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Induction: *Introduction to the Philosophy of Knowledge Course*

Bruce Edmonds

MRes Induction Week

Introduction(s)

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- Me - Bruce Edmonds
- You - Please introduce: yourselves, your "area of study", plus (optionally) one thing that a friend or an enemy might say about your or your area of study if asked
- Purpose of this session:
  - To introduce the course
  - To introduce the tradition of Western liberal, critical thought
  - To raise awareness of good and bad argument
  - To encourage the critique of argument, (including, crucially, one's own argument!)

The Structure of the Course

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- Course is split into two parts:
  1. Introduction to the "Western Tradition of Critical Thinking" that underpins academic enquiry (this plus two sessions in October)
  2. The Philosophy of Knowledge – philosophical positions, arguments, issues etc. (six sessions from next April 2010)
     - To enable you to think critically about the nature of the knowledge you will produce
     - To be able to position your research with respect to the philosophical positions and approaches

Assessment etc.

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- Assessment is via a written essay, due early June 2010 after the second series of Philosophy of Knowledge sessions.
- Philosophy is hard – you will need *practice* before you can do it (need to attend sessions)
- The philosophically inclined literature is ***horrible*** to read – the second series of sessions is designed to make it easier to start doing this.
- Moral: ***don't worry about the assignment until April!***

Materials

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- I will go through materials in my *second session* with you, when you are more likely to take it all in!
- Slides, materials etc. are generally
- Reading list on philosophy will be given at the start of section 2 of the course, **I do not recommend trying to read them until then**. *Firstly* that section is designed to help you make sense of it, and *secondly*, the issues will make more sense later after you have learnt and thought about your research more.
- I am generally available if you want to talk or need help (see sheet for contact details or Google me)

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Part 1: A Very Brief Introduction to Philosophy

THE SMALL PRINT

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- 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 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

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- 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

(Potted) History of the "Western Liberal" Tradition of Thought

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- 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 nutured in different European Countries
- Now in many countries across the world

Some characteristics of the practice of philosophy

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- 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

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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

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- 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

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- 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

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Part 1: Critical Thinking: *about argument*

The Original Greek Context

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- 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

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

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- 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)
- Until you get to the statement you wanted – the *conclusion*

Example of unpacking an argument

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- If humans were sufficiently intelligent, and having such intelligence meant they would inevitably develop technolgies that destroyed the world, then they would realise this and hence find a way of limiting their own intelligence, for example by brain surgery.
  1. Humans being sufficiently intelligent
  2. Intelligence means would destroy world
  3. (Humans would wish for their own survival above all)
  4. Humans would destroy the world (due to intelligence)
  5. Humans would work out that their intelligence threatened their own survival
  6. They would wish to deal with any threat to themselves
  7. They would find a way to limit their intelligence (surgery being a particular way)

Exercise 1: identifying parts of arguments

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- 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 assumptions (the starting points)
  3. Intermediate steps (if any)

Limitations on acceptable argument

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- 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

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- 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 its assumptions

The adversarial approach

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- 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

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- 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

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- In groups of two or three
- Look at some of the arguments on the sheet that you disagree with and
- 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

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- Once you are used to the adversarial approach it can be internalised, that is
- You imagine yourself as your own opponent and so thing 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

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- In groups of two or three
- Look at some of the arguments on the sheet that you agree with and
- Try to formulate some counter-arguments

Exercise 5: arguing with someone

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- 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

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- 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
- 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

My next session with you…

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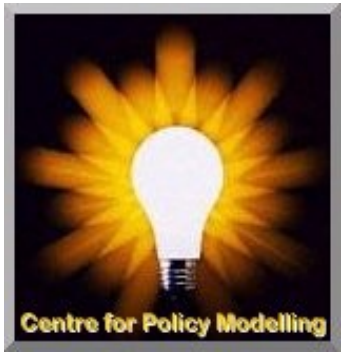
- … is a session on "*Authority and Dissent*" on Thursday 8th of October
- The one after that is on "*Accessing and assessing the academic literature*" on 22nd October
- Then you will not hear from me until towards the end of the course when you will be introduced to the philosophy of knowledge (called "Epistemology") first session of this is: 23rd April 2010.
- *All* welcome!

The End



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these slides are linked from

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