

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
PHILOSOPHY 466

PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE
SPRING 2015

**The Very Idea of a Social Science:
Objectivity, Looping Effects, and the Goals of Social Inquiry**

Instructor: Professor Alison Wylie
Seminar meetings: Tuesday/Thursday 11:30-1:20, JHN 022

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 arguments for and against naturalism, focusing on recent arguments for rethinking the oppositional terms of the debate.

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). Winch’s analysis raised in particularly pointed terms two sets of issues that will be our focus for the rest of the quarter. The first is the question of what epistemic ideals are appropriate to the social sciences. Critiques of the conception of “science” that anchored Winch’s account anticipate now-standard arguments that values play a role in all sciences, and that a ‘view from nowhere’ conception of objectivity is untenable. It is the situated, complex nature of scientific practice generally, not just idiosyncratic features of the social sciences, that requires a systematic reframing of these ideals.

The second set of issues we carry forward from Winch are ontological: what kind of subjects are social entities and social kinds? What follows from the fact that they’re subject to what Hacking describes as “looping effects”: the process of studying social subjects can quite profoundly change them? We end the quarter with a selection of readings that build on these critiques of the naturalist:anti-naturalist divide: arguments for various forms of standpoint theory, and recent reappraisals of social identity constructs due to feminist and critical race theorists.

The 2015 joint meeting of the **Philosophy of Social Science Roundtable** and the **European Network for Philosophy of the Social Sciences** (RT/ENPOSS) will be hosted at UW this quarter: **May 8-10**, at the Simpson Center for the Humanities. The readings assigned for the seminar are designed to complement these proceedings, and seminar participants are invited to attend and report back to class on RT/ENPOSS conference events. The program is available at: <http://www.poss-rt.net/>

Texts

Articles: posted on Canvas - <https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/968073/files>

Books: available through the UW bookstore:

- 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).

Requirements

This course will function as a seminar with the emphasis on discussion. Each member of the seminar will be expected to lead at least one in-class discussion in the course of the quarter. Written assignments will include reading responses posted online, including responses related to the RT/ENPOSS conference sessions, and one term paper of 15-20 pages.