

What is Philosophy?

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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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Some warnings about philosophy



- It can involve:
 - Unnatural/weird counter examples
 - Extremely strong definitions
 - Over generality (attempts to cover too many different cases in one approach)
 - Abstractness (lack of relevance to practice)
 - An obsession with itself
- Overemphasis on *certainty*, necessity and 100% proof
- Often attacks straw men and concludes opposite
- Tends to ignore *process*
- Sometimes just seems premature
 - e.g. early philosophising about the nature of matter
- It does not *necessarily* help one do better research

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Some tips as to how to approach philosophy



- Don't worry about it too much – but keep going!
- Note down and try to understand the terms – one has to understand the language before the content becomes clear
- Continually think of examples – especially with respect to your research/domain
- Remember they may be talking complete rubbish, so rethink the issues yourself!
- If one text does not seem to be helping, don't continue to bash your head up against it, try a different source

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How to talk back to a philosopher



- How does this argument relate to practical matters, in particular ...?
- Can you give me some examples that distinguish between ...?
- What is the scope of this argument/claim?
- On what basis do you make that claim?
- How does your usage of the term ... relate to the common usage?
- What are the opposing views to this?

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My philosophical position



- What I do – formal (but non-analytic) modelling using agent-based computer simulation (see bruce.edmonds.name for papers etc.)
- Contrasts somewhat with Robin Holt's position
- Common sense words like "truth", "meaning" etc. hide *complex* and *multifarious* sub-cases
- This means that there are lots of different *kinds* of truth, meaning etc.
- Each has *different* properties, is established in *different* ways, has *different* uses etc.
- Therefore one has to think what one is trying to do *in each case* based on the practicalities
- Philosophy is only a *guide* to this
- Thus I am *pluralistic, pragmatic, and deflationary*

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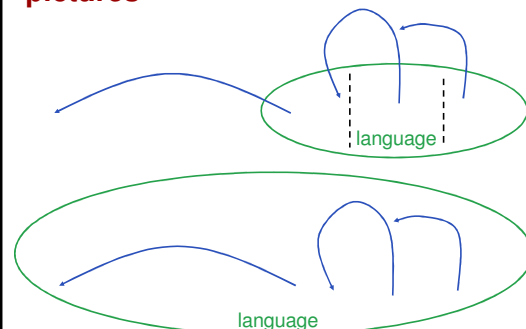
Philosophical words



- *Truth, Knowledge, Phenomena, Deduction, Induction, Causation, Objective, etc.*
- These are *abstractions* of common words used in phrases, e.g. "It is **true** I saw it", "I used to **know** this" etc. (often *meta-statements*)
- Thus they can be seen as a *meta-language* to talk about talking, knowing, discovering etc. *in general*
- This is also argued about in philosophy etc. etc.
- **Note:** these words have a philosophical use that has subtly drifted apart from common usage

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Language – two philosophical pictures



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“Knowledge” as correct representation



Traditional definition: a *justified, true belief*

- **Belief**: something we “have” about the world
- **True**: otherwise we are simply wrong
- **Justified**: the belief isn’t true purely by accident

This has the following consequences:

- Some of our beliefs are mistaken (false)
- There are truths we don’t know
- There is some connection/process between what is true and what we believe (induction?)

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Brief critique of “Knowledge” as correct representation



- Assumes a **split** between representation (or belief) and what is being represented from a sort of objective, exterior viewpoint
- Seems OK for statements about “where the 191 goes to” but is it OK for “appropriate public behaviour” which *is* the beliefs?
- A lot of agreement about the **properties** of knowledge (e.g. consequences) but not the **nature** of knowledge (whatever that is!)

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Realism



- **A strong form**: there is an objective reality independent of the observer and theories directly reflect this
- **An intermediate form**: there is an objective reality independent of the observer and theories approximate this and are improved over time
- **A weak form**: there is an objective reality in which the observer participates and theories capture what is observable of this

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Some reasons to be a realist



- Some theories make novel and surprising predictions that turn out to be correct
- Realist scientists have produced a lot of knowledge that is undoubtably useful
- It is often sensible to assume things are objectively and independently real
- Even very abstract and seemingly theoretical entities are systematically manipulated to obtain intended results

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Constructivism



- Theories/knowledge about the world are **constructed** by us in a creative process
- Thus there is (at least some degree of) **choice** or **contingency** about our knowledge
- Reasons for this might include:
 - Observations are insufficient to uniquely determine theory
 - We can only deal with knowledge through a framework which gives it form (language)
 - There is no separate objective reality

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Some reasons to be a constructivist



- Many theoretical entities have turned out to be incorrect (even though the models are approximately correct in many aspects)
- In retrospect we can see the biasing effect of culture, assumptions, language etc.
- Theories are rarely constrained down to uniqueness by the evidence
- Doing science involves being creative
- Reformulating is often a useful thing to do

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Some *quick and dirty* definitions of some recurring “isms”



- **Rationalism** – truth can be reached through **thought** (e.g. mathematics)
- **Empiricism** – truth derives from **observation**
- **Realism** – truth **objectively reflects** an independent world (of whatever sort of phenomena)
- **Constructivism** – truth is **constructed**
- **Positivism** – truth is established by *the* scientific method (observation and experiment) and involves correct representation of the world
- **Pragmatism** – truth is what works **in practice** or even *is* the working in practice
- **Relativism** – truth is **relative**, not absolute

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