

PoK Session 1
Critical thinking I:
About Argument

Bruce Edmonds
MRes Philosophy of Knowledge
(slides available <http://cfpm.org/mres>)

Introduction(s)

(because I have a bad memory for names)

- **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 tell you a little bit about Philosophy, why its important to you and this part of the course
 - To start to understand and analyse arguments
 - To start you thinking and arguing!

Part: 1

THE PROBLEM

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.

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 (resulting in different compromises)!
- This, of course, is your task

The Purpose of the philosophy 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
- To prepare you for some of the questions and objections you may encounter
- To inform and critique research method and design and hence...
- To produce better knowledge
- ...whatever *that* means! 😊

Part 2

ABOUT PHILOSOPHY

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, assumptions and methods
- *Anticipating* possible objections

(Potted) History of the “Western Liberal” Tradition of Thought

- Start usually attributed to culture of Ancient Greeks from around 600 BCE
- Taken up by Romans (some aspects)
- After Roman empire collapsed, was maintained/developed in the Islamic World
- Later re-imported to Western Europe
- At different times nurtured in different European Countries
- Now in many countries across the world

The Original Greek Context

- Small, independent but affluent “city states”
- Where the citizens discussed court cases, and some decisions collectively
- (the “citizens” did not include women, slaves, outsiders or children)
- Thus rhetoric and argument were important
- This was a social process
- The outcomes of these discussions were important – they had real consequences

Part 3

ABOUT ARGUMENT

(formal account of the)
Structure of an argument
(according to these philosophers)

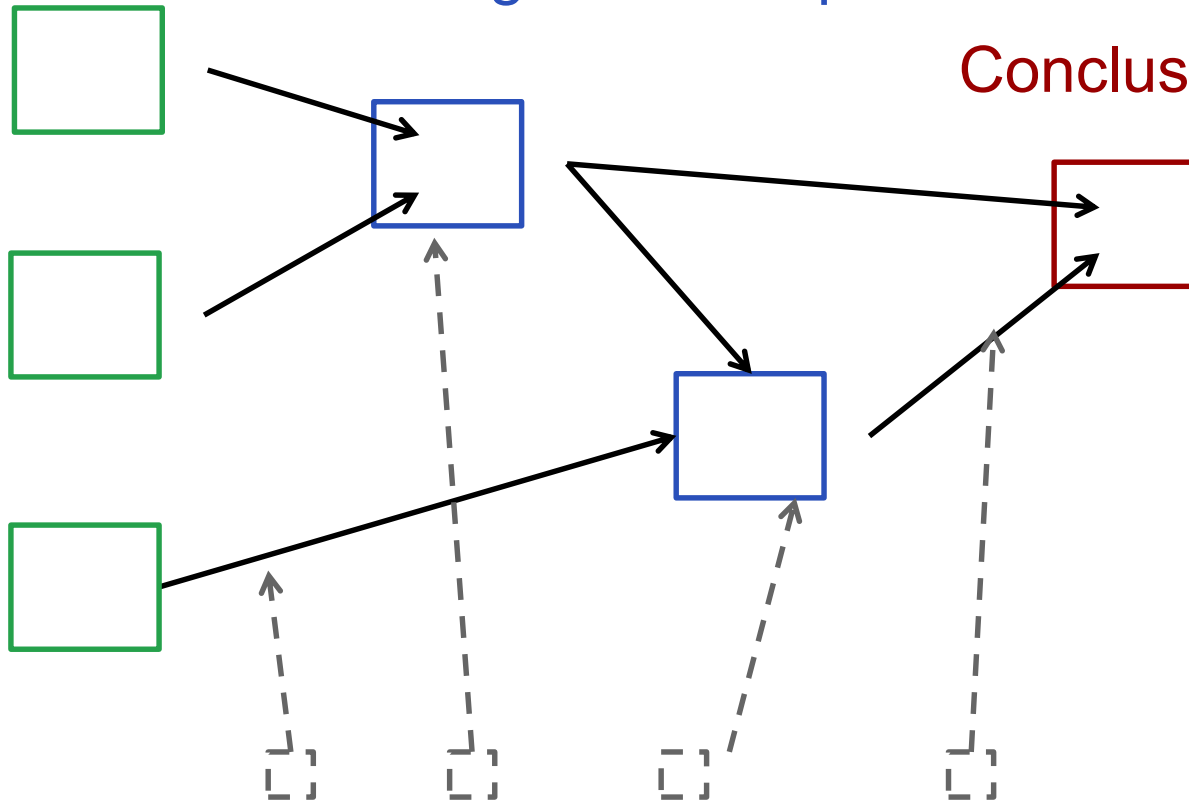
- You start with a number of statements which are agreed with – the *premises*
- Repeatedly you:
 - Make a statement that is a consequence of already established statements (which are the premises *plus* the previously established statements using this step) – the *argument steps*
- Until you get to the statement you wanted – the *conclusion*

the Structure of an Argument

Premises

Argument Steps

Conclusion



Implicit Assumptions

Exercise 1: identifying parts of arguments (again but its hard)

- In groups of two or three...
- Choose some of the example arguments on the sheet, and see if you can identify:
 1. The Conclusion
 2. Any premises (the starting points)
 3. The Intermediate argumentative steps (if any)
 4. Any unmentioned (implicit/hidden) assumptions

Limitations on acceptable argument

- Some philosophers (and others) sought to establish norms as to what kinds of argument were *not* acceptable
- And thus improve the decision making (by avoiding arriving at bad conclusions)
- E.g. *Don't believe Jim – he's a pervert!*
- These kinds of bad argument later came to be called *fallacies*
- They can be seen as the weakest, negative constraint upon discussion

Exercise 2: 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 has **good** or **bad** argument steps
 2. Whether you agree with its conclusion
 3. Whether you agree with its assumptions

Remember because the assumptions could be wrong it could have:

- **good** argument steps with a **bad** conclusion
- **bad** argument steps with a **good** conclusion

Kinds of Bad Argument?

- starting with bad premises
- sequence meaning cause
- reverse logic
- appeal to authority/experience
- majorities are right
- over generalising
- stereotyping – using people’s biases
- failure to mention the full picture
- arguing from non-existence
- circular arguing
- pure emotion

Making an Argument more Rigorous

- Making your assumptions explicit (bringing as many of the implicit assumptions as explicit premises as possible)
- Making your argument steps clear – why does the step follow from its premises
- Being honest about the strength of your supporting evidence and authorities
- Trying to keep different arguments separate
- (Generally) avoiding circular arguments

The adversarial approach

- The best person to find flaws, limitations etc. in an argument is someone arguing for the opposite point of view (counter-argument)
- Answering criticisms concerning one's argument made may lead one to improve one's argument
- Another approach is to criticise the counter-argument, undercutting the criticism
- You may find eventual agreement is possible (e.g. in a *synthesis*) or not
- The presence of adversarial argument may lead to a better formulation of knowledge

Common attacking criticisms of arguments

- Giving a **counter-example** to the argument (an example where the assumptions are true but the conclusion is false)
- Argue that the assumptions do not apply to the case being argued about (**relevance of assumptions**)
- Argue that the conclusion is not relevant to the case being argued about (**relevance of conclusion**)
- Show that consequences of the conclusion would lead to further consequences that were themselves false (**ridiculo ad absurdum**)

Exercise 3: attacking some arguments

- In groups of two or three
- Look at some of the arguments on the sheet that you **disagree** with the steps of
- Try to formulate some counter-arguments
- Decide whether your counter-arguments fall into the common categories just described, namely:
 - Counter-example
 - Relevance of assumptions
 - Relevance of conclusion
 - Ridiculo ad absurdum

Internalising the adversarial process

- Once you are used to the adversarial approach it can be internalised, that is
- You imagine yourself as your own opponent and so think what counter-arguments could be made against your own arguments
- And thus improve one's original arguments (or even change one's mind about them)
- And hence make them more robust against possible criticism by anticipating criticisms

Exercise 4: attacking arguments you agree with

- In groups of two or three
- Look at some of the arguments on the sheet that you **agree with** (or invent them if necessary) and
- Try to formulate some counter-arguments against it
- Are there any unmentioned but necessary assumptions in it?

Exercise 5: arguing with someone

- In pairs
- Choose one of the arguments on the sheet
- One person argues for the chosen argument
- The other argues against it
- Take it in turns to argue for your chosen position and against the position of the other person
- Stop if
 - it becomes too heated (are you talking about the arguments or the conclusions?)
 - It does not seem to be getting anywhere
- Then try this with another example

Conclusion

- It is a necessary part of becoming a PhD student that you learn to judge whether arguments are good or bad (even if made by your supervisor)
- The Goodness of an argument is separate from whether one agrees with its conclusion
- If you disagree with a conclusion you have to decide whether it is the argument steps or the premises you disagree with
- Adversarial (but polite!) argument is the cornerstone of the western liberal academic tradition (also its political and legal traditions)
- Getting good at arguing involves internalising the process and doing a lot of self-criticism/argument

Part 4

ABOUT THE COURSE

The PoK

Is taught in conjunction with Principles of research design, including:

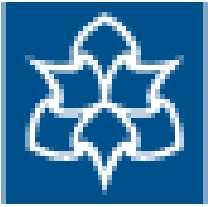
1. An introduction to the Western Tradition of Academic Thought: Argument, Critical Thinking, Authority and Dissent
2. An introduction to some of the main positions and disputes in the philosophy of knowledge
3. How philosophy and the design of your research affect each other

PoK Resources

- All the resources for the PoK part of PRDPK are at:
<http://cfpm.org/mres> with the specific slides in the “2015-1016” subfolder (the BIG link)
- If you think you need specific help, email me for a chat at bruce@edmonds.name
- I will introduce the reading list during the 3rd PoK session, but the set book is:
Chalmers, *What is this thing called science?*

The Assessment is...

- After 6 full-day sessions (half on philosophy, half on principles of research design)
- A 5000 word Essay...
- Which is basically a prototype of that part of your thesis that justifies your approach to knowledge, your assumptions behind this and hence your research design
- This is due on 29th April next year



Manchester
Metropolitan
University



Bruce Edmonds

bruce.edmonds.name

Centre for Policy Modelling

cfpm.org

Manchester Metropolitan University Business School

www.business.mmu.ac.uk

these slides are linked from

cfpm.org/mres