

## **Philosophy, Values, and the Social Sciences**

This course examines the interplay between values and social sciences. It asks both how the social sciences are or should be influenced by values and how moral or political philosophy should incorporate the findings of the social sciences. The course has two overall aims: first, to encourage critical reflection on the methodology of the social sciences and, second, to explore the relationship between normative philosophy and the social sciences.

We will address questions including: Are the social sciences inevitably more value-laden than the natural sciences? Should citizens decide what scientists research? Are there moral or political reasons for social scientists to sometimes refrain from researching particular topics, or reasons that limit how they should communicate their results? How should science guide policy? What can and should moral philosophy learn from the social sciences? What about political philosophy? What should the relation between political philosophy and political science be like?

The course is designed to appeal to undergraduate students familiar with the social sciences, especially political science or economics, and to encourage topical reflection on the relationship between fact and value, between democracy and expertise, as well as providing an introduction to the main themes of philosophy of social science.

### **Course outline:**

#### **1. What is social science?**

Many think the social sciences are different to the natural sciences. Some think that this is a problem for the social sciences, while others hold that social science does not have the same aims as the natural sciences. This week, we will explore a range of reasons for the apparent differences. Are the social sciences different from the natural sciences? Do they have different aims? Are the social sciences inevitably more value-laden?

#### **2. Should social science be value-laden?**

This week, we explore whether the social sciences should be value-laden. We look at the disadvantages of the ideal of a value-free science and consider the advantages of seeing science as value-laden. We also ask which values should, and which should not, inform social science.

#### **3. Research funding and values**

Who should decide what research gets funded? Should the agenda of the social sciences be set democratically? What problems might that create?

#### **4. Science and policy**

Should politicians defer to the findings of social science? Many call for ‘evidence-based policy’. But what standards should that evidence have to meet? Will evidence-based policy miss out on other important considerations? We explore the challenges facing evidence-based policy making.

#### **5. The ethics of scientific communication**

Policy makers and the general public are often interested in scientific findings. But how should scientific findings be communicated? What if they are likely to be controversial or misinterpreted? How should scientists communicate under uncertainty? We examine the ethics of scientific communication, with a focus on social science.

#### **6. Economics and value**

Is economics value free? Ought economics be value free? This week considers what ethical assumptions economists might be making, and whether they are defensible.

#### **7. Political science and political philosophy**

In many departments, there isn’t as much interchange between political philosophers and political scientists as one might expect. Ought the two parts of the discipline be closer? What are the aims of political science? Should political philosophy set the agenda for political science? Should political science inform political philosophy?

#### **8. The fact/value distinction**

Can we learn anything about what *ought* to be the case from what *is* the case? Some think not. But is there a way to overcome the is/ought dichotomy? Do we have to overcome it in order to hold that the sciences could inform philosophy?

#### **9. Ethics and the case of social psychology**

Virtue ethics holds that we ought to cultivate the right kind of character. But recently, some have observed that this idea might be in conflict with the findings of social psychology about what really motivates our behaviour: situations, rather than stable character traits. Through the particular case of the situationist challenge to virtue ethics, we explore what moral philosophy might learn from the findings of social psychology, as well as the pitfalls of attempting to integrate the two.

#### **10. Political philosophy and feasibility constraints**

This week we turn to consider integrating political philosophy and the social sciences, through the case of the debate over whether justice is subject to a feasibility requirement. On the face of it, social science would be full of findings of the sort that could inform our ideas about what justice requires for beings like us. But is that how we should conceptualise justice? Is that even the way that we should conceptualise social science?