

NAVIGATING ACADEMIC LIFE



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The Windows of Debate

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE A
RESEARCH TOPIC?

Imagine academic philosophy to be a vast building with hundreds of rooms. Every room has a debate going on. There is a floor for Metaphysics, one for Epistemology, another for Ethics and so on. The rooms are interconnected to each other, in many different ways- across the floors, between the rooms.

You are standing at the door of this building, wondering "Which room do I want to join? Which window do I look out of, thinking and talking to others about the world?"

Here is a step-by-step movement towards figuring out your research topic:

STEP 1

01 *START EARLY*

STEP 2

02 *CHOOSE 2-3 TOPICS OF INTEREST*

STEP 3

03 *GET THE LATEST UPDATE*

STEP 4

05 *THE READING LISTS*

STEP 5

05 *READ. READ. READ.*

STEP 6

07 *REACH OUT TO POTENTIAL SUPERVISORS*

STEP 7

08 *SELECT TENTATIVE POINT OF DEBATE.*



RESOURCES FOR YOU!

WHAT DO THE THESIS WHISPERERS SAY?

Some websites and blogs to learn about the process!

BRAIN-PICKINGS!

HOW DID YOUR SENIORS DO IT?

Check out the advice of the senior research scholars at our department!



MAPPING YOUR MIND!

FLOWCHART TO THE RESCUE!

Visit the appendix for template flowcharts on how to choose your core debates.

How to use this module?

Varied perspectives and vast amount of information on academic life (and its many dimensions) is available today. Through the module-series "Navigating Academic Life", we have made a modest attempt to systematically present the core points which can assist research students in their journey. We request you to view these modules as a collection of suggestions. Feel free to customize the information for your individual research purposes and preferences. For further assistance, contact Academic Support Cell.

This module is put together by research scholars of the Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi. You can find the core members involved in development of this specific module below.

Credits

Name of the Module: How to choose your research topic?

Research Scholars: Anish Chakravarty, Gautam Sharda, Himanshu Parcha, Jayshree Jha, Nivedita Chaturvedi, Puja Raj, Prashant Verma, Sahana V Rajan and Suyasha Singh.

The guidance of *Prof Nilanjan Bhowmick* has been invaluable in the development of this module.



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STEP 1: START EARLY

You are stepping into the world of academic philosophy. *Where do you start?*

The more important question is: *When?*

You should ideally start the process of choosing your research topic at least 8-9 months before the usual time of admission.

This will allow you time to explore the different debates in your areas of interest, prepare reading lists, meet up with potential supervisors, receive feedback on your ideas and most importantly, to write your research proposal.



Begin the process at least 8-9 months prior to time of admission!

STEP 2: CHOOSE 2-3 TOPICS

Choose 2-3 topics you are familiar with.

During the postgraduate course, you investigated a number of topics, belonging to various domains. Depending on your personal inclinations, perhaps, you also explored many other themes.

Make a list of 2-3 topics which interest you. Remember the academic-philosophy vast building you entered? Standing at the door, you have these topics written on a piece of sheet. Your aim is to move through the floors, that is, the different domains, to find the exact debate-room to enter.

Make sure you have a basic familiarity with the topics you choose.

Imagine this step as the first filter in the process of choosing the research topic. You will slowly eliminate candidates and reach the most suitable research topic.

When you started this step, there were n number of possible topics. You are applying the first filter now. The filter is: "Topics that you are familiar with and that interest you."

The movement is from a (relatively) known territory towards the unknown ones (like, the debates you will learn about in the coming step).



Examples of Topics of Interest

- Jainism on Stances
- Philosophical Disagreement
- Hume on Causation
- Kant's Transcendental Arguments
- Dignaga on Apoha
- Topics in Modality
- Existential Sentences
- Climate Justice



- Know How and Skill
- Enactive and Embodied Cognition
- Plato and Aristotle on Substance
- Dispositions
- Singular Propositions
- Ambedkar on Egalitarianism
- The conceptual/non conceptual divide
- Analyticity
- Physicalism and Consciousness
- The Nature of Concepts

STEP 3: GET THE LATEST UPDATE.

At this point, you have a list of two to three topics of interest.

You can approach a topic of interest from perspective of various domains. Choose a maximum of two domains for each topic of interest.

Now that you have confined your topics to specific domains, it is time to update yourself with the latest debates occurring in these topics within the domain. In each of the topics of your interest, there will be a dozen debates occurring.

Choose a maximum of 2-3 debates in each of the domain-specific topics. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is a great resource to get an idea of the latest debates.

Choose the domain(s) and explore the debates.

Spotting a debate! Debates can often be formulated as questions or also as further topics of current discussions. A definitive sign of a debate, amongst many others, is that there are positions available towards the point of debate and there are arguments for and against such positions.

After choosing the domains and figuring out the broad debates, you will notice that you are left with over a dozen debates! Downsize these to just a maximum of 3 debates. This will allow you to dedicate your attention rigorously to these three topics, studying them in depth than handling many debates on the surface simultaneously.

At this step, you are applying the following filter to the process of choosing a research topic:

"Choose 2 domains for the topic. Make a list of 2-3 debates in each domain-specific topic."

Your position at the end of this step is that you have a list of 3 debates you are interested in.



Topics of Interest

Domains

Debates



BRAIN PICKINGS!

WHAT DO YOUR SENIORS SAY?



Anish Chakravartty
PhD, Batch 2018

...be confident in knowing the Philosophical knowledge that (s)he has acquired..which branch of philosophy (s)he is able to reflect more, entertain and deliberate upon relationship between the philosophical ideas?...think of a philosophical problem that (s)he thinks, needs to be answered either in a novel way, or needs to be critically examined..

...list out different courses and topics wherein your interest lies in Philosophy, and start reading about those topics in contemporary context...websites like Academia, JSTOR, SEP etc are very helpful to find current debates...contact some of the professors who have expertise in the field to shape and sharpen your views on the particular topic..good to have research on topics which are classical, yet it is very important to relate the topic and its relevance in the contemporary times..



Puja Raj
PhD, Batch 2018

...since the researcher has to invest a significant amount of time in the topic of research chosen by her/him, one has to go entirely by what interests the concerned student has within the discipline... (this would motivate) the researcher..to innovate and bring in other areas of interest related to the topic...



Gautam Sharda
PhD, Batch 2015

The topic of your research must be of **your own** interest and not a suggestive one from others since it is only **you** who has to work on it for the next couple of years (M.Phil) or next 5 years (Ph.D.)... your work should be in synchronization with the contemporary problem...



Suyasha Singh
PhD, Batch 2018

STEP 6: REACH OUT TO POTENTIAL SUPERVISORS

FIGURING OUT THE WAVELENGTHS.

In this step, your goal is to reach out to professors who are interested or working in the debates of your interest. Converse with them about points of the debate which struck you and about potential research questions for your research proposal.

After learning more about the debates in the previous step, you are now aware of the prominently discussed points. Which of the points interest you? Are there any points of observation or explanatory gaps in the debate which excite you? Make a note of these points and elaborate on your perspective.

Time to enter a debate-room in the academic-philosophy building and meet the experts! Find professors who are interested or working in the debate of your interest. Drop them a mail, requesting for a discussion about the previously noted points. This might involve scheduling an appointment with the university office and/or an online audio/video call.

Converse with them to learn about their perspective on the debate, their working style and other factors relevant to your research life. You should also research about the university and departmental environment to ensure it aligns with your requirements. This step informs you about the universities you can apply to, given your areas of interest.

STEP 7: SELECT TENTATIVE POINT OF DEBATE

WHICH ROOM ARE YOU VISITING?

In this step, your goal is to pin down the question which you intend to explore during your research.

Here is a list of things you have figured out till now: a list of two-three debates, the tentative points of interest in these debates and potential supervisors in different universities.

In this step, you formulate the exact question you will be handling during your research, based on your insight on the debate and the relevant conversations. You can find more about how to formulate this question in our module: "How to write a research proposal".

This is the final step of your trip around the vast academic-philosophy-building. Which room are you going to visit? You have three debate-rooms locked down. Which do you go to?

This final move is often determined by factors other than your interest. These include the number of seats available at the universities, the competition within your debate of interest. So, you wait. You note the three debate-rooms and apply to universities which provide you entry to all of these rooms. Based on your performance in the admission process and universities' responses, you can select a university that suits your research needs.



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RESOURCES ON HOW TO CHOOSE A RESEARCH TOPIC

1

PHILOSOPHERS' COCOON

[How to Write a Dissertation -- Part I:
Finding a Topic](#)

2

THESIS WHISPERER

[5 Ways to Know You Have the Right Thesis
Topic](#)

3

BLOG OF APA

[Two Factors in Choosing a Dissertation
Topic](#)

4

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN-FLINT

[How to select a research topic](#)

5

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

[How to pick a dissertation topic](#)

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HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR RESEARCH TOPIC?

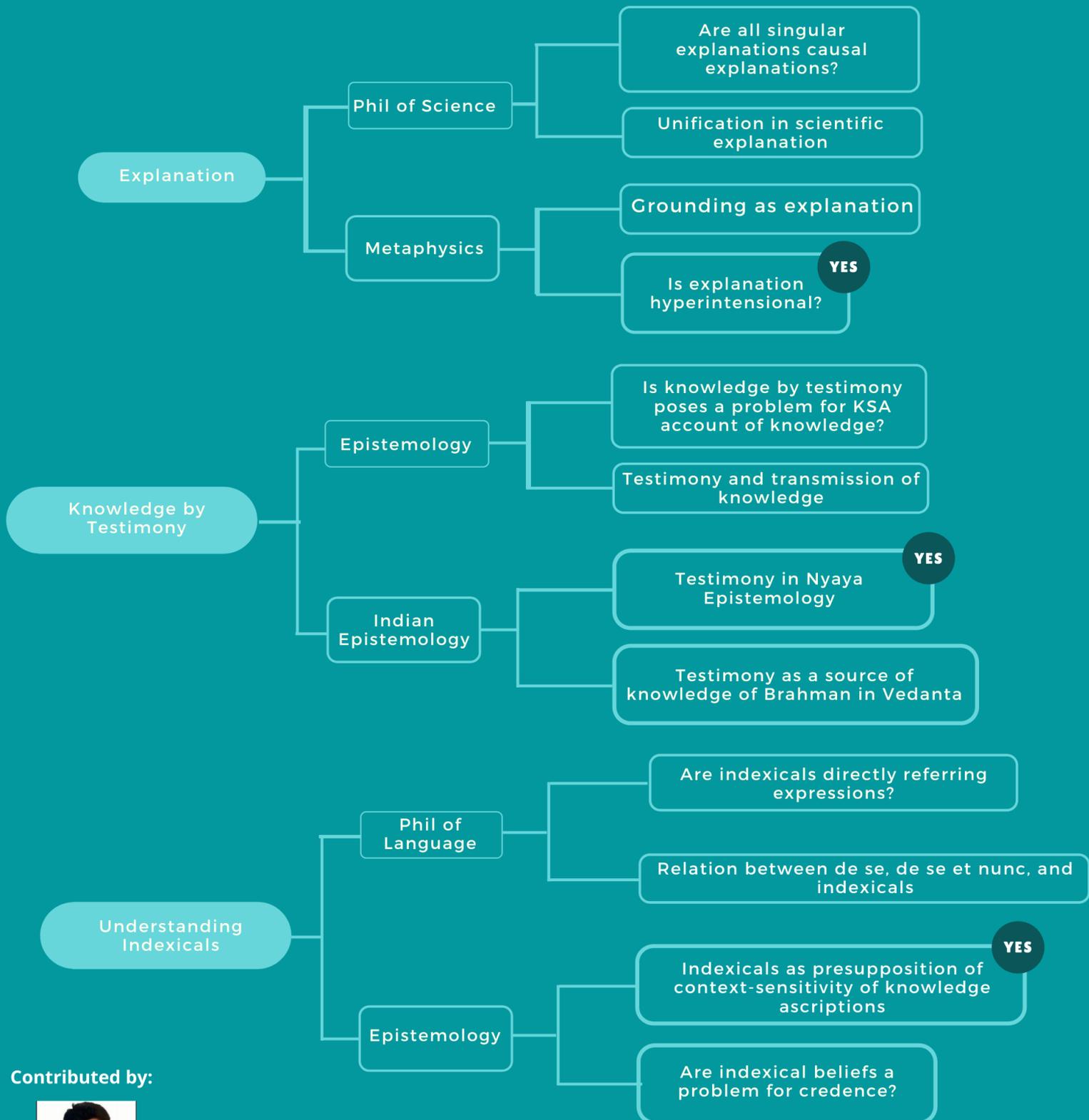
APPENDIX

HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR RESEARCH TOPIC?
THE FLOWCHART METHOD

Topics of Interest

Domains

Debates



Contributed by:



Himanshu Parcha
(PhD, Batch 2018)

Topics of Interest

Domains

Debates

Gender and Religion

Philosophy of Religion

Is the notion of 'sacred' in religious discourse devoid of any gender? **YES**

Whether the body in a religious performance transcends biological sex and cultural gender distinctions?

Gender Studies

Interconnectedness of religion to gender

Is religion a barrier to gender equality and root cause to prevailing biased power structures?

Meaning

Phil of Language (Western)

Examining Later Wittgenstein's views on meaning

Nature of meaning with reference to non-conventional set of words like adverbs, adjectives, pronouns

Phil of Language (Indian)

Exposition of the concept of meaning as given in Indian Philosophical texts.

Examining Nyaya view of meaning with reference to their theory of Sabda **YES**

Morality and Rationality

Western Ethics

A detailed study on Kantian ethics and its practical implications

Are human beings moral by choice (do we have innate morality) or by force (due to institutionalization of morality)?

Indian Ethics

Study of Indian Purusartha in various schools

Moral behavior and its relation with Dharma in Mahabharata **YES**

Contributed by:



Jayshree Jha
(PhD, Batch 2018)

Topics of Interest

Domains

Debates

East-West accounts of some fundamental philosophical concepts: A Comparison

Epistemology

Can knowledge as Justified True Belief be equated with knowledge as pramana?

(or) Does it require careful contextualization, considering nuances of Comparative philosophy?

YES

Metaphysics

Contextualizing Mind-body problem in Indian philosophy. Can it be justified as a central problem in Indian philosophy?

(Or) Considering the stereological nature of classical Indian philosophy, an alternative to the mind-body problem be researched?

Reconstructing the thought system of Dharmakirti

Epistemology

Can Dharmakirti be justifiably called an epistemic foundationalist ?

YES

(or) Or can Dharmakirti be justifiably called a phenomenologist?

Ontology

Status of Universals: Dharmakirti the nominalist

(Or) How can particulars be perceived? The representationalism of Dharmakirti?

Reconstructing the thought system of Kumarila-bhatta

Epistemology

Can Kumarila be justifiably called an anti-foundationalist?

Advocacy of svatah pramanyavada (immediate justification) doctrine, in the light of reformed epistemology

YES

Ontology

Status of Universals: Kumarila, the Direct Realist

Can Mimamsa be construed as a philosophy of action, in lieu of Bhavana: Kumarila-bhatta on the subject

Contributed by:

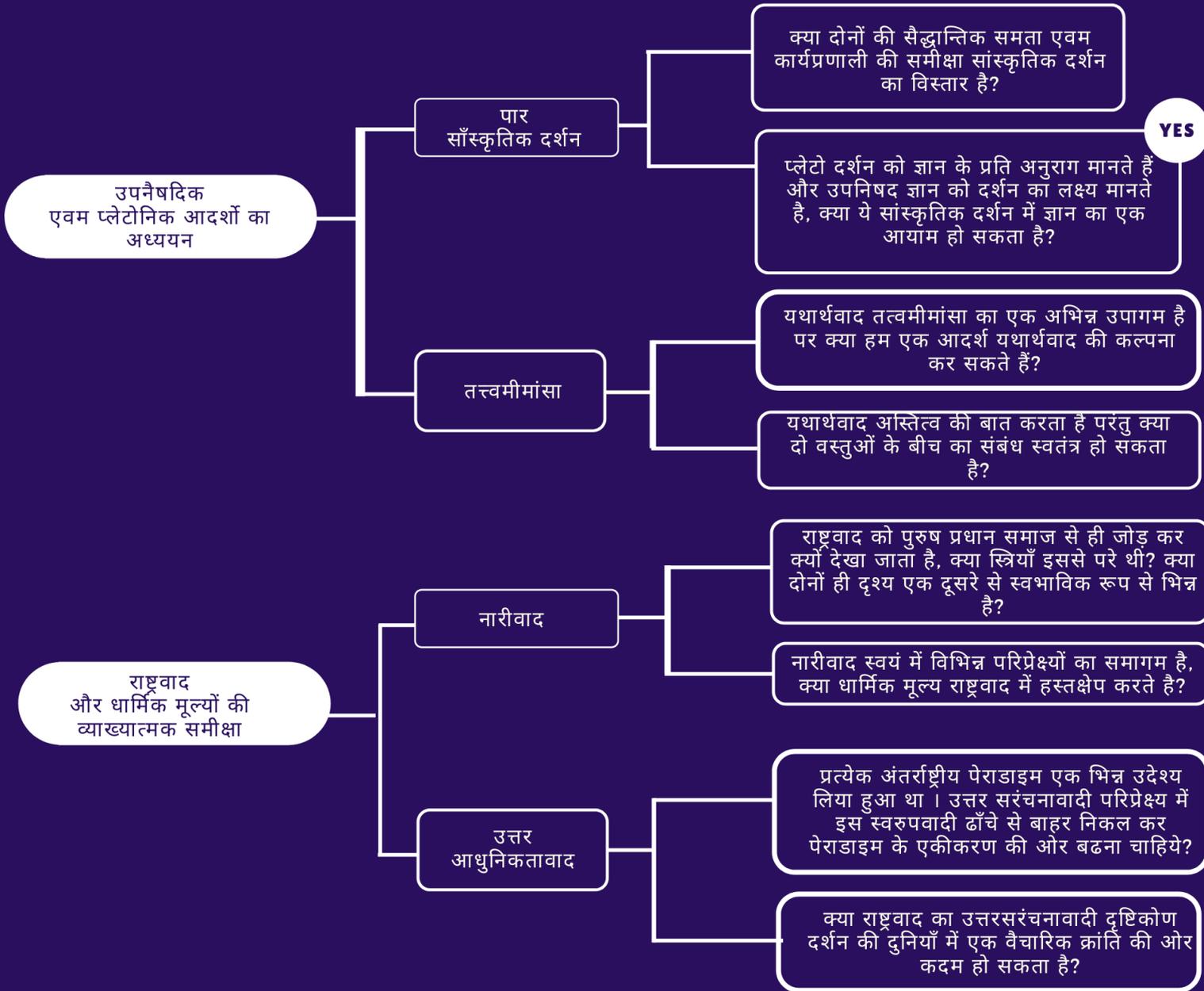


Nivedita Chaturvedi
(PhD, Batch 2017)

Topics of Interest

Domains

Debates



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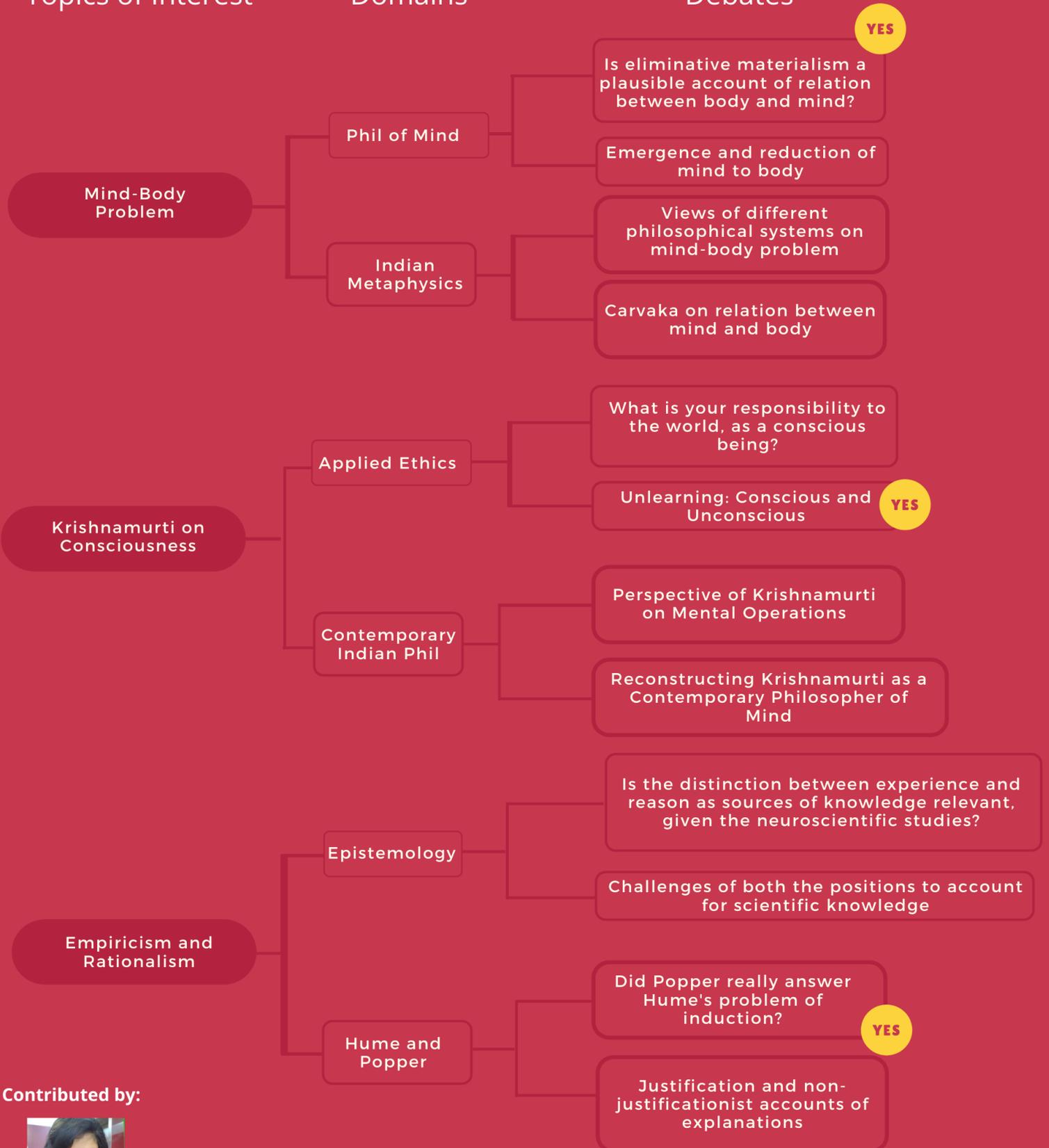


Prashant Verma
(PhD, Batch 2019)

Topics of Interest

Domains

Debates



Contributed by:



Sahana V Rajan
(PhD, Batch 2017)

COMING UP NEXT!



You have completed the first milestone towards entering your research life.

You have chosen points of debate.

How do you formulate such points in form of research questions?

What are the broad prerequisites for admission to a research program in universities?

A vital part of the research admission process is submission of your research proposal, which is requested when you submit the admission form. *How do you write a research proposal? What is the format? Are there any samples which can guide you?*

In our next module, we guide you to prepare your research proposal!

[Click here to visit our website!](#)
