

# Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma

**Richard van de Lagemaat**

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*According to the philosopher Martin Heidegger, 'in all teaching, the teacher learns the  
most'. This book is dedicated to the countless students and teachers I have met whose  
ideas have informed, inspired and delighted me.*

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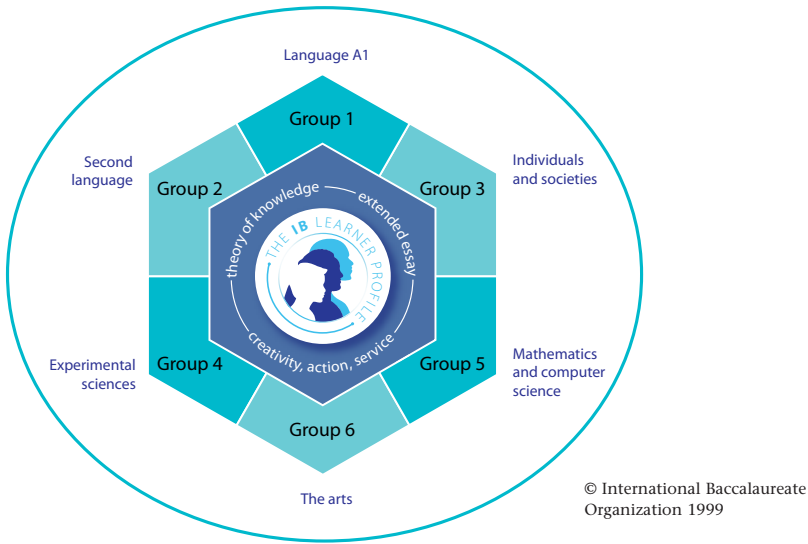
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# Introduction

This book is designed to be used with the Theory of Knowledge course in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. (It is, however, not an official guide to the IB Theory of Knowledge syllabus and is not connected with the IBO in any way.) The book may also be useful for students following other critical thinking courses.

The main question in Theory of Knowledge (TOK) is ‘How do you know?’ The course encourages you to think critically about the subjects you are studying rather than passively accepting what you are taught. Critical thinking involves such things as asking good questions, using language with care and precision, supporting your ideas with evidence, arguing coherently, and making sound judgements. You are, of course, encouraged to think critically in every subject that you study. TOK is designed to help you to reflect on and further develop the thinking skills you have acquired in your other classes.

You can get an overview of the main elements of the Theory of Knowledge course by considering the diagram below:



In line with the above diagram, this book consists of three main parts and a conclusion:

- 1 Knowers and knowing
  - 2 Ways of knowing
  - 3 Areas of knowledge.
- 1 *Knowers and knowing* Since TOK is concerned with the question ‘How do you know?’, we naturally need to spend some time talking about the nature of knowledge. We will be concerned with this in Part 1 and again in Part 4 of this book. Among the questions we shall be asking are: What is knowledge? How does knowledge differ from belief? What is the difference between knowledge, information and wisdom? Should we seek the truth at any price, or are there some things it would be better not to know?

- 2** *Ways of knowing* In TOK, we say there are four main ways of acquiring knowledge about the world: perception, language, reason and emotion. Take any thing that you claim to know and ask yourself how you know and you can trace it back to one of these four sources: either you saw it, or you heard it or read it, or you reasoned it out, or you have a gut-feeling that it is true. Despite their value, none of these ways of knowing is infallible. In fact, they are all *double-edged* in the sense that they can be both a source of knowledge and an obstacle to it. For example, many of our knowledge claims are based on perception, but our senses sometimes deceive us. Much of our knowledge is communicated to us 'second-hand' by other people, but the language they use may mislead us. We pride ourselves on being rational animals, but we often make errors in our reasoning and jump too quickly to conclusions. Finally, we sometimes appeal to feelings and intuitions to justify our knowledge claims, but they are not infallible guides to the truth. In Part 2, we will look at each of these knowledge tools and consider the extent to which they can be relied on in trying to make sense of the world.
- 3** *Areas of knowledge* In Part 3 we go on to look at the various areas of knowledge – mathematics, the natural sciences, the social sciences, history, the arts, ethics and religion. (Although religion does not appear in the above diagram, it is an important enough area to deserve its own chapter.) In each area of knowledge we raise the question 'How do you know?', and consider the role played by perception, language, reason and emotion in the subject in question. We will also touch on some of the 'big questions' that lie at the frontiers of knowledge. For example:

Why is mathematics so useful?  
 Does science prove things?  
 What makes human beings different?  
 Can the past be known?  
 Do we have free will?  
 Are there any universal values?  
 Is everyone selfish?  
 What is the purpose of art?  
 Does life have a meaning?

We will also consider the similarities and differences between the above areas of knowledge and raise various interdisciplinary questions that will help you to think about how different subjects are related to one another and to develop a more coherent and inclusive picture of the world.

The chapters in this book are arranged to be consistent with the above diagram, but they do not have to be read in the order in which they are presented. Each chapter begins with a page of quotations and ends with a summary of key points, terms to remember, some suggestions for further reading, and linking questions. The reading resources at the end of all each chapter give you the opportunity to explore some of the topics covered in greater depth.

The vast majority of the questions raised in this book do not have definite answers, but this does not make them any less important. My aim in writing this book is not to save you the effort of thinking about these issues, but to provoke you to think about them for yourself. My hope is that you will be able to relate what I have written to your own experience and that this book will help you to find your way to your own conclusions.