Introduction to the Philosophy of Knowledge Module

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MRes Induction Week
(slides available on web address at end)
Introduction(s)

• **Me** - Bruce Edmonds

• **You** - Please briefly introduce yourselves, your “rough area of study”, plus (optionally) one thing that a friend might say about you

• **Purpose of this session:**
  – To introduce you to the purpose and form of the Philosophy of Knowledge module
  – To get you thinking about what you have let yourself in for!
  – To start you thinking!
A Thesis is...

• ...a (novel, sound, sufficiently significant) contribution to knowledge

• That is, your “job” is to learn how to discover new significant knowledge in a sound way and write this up for anyone to read!

• So what is this “knowledge” stuff that you will be producing for society?
  – Can we rely on it?
  – How can we rely on it?
  – Are there different kinds of knowledge?
  – etc. etc.

Introduction to the Philosophy of Knowledge Module, MMUBS Mres Induction, http://cfpm.org/mres slide-3
To make it “easier”...

• Academics disagree about everything, including:
  – the nature of knowledge
  – whether this is relative to culture?
  – whether this is a reflection of an independent reality?
  – etc. etc.

• Each (sub-)field has its own disputes and answers about these questions...

• ...indeed they don’t only differ as to what the answers are but even what the questions are!

• It is a complex mess!
Why is this?

• Partly it is due to clever “under-cutting” moves by academics...
• ...partly due to the different natures of what they are studying...
• ...and partly due to the different traditions and histories of different academic fields
• but (in my opinion) it is mostly due to the fact that anything social is very very difficult to understand and study!
• This, of course, is your task
The Purpose of the PoK Module is...

- To get you thinking about these issues
- To make you aware of some of the difficulties underlying knowledge
- To get you reading relevant literature with philosophical leanings...
- ...and to understand it (or some of it)
- To prepare you for some of the questions and objections you may encounter
- To produce better knowledge
- ...whatever *that* means! 😊
Philosophy is...

- About thinking about such issues
- and, crucially, *arguing* about them (at least in the Western Tradition)
- It will not tell you the answers
- but will make you aware of some of the possibilities, traditions and arguments
- Will hopefully get you thinking *critically* about your own arguments and assumptions
- *Anticipating* possible objections
Example: *Argument*

- An argument attempts to persuade other of the truth of a conclusion
- Or otherwise justify such statements
- It is what you might say in response to:
  - How do you know *that*?
  - I don’t believe *that*
  - Why should I believe *that*?
  - I disagree

- Usually, taking the other to the conclusion you are defending in a series of steps
Exercise 1: Judging arguments

- In groups of two or three
- Look at some of the arguments on the sheet, and decide for each:
  1. If you think it is a good or bad argument
  2. Whether you agree with its conclusion
  3. Whether you agree with the steps leading to the conclusion
Conclusion

• It is a necessary part of becoming a PhD student that you learn to judge whether arguments presented to you are good or bad
• The Goodness of an argument is separate from whether one agrees with its conclusion
• These are not simple things to determine!
• We will come back to the Western Tradition of Argument in the First Full PoK Session
The PoK Module

Is in two parts:

1. An introduction to the Western Tradition of Academic Thought, Argument and Critical Thinking (2 sessions)

2. An introduction to some of the main disputes in the philosophy of knowledge:
   - Rationalism vs. Empiricism
   - Realism vs. Constructivism
   - Positivism vs. Pragmatism
   - The Linguistic Turn
The Assessment is...

- An 5000 word Essay
- Which is basically a prototype of that part of your thesis that justifies your approach to knowledge and the assumptions behind this
- This is due in the summer after the second set of PoK sessions
- Do not worry about it before then!
The End

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