

## Session 4: Philosophy for revolution: Perception and contradiction

### Slide 2:

Welcome back to Thinking Toolbox, Part 2.

In this session we'll look at just four concepts that are key to understanding how cognition or thinking works. They are:

**External World, Empiricism, Perception and Contradiction**

### Slide 3: The external world when it's at home

The external world is the term used to describe all which exists outside of our minds: the universe of things, outside and independent of human consciousness.

It embraces the objects of our physical environment - nature and human society – so it includes our own body, and our place in society. It is the totality of material objects, phenomena and their interrelations.

In the **materialist** view, the external world begins with the existence of a natural, physical world, of which we are a part. This is fundamental to a realist philosophy which can be described as the doctrine that holds that the external world really exists, quite apart from our conceptions of it.

In other words, all knowledge must necessarily be knowledge “of something”, and that “something” does not depend on our perception.

On the other hand, in the **idealist** view, that “something” may be created by a spiritual being or a mind. This is known as **objective idealism**. If the “something” is the product of our consciousness, this is called **subjective idealism**.

The external world is both that of an individual person and that which exists outside human society in general.

Significantly, the existence of an external world is often placed into doubt in the realm of philosophy. But in psychology and science it is usually assumed as foundational

The question of if, **and how**, you can have knowledge of such a world, is widely acknowledged as one of the oldest problems in philosophy. It is critical for all those who want to change the world. If we don't have a handle on reality, especially the complex and constantly transforming world of political consciousness, then our efforts will fall flat.

### Slide 4: Put it down to experience

The term "**empiricism**" comes from the Greek word for "experience" and the word "empiric", which refers to a physician whose skill derives from practical experience.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle saw the mind as a "tabula rasa" or "blank slate". Perceptions from the outside world are inscribed on this tabula. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* the English philosopher John Locke also described the mind in this way. His essay is considered foundational in empirical thought.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume and Anglo-Irish bishop, George Berkeley, asserted that sense experience is the source of all knowledge.

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### Slide 5

Bishop Berkeley said: *Esse est percipi* or “To be is to be perceived”.

Variations of this view continue to dominate, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world, right down to the present day.

Empiricism may stretch to asserting that anything that we cannot experience with our five senses cannot be understood or does not exist, as Bishop Berkeley maintained. It tends to reduce all knowledge to sense perception. Anything not perceptible through the senses is considered, even derided as, “metaphysics” – which means “beyond the physical” – and is therefore condemned as “pure speculation”.

So, if everything outside direct perception is irrelevant, how did Albert Einstein come up with his theories, long before he was proved correct by observational evidence? It was only through abstract thought experiments that Einstein deduced his theories of relativity from 1905. This was years before the solar eclipse of 1919 provided the astronomical evidence which proved his theory right.

In the political sphere, how could we prepare for revolution if we wait for the empirical evidence of it happening?

Empiricism was a significant step in human thought, as it encouraged the study and examination of the world outside thought itself and often challenged outlooks handed down by religious or state authorities.

But empiricism also has limitations and potential defects. It may deny that there is any *other* form of knowledge, for example, logical, abstract mathematical knowledge. Or it says that such knowledge is unimportant. Empiricism may thus encourage the study of the external world and at the same time deny that it exists independently of our senses. It may, in some cases, beg the question of where sensations actually come from!

It may limit knowledge to perception of the immediate, thereby missing the connection of the immediate with processes that so often lie hidden deeper inside.

The Encyclopedia Britannica notes that Bishop Berkeley, proposed that:

“nothing exists except minds and spirits and their perceptions or ideas. A person experiences material things, but their existence is not independent of the perceiving mind; material things are thus mere perceptions. The reality of the outside world is contingent on a knower.”

This outlook is known as subjective idealism. In a more extreme form it tends towards solipsism, which holds that *I alone* exist.” It was once described as a mad piano playing its keys in an empty universe.

Bertrand Russell remarked that he was cured of solipsism for life by receiving a letter from a woman saying, 'I'm so glad you think there may be something in solipsism. I wish there were more of us.'

Why does this matter?

If “knowledge” and “the truth” are equated with combinations of sensations, perception can be dangerously misleading. Such a view can stop us probing how the images that surround us are connected or, in some cases, disconnected from the reality that gives rise to them in the first place.

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If we want to move beyond the present system, we must not only see what is before our eyes, but theorise and prepare for historically unprecedented social processes, before they occur.

### Slide 6: Cartoon

### Slide 7

Is perception the same as knowledge?

Clearly not - as we can see from these images!

At the same time, we can only relate to, and begin to take in, what exists through our senses, through perception, by being in the world.

Perception is the process by which we organise and interpret our sensory impressions.

Living perception is the one and only starting point. But it is not **the end** of the road, as we shall discuss later in the course.

In general usage, “**Perception**” has two different meanings

- 1) The ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses.
- 2) The way in which something is regarded, understood, or interpreted.

For example: the right-wing media creates the perception that the UK is flooded with immigrants and that they are responsible for the lack of housing.

In our image-focused, consumer-marketing world, the two - perception and what is being perceived - are often merged:

Abigail Thorn, the popular YouTube philosopher-pundit, tells us, as if it's gospel truth, and I quote: “Mental stuff is the bottom layer of reality – subjective. Reality is grounded in the experience of the subject”.

This view of perception is quite widespread. Indeed, it is heavily promoted through sophisticated marketing techniques (“because I’m worth it”). Thus, it is said, there is no reality apart from what we perceive as individuals.

There is a technical, philosophical term for this outlook. It's called subjective idealism.

### Slide 8: Is perception everything?

It's obviously crucial to distinguish between Images and reality. Our ability to do this is more important than ever today, in the era of fake news and alt truth. This is especially so with the rapid advances in digital technology. We've gone from photoshop to “deep fakes”, which use real, but manipulated videos which deploy artificial intelligence to produce fabricated images and sounds.

If we consider our perceptions to be identical with reality, then it becomes impossible to separate fake from real.

The “perception” that Trump actually won the US election has become the reality for many of his followers. This perception has a purchase because it taps into widespread discontent with the present.

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Idealised images, for example of a person's face or body or lifestyle, as presented by "influencers" and media celebrities drive dissatisfaction and even distress about how you look. Psychotherapist and social critic, Susie Orbach, describes how this leads to mental destabilisation:

".... we are coached towards a dematerialised existence where almost everything we understand about living – eating, breathing, moving, feeling, relating, will occur in the realm of thought, not in the physical, worldly body".

An obsession with appearance often arises from insecurities, especially among young women and men. This of course swells the profits of commercially-astute influencers, social media corporates, and industries from make-up and anti-ageing products to cosmetic surgery.

In other words, **believing** something to be true is said to be the same as it being true.

Going back to Abigail Thorn's view, it may then be claimed that individual identities can challenge the existing paradigm.

She foregrounds and defends Subjectivity. For her, "objectivity" equals male-centred imperial power. The mere notion that there could be a universal objective truth is simply a way of enforcing that power. Heady stuff, but totally wrong in my view.

### Slide 9: Formal logic $A=A$

And finally, we'll look at "contradiction", a key term for understanding where movement comes from.

The ordinary view of contradiction is that there is an absolute distinction between something being or not being. Something is either black or white.

The simple identity of formal logic,  $A = A$ , an apple equals an apple, etc, is useful for many day to day activities. We spend a lot of time using it. For example, if you want to buy something online, you may study customer reviews to compare one brand with another – notions of identity and difference come into play.

At one level this is *of course* true. There is indeed an unbridgeable difference between being alive and dead, for example.

### Slide 10: An introduction to contradiction

True, not true  $A=\neg A$

But simple comparisons of like/ unlike can be inadequate for more complex situations when things are in rapid transition.

In examining reality more closely, we discover that even life and death are processes: opposites conjoin and interact in disturbing and transformative ways.

The controversies over abortion, for example, are evidence of this. Exactly when does an individual life start? And people in comas hover between life and death, giving rise to disturbing ethical dilemmas.

Another example: The very concept of democracy is a contradiction. The word means "people's power". And yet there is within every democracy a constant struggle against the possibility of dictatorship. The price of democracy is eternal vigilance.

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Exploring, and trying to resolve, or transform, contradictions, challenges our assumptions about how things are. If we are to grasp and act within a rapidly changing world, the concept of contradiction is vital.

### Slide 11:

A contradiction expresses the internally conflicted nature of things in themselves.

It can thus be a motivation to action.

For example, doing something that was previously impossible such as running a sub two-hour marathon.

“Doing the impossible” is a logical contradiction. If it’s not possible then I cannot do it.

However, I may still aspire to do something that no one has ever attempted before.

My determination and training finally allow me to break barriers.

### Slide 12

Cat

### Slide 13 Invitation to reflection no audio/video

In this sense “contradictions” are an expression of the essence of things, that the essence of life is movement and change.

Things do exist mutually *in opposition* (or, contradiction) to each other ... and not *only in thought*.

For example, a living person is composed of cells that are constantly dying and being born.

A contradiction can “invite a soul to reflection”. It may encourage us try to unravel why something does not appear to make sense or correspond to our previously-held views.

### Slide 14: Hegel

This quotation *sums up* contradiction as an indispensable concept **expressing the inner source of all motion, change and development**.

### Slide 15: Three thinkers audio

In this slide you can see views of contradiction held by three very different thinkers. Alfred Lord Whitehead, the founder of process philosophy and teacher of Bertrand Russell; the Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin; and Audre Lorde, the American black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet.

### Slice 16: Essence of Britain

Akala is an award-winning rapper and author of *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*. He explains how opposing forces that gave rise to Britain’s identity.

“Britain has long been a land of startling political paradoxes... cultivating a relatively impressive degree of freedom at home, while exporting and supporting terror, torture and slavery abroad – it

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has produced all kinds of conflicting understandings of British history, identity and place in the world, and, of who is, and who not a citizen or an immigrant.”

Thus, contradictions can express deep truths about society. The sophisticated American Literary critic, Lionel Trilling, once wrote that some artists and writers are meaningful and powerful, **because** they contain contradiction. To quote from his *Reality in America* from 1950: they may express “within themselves . . .the very essence of the culture, and . . . they do not submit to serve the ends of any one ideological group or tendency”.

**17: Summing up our terms.**

**18: Looking ahead.**