Social sciences, philosophy of: the study of the logic and methods of the social sciences. Central topics include: 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 sorts of 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 and regularities involving only the properties and actions of individuals? The philosophy of social science aims to provide an interpretation of the social sciences that permits answers to these questions.

The philosophy of social science, like the PHILOSOPHY OF NATURAL SCIENCE, has both a descriptive and a prescriptive side. On the one hand, the field is *about* the social sciences--the explanations, methods, empirical arguments, theories, hypotheses, and so forth, that actually occur in the social science literature, past and present. This means that the philosopher needs to have extensive knowledge of several areas of social science research, in order to be able to formulate an analysis of the social sciences that corresponds appropriately to scientists' practice. On the other hand, the field is *epistemic*: it is concerned with the idea that scientific theories and hypotheses are put forward as *true* or probable, and are justified on *rational* grounds (empirical and theoretical). The philosopher therefore wants to be able to provide a critical evaluation of existing social science methods insofar as these methods are found to be less truth-enhancing than they might be. These two aspects of the philosophical enterprise suggest that philosophy of social science should be construed as a rational reconstruction of existing social science practice--a reconstruction that is guided by existing practice but that goes beyond that practice by identifying faulty assumptions, forms of reasoning, or explanatory frameworks.

Philosophers have disagreed over the relation between the social and natural sciences. One position is NATURALISM, according to which the methods of the social sciences should correspond closely to those of the natural sciences. This position is closely related to PHYSICALISM, the doctrine that all higher-level phenomena and regularities--including social phenomena--must be ultimately reducible to physical entities and the laws which govern them. (See also UNITY OF SCIENCE.) On the other side is the view that the social sciences are inherently distinct from the natural sciences. This perspective holds that social phenomena are metaphysically distinguishable from natural phenomena because they are *intentional*--they depend on the meaningful actions of individuals. On this view, natural phenomena admit of causal explanation, whereas social phenomena require intentional explanation. The anti-naturalist position also maintains that there is a corresponding difference between the methods appropriate to natural and social science. Advocates of the VERSTEHEN method hold that there is a method of intuitive interpretation of human action which is radically distinct from methods of inquiry in the natural sciences.

One important school within the philosophy of social science takes its origin in this fact of the meaningfulness of human action. INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY maintains that the goal of social inquiry is to provide interpretations of human conduct within the context of culturally specific meaningful arrangements. This approach draws an analogy between literary texts and social phenomena: both are

complex systems of meaningful elements, and the goal of the interpreter is to provide an interpretation of the elements that makes sense of them. In this respect social science involves a HERMENEUTIC inquiry: it requires that the interpreter should tease out the meanings underlying a particular complex of social behavior, much as a literary critic pieces together an interpretation of the meaning of a complex literary text. An example of this approach is Max Weber's treatment of the relation between capitalism and the Protestant ethic. Weber attempts to identify the elements of western European culture that shaped human action in this environment in such a way as to produce capitalism. On this account, both Calvinism and capitalism are historically specific complexes of values and meanings, and we can better understand the emergence of the latter by seeing how it corresponds to the meaningful structures of the former.

Interpretive sociologists often take the meaningfulness of social phenomena to imply that social phenomena do not admit of CAUSAL EXPLANATION. However, it is possible to accept the idea that social phenomena derive from the purposive actions of individuals, without relinquishing the goal of providing causal explanations of social phenomena. For it is necessary to distinguish between the general idea of a causal relation between two circumstances and the more specific idea of "causal determination through strict laws of nature." It is certainly true that social phenomena rarely derive from strict laws of nature; wars do not result from antecedent political tensions in the way that earthquakes result from antecedent conditions in plate tectonics. However, when we admit the possibility of non-deterministic causal relations deriving from the choices of individual persons, it is evident that social phenomena admit of causal explanation, and in fact much social explanation depends on asserting causal relations between social events and processes--for example, the claim that the administrative competence of the state is a crucial causal factor in determining the success or failure of a revolutionary movement. Central to causal arguments in the social sciences is the idea of a causal mechanism--a series of events or actions leading from cause to effect. Suppose it is held that the extension of a trolley line from the central city to the periphery caused the deterioration of public schools in the central city. In order to make out such a claim it is necessary to provide some account of the social and political mechanisms that join the antecedent condition to the consequent.

An important variety of causal explanation in social science is MATERIALIST explanation. This type of explanation attempts to explain a social feature in terms of features of the material environment in the context of which the social phenomenon occurs. Features of the environment that often appear in materialist explanations include topography and climate; thus it is sometimes maintained that banditry thrives in remote regions because the rugged terrain makes it more difficult for the state to repress bandits. But materialist explanations may also refer to the material needs of society--for example, the need to produce food and other consumption goods to support the population. Thus KARL MARX holds that it is the development of the "productive forces" (technology) that drives the development of property relations and political systems. In each case the materialist explanation must refer to the fact of human agency--the fact that human beings are capable of making deliberative choices on the basis of their wants and beliefs--in

order to carry out the explanation; in the banditry example, the explanation depends on the fact that bandits are intelligent enough to realize that their prospects for survival are better in the periphery than in the core. So materialist explanations too accept the point that social phenomena depend on the purposive actions of individuals.

A central issue in the philosophy of social science involves the relation between social regularities and facts about individuals. METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM is the position that asserts the primacy of facts about individuals over facts about social entities. This doctrine takes three forms: a claim about social entities, a claim about social concepts, and a claim about social regularities. The first version maintains that social entities must be reducible to ensembles of individuals--as an insurance company might be reduced to the ensemble of employees, supervisors, managers, and owners whose actions constitute the company. Likewise, it is sometimes held that social concepts must be reducible to concepts involving only individuals--for example, the concept of a social class might be defined in terms of concepts pertaining only to individuals and their behavior. Finally, it is sometimes held that social regularities must be derivable from regularities of individual behavior. There are several positions opposed to methodological individualism. At the extreme there is METHODOLOGICAL HOLISM--the doctrine that holds that social entities and facts are autonomous and irreducible. And there is a position intermediate between these two that holds that every social explanation require microfoundations--an account of the circumstances at the individual level that lead individuals to behave in such ways as to bring about the observed social regularities. If we observe that an industrial strike is successful over an extended period of time, it is not sufficient to explain this circumstance by referring to the common interest that members of the union have in winning their demands. Rather, we need to have information about the circumstances of the individual union member that induce him or her to contribute to this public good. This position does not require, however, that social explanations be couched in non-social concepts; instead, the circumstances of individual agents may be characterized in social terms.

Central to most theories of explanation is the idea that explanation depends on general laws governing the phenomena in question. Thus the discovery of the laws of electrodynamics permitted the explanation of a variety of electromagnetic phenomena. But social phenomena derive from the actions of purposive men and women; so what kinds of regularities are available on the basis of which to provide social explanations? A fruitful research framework in the social sciences is the idea that men and women are *rational*, so it is possible to explain their behavior as the outcome of a deliberation about means of achieving their individual ends (see RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY). This fact in turn gives rise to a set of regularities about individual behavior that may be used as a ground for social explanation. We may explain some complex social phenomenon as the aggregate result of the actions of a large number of individual agents with a hypothesized set of goals within a structured environment of choice.

Social scientists have often been inclined to offer FUNCTIONAL explanations of social phenomena. A function explanation of a social feature is one that explains the presence and persistence of the feature in terms of the beneficial

consequences the feature has for the ongoing working of the social system as a whole. It might be held, for example, that sports clubs in working-class Britain exist because they give working class men and women a way of expending energy that would otherwise go into struggles against an exploitative system, thus undermining social stability. Sports clubs are explained, then, in terms of their contribution to social stability. This type of explanation is based on an analogy between biology and sociology. Biologists explain traits in terms of their contribution to reproductive fitness, and sociologists sometimes explain social traits in terms of their contribution to "social" fitness. However, the analogy is a misleading one, because there is a general mechanism establish functionality in the biological realm that is not present in the social realm. This is the mechanism of natural selection, through which a species arrives at a set of traits that are locally optimal. There is no analogous process at work in the social realm, however; so it is groundless to suppose that social traits exist *because* of their beneficial consequences for the good of society as a whole (or important sub-systems within society). So functional explanations of social phenomena must be buttressed by specific accounts of the causal processes that underly the postulated functional relationships.

The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, edited by Robert Audi (Cambridge University Press, 1995)