

# Introduction to the Philosophy of Knowledge

A Module of RDPK

(slides available at <http://cfpm.org/doctrain>)

Part 1:

# Introduction

Philosophy is not so much a matter of knowledge, as a skill, that is used in the privacy of your own mind, and as a sort of non-contact combat sport.

You have to practice this skill, that means trying arguments, losing a lot of times, realising your mistakes, learning and slowly improving.

A *Karate Kid* of the mind.

# Some questions for you....

- How do you *know* that the earth will exist when you wake up tomorrow?
- How do you *know* that I think?
- How do you *know* that I understand what you say, and not “understand” something different?
- Do we *know* when we *know*?
- Do we *know* anything really?
- Is it not rather silly to say we *know* nothing?

# How are **you** going to demonstrate that **you** have contributed to what we *know* in your PhD Thesis?

- Obtaining knowledge about social phenomena is your *job* as a Doctoral Student (your contribution to knowledge)...
- But obtaining knowledge about social phenomena is *very* **VERY** hard...
- ...and we still do not fully understand what kind of knowledge we can have of this...
- ...under what circumstances and *even*...
- ...if this kind can be useful to anyone else.

# How philosophy might help you

- It will not tell you what knowledge IS...
- ...nor, indeed, how to get it!
- But it will...
  1. Inform you about what others have thought about these problems (give you ways of thinking about knowledge)
  2. Make you aware of some of the difficulties and assumptions behind knowledge
  3. It will prepare you for some of the questions and debates that you will face (give you a feel for the academic 'lanscape' you inhabit)

# The End Product...

- Is that section of your Thesis which explains/defends your approach to knowledge
- Your assignment is to write the first draft of this section
- It will be full of guesses and tentative choices, and you will (I hope) change your mind a few times before you finish...
- But this part of the **MRes** is to start you on this journey

# This is HARD

- You can not do this using ‘surface’ methods...
- ...you will have to think things yourself, questioning what you are told and writing from the understanding you have gained
- If you hand in an assignment which is essentially just ‘regurgitating’ bits of text you have read, or references you have noted without questioning them...
- **I will fail you**
- But, if you have started to think things out for yourself, have done some reading, show some knowledge then...
- **You will pass**, even if your arguments are wrong, or naïve, or tentative or partial



# How to do this

1. Don't worry if you don't understand at first, if it all seems complex and *gobbledegook* (a lot is!)
2. Come to **ALL** the philosophy of knowledge sessions (on time) and actively participate
3. Read papers in your field that touch on philosophy and approach, as well as the set books
  - Read a bit, think, discuss it with someone, think, read it again or some more, think...
4. Question (in your mind/out loud) what you are told
5. Try to be precise, clear and honest as possible in your own thoughts/arguments
6. Come and discuss your thoughts/worries/plans concerning your assignment with me

Part 2:

# Some examples

# Group Exercise 1

In groups of 2 or 3 do the following:

- Look at the Random Philosophy Generator™
  - Follow the instructions for two or three example question+statement pairs
1. Where you able to answer the questions clearly about the random statements?
  2. What difficulties did you have in coming to an answer?
  3. What would you have to do to find the answer to the question?

# Brainstorm of Difficulties

Part 3:

# **What Exists?** (Ontology)

# Ontology

- Ontology is the philosophical consideration of what can be said to exist.
- This may seem obvious, but it isn't!

Existence can mean:

- What can we meaningfully talk about?
- What has a stable identity?
- What has inter-subjective reality? (it's the same thing for you and me)
- What could we objectively test for?

## Group Exercise II

In groups of 2 or 3 do the following:

1. Pick one of the phenomena on the left
  2. See if you can answer the questions about it listed at the top, putting a tick (for 'Yes') or a cross (for 'No') in the box
- *Did you agree about its existence or otherwise?*
  - *Were there apparently contradictory answers?*

# Two example positions

## Realism

- There is a reality independent of us
- We can objectively test about real stuff

## Interpretivism

- Our interpretation of what we perceive is crucial to understanding stuff
- We are (at least somewhat) part of what we observe
- We bring stuff 'into being' (either individually or collectively) in a creative process



Part 4:

# How we know things (Epistemology)

# Some Epistemological Questions

- How is it possible to know things?
- How do we get to know things?
- What is the nature of this knowledge?
- How do we know we can rely upon it?
- Is what is true different from person to person, time to time, culture to culture?
- Can we ever be certain about anything?
- Can we ever disprove anything?
- Does (collective) knowledge improve over time, and if so how?

## Group Exercise III (last one today 😊)

In groups of 2 or 3 do the following:

1. Pick one of the Epistemological Examples
  2. Discuss *how* this kind of thing might be known – what the process might be
- What do we learn about ‘knowledge’ by doing this?
  - What kinds of things did you agree about?
  - What were the difficulties in doing this?

# Positions in Epistemology

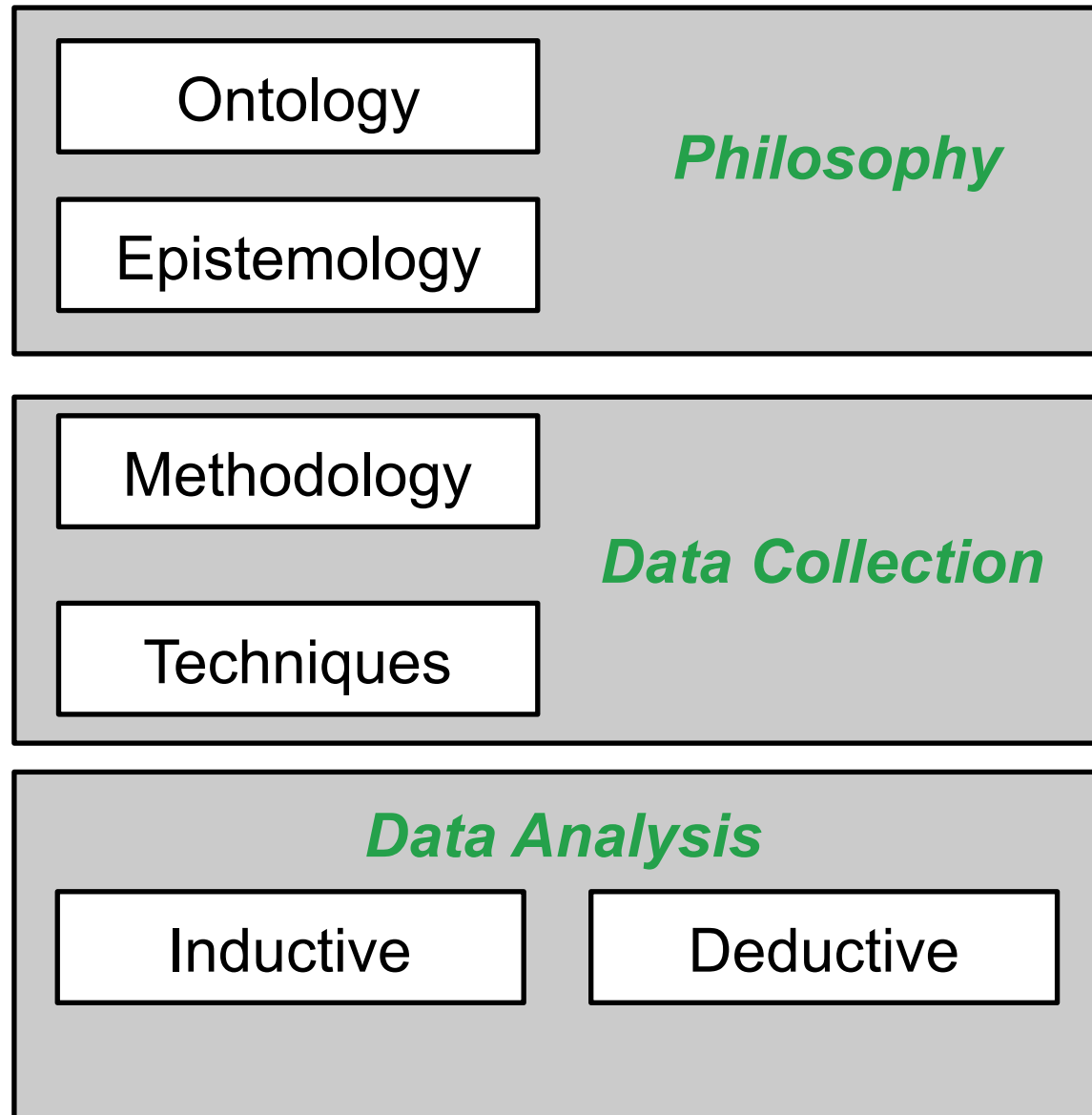
- Too many and too confusing to dive into in this session!
- We will deal with the various disputes and positions in the coming classes
- How knowledge is justified (rather than how one happened to come to know it) tends to be the focus of many of these
- Positions in epistemology are linked to those in ontology

Part 5

# Summary and Overview of Course

# An Overview 'Map'

Research Design



# The Best Way to Develop Skills and Knowledge of This Stuff

Repeat this loop *many* times:

1. Read a bit
  2. Think about it a bit
  3. Talk about it about it (or even argue!)
- Always, always think how these issues might apply to the cases and issues in your field of research
  - In particular, notice and be aware of any philosophy or assumptions authors are making in articles/books you read

# Reading

- Read first:  
**Chalmers**, A. F. (1999) *What is this thing called science?* Open University Press.

This is not primarily about social science but is a well-written and clear introduction to the issues.

- Do **NOT** read a lot of philosophy until after the sessions, I will provide suggestions later
- *Do* notice and read any papers in your field that touch upon philosophy and method



# Future Classes

- 21<sup>st</sup> October: Rationalism vs. Empiricism – where does knowledge come from?
- 11<sup>th</sup> November: Constructivism vs. Realism – is knowledge constructed by us or is it a reflection of an external reality?
- 2<sup>nd</sup> December: Positivism vs. Pragmatism – is truth determined by testing against evidence or is it in how useful it is?
- 24<sup>th</sup> February: The Linguistic Turn, leading to post-modernist and feminist philosophies
- 17<sup>th</sup> March: The Assignment – how to build arguments, decide a position, think about consequences of this.
- 28<sup>th</sup> April: The Assignment is Due

# The Assignment

- A 5000 word essay, divided into
  - (2,500 words) that explains the philosophical assumptions behind doing your research
  - (2,500 words) that argues for the design of your research based on your goals and your assumptions
- The two sections to be closely related
- Do not start this yet, but after the February session – this stuff will make a LOT more sense when you are more into your topic

## Contact details:

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All materials will be at:

[cfpm.org/doctrain](http://cfpm.org/doctrain)

(as well as on Moodle)