

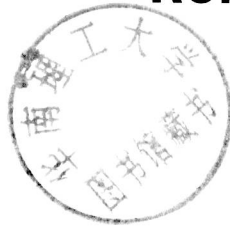


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The Philosophy of the Social Sciences

An Introduction

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Introduction

The social sciences have been of enduring interest. The Nobel Prize for Economics is widely publicized each year, psychologists appear ubiquitous in our culture – including TV sitcoms and movies – and political scientists are interviewed regularly in newspapers and magazines as well as on TV. Part of this interest lies in the fact that we want to know what makes us tick, why we are the way we are. But part of this interest also lies in the kinds of issues social science potentially can address and the worry that, try as they might, social scientists cannot help but bring personal and cultural biases to their research. These latter worries go right to the heart of some of the deepest issues in the philosophy of social science, the subject of this text.

This book is designed to serve as a comprehensive textbook for classes in the philosophy of social science for advanced undergraduate and graduate students at universities. My aim is to be accessible and stimulating to students in philosophy departments as well as students in social-science departments who are interested in the foundations of their disciplines. I focus on important conceptual and methodological questions in the social sciences in a way that identifies a number of often unexamined assumptions underlying the practice of social science, but which does not presume a substantial background in philosophy. These assumptions and issues are critically analyzed along with the key ways they shape the practice of research, the interpretation of findings, and theory formulation in social science.

Separate chapters are devoted to how the assumptions and issues discussed arise in psychology, rational-choice theory, political science and economics. I employ a broad conceptual framework for classifying modes of social-science inquiry affording readers a useful way to compare and contrast approaches to social-science research that often appear quite different or incommensurable. By the end of the book, you will have gained an ability to think critically about crucial aspects of social-science research as well as about the practices of specific disciplines.

With rare exceptions, there is more material in this book than is reasonable to cover in a typical semester for undergraduates. The design of the book is that a

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class will cover all the material in Parts One and Two and then select chapters of interest out of Parts Three and Four. Part One introduces the subject and covers important philosophical, historical and conceptual background serving as a foundation for the rest of the book. In particular, the conceptual framework of five different modes of social inquiry are introduced and discussed (Chapter 3).

The core of the book is contained in Part Two focusing on a sustained examination of the problems of value-neutrality in social sciences. What is unique about this section is its emphasis on how cultural ideals remain hidden away in social-science research, yet colour every aspect of social inquiry. Much of this material is very rarely discussed in the philosophical and professional literature on social science. This lack of attention is indirectly proportional to the influence these ideals have on social science.

Brief expositions of psychology and the behavioural sciences, rational-choice theory, political science and economics are given in Part Three. A chapter is devoted to each of the disciplines or perspectives, where the assumptions and issues discussed in the first two parts of the book are illustrated in each chapter.

Finally, Part Four discusses several issues in the philosophy of social science, some standard and some not. The material here deals with problems in the collection and sorting of data, free will–determinism dilemmas and scientific explanations in social science. The final two chapters in this last part are important for wrapping up the book and I would strongly urge that they be covered no matter what other choices are made. Chapter 16 deals in detail with a theme that appears throughout the book – the question of the similarity of natural science and social-science inquiry. The book concludes in Chapter 17 with a discussion of an alternative path to get beyond the stultifying options of objectivism or relativism that appear to plague our typical thinking about social inquiry.

A book of this nature is simply not possible as an individual endeavour. Rather, it is the product of much conversation and argument with friends, colleagues, students, texts and other interlocutors, far too many to name explicitly. But some do deserve special mention. Frank Richardson has been a true friend, mentor and inspiration. Our numerous conversations over the years have led to a number of the insights in this book that I consider revolutionary. He supplied a number of very helpful and insightful comments on several draft chapters as did David Lorenzo. Many of the ideas in this book were influenced by conversations with Harald Atmanspacher, Charles Guignon and Leonard Smith,

often without their even realizing it. Special thanks to my students who read early drafts of the book as their textbook and offered lots of useful comments from the student's point of view. I would particularly like to acknowledge Sarah Douglas and Adam Green along with the editorial team at Continuum. They were most helpful and made the process of completing this book smoother than I ever could have imagined.

Part One
