Fall 9-1-2000

PHIL 410.01: Philosophy of the Social Sciences

Burke Townsend

University of Montana - Missoula
There is no denying that the group of disciplines now commonly referred to as the social sciences (to include psychology) has become an established part of our intellectual life and a power to be reckoned with both in discussions of the nature of our human existence and in the setting of social goals and policies. It can be and has been denied, however, that the social sciences constitute a generally positive and a proper force in these contexts.

Are the social sciences really sciences at all? What is it to be a science? Is a science of humankind a possibility? Would a scientific understanding of humans constitute the kind of understanding we seek, or would it simply miss the point underlying many traditional goals? If a scientific understanding would not adequately respond to traditional goals, is it the scientific understanding that is misdirected, or the traditional goals? Or is there perhaps a need to pursue both on separate but complementary paths? If humans can be understood from a scientific perspective, what might be the consequences for our conceptions of ourselves as rational creatures with free wills?

These and other questions will be explored during the course. The course is intended to provide some appreciation of what science is as it is modeled from the historical development of the physical sciences and to explore the questions that arise when that physical science model is taken as a guide for the investigation of human nature.
Evaluation for this class will be based upon two exams, two papers, and class attendance/participation. The exams and papers will be equally weighted to determine a preliminary grade. The quality of class preparation and participation will then be used as a "tipping factor" to move a borderline grade up or down. Attendance will serve as a simple maximal condition for a final grade: each 3 unexcused absences will lower the grade one full point.

Both exams will be taken from a previously distributed list of study questions. The first exam will be given on Friday, October 20, and the second exam during the final exam period, 1:10 pm, Wednesday, Dec.20.

The first paper will be either a summary exposition of a philosophical issue [read some appropriate supporting material and present a clear outline of what is at issue, what basic positions have been advanced, and what are the strengths and weaknesses of those positions], or a critical review of a book or major article ["critical" here means an analytic and evaluative, but not necessarily a negative, review]. The second paper should build upon the ground established for the first (although this won't be strictly required), but must this time be primarily a classic position paper, your own structured argument in support of a philosophical position.

Abraham Lincoln once opined that a person's legs should be just long enough to reach the ground. Similarly, each of your papers should be just long enough to accomplish the goal you have set for it. The papers are not expected to be particularly long and involved, but whether your goal can be well met in eight, twelve, or twenty pages is largely a matter of the nature of the goal itself and your own writing style. Choose a manageable goal and concern yourself with accomplishing it rather than with the number of pages you have written.

The first paper is to be submitted on Friday, October 27, and the second paper on Wednesday, December 6. Although it will not be required, each paper may be rewritten and resubmitted after you have received my initial reaction to it. The papers are to be mechanically printed (exceptions may be made for hardship cases).

You will be expected to attend class regularly and to participate in class discussions. You should of course read the assigned materials prior to class meetings (assignments will be made in class rather than by a fixed schedule, because I prefer to let our pace be dictated, to some extent at least, by a natural dynamic), and you may expect to be called on occasionally to present positions or frame questions set by the readings. Your responses won't be treated as "oral quizzes," but you should read actively so that you will be prepared to discuss what you have read and to raise questions about what you have not understood.

Course outcome: to reach understanding of the major controversies concerning the appropriate forms of explanation of human social activities and of the differences in the methodologies relevant to such forms.
Outcome measures: exams, papers, class discussions.

Office: LA 101  Hours: MTWRF 1, and by appt.
Phone: x6233  549-9083 (home)
email: bat@selway.umt.edu