

## **SYLLABUS: PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE**

**TEXTS:** Bakker & Clark, Explanation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science; Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions; Ryan, The Philosophy of Social Explanation; Flanagan, The Science of the Mind

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

The course will be divided into three sections. The first section will deal with the question of the nature of science, scientific explanation, and the philosophy of science. The second section addresses the nature of the social sciences, as opposed to science in general. The third section covers any number of specific theories in the social sciences: we will study the theories, analyze them using the notions of science previously covered in order to determine their scientific validity, and discuss their success or failure to meet the standards of scientific explanation.

The three sections are overlapping and not to be looked at separate and distinct inquiries. One goal of the course is to draw general conclusions about the nature of science, the social sciences, and the status of scientific theories. To draw such conclusions requires a synthesis of all the materials of the course.

Specific questions included in each section are:

#### *Section 1*

1. What is the essential nature of science as opposed to other disciplines such as art, history, or philosophy? What are the marks of science and what makes science separate from other knowledge-seeking endeavors (such as Zen Buddhism)?
2. What is an explanation? How are scientific explanations different from other sorts of explanations, such as a theological explanation? What is the relation between fact and theory, or theory and observation?
3. Are scientific hypotheses different from other types of hypotheses? How are they developed and verified? What is the process of scientific verification like?
4. Does the verification of scientific hypotheses involve any assumptions about the nature of reality? About what counts as a reliable piece of evidence? What standards of truth are used in the verification process? Are the standards of truth different in science than other fields?
5. Are scientific methods and verification relative to cultures or groups? How do theories and shared beliefs figure into what counts as a fact or as evidence (even into what counts as a science)?
6. What is the role of causality in scientific explanation? What is the role of language? Thought? Value judgments?

## Section 2

1. What are social sciences? What traits do they share in common with each other? With the "hard" sciences?
2. Since social sciences deal with human actions, we need to ask about the exact nature of human actions and responses. Can they be explained causally, like any other natural physical phenomenon? What is the connection between intention and action? Intention and language? Can such abstract factors be handled scientifically and how?
3. Can we make predictions about human actions and responses that are scientifically valid? Can there be a science of psychology, of economics, of politics, social behavior? How will we classify and evaluate evidence in each field? Does the notion of free will, and whether or not we accept its existence, help or hinder the attempt to scientifically study human behavior?
4. Are social sciences more or less value-laden than "hard" sciences? Is this a positive, negative, or neutral factor? Is the goal of social science to be value-neutral, objective, factual?

## Section 3

1. Are psychological theories all alike in their status as scientific or non-scientific? What about economics, sociology, history, etc.?
2. What are the positive and negative features of psychoanalysis, functionalism, behaviorism, etc., so far as their scientific status is concerned? How do we determine the truth or falsity of statements, laws, and predictions in these schools of psychology? Can there be a science of psychology at all when there is so much dispute amongst psychologists themselves?
3. Are the terms in psychology or other specific social sciences value-neutral? Consider terms such as 'mental health', 'law of supply and demand', 'illness', 'social ill', 'dysfunctional family', or 'political truth': are these meaningful, objective, subjective...?
4. Should explanations in social science be held to the same rigor as those of the "hard" sciences? Should these explanations refer to groups or to individuals? Is there such a thing as "group psychology", or "social psychology", or "world economics"? Or do all explanations of such things ultimately need to be reduced to a description of the behavior of individuals?

The order of the readings will be: Handouts given the first day of class (the nature of science, hypotheses, explanation, verification, etc.); the Bakker and Clark text; Kuhn; and finally, Flanagan. The Ryan book of readings will be used to supplement these readings throughout the semester where appropriate. Additional handouts may be added, as well.