

# Philosophy of social science

Philosophy 4482/5582, Fall 2005  
Wednesdays 3.00-5.30, 412 Clark Hall

**Instructor: Robert Northcott**

**Room 561, Lucas Building (tel: 314-516-6191)**

**Email: [northcottr@umsl.edu](mailto:northcottr@umsl.edu) (this is the most reliable way to get hold of me quickly)**

**Office hours: Mondays 11.15-12.15, Wednesdays 5.45-6.45, or by appointment**

## Course readings (required, available from the bookstore)

The different readings required each week have been collated into a single reader.

## Course introduction, objectives

Does pornography cause rape? Does a higher minimum wage lead to increased unemployment? Has the invasion of Iraq raised or lowered the risk of terrorism? Answers to questions like these are vital, but unfortunately are also notoriously difficult for social science to find out. It's rarely possible to do controlled experiments, results are in any case difficult to extrapolate to new contexts, and different theories may give radically conflicting advice. In this course we will bring the tools of philosophy to bear on the problem. Does social science have any laws? How could we test for them? How might idealized game theory models be helpful? What kind of social science is even possible? We'll also focus on the crucial issue of how to discover the causes of complex social phenomena. Finally, we will examine whether social science can be value-free or whether certain moral views are always smuggled in from the start

By the end of the course, you should have: (1) a good knowledge of the philosophical problems that face practicing social scientists, and of what philosophy can say about them; (2) a solid foundation from which to pursue, should you wish, further study in the area in the future.

## Grading

Students will be required to take two in-class exams, a mid-term and final, and also to write a paper. The mid-term and paper will each be worth 25% of the total grade, while the final will be worth 30%. Class participation will account for the remaining 20%. Details of the format and content of the exams will be given in due course. The paper should be between 3000 and 4000 words long (i.e. roughly 12 to 15 double-spaced pages). The deadline for the paper is the penultimate class, on December 7<sup>th</sup>. You should consult me in advance about your choice of topic for the paper. I will be using incremental (plus/minus) grading.

A note on class participation: Generally, you do *not* necessarily have to make loads of really smart points to score well for this. However, you *do* have to show an interest in each topic, and show also that you have done the reading for each class. In addition, you will be expected to make at least one short class presentation during the semester. I will explain the details of this.

Generally, you'll need to give me a pretty good reason to miss the deadline for the paper, or to be absent from either of the exams. However, of course unfortunate

circumstances do arise occasionally. The golden rule in those cases is, if possible, to contact me about it in advance. It's much easier sorting things out ahead of time.

### **Approximate course schedule**

This is subject to modification, and is only a guide. However, note that the paper deadline and the dates quoted for the midterm and final exams *are* fixed.

Aug 24            1) Introduction: social science in action

#### *Methodological problems*

Aug 31            2) Are there laws in social science?

Sep 7             3) Can social science be inductive like natural science?

Sep 14            4) Need models always be realistic? Idealization I

Sep 21            5) Need models always be realistic? Idealization II

Sep 28            6) An example of game theory in action: auctions

Oct 5             7) Finding the causes of things

**(Oct 12            Mid-term exam)**

Oct 19            8) More on causes

Oct 26            9) Rationality: what is it exactly?

#### *Can social science be value-free?*

Nov 2             10) Value freedom: introduction

Nov 9             11) More on value freedom

Nov 16            12) Measuring welfare

(Nov 23            Thanksgiving holiday, no class)

Nov 30            13) Happiness: can we define and measure it?

Dec 7             Review, and **deadline for paper**

**(Dec 14            Final exam)**

## **Schedule of readings for each week**

### **Aug 31) Are there laws in social science?**

- H. Kincaid 2005, 'There are laws in the social sciences'
- J. Roberts 2005, 'There are no laws in the social sciences'
- ... each from *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Science*, Hitchcock (ed)

### **Sep 7) Can social science be inductive like natural science?**

- J.S. Mill 1836, 'On the definition and method of political economy', in *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy* 1844
- N. Cartwright 1998, 'Capacities', in *Handbook of Economic Methodology*, Davis, Hands, Maki (eds)
- R. Lucas 1976, 'Econometric policy evaluation: a critique', in *Studies in Business Cycle Theory* 1981

### **Sep 14) Need models always be realistic? Idealization I**

- D. Kreps 1993, *Game Theory and Economic Modeling*, chapter 3
- M. Friedman 1953, 'The methodology of positive economics', in *Essays in Positive Economics*

### **Sep 21) Need models always be realistic? Idealization II**

- R. Sugden 2000, 'Credible worlds: the status of theoretical models in economics', *Journal of Economic Methodology* 7:1 pp1-31
- A. Musgrave 1981, "'Unreal assumptions" in economic theory: the F-twist untwisted', *Kyklos* 34 pp377-87
- N. Cartwright 1999, 'The vanity of rigour in economics', LSE CPNSS Discussion Paper

### **Sep 28) An example of game theory in action: auctions**

- J. McMillan 1994, 'Selling spectrum rights', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 8:3 pp 145-62
- A. Alexandrova 2005, 'Connecting economic models to the real world: game theory and the FCC spectrum auctions', *Philosophy of Social Science*, forthcoming
- F. Guala 2001, 'Building economic machines: the FCC auctions', *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 32:3 pp453-77

### **Oct 5) Finding the causes of things**

- B. Skyrms 1986, *Choice and Chance*, chapter 4
- T. Skocpol 1976, 'France, Russia and China: a structural analysis of social revolutions', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 18:2 pp175-210
- A. Alexandrova 2004, 'Formal qualitative methods: the problem of spurious correlation', 'Tensions in social statistics' conference paper Durham 2004

### **Oct 12) Mid-term exam**

**Oct 19) More on causes**

- D. Hume 1748, *Enquiries concerning human understanding* pp25-79
- J. Pearl 1996, 'The art and science of cause and effect', UCLA public lecture

**Oct 26) Rationality: what is it exactly?**

- D. Hausman 1992, 'On dogmatism in economics: the case of preference reversals', from *The Inexact and Separate Science of Economics*, chapter 13
- G. Gigerenzer 2004, 'Striking a blow for sanity in theories of rationality', from *Essays in Honor of Herbert Simon Augier and March* (eds)

**Nov 2) Value freedom: introduction**

- D. Hausman and M. McPherson 1993, *Economic Analysis and Moral Philosophy*, pp9-16
- D. Hausman and M. McPherson 1993, 'Economics, rationality, and ethics'

**Nov 9) More on value freedom**

- A. Sen 1981, 'Accounts, actions and values: objectivity of social science', from *Social Theory and Political Practice* Lloyd (ed) pp90-107
- A. Atkinson 2001, 'The strange disappearance of welfare economics', *Kyklos* 54 pp193-206

**Nov 16) Measuring welfare**

- G.A. Cohen, 'Equality of what? On welfare, goods and capabilities', pp9-29
- A. Sen, 'Capability and well-being', pp30-53
- C. Korsgaard pp54-61, W. Gaertner pp62-66, commentaries on Cohen and Sen ... each from *The Quality of Life*, Nussbaum and Sen (eds), 1993

**Nov 23) Thanksgiving holiday, no class**

**Nov 30) Happiness: can we define and measure it?**

- E. Diener and M. Seligman 2004, 'Beyond money: toward an economy of well-being', American Psychological Society
- D. Kahneman et al 2004, 'Toward national well-being accounts', *American Economic Review*

**Dec 7) Review, and deadline for paper**

**Dec 14) Final exam**