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What is Philosophy?

MRes Philosophy of Knowledge:

(slides available at http://cfpm.org/mres)

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

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

Some warnings about philosophy

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- 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

Some tips as to how to approach philosophy

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- 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

How to talk back to a philosopher

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- 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?

My philosophical position

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- 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*

Philosophical words

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- *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

Language – two philosophical pictures

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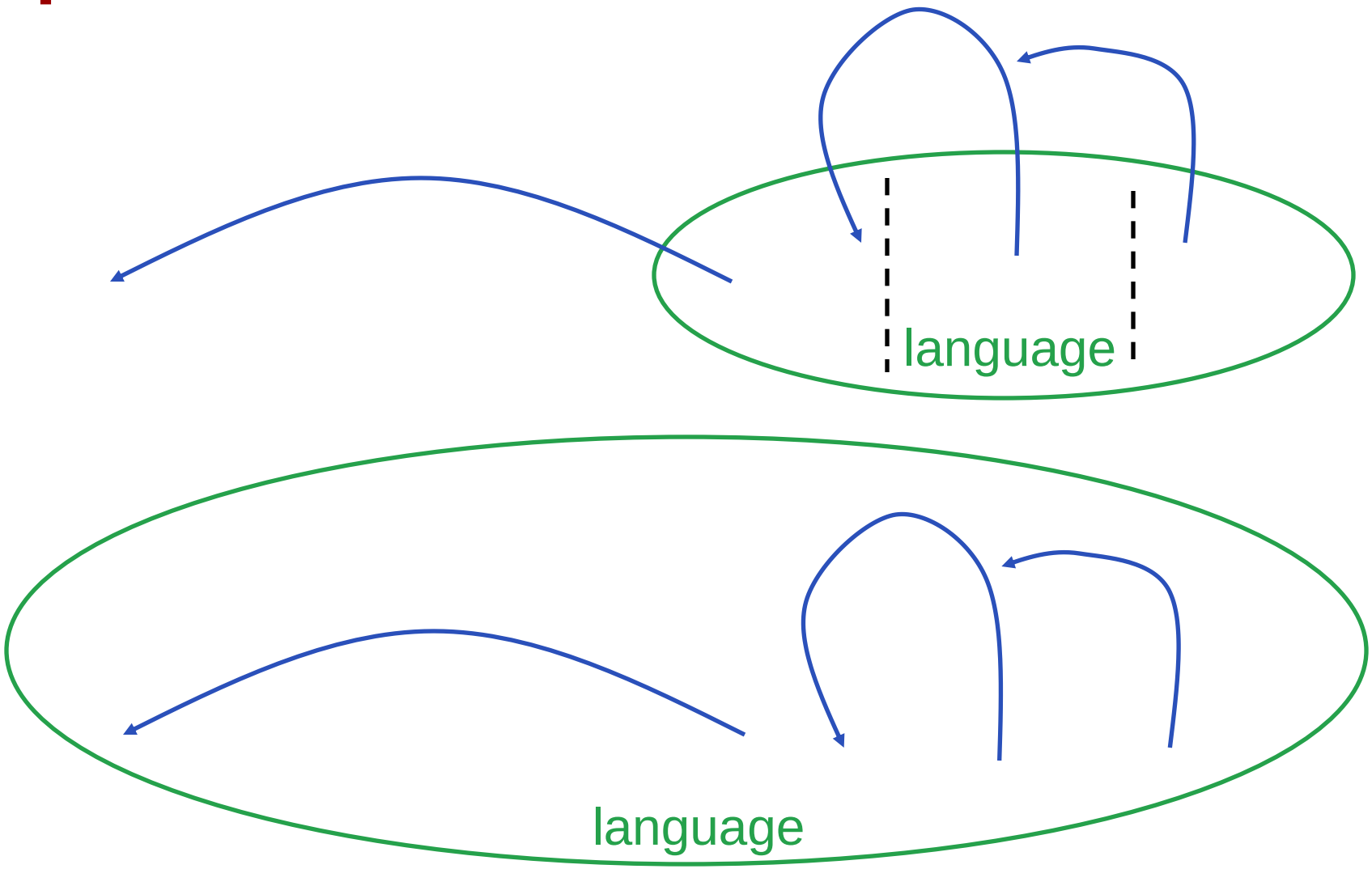

“Knowledge” as correct representation

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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?)

Brief critique of "Knowledge" as correct representation

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- 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!)

Realism

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- *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

Some reasons to be a realist

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- 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 obrtain intended results

Constructivism

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- 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

Some reasons to be a constructivist

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- 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

Some *quick and dirty* definitions of some recurring "isms"

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- 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