments where possible
- ***Make up your own mind about them!***

Exercise 2: judging papers

- In small groups (2 or 3)
- Look at the example papers
- Decide:
 - the *degree of trust* one might put in them
 - *what* indicators give clues to their reliability
 - *why* one trusts some more than others
 - *how* one might check out the information or the source further

But...

- All quickly judged indicators can be counterfeited
- And these indicators can be used to keep outsiders and dissenters away
- If your very fundamental assumptions are wrong, this could lead you to misjudge all subsequent sources and statements
- Sometimes whole cultures (including their academics) have mistakenly rejected knowledge (later shown to be correct)

One way of thinking about how to read & analyse a journal article

- It is like a court room (but where you play all the active parts yourself in turn)
- The journal article is in the dock
- You seriously consider the case for the defence (the paper's strengths)
- You seriously consider the case for the prosecution (the paper's weaknesses)
- You come to a final judgement on it
- The sentence is whether you: forget it; remember it; takes notes on it; cite it; etc.

The Role of Academics

- Some groups of people are specifically employed to seek out the truth independent of their own immediate interests, e.g.:
 - investigative police, coroners, judges
 - juries and other committees of inquiry
 - investigative reporters
- *Some questions for discussion:*
- Are academics such a group?
- Does society expect them to be such a group?
- Do academics see themselves as having such an obligation?
- Are different kinds of academic different in this?

What might the “extra” obligations on academics consist of? (discuss)

- Not to deliberately claim something they think is false?
- To try and find out what is true?
- To discover “useful” techniques/suggestions (regardless of truth)?
- To collectively check/verify claims and theories?
- To ensure that both sides of an argument are presented?
- To question assumptions?
- To contribute intelligent and interesting ideas?
- To be honest about what they have done, how they did it, and what it might mean?
- Not to oversimplify issues?

Dissent

- As discussed the “Western Liberal Academic Tradition” uses (and relies on) argument to test and improve statements and claims
- Thus it is important that there are adversarial debates on important issues
- In particular, that dissenting arguments are put, i.e. those that question accepted opinion or statements made by those in authority
- Thus, in the “West”, there is a tradition of academic freedom and dissent
- Historically this has focused on dissent from religious and political authority (though now might also be from popular opinion or assumptions)

Intellectual Dissent is not Limited

For example that:

- There is no such thing as Truth
- Language *can not* express truths about an objective world
- All *given* conceptual structures are ways of politically controlling people
- Science is not objective and merely promotes a particular set of values
- We don't live in the real world but in our representations of it
- Authors do not know the meaning of what they have written any more than the reader
- Etc. etc.

Possible Caveats

- Are there core values and assumptions which are unproductive to question or dissent from? e.g.:
 - confronting theories with evidence
 - dissenting from dissent
- Academic fields which question everything (e.g. philosophy) have not clearly done better than those which don't (e.g. physics, mathematics)

Social Processes of Academia

– analogy I: *building a wall*

- Knowledge is like a wall or building – built up brick by brick upon real foundations
- Each paper is a brick in the wall
 - It is checked by peers for correctness – letting in a bad brick can lead to a partial collapse
 - It is firmly grounded on previous contributions
- Knowledge is broadly cumulative, though sometimes parts get rebuilt in better ways
- A cooperative but rigorous processes

Social Processes of Academia

– analogy II: *an ecology of contributions*

- Knowledge is like an ecology of organisms
- Each paper has to survive by processing inputs from other papers and providing outputs that can be used in other papers
- Some entities are predators – they survive by trashing other entities
- Some entities are symbiotic – they are mutually supportive
- When the environment (needs of society) changes so does the ecology – it is *adaptive*

Social Processes of Academia

– analogy III: *cynical politics*

- The *only* ultimate guide to the quality of a paper is what other academics think about it (how many and who will like it)
- You need to join a party for mutual protection and for competing with other parties
- There are current norms and rules of the game by which the competition is played...
- ...but these rules can change
- The aim is to gain status/security by climbing the party hierarchy and gaining acceptance
- It would be a game if it weren't so serious

Conclusions

- You have to trust *and use* other sources
- Thus you have to become “good” at judging sources/information/papers
- You will have to disbelieve some authorities
- It is impossible to be completely unbiased
- ...but it is possible to reduce bias and be more honest in your research
- We have *some* obligation in this regard towards the society that pays for us

A Very Brief Introduction to Philosophy

THE SMALL PRINT

- Philosophy always comes with caveats and warnings, including this!
- There is no substantial consensus as occurs in, perhaps, physics (except possibly in the style, presentation or practice of philosophy)
- *Everything* is contested – there will be different views on all issues, including:
 - Key terms in philosophy
 - The history of philosophy
 - What philosophers have said
- I will simplify *considerably* in order to present this material – for the complexity you have to read

The nature of philosophy

- As a tradition or history
 - The thinkers, schools, approaches, books, papers that happened to arise over time
- As a style of enquiry
 - Characterised by argument and counter-argument
- As it defines itself
 - The nature of philosophy is itself a contentious issue, so in general this is avoided except
 - When a philosopher needs to redefine it

Some characteristics of the practice of philosophy

- Linguistic reasoning (occasionally formal)
- Argument and counter-argument
- Seeks general and abstract formulations
- Worked examples and counter examples
- Analogies to establish possibility
- Meta-linguistic activity
- Situating with reference to a tradition/history
- The written word (these days)
- Dense and obscure prose
- They don't use nice clear powerpoint slides 😊



Why you need to know *something* about philosophy

Not (necessarily) to *do* philosophy but to:

- Understand the tradition so that you:
 - Can understand what others are saying
 - Can situate your research with respect to the tradition
 - Are prepared for comments, questions and objections to your research
- Have access to some different ways to think about what you are doing
- Develop a critical approach to arguments and evidence
 - By knowing some of the possible arguments and/or difficulties

What philosophy does not (in general) do

- Provide the **answers**
- **Simplify**/clarify concepts/ideas
- Provide **solid** foundations for methodology
- Tell you what you **should** be doing
- Help one to distinguish what is true
(alternatively **holds/works/can be said** etc.)
and what is not
- Tell you what words/texts **really** mean

What philosophy is (generally) good at

- Critiquing arguments and positions by pointing out
 - Hidden assumptions
 - Counter examples
 - Limitations
 - Fallacies
 - Consequences
- Providing conceptual frameworks/positions
 - With which to describe or think about issues

Suggested reading for my sessions (see list)

If you want to read something about the philosophy of science, read:

- Chalmers *What is this thing called science?*

It is not (much) about social science, but is clear to read and sets out many of the main issues.

There are some other links of materials at:

- <http://cfpm.org/mres>

under “Other Resources”

Or posted on the PoK blog at:

- <http://mmubs-pok.blogspot.co.uk/>

Please do not worry about the whole reading list or assignment yet!



The End of Session 2



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