

Phil 223 A01 Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Sciences Spring 2025

Instructor: Prof. Peter Dietsch
Lectures: MR 2:30-3:50pm
Office hours: Wednesdays, 2-4pm, Clearihue Building, office B309
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Course description

This course aims to provide students with an introductory understanding of the nature of society as well as our understanding of it. In particular, it looks at the philosophical presuppositions of the dominant currents of social scientific theories. How do we explain social phenomena? What does it mean to invoke causal relations in social setting? Is the individual the basic unit of analysis in social science and, if so, in what sense? How is one to understand the distinction between facts and values in social analysis?

Course Website

Online materials will be made available via Uvic Brightspace. Access your customized Brightspace page by signing in to Uvic and clicking on Online Tools.

Texts

Core readings will most likely be available as a course pack for sale at the UVic Bookstore.

Grading System

Percentage	Letter Grade	Grade Point	Grade Definition
90 – 100	A+	9	An A+, A, or A- is earned by work which is technically superior , shows mastery of the subject matter, and in the case of an A+ offers original insight and/or goes beyond course expectations. Normally achieved by a minority of students.
85 – 89	A	8	
80 – 84	A-	7	
77 – 79	B+	6	A B+, B, or B- is earned by work that indicates a good comprehension of the course material, a good command of the skills needed to work with the course material, and the student's full engagement with the course requirements and activities. A B+ represents a more complex understanding and/or application of the course material. Normally achieved by the largest number of students.
73 – 76	B	5	
70 – 72	B-	4	
65 – 69	C+	3	A C+ or C is earned by work that indicates an adequate comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to work with the course material and that indicates the student has met the basic requirements for completing assigned work and/or participating in class activities.
60 – 64	C	2	
50 – 59	D	1	A D is earned by work that indicates minimal command of the course materials and/or minimal participation in class activities that is worthy of course credit toward the degree.
0 – 49	F	0	F is earned by work, which after the completion of course requirements, is inadequate and unworthy of course credit towards the degree.

Interpretation of these grade definitions is up to the discretion of the instructor. If you receive a grade during the course that you believe is unfair, please begin by discussing

the matter with the TA in a respectful, open-minded manner. If you are still not satisfied with your grade, you can ask for a re-correction of the copy by the instructor. The new grade will count, whether it is higher or lower than the original one.

For additional information regarding undergraduate grades, please consult the [Grading](#) section of the Uvic Undergraduate Calendar.

All evaluations of tests and assignments will be calculated according to percentage scores. Letter grades and grade point scores are listed purely for reference.

Final examinations are the property of Uvic and are not returned. They are available for viewing at the Records Office according to Uvic Examinations procedures and regulations.

Uvic is committed to providing a safe, supportive learning environment for all members. Further information regarding Uvic policies on human rights, equity, discrimination and harassment are located in the Uvic calendar [General University Policies](#), but if you have any particular concerns related to our course please do not hesitate to contact me.

Graded student activities

- Mid-term exam* on February 13 (20%)
- 1500-word essay (25%) due on March 13
[5 percentage points penalty for each 100-word increment over 1500 words, excluding footnotes and bibliography – *everything* else counts; e.g. 1507 words => 5 percentage points penalty; 1623 words => 10 p.p. penalty]
- 15-20 minutes oral exam at the end of term (35%)
- Quote and comment (400 words; 10 weeks out of 12; 10%)
see Brightspace for instructions
- Attendance (10%)

* Exams missed for ineligible reasons will not be rescheduled. Deferred exams will have a more limited choice of questions.

Policy on Late Assignments

5% per working day will be subtracted from grade unless students are delayed by illness or family emergency. No late submissions are accepted for weekly quote & comments.

Counseling Services

Many, if not most, students experience some difficulties with their mental health during their years as undergraduate students. Make sure you are familiar with [Uvic Counseling Services](#), which is an excellent resource you have at your disposal on campus. It is hard to shake the stigma associated with problems like depression and anxiety, but if at any point you can benefit from help with mental health issues, please contact Counseling Services. They genuinely want to help, and why not take advantage of this free resource?

Important Dates

Please consult the Uvic calendar's [Academic Year Important Dates](#) for information about last possible dates to withdraw from courses without penalty, examinations period start/end dates, etc.

Academic Integrity and Professional Conduct

Chat GPT and similar technologies are not permitted for this course. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will not be tolerated. It is each student's responsibility to know the University's regulations in this regard. The Policy on Academic Integrity is published

in [the University Calendar](#). You can also consult the [Libraries' plagiarism guide](#) or the [Tri-Faculty Standards for Professional Behavior for Students](#), which draws together a number of existing UVic policies in one place for ease of reference. Professionalism is expected from all students enrolled in courses in the Faculty of Humanities. As part of professionalism, students, faculty and staff are expected to be familiar with University policies, including the Tri-Faculty Standards.

Technology in Classroom

Laptops, tablets, and mobile phones are not allowed in the classroom unless students *either* have an accommodation letter from the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL) *or* have been granted an exception in response to a written request to the professor. Using electronic devices is a source of distraction for the student using them as well as for others in the classroom. More importantly, studies show that note taking by hand leads to better learning outcomes.

Uvic Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response

Learn more about preventing sexualized violence by visiting www.uvic.ca/svp. If you or someone you know has been impacted by sexualized violence and needs advice, and/or support, please contact the Sexualized Violence Resource Office in EQHR, Sedgewick C119; email: svpcoordinator@uvic.ca.

Territory Acknowledgment

The University of Victoria is committed to acknowledging and respecting the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day. For information about support for indigenous students and efforts to foster reconciliation, visit the Uvic [Office of Indigenous Academic & Community Engagement](#).

Detailed course plan

Jan 6: Introduction

Complementary literature

- Alexander Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Social Science*, 5th edition, Westview Press, 2016, ch. 1.
- Martin Hollis, *The Philosophy of Social Science*, revised and updated edition 2002, ch. 1.

The books from which these chapters are drawn provide good introductions to the philosophy of social science that might prove useful as background reading.

PART I: MODELS OF EXPLANATION

Jan 9 and 13: Methodological naturalism

Compulsory reading

- John Stuart Mill, *System of Logic*, Book 6 'On the logic of the Moral Sciences', chapters 6, 9 and 10.

Complementary literature

- Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, London: Macmillan, 1984 [1893], preface to the first edition.

- Alexander Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Social Science*, 5th edition, Westview Press, 2016, ch. 2.
- Martin Hollis, *The Philosophy of Social Science*, revised and updated edition 2002, chs. 2-4.

Jan 16 and 20: The interpretative tradition

Compulsory reading

- Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man”, *Review of Metaphysics* 25/1 (1971): 3-51.

Complementary literature

- Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”, in: *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, pp. 3–30.
- William Outhwaite, *New Philosophies of Social Science. Realism, Hermeneutics and Critical Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1987, ch. 4.
- Daniel Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*, 1991, ch. 4.

Jan 23 and 27: Causal analysis

Compulsory reading

- Nancy Cartwright, “Causal inference”, in: Nancy Cartwright and Eleonora Montuschi, *Philosophy of Social Science. A New Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 308-26.

Complementary literature

- Daniel Steel, “Social Mechanisms and Causal Inference”, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 34/1 (2004): 55-78.
- Christopher Hitchcock, “How to be a causal pluralist”, in: P. Machamer and G. Wolters (eds.), *Thinking about Causes: From Greek Philosophy to Modern Physics*, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2007, 200-21.
- Daniel Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*, 1991, ch. 2.
- Julian Reiss, *The Philosophy of Economics – A Contemporary Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2013, ch. 5.

Jan 30 and Feb 3: Rational choice theory

Compulsory reading

- Amartya Sen, “Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioural Foundations of Economic Theory”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6/4 (1977): 317-44.

Complementary literature

- Daniel Kahneman, “Maps of Bounded Rationality: A Perspective on Intuitive Judgment and Choice”, Nobel Prize Lecture, 2002.
- Geoffrey Brennan, “Five Rational Actor Accounts of the Welfare State”, *Kyklos* 2/3 (2001), 213-234.
- Shaun Hargreaves-Heap et al., *The Theory of Choice: A Critical Guide*, Blackwell, 1992.
- Jon Elster, “Social Norms and Economic Theory”, *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 3 (1989), 99-117.

Feb 6 and 10: Functionalism and materialism

Compulsory reading

- Martin Hollis, *The Philosophy of Social Science*, revised and updated edition 2002, ch. 5.

Complementary literature

- Harold Kincaid, "Assessing Functional Explanations in the Social Sciences," *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*, vol. 1990, 1990, pp. 341–354. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/192715.
- Daniel Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*, 1991, ch. 6.
- Van Parijs, Philippe. 1982. "Functionalist Marxism Rehabilitated." *Theory and Society* 11(4): 497–511.

Feb 13: mid-term exam

PART II: METHODOLOGICAL DEBATES

February 24 and 27: Methodological individualism

Compulsory reading

- Geoffrey M. Hodgson, "Meanings of Methodological Individualism", *Journal of Economic Methodology* 14/2 (2007), 211-26.

Complementary literature

- Jon Elster, "The Case for Methodological Individualism," *Theory and Society*, 11 (1982): 453–482, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/657101>.
- Harold Kincaid, "Reduction, Explanation, and Individualism," *Philosophy of Science*, vol. 53, no. 4, 1986, pp. 492–513. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/187903.
- Goldstein 'The Inadequacy of the Principle of Methodological Individualism' *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 53, no. 25 (1956), 801-813.
- Watkins 'The Alleged Inadequacy of Methodological Individualism' *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 55, no. 9 (1958), 390-395.

March 3 and 6: Facts and values in social sciences

Compulsory reading

- Amartya Sen, "Accounts Actions and Values: Objectivity of Social Science", in C. Lloyd (ed.), *Social Theory and Political Practice*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, pp. 87-107.

Complementary literature

- Max Weber, "Objectivity" in Social Science and Social Policy', in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, London, Macmillan, 1949, 51-63.
- Heather Douglas, "Values in Social Science", in: Nancy Cartwright and Eleonora Montuschi, *Philosophy of Social Science. A New Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 162-82.
- Daniel M. Hausman and Michael S. McPherson, *Economic analysis and moral philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, appendix.
- Robert Solow, "Science and ideology in economics", *The Public Interest* (1970), 94-107.

March 10 and 13: The feminist question in social science

Compulsory reading

- Sharon Crasnow, “Feminist Standpoint Theory”, in: Nancy Cartwright and Eleonora Montuschi, *Philosophy of Social Science. A New Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 145-61.

Complementary literature

- Sandra Harding, “After Mr. Nowhere: What Kind of Proper Self for a Scientist?”, *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, 1/1 (2015): 1–22.
- Alison Wylie, “The Feminist Question in Science: What Does it Mean to ‘Do Social Science as a Feminist?’”, in: Francesco Guala & Daniel Steel (eds.), *The Philosophy of Social Science Reader*, Routledge, 2010, chapter 4.

March 17 and 20: Norms, conventions, institutions

Compulsory reading

- Cristina Bicchieri and Hugo Mercier, “Norms and Beliefs: How Change Occurs”, in: Maria Xenitidou and Bruce Edmonds, *The Complexity of Social Norms*, Springer, 2014, pp. 37-54.

Complementary literature

- Cristina Bicchieri, “The Rules We Live By”, chapter 1 of *The Grammar of Society. The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- John R. Searle, “What is an Institution?”, *Journal of Institutional Economics*, Volume 1, Issue 1, June 2005, pp. 1-22.
- Frank Hindriks and Francesco Guala, “Institutions, rules, and equilibria: a unified theory”, *Journal of Institutional Economics* 11/3 (2015): 459-80.

March 24 and 27: Evidence-based policy

Compulsory reading

- Julian Reiss, *The Philosophy of Economics – A Contemporary Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2013, ch. 11.
- John P.A. Ioannidis, “How to make more published research true”, *PLOS Medicine* 11/10 (2014): e1001747. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001747>.

Complementary literature

- Nancy Cartwright, “What Are Randomised Controlled Trials Good For?” *Philosophical Studies*, 147/1 (2010), pp. 59–70.
- Sanjay Reddy, “Randomize this! On Poor Economics”, *Review of Agrarian Studies* 2/2(2012): 60-73.
- Howard White, “An introduction to the use of randomised control trials to evaluate development interventions”, *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 5/1 (2013): 30-49, DOI:10.1080/19439342.2013.764652.
- Angus Deaton, “Instruments, Randomization, and Learning about Development”, *Journal of Economic Literature* 48/2 (2010): 424-55.

March 31 and April 3: Behavioural economics and the ‘nudge’

Compulsory reading

- Richard H. Thaler et Cass R. Sunstein, “Libertarian Paternalism”, *The American Economic Review* 93/2 (2003), 175-79.
- Daniel M. Hausman & Brynn Welsh, “Debate: To Nudge or Not to Nudge”, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18/1 (2010): 123-36.

Complementary literature

- Julian Reiss, *The Philosophy of Economics – A Contemporary Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2013, ch. 15.
- Luc Bovens, “The Ethics of Nudge”, in: Till Grüne-Yanoff and Sven-Ove Hansson (eds.), *Preference Change*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2009, 207-19.
- Daniel Kahneman, “A Psychological Perspective on Economics”, *American Economic Review*, 93/2 (2003): 162-168.