

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
WINTER 2017 | TERM 2

PHILOSOPHY 461: PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE
The Very Idea of a Social Science: Objectivity and Looping Effects

Instructor: Professor Alison Wylie
Seminar meetings: Tu/Th 4:30-6:00
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Can human, social subjects be studied “scientifically” or do they require, instead, a distinctive interpretive methodology? The debate about “naturalism” – whether the social sciences can or should model themselves on the natural sciences – has long been central to philosophy of the social sciences. The aim of this seminar is to assess claims for and against naturalism, focusing on recent arguments for grounding philosophical analysis of the social sciences in a detailed understanding of research practice.

We begin with an historical account of how the social sciences took shape in relation to the natural sciences and the humanities – the Gulbenkian Commission report, *Open the Social Sciences* (1996) – and then turn to Winch’s classic defense of anti-naturalism, *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958/2008). Selections from this text and from Cartwright and Montuschi’s *Philosophy of Social Science* will lay the foundations for discussing two sets of issues that will be our focus for the rest of the term.

The first is the question of what epistemic goals and ideals are appropriate for the social sciences. In arguing that social inquiry should not pursue the same goals or institute the same epistemic norms as the natural sciences, Winch presupposed a logical positivist/empiricist conception of science and an aligned “value free” ideal of objectivity that has since been widely criticized. If, as many have argued, this conception of science is untenable, where does this leave the naturalism debate? We focus on the implications of this sea-change in philosophical thinking for ideals of objectivity in the social sciences, and consider analyses of several contrasting examples of social inquiry in which contextual values can be seen to play a role: qualitative case studies, the choice of measurement protocols, and the use of causal analysis and case studies to inform “evidence-based” social policy.

The second set of issues we carry forward from the debate about naturalism are ontological: what kind of subjects are social agents and social entities? What follows from an appreciation that they can be profoundly changed by the process of inquiry itself through what Hacking describes as “looping effects”? This raises ethical as well as methodological and epistemic questions: What accountability do social scientists have to those they study, and what roles can or should the subjects of inquiry play in research? We close the term with a selection of readings from recent reappraisals of social identity developed by feminist and critical race theorists; the use of standpoint theory as a research methodology and as a resource for reconceptualising objectivity; and arguments for and against building reflexive critique into social research.

Texts

- Cartwright & Montuschi (eds.), *Philosophy of Social Science: A New Introduction* (Oxford, 2014).
- Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, 50th anniversary edition (Routledge, 2008/1958).
- All other readings will be available through UBC library reserves and on Canvas.

Requirements and format

This will be a reading-intensive course with the emphasis on seminar-style discussion. The requirements include active participation and weekly discussion posts, as well as two essay assignments: a short expository mid-term paper and a thesis-driven final term paper.

Prerequisites

At least one prior course in a social science and/or in philosophy is strongly recommended. Contact the instructor if you have any questions about appropriate background for this course.

Graduate students are most welcome. If you prefer to take this course for 500-level credit contact the instructor to arrange graduate-level requirements and to complete the necessary form. This request must be approved before registration closes.

A full syllabus, with a schedule of weekly readings and details of graded assignments, will be available on the Canvas course website.

Details of course policies and guidelines will also be posted on Canvas, but here are the UBC guidelines relating to academic integrity.

Academic Integrity

UBC campus-wide policy recognizes “academic honesty” as crucial to the functioning of the university and makes it the responsibility of students to inform themselves of the relevant standards for honest and responsible conduct as members of an academic community. This policy as well as guidelines and procedures related to it are set out in the Academic Calendar: <http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,286,0,0>

Plagiarism

One form of academic honesty that is especially important in your role as a student is to ensure that what you turn in for all course assignments is your own original work. The UBC policy on plagiarism is as follows: Plagiarism, which is intellectual theft, occurs where an individual submits or presents the oral or written work of another person as his or her own. Scholarship quite properly rests upon examining and referring to the thoughts and writings of others. However, when another person's words (i.e. phrases, sentences, or paragraphs), ideas, or entire works are used, the author must be acknowledged in the text, in footnotes, in endnotes, or in another accepted form of academic citation. Where direct quotations are made, they must be clearly delineated (for example, within quotation marks or separately indented). Failure to provide proper attribution is plagiarism because it represents someone else's work as one's own. Plagiarism should not occur in submitted drafts or final works. A student who seeks assistance from a tutor or other scholastic aids must ensure that the work submitted is the student's own. Students are responsible for ensuring that any work submitted does not constitute plagiarism. Students who are in any doubt as to what constitutes plagiarism should consult their instructor before handing in any assignments.

- For the details, see the UBC campus-wide policy on Academic Misconduct, where this statement about plagiarism is posted: <http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/Vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,54,111,959>
- For advice on avoiding plagiarism, citing sources, and respecting copyright, see the Academic Integrity webpage on the UBC Learning Commons: <http://learningcommons.ubc.ca/academic-integrity/>