PHL 485: Philosophy of Social Science  
Course Description  
Spring Term 2006  
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A characteristic feature of the social sciences in contrast to natural sciences like physics or molecular biology is the extent to which fundamental issues of both theory and method are a matter of controversy. For example, it is common in economics to presume that individuals are motivated by stable, self-regarding preferences, yet there are extensive experimental literatures suggesting that preferences are typically neither stable nor entirely self-regarding. At a more general level, there is a very old dispute in social science about whether social phenomena are most fruitfully studied in terms interactions among individual agents or by reference to the relations between larger scale social features, like unemployment, economic inequality, and so on. At an even more basic level, there is a long running dispute about whether social science should attempt to emulate the natural sciences or whether there is some alternative mode of inquiry specifically suited to the human realm. Moreover, such philosophical issues are not purely academic but have important implications for ethical and social policy questions. For example, consider a person who thinks that the World Trade Organization ought to be reformed because she believes that the current structure of this institution has harmful effects on poorer nations—effects that could be avoided with the appropriate changes. Such a viewpoint presumes that social science can reliably discover the effects of social institutions and predict consequences of changing them, yet whether this is the case, and if so, how, are central among the philosophical issues just sketched.

In this class, we will read some classic and more recent philosophical essays on issues of the sort alluded to above. Since I think that a proper understanding of these issues requires an appreciation of their connection to real-life research, we will also read several recent social science articles that bear on the issues at hand. I currently have a few articles of this sort in mind, but I would welcome suggestions from students.

1 I plan to use the anthology, Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science, edited by Michael Martin and Lee McIntyre (1995), MIT Press. There will also be additional readings, some posted on the course website and some made available for photocopying.