

Course	PHIL60221 or 60222
Title	Philosophy of Social Science
Tutor	Prof Thomas Uebel

Course Content

Philosophy of social science is a specialised part of the wider field of philosophy of science which concerns the methodological or epistemological and the metaphysical questions raised by science. This course unit deals with philosophical issues that are shared by all of the social sciences, with the majority of these concerning methodological questions. Typically the issue of the relation between the natural and the social sciences plays a major role here. While traditionally the social sciences were held to be either the same in kind as the natural sciences or utterly different from them, the perspective to be explored here grants them both wide-ranging similarities as well as significant differences.

Topics covered in this course unit will include the nature and the role of causal explanation in social science (this may concern the nature of the regularities or laws to be detected in social science and/or the relation of causal to functional, structural and narrative explanations); the nature of and challenges for interpretative understanding (the supposed dichotomy of explanation and understanding); the issue of reductionism and the nature and viability of “methodological individualism” (a broad methodological maxim concerning explanatory priority); conceptual issues in rational choice theory (the supposed assumptions of the “homo economicus”); the nature of the so-called construction of the social world (this is our venture into metaphysics); and, finally, the question of the nature of values, ideology and objectivity in social science (the pros and cons of value-neutrality).

Aims

The course unit aims to

- provide students with a detailed understanding of some of the issues that make up philosophy of social science in general and philosophy of economics in particular
- to help students come to terms with some central texts in the field
- encourage students to think through these issues for themselves and arrive at well-argued conclusions

Objectives

On completion of this unit successful students will be able to demonstrate:

- a critical understanding of some of the disputes that make up philosophy of social science in general and philosophy of economics in particular
- a thorough knowledge of some of the central texts of the field
- an ability to write concisely, relevantly and analytically about the issues raised, both in an essay and under examination conditions

Assessment

5000 Word Essay (100%)

Teaching Methods

After an initial meeting, there will be seven two-hour seminars, at which students will give presentations, and the tutor will lead a discussion of issues raised by texts that we have read.

Students will also have the opportunity to discuss their private reading and writing assignments one-to-one with the tutor.

Preliminary reading

M. Hollis, *The Philosophy of Social Science. An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

D. Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Science*. Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1991.