

Session 3: Philosophy for revolution: My Thinking Toolbox

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Hello again. As part of our normal existence, we quite naturally order and structure the disorderly and messy nature of reality so we can think and function.

Every area of study has its own language and philosophy is no exception. So, to help us make progress later on in the course, we're going to be looking at the meaning of some key words and concepts, otherwise known as "terms".

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Even the most ordinary words that we take for granted, have meanings in philosophy that are very different from the way that they are used in everyday language. This is of course true of any form of specialised thought and collective practice. Take the word "bar" – it could be a drinks bar in a pub, but it has quite different meanings in science, computing and law or even sailing.

In philosophy, the word "Materialism" is a good example. In everyday use, it usually means being greedy or obsessed with consumption. Or it can mean that you deny or downplay the importance of the mental, or spiritual, dimension of human existence.

But in philosophy, materialism has a quite different sense. As do words like "idealism", "being" and "matter". Then, there are also terms like "negation" which we'll get to later.

Exploring how meanings may differ from every-day use and from person to person, and how new terms can develop over time helps us develop a rich and diverse discussion.

We need to negotiate meanings as part of a process of building the significance of some basic, fundamental terms.

There are a lot of "isms". We can't define them all in this course, though you can check the course resources to go deeper into these. If you can get a handle on the main concepts, then it becomes easier to relate them to other terms and theories. You should then feel more confident in getting to grips with how, for example, various thinkers' approach and seek to "resolve" the mind - matter, thought - body relationship.

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"Ologies" and "isms" are by their very nature complex and disputed fields of research. Preparing for this course, I spent time making a Mindmap – it grew into so many schools and trends that it never stopped!

So, it will help to share a kind of thinking toolbox. That way, we can agree on terms, and collectively probe and challenge our own and others' preconceptions, or built-in biases.

Let's get one "ology" out of the way immediately. **The philosophical starting point for the study of how we know is called epistemology. Otherwise known as "theory of knowledge".**

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Slide 4 no audio/video how we come to know

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Materialism proposes that there is an objective world that exists independently of our consciousness. We are part of this material world, which is **fundamental and primary**. We understand Matter as the underlying, basic substance in nature. And all things, including mental states and consciousness, have their origins in material interactions.

Idealism is the opposite point of view. In philosophy it proposes that everything that exists is spiritual or thought or mind. In other words, it's the outlook that reality itself is reducible to a **form of thought**. Mind and consciousness are viewed as the first-order or primary realities to which matter is subject, and material interactions are viewed as secondary.

All philosophies are variations or combinations of these fundamentally contrasting starting points.

Both materialism and idealism can be described as **"Monist"** or single, unifying philosophies. Reality and thought are brought together in one doctrine.

This contrasts with **"Dualism"**. Dualists propose an unbridgeable separation between matter and mind. Descartes and Kant can be seen as exponents of this, we will get to them in session 7.

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ONTOLOGY is the branch of philosophy that studies "Being", or what it means for something "to be", to exist, or existence itself.

The fact that we EXIST as LIVING BEINGS and that we ACT, that is, engage in activity, in association with others should be self-evident if you give it a moment's thought! Nevertheless, as we shall see, Being, is a highly contested term.

Of necessity, there is an interaction between how we think and what we are - our being.

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Back to being and the different interpretations that I mentioned before. Let's give ourselves a chance to reflect on what "being" is.

From a dialectical standpoint, Being is **becoming – in transition and development** – the world and/or ourselves in movement and change, in transition. And, Being itself has an independent, objective existence.

Supporters of this outlook over the millennia have included Heraclitus and the pre-Socratics in Greece about 2,500 years ago. Kant and Hegel picked this up much later.

Slide 8 no audio/video unbearable lightness of being

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In the 21st century science has provided huge evidence for this understanding, from the birth & death of stars in the cosmos, down to the smallest particles in physics. In the life sciences, viral evolution is currently a burning issue. But it's also true of social and political processes.

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American philosopher, Charles H. Kahn, has noted that, apart from the concept of Nature, the concept of Being has enjoyed the most influence throughout the history of thought.

However, in 20th century philosophy, principally in analytical and linguistic academic philosophy, the question of “being” was reduced to a language problem, or generally ignored.

The concept of “being” is still very much played down in mainstream tendencies, and by social constructivist schools of thought, which have dominated academic studies.

Many philosophers, most of all in Anglo-Saxon philosophy during the last century, have been most reluctant to recognise the independent existence of “Being”, even going so far as to deny it completely.

Kahn acknowledges, and I quote, “... we cannot blink the fact that, in English and American philosophy at any rate, the concept of Being is likely to be regarded with great suspicion, as a pseudo-concept or a mere confusion of several distinct ideas.”

The most renowned British philosopher of the last century, Bertrand Russell, for example, did not differentiate between “Being” as a reality and as a “term”. In other words, “being” was identified with, or reduced to, **language**, rather than having a separate, material existence.

Russell had a “metaphysical” view of being. In other words, for him, something might be “real” but may not actually exist. Somewhat confusing!

As a sidenote, throughout his life, Russell campaigned against war and nuclear weapons and was once jailed for his actions.

Thus, for a variety of reasons, the notion of continuity and unity between the world in which we live, our physical “being” and our social “being” tends to be obscured.

This matters for us because, until recently, the effect of human activity on the planet, was played down by climate change deniers. But today, the pandemic, caused by mutant viruses, means that our relationship with nature has come sharply into focus. The “being” of nature and our own being, are urgent matters of survival.

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Meanwhile, in Continental Europe things have been different. In the 1920s, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger undertook to resurrect the concept of being with his notion of “Dasein” which means “being there”. His project was later irretrievably marred by his open support for Nazism.

In the post-war period, Existential philosophers Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, for example, spoke about existence mainly from an individual point of view.

However, the 20th century also saw the rise of sociology and post-modernist thought, which in varying degrees interpreted “being” as socially constructed.

It is hard to think about Being in its physical, material and mental aspects. In fact, it’s almost impossible unless you consider its opposite which is “not being” or “nothing”. Or as the late Anglo-Indian philosopher, Roy Bhaskar put it, “absence”.

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For Bhaskar, as for Hegel, “not-being”, the “negative” or “absence” become dynamic and active concepts that are full of significance.

Increasingly, we can understand our relationship to the world, society and other human beings and history itself, as characterised by gaps, discontinuities, and leaps – birth, life, and death, for example! In other words, “being and nothing” can be grasped as real, physical, and mental processes.

Given that the world – both natural and social – is, in my view, in constant change and transition, this movement can be understood as “becoming”. Something may be here one moment and gone the next. Some things last longer and change slowly, others only last momentarily. Discovering and tracking moments and transitions, as well as continuity and stability, is the stuff of grasping reality.

The eruption of protests in Kazakhstan, as I speak, shows how movements can burst out of, seemingly, nowhere.

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And then there is... **Social Being**

Being and Consciousness are, as we have seen, fundamentally different and even opposing starting points. And yet, they are co-determined. Without being alive we cannot be conscious. As social, developing creatures (human nature) we are constantly being shaped or nurtured as well as shaping ourselves.

As a child grows up she has to adapt herself to those around her and become a social individual. She comes into various forms of conflict with her social environment.

Social consciousness comprises all the influences that constantly surround us. In particular, the outlooks derived from education and social media/advertising/news...

If “social being” and “social consciousness” were simply identical, without difference or conflict, then there would never be any need for parenting or education – good, bad or otherwise.

On the other hand, if we were completely determined by the social order in which we live, no one could ever imagine something, other than what already exists.

People would simply be pliant servants of those in power. They could never act in opposition.

But throughout history, individuals and social movements have come into conflict with the existing order of things, despite, and against, the prevailing ideologies.

We can understand this as the contradiction between social consciousness and social being. Social consciousness is dominated by prevailing ideologies and accepted “truths”. In opposition to this, are the real events in people’s lives – **their social being**.

The arguments over the Brexit vote are a good example. According to prevailing stereotypes, otherwise known as social consciousness, a “yes” vote indicated anti-immigrant, nationalist prejudices, especially amongst working class voters in areas like the northeast.

The Leave vote was interpreted simplistically as support for Johnson and the Tories. But most of these voters’ real lives had deteriorated under both Labour and Tory governments. Thus, people’s “social being” drove them to vent their frustration and anger with things as they were. Why not take a chance on change?

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There's also the worn-out nostrum that wasteful consumer goods, like ever more cars, are produced "because that's what people demand".

The fact that advertising, product placement and influencers relentlessly bombard people with stuff they don't need is left out of the equation. And that when offered alternatives – such as affordable and efficient public versus private transport – people grab them with both hands and feet.

Socially, our consciousness is shaped and influenced by prevailing ideologies and outlooks. And yet our real day to day experience is often in sharp contrast to the images that swirl around us.

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Developing flexible, dynamic concepts, grounded in changing material and social realities, is the challenge.

It doesn't just happen. We need to work on it mentally and physically.

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So, in future sessions we will look at how to reach a deeper understanding of reality and how it can shape better practices. In the next section we'll see how humanity has struggled down the ages to get its collective head around things. We'll get a bird's eye view of how some of these fundamental outlooks evolved over time.