

Session 2: Philosophy for revolution: A theory of knowledge: how we know what we know

Welcome to Session 2: A theory of knowledge

How we know what we know

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Any philosophical outlook influences what we do in life. It affects how we react to just about everything. Philosophy can give us a comprehensive, bird's eye view of the world around us.

It helps us bring together opinions, phenomena, facts, and events which allow us to reach conclusions. These in turn bear a direct relation to the way we view the world, how changes happen and how we can act to influence them.

There is the outlook that we acquire over time simply by growing up and being educated in one way or another.

Then there is **the way** we may deliberately and consciously set out to explore and understand things. We do this by adopting a distinct philosophical approach, more specifically a "theory of knowledge".

In the history of human thought, the relationship between our existence and knowledge has been strongly contested.

Later we will look at some of the different approaches to understanding the world.

To sum up: philosophy in general addresses the relationship of our being in the wider world to our thoughts and knowledge. It influences how we can and do act to transform things and people around us.

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There's nothing to be afraid of!

We all have one!

Everyone has what is known as a theory of knowledge, of one kind or another, whether they are aware of it or not. We will return to this term later in the course, but for the moment let's say a theory of knowledge is about the relationship between our knowledge and the world in itself.

So, how DO we get a theory of knowledge? It's because we are born into a society which has developed a range of philosophical outlooks over centuries of cultures and class struggles.

A theory of knowledge shapes and influences what we do as individuals, our practice.

This is true at the individual as well as the social level. Scaled up, theories of knowledge can have a crucial effect on what people do at a mass level. For example, our theory of knowledge could lead us to conclude that the system is broken and that we need to make a transition to a more democratic society. Or, the opposite conclusion, that there is no alternative.

At a collective level, theories of knowledge – expressed either unconsciously or consciously – shape and influence political and social life. They can be quite decisive at transitional moments in history, such as today, as we will discover during the course.

But that is getting ahead of ourselves.

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So, the question is, how do we think about this and, at a social level, how do people form that understanding?

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We live in complex, rapidly changing times. The pandemic has turned many lives upside down. Much of what we took for granted is being challenged. Many people don't want to go back to what **didn't** work anyway before the pandemic.

We live in an era when fake news can circulate around the globe before the truth even pulls its digital boots on. So, finding out the truth of things requires an approach that can probe and make sense of the nature of today's world.

The internet, social media and digital communication have vastly extended the availability of information.

Given the huge amount that comes our way, finding ways of discerning the truth has become more important than ever.

Having the capacity to understand is not a matter of being born brilliant. The ability to think deeply, examine and make judgements is something we need to train ourselves to do. It's not just about collecting facts and bits of information. As writer Oscar Wilde quipped, it's possible to know the price of everything but the value of nothing.

So how do we begin to get to the heart of what's going on around us?

Getting to the *essence* of things and *processes* is not simply achieved by identifying collections of objects or facts simply as they present themselves in *perception*.

What I will set out to show in this course is that the challenge is to discover the connection between the **immediacy** of things and the **underlying processes** that bring change. This could be understood as the activity of discovery.

Along this path, and maybe right from the start, we will likely encounter "*contradictions*" – things that may not make sense or jolt against our understanding.

Rather than brushing these aside as problems or a failure of our own understanding or "mistakes", "*contradictions*" are better understood as the expression of the essential and changing nature of things themselves.

We can draw strength thanks to our built-in social and problem-solving nature. We will enhance the ability to locate the often hidden sources of social and political transformation. That means probing into why and how things are *contradictory in and of themselves*.

This can lead us in the direction of *searching for solutions within problems themselves*.

So, in this unit you will explore some fundamental philosophical concepts. The aim is to build up your ability to discover, analyse, and, finally, act in the light of our newly-gained knowledge.

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The tree of philosophy has many branches and bushy outgrowths.

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A main branch of philosophy is the one which proposes the existence of a material world of which we are a part. This is known as materialism.

Its opposite is the view that nothing exists outside our minds. This is characterised as idealism.

Empiricism proposes that all knowledge is derived from, and limited to, the experience of our senses.

This may be stretched to the notion that reality doesn't exist at all, that it's a figment of our imagination.

Then, there is the view that there IS indeed "something out there", but we cannot truly know it. Outgrowths of this approach are scepticism and agnosticism. A combination of all these outlooks could be described as **eclecticism**.

All these outlooks involve exploring the possibility of truth and how we test our knowledge.

This is a complex, disputed territory which has divided philosophers over the centuries.

They wrestled with how we come to know – or indeed, if we can know.

Their work reflects AND shapes the history and struggles of humanity. Later we will look at the different approaches to understanding the world in more detail.

The evolution of philosophical thought is a long and complex process. The course seeks to distil some essential truths and "laws" of thought.

All outlooks in one way or another have a view on the relationship of thought to matter and vice versa. This is also known as **being and consciousness**.

These ideas are exciting because they inter-relate with how humanity has progressed mentally and physically.

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One of the great philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, pioneered an organic, developmental approach.

This means taking hold of existing ideas as well as shaping them, so that they become our own.

"This is the function of our own and of every age: to grasp the knowledge which is already existing, **to make it our own**, and in so doing, develop it still further and to raise it to a higher level. In thus **appropriating it to ourselves** we make it into something **different** from what it was before."

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hp/hpintro.htm>

Hegel was the first to introduce the concept of **practice** into logic.

In conclusion, we don't reject past achievements of human society because they were developed under the 'wrong regime'.

We'll return to Hegel later.

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There's a lot of pressure to conform to prevailing "common sense" views which, while appearing spontaneous, are actually grounded in definite philosophical outlooks.

Examples of such mainstream mythologies include notions like:

"success or failure is down to the individual";

"the poor are always with us";

"people don't like change",

"selfishness trumps altruism";

"history shows that revolutionary change is doomed to fail".

In general, such stereotypes are a kind of social cement that helps to keep the existing state of society – capitalism – in place. They limit our horizon to the prevailing system.

The world is seen largely from the standpoint of the past. Not only that, *the past itself* is mythologised. *Images* of things are *conflated with truth*, while hidden processes and forces that drive history remain invisible and unexplored.

Combinations of images are taken out of context, torn out of their original time and place. They are often presented in a one-dimensional way as supposed evidence that history is made by a few individuals, leaving out the class and economic forces that lie behind them.

A strong example is: The BBC series by Adam Curtis: *Can't get you out of my head*.

Let's continue on our journey, starting from and never leaving the present, taking in and developing new concepts and approaches.

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We need to develop our theory of knowledge because grasping things from the standpoint of changing them demands more than *intuition* or *common sense*.

Philosophers and thinkers in the past have pointed to the difference between outer appearance, immediate impressions and what may lie behind or within them.

As Hegel said: "The familiar or well-known in general, because it is well-known, is not known".

We may think we "know" things or a person and then be surprised when people (or things) turn out to behave in a way we did not expect. Or conversely, we may even deny that a change has taken place because it does not fit in with our preconceptions. We treat unexpected things as "abnormalities" instead of possible indicators that an important change is about to happen or has already happened.

We can describe this approach as developing dialectical concepts. More on that later.

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We need to challenge ourselves and not take for granted the way we understand the world.

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Our theory of knowledge is like an iceberg lying beneath the tips of our thoughts.

Later we'll look at blocks that stunt our understanding and how to complete our journeys into *knowledge and back to practice*.

Building up knowledge is not a passive absorption but something that **we do**, an **activity**.

We'll look at *knowing* as "a path" that we walk mentally, spiritually and physically.

The outer appearance of things and processes is the beginning of our journey. In today's world that's important, given the multiplicity of images that surround us.

We'll also consider how human beings, individually and socially, develop knowledge, not in a vacuum, but in response to changes in the world around them.

To grasp how things change requires a conceptual, even an abstract approach, as we need to analyse and synthesise the things that we are seeking to understand, from the standpoint of changing them.

Slide 10. ~~Here is a summary of what we've discussed~~

Slide 11. Here are some questions to reflect on.