

**UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**  
**WINTER 2017 | TERM 2**

**PHILOSOPHY 461: PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE**

**The Very Idea of a Social Science:  
Naturalism, Objectivity, and Looping Effects**

*Instructor:* Professor Alison Wylie  
*Seminar meetings:* Tu/Th 2:00-3:30  
Room: Food, Nutrition & Health #50  
*Office Hours:* M 2:00-3:00, Th 4:00-5:00  
or by appointment

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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 moving beyond the terms of this abstract, oppositional debate and 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). Winch’s analysis raised two sets of issues that will be our focus for the rest of the term. The first is the question of what epistemic ideals are appropriate to the social sciences. Winch’s anti-naturalism presupposes 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, ideals of objectivity are radically contingent and social, contextual values play a pivotal role in all forms of scientific practice, not just social inquiry, where does this leave the naturalism debate? We focus on the implications of this sea-change in philosophical thinking about “values in science” 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 Winch are ontological: what kind of subjects are social entities and social kinds? What follows from the fact 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 that build on these critiques of the naturalist:anti-naturalist divide: recent reappraisals of social identity due to feminist and critical race theorists; the use of standpoint theory as a research methodology and resource for reconceptualising objectivity; and arguments for and against building reflexive critique, in the form of “radical historicism,” into social research.

**Texts**

*Articles:* available through UBC library reserves and on Canvas

*Books:* available through the UBC bookstore

- Cartwright & Montuschi (eds.), *Philosophy of Social Science: A New Introduction* (Oxford, 2014).
- Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (Routledge, 2008/1958).

**Requirements and format**

This is a reading-intensive course with the emphasis on seminar-style discussion. The requirements include active participation (10%), discussion posts (25%); and two essay assignments: a short expository mid-term paper (2-3 pages; 15%) and a thesis-driven final term paper (10-12 pages; 50%).