Philosophy of the Social Sciences: Philosophical theory and scientific practice
Edited by Chrysostomos Mantzavinos

Philosophy of the Social Sciences is a collection of essays in which the philosophical issues in the social sciences are examined with particular concern for how practicing social scientists work. The principle novelty of this collection is that the twenty essays form ordered pairs. Each of the ten chapters consists of a pair of essays, the first by a philosopher and the second a reply from a social (or socially minded) scientist. The exception to this is the final chapter where the reply too comes from a philosopher: evidently, the final word must go to the philosophers. The book is divided into three sections; firstly, “The Basic Problems of Sociality” focuses on ontology and agency; secondly, “Laws and Explanation in the Social Sciences” focuses on the metaphysics of social science; and thirdly, “How Philosophy and the Social Sciences Can Enrich Each Other”, presents three chapters that discuss co-operation, virtue theory and the hermeneutic circle respectively, instead of having a unifying theme.

As explained in the book’s introduction, the stated rationale for this format is to meet “a real need for interaction between the two communities” (1). However an initial problem would seem to be that the chapters are ordered pairs: we always read a social scientist’s commentary on the philosopher’s essay. There are no chapters where a philosopher comments on a social scientist’s offering. Given the aim of the book, it is unclear why the ‘interaction’ only goes one way.

Never the less, the key question to ask about this collection is whether the essays in each chapter serve as examples of a productive interaction between the two disciplines. Indeed, how the essays interact with each other is, so far as this review is concerned, of more interest than how we judge them as contributions to the philosophy of social science.
In what follows I discuss the three sections of the book out of order. I examine the first and the third sections before looking at the second section. The reason, which will become apparent, is that while the first and third sections provide examples of successful interaction between philosophers and social scientists, the second section does this less well.

In the first section of the book, which deals with social ontology, the replies make interesting contributions to the agenda as set by the philosophical essays. It is instructive to note how they do this; the first two chapters illustrate different ways in which this contribution can be made.

The first chapter is made up of an essay by John Searle concerning “Language and Social Ontology” and a reply by Mark Turner. Searle presents the kind of arguments that will be immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with his *Construction of Social Reality* (The Free Press, 1995). Searle’s substantive conclusion is that institutional facts—facts about social institutions—are created and maintained by declarative speech acts; such as, for example, “I now pronounce you husband and wife” (18), or “Let there be a corporation!” (27). In his reply Turner does not make Searle’s conclusion the focus of his argument. Instead he extends what he sees as Searle’s main methodological point, namely that we should not take language for granted, that is to say, we should not forget that language is “the fundamental social institution” (25). Turner argues that Searle’s contention that it is wrong to take language for granted generalises to encompass a good deal of other aspects of sociality that should not be taken for granted either; including for example, intentionality, personal identity, roles and narrative (30). Turner’s claim is that Searle’s argument shows us how philosophical work that explores these notions helps us to avoid tempting but fallacious reasoning in the social sciences. What Searle does for language, Turner hopes can be done for other aspects of sociality.

Whether or not we judge Searle or Turner’s arguments to be successful, it is more important for this discussion to note that Turner’s reply illustrates one way in which philosophy and the social sciences
can interact. Turner draws out and extends a methodological implication of Searle’s work: this is clearly valuable, even though Turner does not engage substantively with Searle.

A very different kind of interaction can be seen in the second chapter. In this chapter Michael Bratman discusses “Shared Agency”, and the reply is supplied by Pierre Demeulenaere. Bratman’s argument begins with the idea that intentional and norm-guided planning is characteristic of individual agents. He extends this idea by arguing that the individual’s psychological resources which make such planning possible are sufficient resources out of which to construct a genuine notion of shared intentions and agency for small groups of individuals. The conclusion being that shared intentions and agency is emergent.

Demeulenaere does an excellent job of taking Bratman to task over the plausibility of his argument’s assumptions. Demeulenaere explains: “[Bratman’s] argument rests on a series of metaphors like ‘bottom,’ ‘level,’ ‘emergence’ and others of similar ilk that oppose the locus of the ‘individual’ and the locus of the ‘social’. Since he intends to examine the nature of both individual and shared intention “under a philosophical microscope” it should be noted straightforwardly that such a microscope has very conceptual lenses that should themselves be examined under a sociological microscope” (60). The argument that Demeulenaere develops is a superb demonstration of how sociological insights can inform philosophical reasoning; helping to avoid unsophisticated, and more importantly, unsound, premises.

Again, the point I wish to make here does not concern the substantive content of Bratman or Demeulenaere’s arguments; rather I simply note the way this chapter illustrates a second way that philosophy and the social sciences can fruitfully interact with each other. The general lesson is that philosophical arguments sometimes involve empirical premises, especially if they purport to be relevant to the social sciences and assessing the soundness of such premises is unlikely to be a matter of philosophical expertise.

Much the same can be said about the third chapter in the first section (Diego Rios replies to Philip Pettit’s discussion of “The Re-
ality of Group Agents”); Although on this occasion, while Rios does engage very well with the substance of Pettit’s argument, too much in the reply is merely gestured towards and not enough is followed up in detail.

Similarly, in the third section of the book the chapters (ch. 8–10) are successfully put forward as examples of “How Philosophy and the Social Sciences Can Enrich Each Other”. Werner Guth & Hartmut Kliemt’s reply to James Woodward’s “Why Do People Cooperate as Much as They Do?”; Steven Luke’s reply to Ernest Sosa’s “Situations Against Virtues” and David-Hillel Ruben’s reply to C. Mantzavinos’s “What Kind of Problem is the Hermeneutic Circle” all engage with the philosophical essays by challenging the soundness of their assumptions and premises.

It is perhaps to be expected however that the first and third sections of the book succeed in demonstrating—in my opinion very well—how philosophy and the social sciences can interact. The reason is that they take on issues that are directly relevant to the practice of social science. It is no great surprise that essays by philosophers about topics such as group agents or cooperation provide material that social scientists can productively engage with. It is less clear that the same expectation should be held for the second section of the book. The second section, called “Laws and Explanation in the Social Sciences”, is concerned with metaphysical issues in social science. And indeed it is this section where some of the essays and replies can be seen to come apart.

The starkest example of this is chapter 4 and concerns David Papineau’s essay “Physicalism and the Human Sciences”. In this essay Papineau seeks to draw out some methodological implications, for the social sciences, of a commitment to physicalism and associated reductionist theses. His worry is that the specific concerns of social scientists regarding their purported laws are independent of whether or not those laws are physically reducible, that is, the question of reducibility just does not seem to affect everyday social scientific practice. As a result he notes that “a purely in principle requirement of reducibility to physics would seem to leave plenty of room
for human sciences that *in practice owe nothing to physical theory*” (112, my emphasis).

Despite this worry Papineau goes on to argue that there are implications of physicalism that are practically relevant for social science. He claims that consideration of whether particular reductions are in principle possible “can be a crucial guide to the prospects for further research” (122). The reason being that the in principle question is supposed to inform social scientists about what to look for and what to expect; in particular, whether it is “sensible to seek a nexus of interconnected causal laws” (122). Now it seems to me at least that the interesting question to ask of Papineau’s essay is whether thinking through one’s metaphysical commitments to physicalism really can be a “crucial guide”, given the initial worry that the social sciences “in practice owe nothing to physical theory”. The heart of Papineau’s argument is that such thinking can.

The unfortunate problem is that Papineau’s commentators, Robert G. Shulman and Ian Shapiro, fail to appreciate this. They criticise the claim that reductions to physical theory should be actively sought. Their arguments attack the contention that there have been significant reductive achievements and question whether such reductions could be expected to be helpful, concluding that trying to achieve reductions is, in fact, deeply unhelpful. Quoting Shulman and Shapiro, “the philosophical argument loses relevance for us ... the relevant reducing theories have not been found and we have no idea what they might be or how they might affect our empirical results. ... proposed reducing theories ... are inimical to contemporary research” (127).

While they might make many valid points, their points are directed at the wrong target as Papineau is not advocating the kind of reductive program that they criticise. Shulman and Shapiro’s reply fails to engage with Papineau’s essay because it misses the point. What is the significance of this?—that it is hard to sell metaphysics to social scientists? That is too patronising. A better interpretation is more like that suggested by Papineau’s worry: that social sciences, in practice, owe nothing to metaphysical theory.
That metaphysics is at best only a minor concern for social scientists is I think born out in all the chapters in the second section. For instance, the replies from James Alt and Jack Knight to the respective essays by Sandra Mitchell (“Complexity and Explanation in the Social Sciences”) and Daniel Little (“The Heterogeneous Social”) both emphasise a re-prioritising of the philosophers’ concerns. In the case of Mitchell’s essay, Alt’s reply suggests focusing on well-defined models rather than admittedly complex actual processes, and, in the case of Little’s essay, Knight questions whether social scientists really need to embrace the methodological implications of Little’s arguments. In both these chapters the overriding sense is that the philosophers’ arguments don’t speak to the social scientists’ concerns.

However it is the last chapter in section two that best shows how the essay and reply can come apart through differing priorities. Here Gerd Gigerenzer provides a reply to Nancy Cartwright’s essay “What Is This Thing Called ‘Efficacy’?”. The problem Cartwright tackles is about the often undefended assumption that the results from randomised controlled trials (RCTs) genuinely do supply us with evidence that a particular policy (her examples concern education policy) will be effective in particular situations. She argues that, in fact, a significant amount of work needs to be done to justify the assumption that RCT results count as evidence in non-experimental situations. More precisely the work that needs to be done should give us reasons for believing that the experimentally observed effect would endure across changed conditions, that it really is a genuine effect and is not “piggybacking in a misleading way” (199) on the real effect, and that there is an account of the relationship between the magnitudes of the causes and the effect (for example, whether it is linear or plateaus after a certain effect size has been reached). Such reasons, so Cartwright argues, can be supplied by robust theory describing the mechanism of the intervention in question, but without theory results from RCTs are entirely redundant for policy making.
As Cartwright admits, these are hard requirements to meet in a policy context, since it is by no means clear that such theory is available; the mechanisms by which policy interventions have effects are diabolically complex. There are likely to be many causes that may or may not cluster together to produce or negate the effect in non-experimental situations—think of Mackie’s INUS conditions. To my mind, social scientists are well placed to offer help with theory building here and to inform and improve policy; but that is not the issue taken up in Gigerenzer’s reply.

Gigerenzer describes the way that political interests shape health policy in relation to cancer screening in the US and Germany; the (unfortunate) result being that RCT evidence is ignored. His aim is to highlight the contribution of the sociological factors to policy making, in contrast to Cartwright’s focus on the epistemic factors. Clearly the sociology of policy is an interesting issue, especially when particular political factors seem to be acting to undermine the evidence-base of a policy; but equally clearly it is just a different issue from Cartwright’s. It is tempting to say that Gigerenzer’s reply fails to be a useful contribution, because it fails to engage with Cartwright’s essay. However I think it is instructive; it serves to illustrate again the different priorities of social scientists.

To conclude, examples have been given above of chapters where the social scientist’s replies engage substantively with the philosophical issues, where they extend and elaborate on the issues and also where they simply miss the point. The Cartwright-Gigerenzer chapter is an example of another kind of relationship, it is an example of the differing priorities of philosophers and social scientists.

In his introduction and epilogue C. Mantzavinos repeats the statement that this book should foster an interaction between philosophy and the social sciences, and that the two benefit from such an interaction. There are many chapters in this book that serve as examples of this certainly the majority of chapters. It is also noteworthy however that this interaction is achieved best when philosophers use their analytical tools to address the social scientists disciplinary
interests. If we take the aim of this book seriously, then we should starting talking about philosophy for social science.

Andrew Turner
University of Nottingham