

# How TOK differs from philosophy

TOK is not a philosophy course. There is a branch of philosophy, called epistemology, which concerns itself with the nature of knowledge, and so the two do have significant overlap. However, the sorts of things that professional philosophers do, their aims, their use of concepts and their methods are not the same things that TOK students do. We touch briefly on this distinction in the student book in Chapter 3 (Knowledge and Technology) when discussing the difference between Greek concepts like *epistēmē*, *technē*, and *phrónēsis* (page 81).

The primary difference between TOK and philosophy is that philosophy generally focuses on the conceptual analyses of topics and seeks to clarify those concepts. Traditionally, philosophy has focused on **ethics** (how we define 'good' and 'bad' and how we construct the systems which describe those terms), **metaphysics** (the *nature* and constituents of reality) and **epistemology** (the conceptual analysis of knowledge and how we know what we know). Different philosophical traditions (Western/Eastern, Continental/Analytic, etc) will then link those analyses to lived human experience in different ways.

As opposed to philosophy, which is far more conceptual in nature, the TOK course is far more concerned with the nature of knowing, contextualized in communities of expert knowers. TOK is essentially a practical investigation, exploring how experts actually do construct knowledge in their subjects, and would include investigations into the nature and scope of various subjects, their methodologies and the various impacts on those methodologies in relation to their reliability and certainty. The discussion in the Introduction, regarding the deeply sceptical position that we can only know the contents of our own consciousness, is a position in philosophy called 'solipsism'. There are a wealth of other philosophical positions related to this sceptical claim, including 'representational realism', 'indirect realism', 'idealism', 'direct realism' and 'anti-realism'. The philosopher attempts to identify and apply these theoretical constructions – these 'isms' – whereas the TOK student remains in the real world of the practical methods followed by historians and human scientists as they construct their claims.

One pairing of concepts that do have a legitimate place in a TOK course (though not all teachers will use them explicitly) are empiricism and rationalism. These both identify a general strategy or 'normative' claim about how we should know the world:

- **Empiricism** claims that all knowledge ultimately derives from some sense experience in the world, including (in the strongest versions) our ideas of imperceptibles like 'justice' or 'friendship', or even the logical principles found in mathematics and formal logic.
- **Rationalism** is the claim that truths about the world can be uncovered through the exercise of reason alone. This was Descartes' view – he locked himself away and used reason to find out all sorts of things about the world.

These two philosophical positions are often helpful in TOK because they can provide opportunities to discuss the relationships between AOKs like mathematics (which leans towards 'rationalism') and the natural sciences (which lean towards 'empiricism'). They are philosophical because they are more like 'worldviews' rather than anything that you could derive from evidence. They provide a framework for understanding the world, rather than a description of the world.

Philosophy and TOK overlap in terms of content most when exploring the construction of ethical principles. The construction of ethical principles and theories are exactly the sort of 'knowledge' (like scientific or mathematical principles) that the TOK teacher and student will investigate. The philosopher, however, will then apply those principles to a general real-world

or hypothetical question of ‘whether action X is good or right or not’. TOK students are not primarily aiming at this sort of decision, rather they are more interested in evaluating the construction of the principles in terms of reliability and perhaps comparing them to other AOKs. If a TOK student gets caught up in whether some action is ‘good’, they are doing ethics, in the same way that in an investigation of mathematical principles, a student that got caught up in solving an equation would be shifting from a TOK process to a subject-based process. Solving an equation is not TOK any more than deciding whether abortion is ‘ethical’ is TOK.

In terms of thinking skills, of course, there is a lot of overlap, but this overlap happens in all subjects because they all prioritize critical thinking in their own way. In this sense, one might argue that students take a philosophical approach in that they seek to identify and describe central concepts clearly, analyse them to uncover their complexity and relationships and dynamics, then evaluate their own conclusions and analyses. But this approach is not unique to the TOK course; all good curricula will encourage students to take this approach (as opposed to the other extreme of memorizing a list of facts). This suggests also that TOK is not only a ‘critical thinking course’, if by this you mean a course which teaches critical thinking. It certainly does provide opportunities to be critical and provides structures to manage a critical reflection on how we construct knowledge, but it is not consciously aiming to deliver a curriculum in the principles of critical thinking.

While you can expect to ask students to consider some philosophical questions about how suited human beings are to constructing knowledge, you will be doing so in the very specific contexts of the five areas of knowledge and the other six themes. The focus, in TOK, is on understanding how knowledge works in the world, so that students are ultimately empowered to deal with the knowledge claims that they are faced with in their lives. TOK teaches students to be able to discern between knowledge claims which are contestable, those which are not contestable, and those which are not true. It also teaches students to recognize when and why publicly generated knowledge is sound. Philosophy broadly deals with a more abstract understanding of how knowledge forms a part of being human. The two subjects are compatible, but they focus on different aspects of the role of knowledge. There is no need, in a TOK course, for students to be studying the work of specific philosophers or learning a long list of ‘-isms’.

### TEACHING TIP

If you are brand new to TOK, do not start with a philosophy book on epistemology. Start with TOK textbooks and teaching guides (just like this one).

You may find it useful to explore an explicitly philosophical approach to knowledge (‘epistemology’) but you do not need to do this straight away. Let the TOK concepts and approaches embed first before comparing them with the philosophical approaches.

If you are interested in epistemology, you can certainly read up on it, but it is not necessary in order to be a successful TOK teacher – you just have to take good care to see the differences.

### THE SHORT VERSION

#### Philosophy vs TOK

Epistemology, as part of philosophical study, is concerned with conceptual questions about how our ability to know relates to being human and how this relates to broader questions about human experience. As part of TOK, the study of knowledge is a practical approach to gaining the kind of cognitive control over one’s life that comes from the ability to discern claims which are true or justified or reliable, from those which are not true or justified or reliable because it is either hypothetical, exaggerated, distorted or simply wrong.