Introduction:

*The Methodological Divide: Naturalism Versus Interpretation* is the second chapter of this book. In this chapter, the author introduces some epistemologies, their main idea, stand points, arguments, and controversies. The author discusses some philosophical view of these epistemologies and their answer to some important questions about the very difference between natural science and social science. Does these differences make the research methods and research goal of social science distinguished from those of natural science? Does Social Science really made less progress than natural science in the past? Should Social science be focused on uncovering the laws and causation behind human beings and provide accurate prediction of human behavior, just like what natural science do? Or…?

Summary:

First, the author discusses about what is the feature of science. By making hypothesis, experiment and observation, we can find out the “causation” and thus predict what will happen after certain sequences of events. As British philosopher David Hume argue that in science, a causal explanation must in the end appeal to laws connecting event to be explained with prior events. The role accorded to laws has been a continuing feature of empiricist philosophy and methodology in science ever since Hume. Inspired by Hume, a philosophy of science called “Logical Positivism” has become popular after 1900. Logical positivists claim that our knowledge of the world can only be justified only by experience. Logical positivist regard the history of science -- discovering theories and verifying them through deducing them to already known laws, a progress of accumulating knowledge and certified by its increasing predictive success. However, if it is through their predictions that scientific claims face the court of experience, not one by one but in large groups, then we can’t distinguish the theoretical statements or individual concepts in the group that are meaningful from the ones in the group that may not be. So when observation disconfirm current theories, it implies some of these current theories must be wrong and some of them must be given up. Scientists often “save” their favorite hypothesis from disconfirmation. This lead to the conclusion that it must be that the scientists’ theoretical choices are driven by non-empirical factors-- sociological ones , economic ones , politics ones…etc. Searching for the non-empirical factors means, in effect, giving up positivism and its empiricist epistemology as an account of scientific method.

Second, the author discusses about why social science fails to discover laws, in empiricists’ view. Some people would say that is because human being is too complex to uncover regularities behind them. But compared to natural science, which also faces increasing difficulties, scientific advance has not slowdown in natural science. Plus, the author says that social science has advantage over natural science because the obstacle in the development of natural science has been conceptual, which means the need to carve out entirely new ways of looking at the world when doing natural science research , while in social science it is not the case.

So it is not tenable to say it is social science’s complexity that made it hard to do research. Some people thus argue that the basic categories of social science are wrong – the reason no laws have been uncovered is that the misconceived categories of action, desire, belief, and their cognates have prevented us from discovering the laws. Thus, the search for “natural kinds” (the kind-terms that figure in laws) is considered to be really important to many people.

Third, some people reject the argument that natural science has progressed and social science has languished take up their counterargument at the very foundations of the philosophy of science. Kuhn, argued that natural science indeed made no improvement in prediction. He regard the history of natural science is merely “paradigm shifts” of theories. Because there is no theory-neutral language to compare different theory, scientists in each generation were just rewriting the history of their subject, not “accumulation” of knowledge. Above argument has undermined the dominance of logical positivism in the philosophy of social science. In the author’s opinion, the doubt about progress of social science is fundamentally misconceived. Social science is not meant to provide us with ability to control the behavior of others. Instead, it is aimed to enable people to free themselves from the control of society, by giving interpretation. And by this point of view, social science do have made a lot progress by digging into the meaning of social institution and human behavior and thus emancipate human from their mistaken beliefs about the meaning of social events

Review:

In this chapter, the author divide the epistemologies mainly into two poles – Naturalism and Interpretation -- so as to make it easy for us to understand the controversy over the methodology and philosophy of social science. The Naturalists’ view, which consider social science has to be the same kind of science as natural science does. By making hypothesis, doing experiment and observation so as to find out the laws and causation of society events, and enable us to predict future. While the supporters of interpretation think the mission of social scientists is to uncover the meaning and significance of human behavior and render it meaningful and intelligible. The main problem of empiricist is that they always take their experience as neutral reality with superior importance, without an insight into the non-empirical factors of their “observation”. But I think, that it is also important for those who advocates for interpretation as the goal of social science to give out reasons why “human” is so special that we shouldn’t deal with it with the methods we used to deal with other things else.

Obviously, the author is inclined to the “interpretation” rather than naturalist as he made a lot of counterargument to undermine naturalists’ view, but little or no counterargument to interpretation supporters. If I ask myself where will I locate myself on the continuum of the problem, I think I would also be inclined to the “interpretation”, as my study of sociology suggest me a lot of different view to understand the society and the institution and structure behind it. Even though I am an engineering major student and supposed to become an engineer in the future, the interpretation provided by sociology do change my belief and ways to look at the world a lot.

In my opinion, I think that Naturalists have stuck to the word “science”. The word “science” is originally coined for the research of natural world. While the study of human behavior and society arose, people named it social “science”, and thus some people, or Naturalists, would like it to be the same “science” as natural science. But they are essentially different form each other, so using criteria in natural science to judge whether social science is progressing and whether it is using “scientific enough” approach to do research is kind of strange. It shouldn’t be constraint by so called “scientific criteria” of those in natural science, it should build its own criteria.

The progress of natural science is to make predictions more powerful, by successively eliminating “meanings, purposes, or significance” from nature. However, social science should go along the inverse way by explaining the “meanings, purposes, or significance” of human actions.

However, in my opinion, both natural science and social science have a common mission, that is to “make human life better”. The meaning of the word “Better” can be diversified. Either by making human life more convenient, making originally impossible idea to be possible, or making new interpretation of human society and behavior to let people have different view in the world. Sometimes the progress of science don’t really make human life better (e.g. the development of military force have stimulate militarism to grow and destroy many people’s house), but the belief that their research should aimed to make human life better is important, no matter what methodology they employ.