

## Philosophy of social science

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**Philosophy of social science**, branch of [philosophy](#) that examines the concepts, methods, and [logic](#) of the [social sciences](#). The philosophy of [social science](#) is consequently a metatheoretical endeavour—a theory about theories of social life. To achieve their end, philosophers of social science investigate both the practice of the social sciences and the nature of the entities that the social sciences study—namely, human beings themselves. The philosophy of social science can be broadly descriptive (unearthing the fundamental [conceptual](#) tools in social science and relating them to the tools employed in other human endeavours), [prescriptive](#) (recommending that a certain approach be adopted by the social sciences so that they can accomplish what the recommender thinks social science ought to accomplish), or some combination of the two.

Historically, many philosophers of social science have taken the basic question of their [discipline](#) to be whether the social sciences can be “scientific” in the same way that the natural sciences are. The approach that answers this question affirmatively is called [naturalism](#), whereas that which answers it negatively is known as [humanism](#), though a number of theories attempt to combine these two approaches. Given this framework, the term *philosophy of social science* is arguably misleading, because it suggests that the discipline is concerned with the social sciences insofar as they are sciences or scientific; thus the term seems to imply naturalism. To avoid this suggestion, practitioners sometimes denominate their field of inquiry: “philosophy of social inquiry” or “philosophy of social studies.” By whatever name the field is called, it ought to be clear that whether or how the study of human social behaviour is scientific is an open question that is part of the business of the philosopher of social sciences to address.

Naming the area to be studied “social studies” calls attention to how wide the field of inquiry into [human behaviour](#) and relations is. In addition to the core [disciplines](#) of [economics](#), [political science](#), [anthropology](#), and [sociology](#), the social studies also include such [disparate](#) disciplines as [archaeology](#), [demography](#), human [geography](#), [linguistics](#), [social psychology](#), and aspects of [cognitive science](#), among others. This should indicate the range of the field that the philosophy of social sciences [encompasses](#) and how [diverse](#) the questions, methods, concepts, and explanatory strategies are within the field.

### Meanings And Causes Of Human Behaviour

Human actions can be described as self-evidently meaningful; they are typically performed for a purpose and express an intention, and they also often follow rules that make them the kinds of action they are. Thus, people do not simply move their limbs or emit sounds, they vote or marry or sell or communicate, and, when they do, their actions and relations appear to be different in kind from the behaviour of other animals, especially nonconscious animals (such as [sponges](#)). Philosophers mark this difference by saying that humans act, whereas entities that lack [consciousness](#) or that lack the capacity to form intentions merely move.

How should the interpretation of the meanings of actions fit into the study of human behaviour? Does it introduce elements that make such a study different in kind from studying entities whose movements are not meaningful? Those who give an [affirmative](#) answer to the latter of these questions insist that social science must either be an interpretive endeavour or must at least provide a role for the interpretation of meanings within it; for them, meaning is the central concept of the social sciences. German theorists of the late 19th century initially developed this line of thought by conceiving of social science as the study of “spirit” (*Geisteswissenschaften*). The term *spirit* harkens back to [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel](#)’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), in which “spirit” referred in part to the broad [intellectual](#) and cultural dimensions of a people. Philosophers such as [Heinrich Rickert](#) and [Wilhelm Dilthey](#) argued that human phenomena are the product of conscious and intentional beings who became so by means of enculturation (the assimilation of a [culture](#), including its values and practices), and this means that the human sciences must concentrate on meaning and its interpretation as they attempt to understand human life.

This line of thought continued into the 20th century and beyond. Most notable was the application of hermeneutics to the study of human social life. The term [hermeneutics](#) derives from the Greek word *hermeneuein* (“to interpret”), which in turn comes from the Greek word for the god [Hermes](#), who carried messages from the other gods. Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation, originally of written texts and later of all forms of human expression. It originated in the modern period in reflections on the interpretation of the [Bible](#). A number of hermeneutical theories of the social sciences have been developed, the most significant being that of the German philosopher [Hans-Georg Gadamer](#), presented in his masterpiece *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960; *Truth and Method*), and that of the French philosopher [Paul Ricoeur](#), discussed in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation* (1981). Hermeneuticists argue that human actions are the expressions of ideas and feelings and as such are essentially meaningful phenomena. To understand them is more akin to interpreting a text or a painting than it is to dissecting the contents of a [cell](#) and the causes that produced them. Meaning, not cause, and understanding (meaning), not (causal) [explanation](#), is the rallying point for philosophers of social science of this persuasion, though they offer varied accounts of what is entailed in interpreting meaning.

A cognate line of thinking developed largely in England and in the United States out of the later philosophy of [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#), as represented especially in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), a work that argued for the essentially social nature of linguistic meaning, which it parsed in terms of rule following. [Analytic](#) philosophers, most notably Peter Winch in *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (1958), applied this [idea](#) to the social sciences, hoping to show that the study of human beings involves a scheme of concepts and methods of analysis that are wholly unlike those in the natural sciences.

[Phenomenology](#) is another branch of philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness of beings who are [conscious](#) and who know that they are. The German philosopher [Edmund Husserl](#) founded the phenomenological movement in the early 20th century. A number of important thinkers, most notably the American sociologist and philosopher [Alfred Schutz](#) and the French philosopher [Maurice Merleau-Ponty](#), developed Husserl’s insights, suitably changing and

refining them to make them applicable to the study of human social life. Phenomenologists focus on the fact that human doings are consciously undertaken and are thus essentially intentional in character. They have an “inside” that phenomenologists argue cannot be ignored when they are studied. For this reason, humans cannot be studied in the way in which [plants](#) and [molecules](#) are; instead, the structures of human [consciousness](#) must be unearthed and shown how they are expressed in human relations and actions. Human acts are typically gestural in that they express some psychological state and cultural orientation, and much of what humans do is shaped by their culture and psychological states—motives, desires, goals, feelings, and moods as well as the [life-world](#) (the world as immediately or directly experienced), in which psychological beings necessarily exist. The study of human life consequently involves such things as [empathy](#), attempting to relive what others have experienced and to grasp their subjective states, and the like. This way of thinking has underwritten a variety of approaches in the social sciences, the most well-known being ethnomethodology, a school of sociology formulated by the American sociologist Harold Garfinkel in his classic work *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967). Ethnomethodology seeks to uncover the “taken-for-granted” structures of everyday life and to [delineate](#) how they are maintained and changed over time.

The social sciences that figure most saliently in humanist approaches, which centrally feature the interpretation of meaning and consciousness, are anthropology, [history](#), and those parts of sociology that focus on the margins of mainstream society. The reason for this emphasis in sociology is that, when confronting the behaviour of those whose linguistic, cultural, and conceptual worlds are significantly different from their own, social analysts cannot ignore questions of meaning. Moreover, these disciplines strikingly confront a host of questions that trouble philosophers of social science, questions that are grouped around the topic of relativism (the doctrine that either experience, [assessments](#) of value, or even reality itself is a function of a particular conceptual scheme; these views are called, respectively, epistemological, [moral](#), and ontological relativism).

But not all philosophers of social science believe that meaning is something on which the social sciences should focus. Despite the fact that human actions and relations are clearly meaningful on the surface, some philosophies of social science have denied that meaning ultimately has (or should have) a fundamental role to play in the social sciences. One of the most noteworthy of these approaches is [behaviourism](#), which dispenses with inner mental states and cultural meanings altogether. Instead, human behaviour is conceived as a series of responses to external stimuli, responses that are regulated by the patterns of conditioning that have been inculcated into the organism.

Other approaches that deny that the interpretation of meaning is of fundamental import in the social sciences include [systems theory](#) and [structuralism](#). Systems theory conceives of society as an entity each of whose various parts plays a certain role or performs a certain function in order to maintain society or to keep it in equilibrium; such roles are played by those who inhabit them, whether they know that they are doing so or not. Structuralism asserts that agents do not create the structure of meanings through which they act; rather, as social subjects, they are “created” by this structure, of which their acts are mere expressions. As a result, the purpose of

social science is to unearth the elements of this structure and to reveal its inner logic. In both systems theory and structuralism, the meaning that behaviour has for those engaging in it is ultimately irrelevant to its explanation. Behaviourists, systems theorists, and structuralists base their approaches on the assumption that human behaviour is the result of prior causes in the same way that the behaviour of plants and animals is.

## The Nature Of Theory In Social Science

Beyond the intentions and meanings associated with behaviour, social scientists are also interested in mapping out the basic structures of society and the resources, social and otherwise, that underwrite these structures. They are also concerned with the unintended consequences of actions and relations. In all of these investigations, social scientists go beyond deciphering the meaning and import of acts and relations to uncover their broader causes and effects. Indeed, depending on how broad and successful [social science](#) is in this task, causal explanations become [integrated](#) into theories of social life—theories that typically go far beyond the self-understandings of the agents involved. Examples include [Keynesian](#) or [monetarist](#) theories in [economics](#), [kinship](#) theories in [anthropology](#), and [modernization](#) theory in [political science](#) and [sociology](#). Questions about the nature of social-scientific theorizing abound: for example, can theories in the social sciences involve genuine laws, and what makes a regularity into a law? Can the social sciences make warranted predictions about future actions or relationships? Should the social sciences ultimately aim at [explanation](#) in terms of individual actions or in terms of groups or group structures (i.e., should fundamental explanations in the social sciences be individualistic or holistic)?

To these sorts of questions, humanists have sometimes insisted that [causality](#) in the social sciences is different in kind than causality in the natural sciences. Others have tried to work out a middle road that combines the best of both the naturalist approach, with its focus on causality, and the humanist approach, which focuses on meaning. The methodological writings of the German sociologist [Max Weber](#) are a particularly vivid instance of this.

An important class of theories in the social sciences—so-called competence theories—constitute a distinctive type. Theories of this type explain [human behaviour](#) as arising from principles of rationality or from internalized systems of rules. Examples include [game theory](#) (including [prisoner's dilemma](#) games), [Noam Chomsky's](#) theory of [transformational grammar](#), and [Jürgen Habermas's](#) theory of communicative competence. These examples are indicative of the ways in which theorizing in the social sciences may be fundamentally different from that in the natural sciences.

Meaningful actions involve rationality because they consist of following rules, procedures, principles, and the like. For example, in order to christen a ship, a speaker may need to act in accordance with linguistic rules that specify the circumstances in which an utterance of the form “I christen thee” counts as a christening of a ship. Or, again, principles of economic reasoning specify how much product to bring to market in order to maximize profit. An actor's competence is his mastery of the rules or norms of rationality that apply to a particular activity, and competence theories are those that seek to describe in detail what these rules and norms are.

They proceed by discovering how an idealized actor who is perfectly rational or who has perfectly mastered the relevant rules would behave in various situations.

Another way in which theories in the social sciences are different from those in the natural sciences is that the entities being explained in the social sciences (i.e., human beings), unlike those being explained in the natural sciences, themselves possess their own theories about what they and others are doing. One might call these theories the agents' self-understanding or their [ideology](#). Moreover, it is plausible to claim (though some theorists have denied this) that agents' [ideology](#) is an important element of any account of how they behave. But this raises the question of what is the relationship, in social-scientific theories, between, on the one hand, the ideology and self-understanding of the agents and, on the other, the theoretical constructs that social-scientific observers of their behaviour might propose. Does the former take [precedence](#) over the latter? Does the former constrain the latter? These are questions that philosophers of the natural sciences need not address, because the phenomena studied in the natural sciences are not the product of the ideology of that which is being studied. Indeed, the notion of ideology points to an activity crucial in the social sciences but one potentially in tension with its scientific [aspirations](#), namely, [critique](#).

### **The Role Of Critique In Social Science**

Critique becomes a possible dimension of social science because the self-understandings that serve as a basis for the actions and relations of agents may themselves be systematically mistaken. That is, agents' self-understandings may be at variance with their situation, and they may characterize themselves and others (their motivations, their emotions, their beliefs, etc.) in ways that [manifest](#) ignorance or even self-deception. They may be under the control of an ideology that masks their social and personal reality, or they may be the victims of an irrationality that hinders them and makes them act in unintelligent or deluded ways. Such irrationality may lie beneath their frustrations or the social conflicts in which they perform find themselves. All of this suggests that, in order to understand and explain what such people are doing and how they are relating to others, social scientists must engage in what is called ideology critique: they must assess the accuracy and rationality of the basic self-understandings of those whom they study, they must explain why and how any misunderstandings arose and continue to function, and they must suggest in what ways these misunderstandings can be corrected. Examples of important social theories for which ideology critique is central are those of [Karl Marx](#), [Sigmund Freud](#), Habermas, and some [feminist](#) theories.

[Deconstruction](#) is yet another form of critique in the social sciences, one inspired by the work of the French philosopher [Jacques Derrida](#) and by [postmodernism](#) more generally. Deconstruction is the procedure in which that which is hidden in an entity (such as a category or a social formation) is brought to light and shown to be part of the entity, even though it was ostensibly something [antithetical](#) to it. For example, the category "heterosexual," and a social order based on this category, might rest on a contrast between heterosexuality and homosexuality, in which the latter is typically conceived as defective. But deconstruction might show that heterosexual identity is in fact parasitically dependent on homosexuality, even as the former tries to exclude or subordinate the latter—indeed, it might show that the difference between these two terms is

constitutive of their meaning and, thus, that homosexuality is a hidden aspect of the identity of heterosexuals. What is true for the opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality may also be true for other antinomies: white versus black, colonizer versus colonized, sane versus mad, or saved versus damned.

The [assessment](#) of rationality or the [coherence](#) of schemes of meaning (including ideology critique and deconstruction) raise questions about the objectivity of social science. How do social scientists go about assessing rationality or coherence in a way that avoids simply judging others on the basis of the scientist's own [predilections](#)? Of course, questions about objectivity arise even if [assessments](#) of rationality and coherence play no essential role in the social sciences, for the simple reason that social science investigates phenomena that include the social scientists themselves and that often have close bearing on their own values and on what they hope or fear for themselves and their fellow humans. Questions about the conditions and nature of objectivity are thus a central concern of the [philosophy](#) of social sciences.