

Can social sciences be truly scientific?

According to **John Stuart Mill**, the aim of the social sciences is to explain social phenomena using law-like generalisations which do not differ fundamentally from those of natural sciences. However, this essay will argue for the **exceptionalist view** that social sciences are fundamentally different sciences, in methods and subject matter to natural sciences, and thus the **naturalist** account can never be realised. I will demonstrate this by showing how social processes differ fundamentally from natural processes, because the respective subjects of study, namely human kinds and natural kinds, are fundamentally different.

To many social scientists like historians and sociologists, to understand an event involves distinguishing between the 'inside' and 'outside' of an event (Collingwood).

- The process of nature can be described as sequences of mere events, but those of human or society cannot: they are processes of actions with an inner side, consisting of processes of thought, and what a social scientist is looking for is these processes of thought.
- As a result, social sciences need not and cannot adopt the same approach as natural sciences in searching for explanations or laws.
 - While social and natural sciences both involves interpretation beyond the observables, such interpretations have to occur at different levels. **Social scientists** penetrate to the inside of events and detect the thought which they express, and to discover that specific thought is already to understand it; after they have ascertained the facts, there is often no further process of inquiry. **Natural scientists**, however, treat an event as a phenomenon without an inner side, and are able to search for its cause by assigning it to its wider class and determining the relation between that class and others.
- This fundamental difference therefore explains why sciences produce general laws of a class while explanations in social sciences like history often only work for particular events.

Some readers may argue that this argument is only applicable to traditionally less 'scientific' social sciences like history, but such distinction is actually equally prominent for economics.

- On the surface, the economists emulate the scientists in terms of quantitative models, but the fundamental difference in social and natural processes means that the economists' model must be constructed or applied differently – by probing into the 'inside' of their subjects. This is indeed the case.
 - For example, in modelling consumer choice, the widely used, **convex-shaped 'indifference curve'** in microeconomics models a consumer as having no preference for various combination goods along the curve, based on the assumption of '**convex preferences**' – meaning that given the same total amount and cost, individual consumers would 'prefer a mix of different goods than one single type of goods'. Such an assumption clearly requires **psychological interpretation** – the inside of the event of microeconomic decision making.
 - Reasoning of why and how changes in consumer preferences shift the market demand curve is also such an example.
 - Therefore, Collingwood's argument applies equally well in economics.

Furthermore, the subjects of study of social sciences and natural sciences – human kinds and natural kinds respectively – are also fundamentally different. According to Ian Hacking, there is a feedback effect involving the introduction of classifications of people; human kinds respond to being studied while natural kinds do not, what he calls 'the looping effect'.

- Human kind terms **carry heavy moral overtones**, like 'sexual pervert' or 'normal', which motivate people to behave differently to alter the ways in which they are classified.
 - For example, after the **idea of childhood trauma** was established, it has become part of the essence of **multiple personality** that it is caused by repeated childhood trauma. This is not because we have found out more about the natural disorder, but because what these people remember is influenced by how they see themselves, and they get such concepts from the social scientists.
 - Social sciences thereby **create new human kinds** by creating new descriptions and classifications, a phenomenon unseen in natural sciences, which necessarily means that it is **logically impossible** to study human kinds in the same way natural scientists study natural kinds.

Opponents of Hacking's philosophy argue that conceptualisation is not essential in allowing human actions and defining human kinds.

- **Rachel Cooper** uses examples of birds and cavemen to support this objection. Birds, for example, intentionally search for food even though for them there is no formulated description of such intention. The intention of searching for food for birds, like childhood trauma for human, does not rely on conceptualisation to be created – it exists before invention of suitable description or classifications.
 - I would argue that her objection fails to recognise the main focus of social sciences.
 - Cooper does recognise that some actions **are only possible with language**, like the act of marriage or promises, but she suggests that such actions "**only form an unusual class**".
 - However, the very meaning of 'social' in 'social science' already suggests the focus of the discipline on the more **sophisticated aspect of human kinds in the context of 'society'**, which definitely involves well-defined cultural, political concepts. It is clear that majority of these sophisticated 'social' concepts are only possible with language, in contrast to the rather primitive picture by Cooper where complicated conceptualisation is naively dismissed as 'unusual' and thus unimportant.
 - Therefore, Cooper's argument has failed to refute Hacking's argument.

In conclusion, believers of a social science that resembles natural sciences in its approach and theories will inevitably be disappointed by its failure to meet this goal. This is not because social scientists are underqualified for their jobs, but because this goal **is in the wrong direction of what social sciences can and should pursue**, because social processes, human kinds are fundamentally different from their natural counterparts, and to impose 'scientific' criteria on social sciences will only mistakenly render their achievements worthless. Social sciences should and have rightfully pursued their own path, instead of emulating the sciences.