

Philosophy of Social Science

Course Description

This course consists of an in-depth inquiry into recent debates concerning the philosophy of the social sciences, with an emphasis on ontological and methodological issues. Among the questions to be discussed are the following:

- Are the theoretical entities that figure in social scientific theories different in nature from those that appear in the natural sciences? Specifically, do they correspond to natural kinds, or are they merely human constructs?
- What, fundamentally, are social structures, practices, norms, and institutions? What is the relationship between individuals and social structures? Should social structures be understood merely as collections of individuals, or do they exist over and above individuals?
- Do explanations in the social sciences have the same form as explanations in the natural sciences? Are there specific features of social phenomena that require a different kind of explanation than those used in the natural sciences? Is the aim of the social sciences not merely explanation but rather a different form of understanding?
- Are there laws or law-like generalizations in the social sciences? Do explanations in the social sciences refer to laws, or is this a fundamental difference between the social and natural sciences? What form should such explanations take: causal, functional, teleological, or other? Is prediction possible in social science?
- Is social science value-laden in a different way or to a different degree than natural science? Is a value-free social science undesirable, unattainable, both, or neither? Is objectivity in social science possible, and how can it be achieved?

Throughout the course, attention will be paid to theories and explanations in a variety of social sciences. Examples will be drawn from economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, archaeology, and social psychology, among others.

Requirements

You will be required to write two essays for this course. The first essay will be worth 30% of your mark, and will be due around halfway through the semester. The second essay will be worth 45% of your mark and will be due during the examination period. Essay topics for both essays will be distributed around two weeks in advance of the due date. You will also be required to give an in-class presentation on one of the readings (to be assigned by the second week), worth 10% of your grade. The remaining 15% of your mark for the course will be reserved for attendance and participation, including posting a weekly 300-word comment on the Moodle discussion board, due by noon on the Monday before each class meeting (i.e. roughly 24 hours before class). You will be allowed one unexcused absence and one "pass" on comments; anything over and above that will lead to a reduction in your grade.

Reading Schedule

Week 1 Sept 14	Introduction	<i>NB: All readings are required and should be read before the class in question.</i>
Week 2 Sept 21	What is the Social?	E. Durkheim, "What Is a Social Fact?" from <i>Rules of the Sociological Method</i> . J. Greenwood, "Social Facts, Social Groups, and Social Explanation," <i>Nous</i> 37:1 (2003), 93-112.
Week 3 Sept 28	Social Ontology I	J. Searle, <i>Construction of Social Reality</i> , Chapters 1 and 2. A. Thomasson, "Realism and Human Kinds," <i>Philosophy and Phenomenological Research</i> 67:3 (2003), 580-609.
Week 4 Oct 5	Social Ontology II	I. Hacking, <i>The Social Construction of What?</i> , Chapter 1. R. Mallon, "A Field Guide to Social Construction," <i>Philosophy Compass</i> 2:1 (2007), 93-108.
Oct 12	READING WEEK	
Week 5 Oct 19	Individualism and Holism	P. Pettit, "The Reality of Group Agents," in C. Mantzavinos (ed.), <i>Philosophy of the Social Sciences: Philosophical Theory and Scientific Practice</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). D. Rios, "A Note on Group Agents," in Mantzavinos. B. Epstein, "Ontological Individualism Reconsidered," <i>Synthese</i> 166 (2009), 187-213.
Week 6 Oct 26	Laws, Explanation, and Prediction I	B. Fay, "General Laws and Explaining Human Behavior," in M. Martin and L. McIntyre (eds.), <i>Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science</i> (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996; originally published 1983). H. Kincaid, "Defending Laws in the Social Sciences," <i>Philosophy of Social Science</i> 20:1 (1990), 56-83.
Week 7 Nov 2	Laws, Explanation, and Prediction II	P. Pettit, "Functional Explanation and Virtual Selection," <i>British Journal for the Philosophy of Science</i> 47 (1996), 291-302. D. Papineau, "Physicalism in the Human Sciences," in Mantzavinos. R. G. Shulman and I. Shapiro, "Reductionism in the Human Sciences: A Philosopher's Game," in Mantzavinos.
Week 8 Nov 9	Rationality and Rational Choice I	S. Lukes, "Some Problems about Irrationality," in M. Hollis and S. Lukes (eds.), <i>Rationality and Relativism</i> (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982). S. Lukes, "Different Cultures, Different Rationalities?" <i>History of the Human Sciences</i> 13:1 (2000), 3-18. D. Follesdal, "The Status of Rationality Assumptions in Interpretation and in Explanation of Action," <i>Dialectica</i> 36:4 (1982), 301-316.

Week 9 Nov 16	Rationality and Rational Choice II	J. Elster, "The Nature and Scope of Rational-Choice Explanation," in E. LePore and B. McLaughlin (eds.), <i>Actions and Events: Perspectives on Donald Davidson</i> (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985). P. Pettit, "The Virtual Reality of <i>Homo Economicus</i> ," <i>Monist</i> 78:3 (1995), 308-329.
Week 10 Nov 23	Character Traits and Human Behavior	G. Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology," <i>Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society</i> 1998-99, 99, pp. 315-331. E. Sosa, "Situations Against Virtues: The Situationist Attack on Virtue Theory," in Mantzavinos. S. Lukes, "Do People Have Character Traits?" in Mantzavinos.
Week 11 Nov 30	Values and Objectivity I	H. Longino, "Beyond 'Bad Science': Skeptical Reflections on the Value-Freedom of Scientific Inquiry," <i>Science, Technology & Human Values</i> 8:1 (1983), 7-17. M. Risjord, "The Politics of Explanation and the Origins of Ethnography," <i>Perspectives on Science</i> 8:1 (2000), 29-52.
Week 12 Dec 7	Values and Objectivity II	S. Harding, "Is There a Feminist Method?" in S. Harding (ed.), <i>Feminism and Methodology</i> (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). A. Wylie, "The Interplay of Evidential Constraints and Political Interests: Recent Archaeological Research on Gender," <i>American Antiquity</i> 57:1 (1992), 15-35.

Late Penalties and Excuses

If you are unable to fulfill any of the requirements for this course by the announced deadlines, you must contact me as soon as possible and always before the deadline in question. If you have a legitimate excuse backed up by supporting documentation (e.g. a medical emergency), your penalties will be reduced or (in some cases) waived. The key is to contact me *as soon as possible* after a problem arises. In the absence of a legitimate excuse, late work will be penalized in accordance with instructions for that particular assignment. Late weekly comments will not be accepted.

Special Accommodation

Students with health-related, learning, physical, psychiatric, or sensory disabilities who require reasonable accommodations in teaching style or evaluation methods should discuss their concerns with me *as soon as possible* so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

Plagiarism and Cheating

If you haven't done so already, please familiarize yourselves with the York University Senate Policy on Academic Honesty at the link below, and if you have questions concerning what constitutes plagiarism in specific cases, please consult with me:

<http://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/policies/document.php?document=69>