

Mark Risjord: *Philosophy of Social Science: A Contemporary Introduction*
Routledge, London, 2014, 288 pages

The past few centuries have witnessed an extraordinary boost in our capacity to explore our world and to amass knowledge of it. We have established an apparently efficient method of exploration in which we seek for deterministic causal laws that govern all happenings in our world, so that they make it possible for us to predict future happenings. And although sometimes, such as when researching living organisms, the laws appear less clear, nevertheless everything seems to be ultimately underlain by the wonderfully simple laws of physics.

This procedure, however, falters when our aim is to explore our own, human communities. Here, no deterministic laws appear to be in view; and skeptics would say that the only thing we have managed to acquire is the *illusion* that we have something as knowledge. Why do human communities so stubbornly resist our efforts to extract underlying laws from them?

One answer which would seem to be forthcoming, is that our communities are simply too complex for us to get a hold on them. After all, it is not only the communities that are so impenetrable for us, but also other extremely complex systems. Consider, for example, the weather: we still seem unable to arrive at very reliable forecasts, and our excuse is thought to be the fact that the weather is so multidimensionally complex. Maybe in the future we will develop methods of mastering more complex systems and then we will have the ability to predict weather more reliably. And maybe, by the same token, one day we will be also able to determine the laws of human communities.

But it is far from clear that it is only an issue of complexity differentiating the exploration of nature from that of human communities. One traditional view is that what makes a more substantial difference is that what is in play are two utterly different kinds of *understanding* – and that understanding human communities is not a matter of determining causal laws. Thus, philosophers from Dilthey to Gadamer speak about searching for *sense* – about *hermeneutics*. However, the concepts of hermeneutics generally remain somewhat esoteric, which usually prevents them from offering much guidance to social *scientists*.

On the one hand, then, we have philosophers who claim that understanding human communities must, at base, be akin to understanding nature, and

assume that if as yet we have not acquired any reliable laws, then it is only because our social sciences are still immature. (The hope is often that this will change once we master the interconnections of human neurology and human behavior.) On the other hand, we also have philosophers who think that it is futile to try to understand human communities in the way we have come to understand nature; and that trying to look for deterministic laws governing social events is nonsensical.

All this has spawned the situation whereby the foundations of social sciences are surrounded by sufficient philosophical problems to warrant a wholly specific philosophical discipline: the *philosophy of social sciences*. While what is usually understood under the traditional heading *philosophy of science* is the philosophy and methodology of *natural sciences*, this new discipline concentrates on the philosophical and methodological problems of specifically social sciences and humanities.

Risjord's introduction into this new philosophical discipline is a very well written book, surveying the multifarious specifics of investigating human communities and humans as its members. This should be particularly appreciated in view of the fact that the discipline is still very much in its infancy and has, as yet, no standardly accepted structuring of its specific topics. (Indeed, as far as I can see, there is no general agreement on what it is to comprise.)

The first topic Risjord discusses in his book is the question of objectivity in social sciences. The point is that while in natural sciences there is usually no problem in assuming the standpoint of a detached observer, this is less easy in social sciences; and here there are voices that one of the features distinguishing social sciences (and humanities) is that they are not able to clearly separate facts from values. If this is the case, then social sciences, it would seem, cannot be objective in the same sense in which natural sciences strive for objectivity – we cannot just tell stories about what there is, without slipping into talking about what there *should be*.

Risjord, it must be said, evades expressing a clear view on this matter. In the first part of the chapter he sees the situation in the eyes of those who would want social sciences to come as close to natural sciences as possible and discusses some obstacles to this; while in the second part of the chapter he switches to the view of those who think that striving for the natural scientific kind of objectivity in social sciences is futile – that achieving it is both impossible and pointless. Personally I would like to hear more about the confrontation of these two views.

In the next two chapters Risjord addresses the quarrel of naturalism (i.e. the conviction that social sciences do not differ substantially from natural

ones) vs. interpretivism, and then especially the tenets of interpretivism. Exponents of this view maintain that explaining a human society is not a matter of finding causes of what happens in the society, but rather of finding reasons for why the members of the society do what they do. And as reasons are beliefs, which in turn consist of concepts, this amounts to finding the beliefs of the people and understanding the concepts with which they operate. Thus, the main business of interpretativism is to *make sense* of the community under study, especially by aligning *their* concepts with *our* ones – in order to be able to understand *their* reasons in terms of *our* ones and thus to understand why they do what they do.

Next Risjord turns his attention to the questions of agents and agency. This, in one view, is closely connected with interpretivism, for it seems that there is a crucial difference between studying us humans and studying anything else in our world – humans can be seen not only as organisms behaving in certain ways, but also as actors carrying out actions, and to understand the latter aspect requires us to *make sense* of them. Also it may lead us to the game-theoretical models of human intercourse, which have become so popular in some social sciences.

The following chapter discusses the possibilities of reducing the social to something simpler, typically to the individual. Of course, such a reduction might render the specifically social sciences superfluous; but as the book clearly shows, there are so many specific problems related to the social level that even if someone believes that this level can be reduced, “in principle”, to some underlying levels, the problems of the specifically social level would still remain relevant and unresolved.

Then Risjord gets to what I would take as the most distinctive feature of the social – i.e. norms and rules. (In my personal view, the whole level of the social may be seen as grounded in our human capacity to assume normative attitudes.) Risjord pays special attention to the discussion between the so called *normativists* (those who believe that normativity is a *sui generis* phenomenon that must be explained as such) and anti-normativists (who want to reduce normativity to non-normative phenomena).

The next chapter is devoted to collective intensionality and related phenomena which seem to be emergent only on the collective level. Here, too, he pays attention to game-theoretic models.

In the final two chapters of the book, Risjord moves on to discuss problems related to causality within social sciences. It is clear that although it might not be possible to assimilate the whole of social sciences to the search for causal laws as in natural sciences, it would be preposterous to conclude that looking

for causal connections is not also of importance for a social scientist. Risjord points out that social scientists often profit from building causal models; and he further discusses the general question of the existence of causal laws governing human societies.

Many of the problems discussed in Risjord's book are quite complex; hence it is not the kind of introductory book that is easily accessible to complete outsiders. However, for people with some grounding in philosophy and ways to account for human societies, the book constitutes a nice compendium of philosophical problems specific to the social sciences, to the understanding of human communities and to the understanding of us humans as members of such communities.

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Barry Dainton – Howard Robinson (eds.): *The Bloomsbury Companion to Analytic Philosophy*
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“In this Companion we provide a guide to analytic philosophy’s past, present, and future; we also attempt to specify what – if anything – is genuinely distinctive about it” (p. xi).

With these words of editors Barry Dainton (University of Liverpool) and Howard Robinson (Central European University) starts *The Bloomsbury Companion to Analytic Philosophy*. After passing a short Introduction and Preface, the book continues with three parts dedicated to the past, present and the future of the analytic philosophy.

Part I: History, Methods, and Problems. The main topic of the first part is the history, or we can say the stories of the most well-known figures from the analytic philosophy. This part is written by the editors Dainton and Robinson and begins with a description of changing opinions about the world in the middle of the 19th century (the story of Francis Bradley and his holistic view of the world). After this short introduction, there appear George Edward Moore, Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege. The author of these chapters, Barry Dainton, focuses on the famous problems and possible solutions to them (proposed by each of the authors) connected with the beginning of the analytic philoso-