Philosophy of the Social Sciences

Lectures
Michaelmas Term 2009, Fridays Weeks 2-7 9.15-10.45
Lecture Theatre, Social Studies Building, Manor Road

The objectives of these lectures are:

- To introduce students to the philosophical analysis of explanation.
- To introduce philosophical analysis of relevant key concepts including theory, facts, values, cause, rationality, agency, interpretation, action.
- To introduce the history of philosophical debates that underpin current controversies regarding social scientific explanation.
- To introduce the philosophical analysis of methodologies including empiricism, positivism, realism, instrumentalism, functionalism, structuralism, interpretivism, phenomenology.

The sessions will consist of a one hour lecture. For those who have to submit coursework for this subject, and for any others who wish to stay, this will be followed by an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the issues.

(For students who have to submit coursework in this subject, there will be two classes for further study of the philosophy of explanation, and essay planning, in Hilary 2009).

Introductory and General Reading

Introductory
Alan Chalmers What is this thing called science? Milton Keynes, Open Univ Press, 1982

General
Alexander Rosenberg Philosophy of Social Science 3rd edn, Oxford, 2004

More Advanced
James Bohman New Philosophy of Social Science: problems of indeterminacy Polity 1991 intro + chs 1 and 2
Jon Elster The Cement of Society CUP 1989
Sandra Harding The Science Question in Feminism Milton Keynes, Open Univ Press, 1986, chs 2,3,8
Charles Taylor Philosophy and the Sciences of Man Cambridge 1985

Lecture 1. Week 2.
Explanation I - the deductive nomological model of scientific explanation
Problem: "All scientific explanations must be deductive; that means that the objects of scientific knowledge must be law governed; that means that the idea of a 'social science' is dubious"

J S Mill The Logic of the Moral Sciences esp ch 3
Karl Popper The Logic of Scientific Discovery esp chs 1,4,5; or Objective Knowledge esp chs 1,2; or Conjectures and Refutations esp chs 1,3,10,11
Carl Hempel Aspects of Scientific Explanation esp chs 9, 12; or ch I of David Hillel-Ruben (ed) Explanation Oxford Univ Press 1993

Lecture 2. Week 3
Explanation II - the realist critique of empiricist accounts of causal explanation
Problem: "Great philosophers have had the utmost difficulty in arriving at an operationalisable philosophical analysis of the difference between a genuine 'cause' and 'accidentally true generalisations' or simple empirical associations. Yet in social science we need to know whether one factor really is the cause of another."

David Hume An Enquiry into Human Understanding ...
Nancy Cartwright How the Laws of Physics Lie
Jon Elster 'Mechanisms' in Explaining Social Behaviour

Lecture 3. Week 4
Explanation III - the interpretive critique of causal explanation in the social sciences
Problem: "An adequate explanation of an agent’s behaviour or action must include reasons and understandings from the agent’s point of view; reasons cannot be causes in the scientific sense; so there can be no conventionally scientific explanations of human actions."

Peter Winch The Idea of a Social Science 2nd edn including Preface
"Understanding a Primitive Society” in Ethics and Action Routledge 1972
Donald Davidson Truth and Interpretation esp section 'Language and Reality'
Ludwig Wittgenstein Philosophical Investigations I, ss 198 ff (on 'following a rule')
Alasdair MacIntyre "The Idea of a Social Science" in Alan Ryan (ed) The Philosophy of Social Explanation
Max Weber The Methodology of the Social Sciences
Jon Elster Explaining Social Behaviour esp chs 1 and 5.

Lecture 4, Week 5.
Scientific Theory I - how do we judge whether a theory is scientific?

J S Mill The Logic of the Moral Sciences
Karl Popper The Logic of Scientific Discovery esp chs 1,4,5; or Objective Knowledge esp chs 1,2; or Conjectures and Refutations esp chs 1,3,10,11
Thomas Kuhn The Structure of Scientific Revolutions 3rd edn Chicago 1996 (1st edn 1962)
Peter Winch The Idea of a Social Science 2nd edn including Preface
Lecture 5, Week 6.
Scientific Theory II - what is a scientific theory? what is the relationship between scientific theory, scientific knowledge, scientific data, and reality?
Problem: "No clear distinction can be drawn between 'theories' and 'observations' so the empirical testing of theories is impossible."

Karl Popper The Logic of Scientific Discovery ch 3
Thomas Kuhn, The Essential Tension Chicago 1977

Lecture 6. Week 7
Structure and Agency - decisions, actions, causes and explanations.
Problem: "So-called scientific explanations of decision and action are based on models that bear as much resemblance to real world processes as a model railway does to a real railway."

Milton Friedman 'The Methodology of Positive Economics' in Martin and McIntyre (eds).
Max Weber The Methodology of the Social Sciences
Donald Davidson 'Actions, Reasons and Causes'; 'Hempel on Explaining Actions' in Essays on Actions and Events
Charles Taylor ”What is Human Agency?” in Human Agency and Language
Jon Elster Explaining Social Behaviour