

Introduction

C. Mantzavinos

Philosophy of science examines “scientific knowledge.” It tries to illuminate the specific characteristics of science, the way it is produced, the historical dimensions of science, and the normative criteria at play in appraising science. The discussions mostly take place with reference to the natural sciences, which are still at the core of the philosophy of science as a discipline. The examples used are often taken from one of the natural sciences (usually physics); and it is characteristic that the training of most contemporary philosophers of science has been – at least partly – in one of the natural sciences. The philosophy of the social sciences, on the other hand, traditionally deals with such problems as the role of understanding (*Verstehen*) in apprehending social phenomena, the status of rational choice theory, the role of experiments in the social sciences, the logical status of game theory, as well as whether there are genuine laws of social phenomena or rather social mechanisms to be discovered, the historicity of the social processes, etc.

The aim of this volume is to push the frontiers of the philosophy of the social sciences as a sub-discipline of the philosophy of science by presenting the results of cutting-edge research in the main fields, along with their critical discussion by practicing social scientists. The enterprise is motivated by the view that the philosophy of the social sciences cannot ignore the specific scientific practices according to which scientific work is being conducted in the social sciences and will only be valuable if it evolves in constant interaction with the theoretical developments in the social sciences. Since a great number of basic concepts of the philosophy of the social sciences have become increasingly sophisticated and technical, and even philosophically minded social scientists do not follow the philosophical discussion on a number of issues – like intentionality, reductionism, shared agency etc. – there is a real need for interaction between the two communities. This volume is designed to close this gap and to foster an exchange between philosophers and philosophically minded social scientists on philosophical concepts and the practices of apprehending social phenomena.

With this in mind, the format of the volume is the following: It includes ten chapters by philosophers, who draw from their broader research agenda, but focus on one or more specific issues. Social scientists who are philosophically minded, but who nevertheless employ the standard scientific practices of their respective disciplines provide comments on the chapters. This format guarantees a genuine discussion of the issues, engaging both philosophers and social scientists in productive dialogue that provides insights into the three main areas of the philosophy of the social sciences. The book is designed so that its three parts correspond to those three areas.

The first area concerns *Basic Problems of Sociality* (Part I). The social sciences deal with the interactions of individuals and the products of those interactions – obviously from very different angles. In a nutshell, the problems that a social scientist deals with are problems of sociality, and the philosophy of the social sciences attempts to shed some light on those problems. Social ontology, broadly defined to include issues such as collective intentionality, shared agency, the reality of group agents, etc., delineates the field of philosophical work that deals with what exists in the social world.

The second area concerns the *Laws and Explanation in the Social Sciences* (Part II). When problems of social interaction are studied by social scientists, a series of problems emerge concerning the appropriate method of study and the epistemological status of the obtained knowledge. A few of the notorious problems concern whether there are any laws in the social sciences and whether there are genuine social scientific explanations or rather *Verstehen* (understanding). Methodology of the social sciences, broadly defined to include issues such as how social scientific knowledge relates to knowledge that is produced by the natural and life sciences, the degree of complexity of social phenomena, issues related to how to proceed to policy advice based on the empirical findings of the social sciences, etc., is the field of philosophical work that deals with the method of the study of what exists in the social world.

The third area concerns *How Philosophy and the Social Sciences Can Enrich Each Other* (Part III). The relationship between philosophy and the sciences is a difficult problem which remains unresolved. However, it seems that philosophy does not have a more epistemologically privileged position than the sciences and that there is rather a continuum between philosophy and the sciences. Besides, the application of scientific theses, research, and results must be both acceptable and imperative for philosophy. The scaffolding of philosophy erected on the social sciences is far from perfect – its exact shape and function is the third main area of research into the philosophy of the social sciences.

A detailed plan of the chapters and comments is provided at the beginning of each Part, so that the reader has a map of what awaits him and what he can look for in every Part of the book. The *Epilogue* contains a short reflection on the problem areas of the discipline and how they have been addressed in this volume.

