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Social Philosophy

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Outline social philosophy in the social sciences and humanities

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https://lo.unisa.edu.au/course/view.php?id=6745

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Introduction

Presented here is a short introductory summary of the course content from RESA online, social philosophy for business, social sciences and humanities.

This series of web resources introduces a range of philosophical perspectives that inform different approaches to research and scholarship in the social sciences, business and humanities

The site link is NC0030 https://lo.unisa.edu.au/course/view.php?id=6745

Please forward any questions or suggestions to wendy.bastalich@unisa.edu.au

What is social philosophy?

What are the criteria of a good social explanation?

How (if at all) are the social sciences distinct from the natural sciences?

Is there a distinctive method for social research?

Through what empirical procedures are social science assertions to be evaluated?

Are there irreducible social laws?

Are there causal relations among social phenomena?

Do social facts and regularities require some form of reduction to facts about individuals?

What is the role of theory in social explanation? (the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy 1999).

The so what…?

Researchers produce knowledge, and in doing so, they make assumptions about what can be investigated (ontology) and how we come to know about the world (epistemology)

Philosophical assumptions about what it is proper for a researcher to study and where certain knowledge comes from are contested, especially within, and across social sciences and humanities disciplines

This means that any one approach can be, and frequently is challenged from other points of view

Understanding the possible range of philosophical assumptions that underpin knowledge making practices helps researchers to articulate their methodological assumptions, as well as to understand the perspectives of those coming from different points of view

Approaches in social philosophy

❖ Positivism and classical social theory

❖ Realism and empiricism

❖ Interpretivism, social constructionism and phenomenology

❖ Hermeneutics

❖ Critical approaches e.g. critical theory

❖ Structuralism

❖ Derridean deconstruction

❖ Foucaultian genealogy

❖ Post colonial theory

❖ Post structuralist feminisms

Realism

The subject matter of scientific research and scientific theory exist independently of our knowledge of them

There are knowable, mind-independent facts, objects, or properties

Real structures or mechanisms exist independently of our observations of them. They exist whether we observe them or not

Although not always observable in terms of their effects, these structures can generate observable events, or cause manifest phenomenon

The goal of scientific research is to describe and explain both observable and unobservable aspects of the world

Logical Positivism/Empiricism

A priori knowledge of reality is impossible ─ valid knowledge of reality originates only in sensory experience

Only knowledge that can be empirically accessed and tested is valid

There is a division between 'fact' and 'value' in which only empirically verifiable ideas count as knowledge

Constructionism

There are multiple interpretations of an object none of which are objectively 'true' or 'valid'

'all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (Crotty, 1998:42)

There is a reciprocal and interdependent relationship between objects in the world and consciousness – 'no object can be adequately described in isolation from the conscious being experiencing it, nor can any experience be adequately described in isolation from its object' (Crotty, 1998:45)

Interpretivism

The world, especially its social aspects, cannot be understood simply by observation

Our relationship to the world and its meaning is culturally mediated

Consciousness plays an active role in acts of knowing

It is important to understand phenomenon as they are experienced or made meaningful by human beings within specific social contexts

Hermeneutics

Language is central to human life and experience

We can only understand and articulate ourselves as culturally and historically located beings

Speech, writing, art, behaviour, law, institutions, and therefore experience itself, are all products of time and place

It is important to gain an understanding of the text that goes beyond the author's understanding or ability to articulate

Authors bring implicit meanings and intentions that they do not themselves recognise

Critical Theory

All knowledge is socially and culturally produced

There is a distinction between inherited meaning and something more fundamental to experience

It is not true that knowledge can only be gained via sense experience

It is possible to describe and explain unobservable aspects of the world

It is not true that nothing exists beyond interpretation

Social structure is real whether we observe it or not, and can be known through the events or phenomena it causes

Social processes must be understood within their historical and cultural circumstances

Structuralism

It is not true that knowledge of the world and of ourselves relates to an underlying reality, or grows out of individual consciousness;

There is no pre-cultural 'rational' or 'authentic' consciousness; everything we perceive is always already given to us by language

Knowledge arises within the structure of language;

It is important to understand the relationships that exist between sounds and concepts, or signs, within language, and the way that language structures society and culture;

Language is an autonomous and closed system of arbitrary signs whose meaning arises in contrast or non-identity with other signs within the sign system, and not by anything external to language;

It is important to understand society through the study of its linguistic and other communicative structures;

Society cannot be understood in isolated parts, but in the system of relationships which make up the whole;

It is important to have a theory of language and a theory of the formation of subjectivity to explain the human condition

Derridean Deconstruction

Language is an arbitrary system of relationships and differences however, there is no deep laid and stable meaning, either within the text or the mind of the reader

Speech is not more 'immediate' than writing, or closer to the authentic meaning of the speaker

Writing is a precondition of language, coming prior to the speech act

There is no essential meaning, meaning is always deferred, displaced or substituted by further reference

Oppositional logic is one of many metaphorical devices which gives the illusion of essential meaning

It is important to reveal and subvert these devices, and to undermine the status accorded to privileged terms such as 'reason', 'man', 'writing', and 'science'

Foucaultian Genealogy

Systems of thought that shape social reality and experience evolve independently of the beliefs and intentions of individuals

Analysis of systems of thought should include not only theoretically or politically significant discourses and institutions, but the whole field of practice and discourse, including seemingly unrelated or insignificant causes

Rather than uncover 'essential truth', it is important to release human beings from the constraints that apparently certain knowledge entails

This is achieved by showing the historical play of discursive and non-discursive actions and events that give rise to what we hold to be essential knowledge about human beings and society

It is important to enable alternative forms of existence, and progressive intentions that coincide with the real practice of people in the exercise of their freedom

Reference of general texts as a staring point

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For access to the complete web site please refer to the link below

https://lo.unisa.edu.au/course/view.php?id=6745

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