

Philosophy and Methods of the Social Sciences

Instructors

Cameron Macdonald & Don Tontiplaphol

Teaching Fellow

Tim Beaumont

Social Studies 40

Spring 2014

T&TH (10–11 AM)

Pound Hall #200

Lecture 6: Feb. 13

Interpretation and the Sciences

(Prefatory Soundtrack: Stereolab, "What's Society Built On?"
Our answer for today: "Thought.")

Outline

- 1: The arc so far . . .
 - ▶ Motivating individualism?
 - ▶ “I’ll teach you differences”
- 2: Two pictures of the world
- 3: Explaining human action: as *description*
- 4: Explaining human action: as *rationality-revealing*
- 5: The crucial thought
- 6: Kuhn: Taylor-plus-MacIntyre . . . *gone mad* . . . ?
- 7: Preparing for Armitage

1-a:

The arc thus far...

- ▶ Motivating individualism?
 - ▶ Behavior \neq action... in some sense
 - ▶ Belief—or thought, or the “mental”—matters... in some sense
 - ▶ But how?

Motivating individualism?

Target for analysis: “ q because p ”

- ▶ Nomological demand: observed *regularity*?
 - ▶ p [observation]
 - ▶ p -type \rightarrow q -type [covering law]
 - ▶ *NB*: Not a “causal” arrow, but a “material” arrow
 - ▶ Therefore, q [observation]
- ▶ Nomological demand: *counterfactual* support?
 - ▶ In addition: If event (or event-type) p hadn't happened, then event (or event-type) q wouldn't have happened
 - ▶ Time for metaphysics?

Motivating individualism?

Target for analysis: “ q because p ”

Now: What kinds of things—or events or event-types or facts—belong in the place of p and q ?

- ▶ Holism?
- ▶ — *rates* explain *rates*?
- ▶ — *generalizations* explain *generalizations*?
- ▶ — *generalizations* explain *instances*?
- ▶ Individualism?

Motivating individualism?

Target for analysis: “ q because p ”

Now: What kinds of things—or events or event-types or facts—belong in the place of p and q ?

- ▶ Individualism?
- ▶ — micro-theory?
- ▶ — processes?
- ▶ — mechanisms?
- ▶ — beliefs?
- ▶ — The *Heat Wave* debate. . .

1-b:

The arc thus far...

- ▶ Motivating individualism
- ▶ “I’ll teach you differences”
— Wittgenstein on his *Philosophical Investigations*

“I’ll teach you differences”

Two conceptions of philosophy

- ▶ Bedrock truth?
- ▶ Score-keeping, cost-counting?
 - ▶ $p \rightarrow q$ [rational commitment]
 - ▶ $\neg p \rightarrow$ maybe $q, s, t?$ [rational liberty]
 - ▶ Durkheim; Weber; Mill; Hempel
 - ▶ Jackson & Pettit; List; Elster; et al.

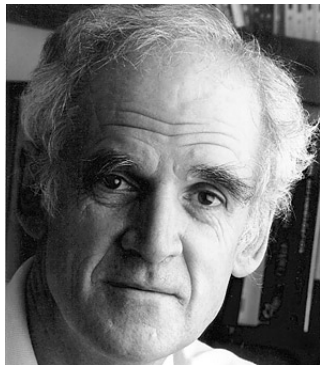
2:

Two pictures of the world

- ▶ The scientific image v. the manifest image
- ▶ The realm of law v. the space of reasons
- ▶ Matter in motion v. exercises of agency and of meaning-making
- ▶ Disenchanted v. enchanted

Which picture *must* the social sciences adopt? Which pictures *can* they adopt? Where can rationality—or intelligibility—fit in, in such pictures?

Charles Taylor



- ▶ McGill, Oxford, Northwestern
- ▶ Helped to revive Hegel scholarship in the “analytic” world
- ▶ *Doktorvater* to some Social Studies notables

Presuppositions?

- ▶ Behavior \neq action
- ▶ Explaining human action requires appealing to beliefs?
- ▶ Or: Explaining human action permits appealing to beliefs?

Presuppositions?

- ▶ Intentionality & intensionality
 - ▶ Bob believes that George W. Bush laughed weirdly.
 - ▶ GW Bush is the son of George Herbert Walker Bush.
 - ▶ So: Bob believes that the son of GHW Bush laughed weirdly.
- ▶ Problems with this argument?
- ▶ If it seems sanitary, what about *Clark Kent & Superman* instead?
(H/t: Tim)

Taylor's main question

Is interpretation essential to social science?

- ▶ Essential as a means?
- ▶ Essential as *internal* to doing social science?
- ▶ Essential as *internal* to doing social science *well*?

A “prevailing epistemological prejudice” (5)

The argument?

- (1) Some necessary conditions for interpretation are...XYZ....
- (2) Human actions satisfy...XYZ....
- ∴ (3) Human actions are suitable objects for interpretation.
- (4) But the social sciences aim at explanations of human action.
- ∴ (5) The social sciences must involve interpretation.

Problems with the argument?

But what is interpretation, anyway?

Three *necessary* conditions for an activity to count as interpretative:

- (a) Its object is capable of being more or less coherent.
- (b) Its object differs from its expression.
- (c) Its object is for or by a subject.

So: The social sciences as interpretative?

The argument, again

- (1) Some necessary conditions for interpretation are...XYZ....
- (2) Human actions satisfy...XYZ....
- ∴ (3) Human actions are suitable objects for interpretation.
- (4) But the social sciences aim at explanations of human action.
- ∴ (5) The social sciences must involve interpretation.

The “hermeneutic circle”

- ▶ Background: Ontology v. Epistemology
 - Are there such things as witches?
 - What warrants your denial?
- ▶ The “hermeneutical circle” (6)

The “hermeneutic circle”

“What we are trying to establish is a certain reading of text or expressions, and what we appeal to as our grounds for this reading can only be other readings” (6).

Two options:

- 1: “Perhaps the only sane response” (6)
- 2: To break out of the circle

Breaking out of the circle

Two more options:

- 2-a: Hegelian “absolutism” or “rationalism”
- 2-b: “Empiricism”: beyond subjectivity

Beyond subjectivity

“Empiricism” :

- “Brute data”
- Underdetermination of theory by data
- Eliminate appeals to beliefs: the machine criterion
- “Matter in motion”

“These notions about the sciences of man are sterile, [. . .] we cannot come to understand important dimensions of human life within the bounds set by this epistemological orientation” (10).

The argument, again

- (1) Some necessary conditions for interpretation are...XYZ....
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3:

Explaining human action: description

“On the phenomenological level or that of ordinary speech [...] a certain notion of meaning has an essential place in the characterization of human behavior. This is the sense in which we speak of a situation, an action, a demand, a prospect having a certain meaning for a person” (10).

The stakes

Utter mysteriousness! Two worlds!

The stakes

“There is thus a quite legitimate notion of meaning which we use when we speak of the meaning of a situation for an agent. And that this concept has a place is integral to our ordinary consciousness and hence speech about our actions. Our actions are ordinarily characterized by the purpose sought and explained by desires, feelings, emotions. But the language by which we describe our goals, feelings, desires is also a definition of the meaning things have for us” (12).

The argument, again

- (1) Some necessary conditions for interpretation are...XYZ....
- (2) Human actions satisfy...XYZ....
- ∴ (3) Human actions are suitable objects for interpretation.
- (4) But the social sciences aim at explanations of human action.
- ∴ (5) The social sciences must involve interpretation.

Winks and nods

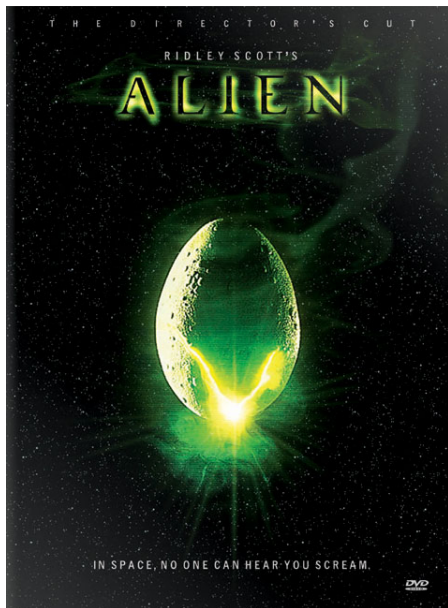
- ▶ How can *actions* have *meaning*?
 - What must be true for *winking* to be *flirting*?

Winks and nods

Winking as flirting:

1. “Meaning is for a subject” (11).
- 2.
- 3.

Winks and nods



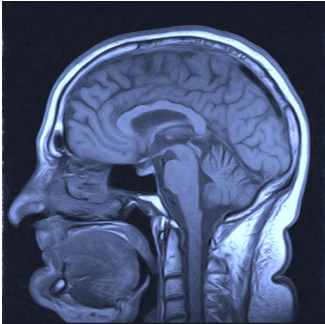
No one can flirt in space.

Winks and nods

Winking as flirting:

1. “Meaning is for a subject” (11).
2. “Meaning is of something” (11).
- 3.

Winks and nods



Mental flirting?

Winks and nods

Winking as flirting:

1. “Meaning is for a subject” (11).
2. “Meaning is of something” (11).
3. Meaning is “in a field” (11).

Winks and nods



Gesundheit!

“Meaning is in a field.”

But how many “fields”?

- ▶ Fregean “concepts”:
 - “Vienna is the capital of Austria.”
 - “Trieste is no Vienna.”
- ▶ Meaning in context:
 - “Take this, all of you, and eat of it: for this is my body which will be given up for you.”
 - So: What’s his cholesterol?

Explaining human action: description

“Timmy skipped practice because he was ashamed of his poor grades.”

— Metaphysical: What must be true for Timmy to have been ashamed?

— Epistemological: How do you know he was ashamed? (What warrants your claim that he was ashamed?)

4:

Explaining human action: rationality-revealing

— Rationality as coherence:

Perfect rationality v. intelligibility

— “Timmy skipped practice because he was ashamed of his poor grades.”

— “Timmy skipped practice because he was ashamed that the moon was waxing.”

— “Timmy skipped practice because he was ashamed after the evil doctor made him take a shame-pill.”

Explaining human action: rationality

- ▶ Behavior \neq action
- ▶ Explaining human action requires appealing to beliefs?
- ▶ Or: Explaining human action permits appealing to beliefs?
- ▶ Intentionality & intensionality
- ▶ Describing human action

- ▶ Now: What does having a belief require?
 - Rationality-relations (“constitutive ideal of rationality,” cf. Donald Davidson)
 - Social practices that set the context for meaningfulness & rationality-relations

The argument, revised?

- (1) Some necessary conditions for interpretation are...XYZ....
- (2) Human actions satisfy...XYZ....
- ∴ (3) Human actions are suitable objects for interpretation.
- (4) But the social sciences aim at explanations of human action.
- (5)' Human action involves "intersubjective meaning" (among other things).
- ∴ (6)' The social sciences must, to be complete, involve interpretation.

5:

The crucial thought. . . in two senses!

Thought-*dependent* action!

- ▶ A causal claim?
- ▶ A metaphysical—constitutive—claim: You're not ϕ 'ing unless you think you're ϕ 'ing
 - ▶ Examples?
 - ▶ Lying, promising, marrying, . . . everything?
- ▶ A fine line: thought-*sufficient* action?!?
- ▶ Thinking so makes it so?!?

6:

Kuhn on social science

- ▶ Lacuna on social science?
- ▶ Different worlds? *Really?!?*
- ▶ A commitment to thought-sufficient reality?
- ▶ Thinking so makes it so?!?
- ▶ An intolerable conclusion?

7:

Preparing for Armitage

- ▶ In some sense, explaining action requires appeals to beliefs
- ▶ Action-explanation requires action-description
- ▶ Actions are constituted, in some sense, by beliefs
- ▶ Beliefs are, in some sense, rationality-dependent
- ▶ Beliefs are not mere matters of the will: in some sense, they are *social*