

## Review of *The SAGE Handbook of the Philosophy of Social Sciences*

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*The SAGE Handbook of the Philosophy of Social Sciences*, edited by Ian Jarvie and Jesús Zamora-Bonilla, SAGE Publications, 2011, xvii + 749 pages.

*The SAGE Handbook of the Philosophy of Social Sciences* is a valuable and well-organized collection, offering a fresh and comprehensive picture of this diverse field. Edited by Ian Jarvie, who also serves as editor of the journal *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, and Jesús Zamora-Bonilla, philosopher of science at the National Open University of Spain, the volume collects 39 articles by leading thinkers. This new *Handbook* is distinctive in its usefulness for philosophers and social scientists interested in the foundations of the discipline.

Jarvie motivates the *Handbook's* organization in his introduction. He begins with a history of the topics falling within the discipline, tracing its institutionalization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as it coalesced around a series of problems. Jarvie stresses that the problems in the philosophy of social sciences reflect the dynamics of interactions, over the years, among philosophical schools and numerous fields in the social sciences. Moreover, because an academic field is “a socially constructed institution *par excellence*,” the philosophy of the social sciences is uniquely positioned (or perhaps, cursed) to challenge its own foundations. Different approaches to the philosophy of social science cannot avoid taking a stand on questions of the continuity between natural and social sciences and even the possibility of social science altogether.

Neither can they avoid taking a stand, at least implicitly, on the ontology of the social world. Jarvie points out that in the early days of the philosophy

of social sciences, when logical positivism dominated the literature, any topic “smacking of metaphysics” was sidelined. Even the question of individualism versus holism — a topic that nowadays seems obviously to be a metaphysical matter — was cast in epistemological terms at the time. Countering this, Jarvie highlights the tight relation between approaches to social ontology and the methods of the social sciences. Even though philosophers of social science take their cues from the practice of social scientists, there is feedback, and ontological commitments make their way into the methods of the social sciences.

This attention to social ontology represents a welcome and noteworthy feature of the *Handbook*. Although philosophers have explicitly debated social ontology at least since Comte and Durkheim, the mid-century hostility toward metaphysics has cast a long shadow. Only recently has social ontology begun to crystallize as a field, and it is increasingly clear that its topics are broader than just the traditional individualism-holism debate. The *Handbook* is structured to reflect this. After a short Part 1, addressing the development of the philosophy of the social sciences, Part 2 consists of ten chapters dedicated to social ontology. Part 3 then turns to the diverse range of paradigms in the philosophy of social science, and Part 4 consists of articles on methodologies in the social sciences. In what follows, I will focus on articles of interest to philosophers of economics, though I will still have to be quite selective, given that the *Handbook* is a massive volume of 750 two-column pages.

Part 1 begins with a provocative article by Joseph Agassi, arguing for the relation between philosophical ideologies and methodologies in the social sciences. Agassi mostly focuses on the motivations for individualistic versus collectivist methods, culminating in “institutional individualism.” This is followed by a survey of continental philosophies of the social sciences by David Teira, which he amusingly begins by denying that there is such a thing as a continental philosophy of the social sciences. The article gives a useful overview of Marxist methods in the social sciences, connecting them with

debates on methodological individualism and on social transformation, and briefly presents phenomenology and Foucault's methodology.

The third chapter, by Paul Roth, represents both the virtues and some of the limitations of the *Handbook* as a whole. Whereas some of the articles, like Chapter 2, are expositions or surveys of a subfield, other chapters are more opinionated, written by experts with a well-argued but particular perspective. Roth, for instance, presents a fascinating picture of the "Rationalitätstreit," the debate over the nature of rationality and its role in the interpretation of human action, and argues in favor of the "interpretivist" positions coming from Quine, Kuhn, and Davidson. He begins by connecting the nineteenth century debate between law-involving and historicist theories of social inquiry with the rise of logical positivism. He then discusses Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science*, as well as succeeding work by Quine and Kuhn, all of which he argues break down the assumption that there is a stable world of objects, across which knowledge can be quantified. Finally, he turns to Davidson, who gives an interpretivist theory of meaning and rationality. These views, Roth argues, show that interpretation of a social phenomenon involves assimilation, which "makes moot disputes about reconstructing how any individual or group 'really' thinks about things."

Roth's presentation of this material is clear and useful. However, in defending the interpretivist perspective he does not go on to consider subsequent developments in theories of meaning and language, or in theories of rationality. For instance, although Roth approvingly cites Saul Kripke's arguments on rule-following, arguably the more important outcome of the work of Kripke and his successors has been to demote the role of interpretation in meaning. The approaches of Quine and Davidson have largely fallen out of favor, as has their criticism of the "stable world of objects" that Roth cites. Instead, these have largely been replaced by externalist and context-embedded theories of reference. Equally, theorists in psychology, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind have developed sophisticated context-dependent theories of rationality, in recent years. Philosophers of economics in particular, given their intimate familiarity with

the heuristics and biases program in psychology and the background of behavioral economics, might profit by considering such connections. Some of these topics are valuably taken up by Fred D'Agostino in Chapter 7, "Rational Agency," but it would be useful to the reader if these articles took account of one another. (I myself consider the question of alternative standards of rationality in light of some of this contemporary work, in Epstein 2010.)

Part 2 of the *Handbook* is dedicated to social ontology, and consists of articles on a wide assortment of topics: the place of society in the natural world; language and society; the various senses in which the mind is social; rational agency; individualism and the micro-macro relation; the nature of rules and norms; systems approaches to social theory; the nature of culture; power and social class; and causality and causal modeling.

One of the most useful papers in this part is chapter 6, Laurence Kaufmann's "Social Minds." Many theorists ascribe intentional properties — such as beliefs, preferences, and judgments — to groups and institutions. Many others have argued that the individual mind is itself "social" in some way or other. Kaufmann performs a great service by disentangling and clarifying five different but often confused approaches to these issues: *individualist approaches*, which see the social as a matter of mental contents; *social approaches*, which see individual subjectivity as consisting of features of the community; *the extended mind*, which sees external features of the environment as constitutive of the individual mind; *some analytical approaches to collective intentionality*, which take groups to bear attitudes differently than individuals do; and *the social brain*, which regards cognitive pathways to be adapted to social conditions. All of these may be relevant to the theorist concerned with a more sophisticated treatment of attitudes and other intentional properties.

Another interesting paper in this part is Chapter 9, "Rules, Norms, and Commitments" by Fabienne Peter and Kai Spiekermann. They begin with a broad discussion of the ontology of rules and rule-following. Then they discuss rational choice theory and the role of commitments in avoiding a

picture of agents as “rational fools,” evolutionary game theory and the evolution of cooperative norms, and collective intentionality and controversies over joint commitment. Peter and Spiekermann give an excellent presentation of these theories, as well as how rules and norms figure in to them. Their discussion of the ontology of rules and norms is not quite so successful. In connection with Durkheim and Weber, for instance, they contrast theories of what norms are the result of. They gloss Durkheim as taking norms to be the result of their contributions to maintain social order, and Weber as taking norms to be a result of the subjective meanings individuals attach to their actions. Yet neither of these views is a proposal about the *ontology* of norms, i.e., a proposal about what norms *are*. These contrasting views, as far as they go, are proposals about what norms are a causal consequence of. Similarly, in their characterization of rules in rational choice theory (RCT), Peter and Spiekermann say, “RCT implies that a convention or a social norm is observed because the action that the rule recommends happens to be the one that maximizes individual utility.” Here too, the nature of norms is elided with the reason a norm is in place. Perhaps there is a connection between the causes of norms and the nature of norms, but if so, it is not addressed.

This blurring of ontological and other issues occurs in a number of papers in this section, and even in the organization of this part as a whole. While the editors successfully highlight many basic ontological questions in the social sciences, several of the chapters only discuss ontology peripherally if at all. For instance, the article on systems theory devotes little attention to the nature of systems or the analysis of social phenomena in terms of systems, and might better have been included in Part 3. Similarly, the paper on causal modeling does not address any ontological issues, and might better have been included in Part 4.

More puzzling is the omission of some of the most central topics in the contemporary literature on social ontology. In his introduction, Jarvie gives some compelling reasons for skepticism about the recent literature on collective intentionality, including the views of Bratman, Gilbert, Searle, and

Tuomela. However, a number of authors in the *Handbook* make use of this material, and it is perhaps the central literature for recent discussions in social ontology, so it is odd for it not to be represented. Likewise, the only place that what Francesco Guala has called the “standard model of social ontology” appears is in Frank Hindriks’s chapter on language and society. In that chapter, Hindriks does provide a nice overview of John Searle’s theory, a representative of this “standard model.” But, as advertised, his chapter is largely on language, rather than on the model in general and its challenges.

Part 3 is “A philosopher’s guide to social science paradigms.” This part consists of thirteen chapters, introducing topics as diverse as rational choice theory, institutionalism, functionalism, and critical theory. A number of these chapters would be helpful introductions for an intermediate or advanced class in the philosophy or methods of the social sciences, such as the chapters on rational choice theory, social networks, functionalism and structuralism, and critical theory. Some of the chapters, such as the ones on game theory, social choice theory, and on phenomenology and hermeneutics, may be a bit technical for this purpose.

The chapters on rational choice theory and game theory have obvious relevance to philosophers of economics. Let me highlight a couple whose relevance may not be quite as evident. Chapter 16, “Social Networks,” by Joan de Martí and Yves Zenou, is a good introduction to a branch of mathematics that is becoming increasingly useful to economics. Martí and Zenou present the basic mathematical concepts in social network analysis, such as centrality measures, structural equivalence, and clustering levels. Then they describe models of network formation, both random and strategic formation, and discuss behavior on networks, including models of peer effects, public goods, and collective action. As the article indicates, applications in economics are still nascent. Nonetheless, the authors refer to some interesting work in information diffusion and collective action, where it seems that network structure may be as important as strategic dynamics.

Chapter 19, “Institutions,” by C. Mantzavinos, also represents a topic of increasing importance in economics but sparsely represented in the

philosophy of economics literature. Mantzavinos reviews the basic elements of the theory of institutions, as represented in the “new institutionalism” program associated with Coase, North, and Williamson. He also sketches a theory of the difference between formal and informal institutions, and discusses the evolution of institutions and the problem of path dependence. Mantzavinos does a nice job presenting the field and illustrating applications in social theory. Here again, though, is a place where it would have been useful to connect this article with others in the volume. In particular, from the perspective of social ontology, the theories of the nature of institutions in this program are rather simple, usually focusing on a single feature or function of institutions. If it is justified to put social ontology in a central place in the philosophy of social science, the “new institutionalist” program is an obvious place where social ontology can positively contribute to a burgeoning research program.

The other half of Part 3 consists of articles on paradigms more closely associated with sociology and anthropology than economics. These include articles on functionalism and structuralism; phenomenology, hermeneutics and ethnomethodology; pragmatism and symbolic interactionism; postmodernism and deconstructionism; “culture and cognition” theories; and critical theory. All of these are useful overviews, but are left rather disconnected from one another and from the rest of the book. This, I think, is a missed opportunity. For example, Chapter 21, “Functionalism and Structuralism” by Anthony King, is a nice overview and assessment of these schools. But they are presented mainly as being of historical interest. This, despite the fact that there is a huge contemporary literature on the nature of functions in other sciences, and also despite the fact that economic models in particular are frequently built to illuminate hypothesized functions of various economic entities (e.g., Diamond 1984 on search models of money; or Leland and Pyle 1977 on financial intermediation as responding to asymmetric information vs. Merton 1989 on intermediation as risk-trading). Whether the vast amount of historical work on social functions can help illuminate

contemporary models is an open question, but it is plausible that there are connections worth developing.

Part 4 is on methodologies in the social sciences. Although there is obvious overlap between various research paradigms in the social sciences and the methodologies associated with them, the editors do a nice job in selecting methods for discussion that apply to a range of paradigms. Several of these are the chapters that are most readily useful for philosophers of economics in particular. In this part are included chapters on facts, values, and objectivity; idealization; empirical evidence; experiments; statistics in the social sciences; agent-based simulation; explanation; prediction; social epistemology; expert judgment; and social technology.

One of the most useful papers in this part is Chapter 29, “Empirical Evidence,” by Julian Reiss. Beginning with a useful distinction between theories of evidence and theories of induction, he presents a valuable taxonomy of approaches to each. Among the theories of evidence are instance theories, hypothetico-deductivism, and contextualism, and among the theories of induction are theories of categorical induction, probabilistic theories, and naturalism. Next Reiss discusses the sources of evidence, including descriptive inference, qualitative comparative analysis, and causal modeling, and finally policy inference. Some of the distinctions Reiss presents may not be as clear as he suggests. For instance, he asserts that inference to the best explanation is a theory of evidence, telling us what sorts of tests we should run in order to confirm or disconfirm a hypothesis, and “is silent about the types of inferences to be drawn from the evidence.” Also, he interprets policy inference as inference involving the future, but he does not explain why this topic should be separate from explanation or evaluation of past policies. Such lines may be too sharp, but even if so, overall they provide an effective framework for highlighting differences among a range of theories.

Another useful paper in this part is Chapter 30, “Experiments,” by Francesco Guala. In this chapter, Guala discusses the role of laboratory experiments in supporting inferences in the social sciences. He begins with a discussion of the goals of experimentation and the design strategies for



experiments that ground various kinds of inferences in the social sciences, and then turns to problems with drawing inferences from experiment. In particular, he focuses on the problems of internal and external validity associated with experimental design, and then considers some responses. As a discussion of experimentation in the social sciences, this chapter is limited, inasmuch as it only considers laboratory experiments. Guala does not confront the broader questions of whether investigations in the field can be treated as experiments, or the sorts of randomized testing that are now becoming widespread in economics departments and government agencies. Many of the ideas Guala discusses, however, are applicable to these cases as well.

Altogether, the editors have aimed very high with this *Handbook*. The quality of articles is uniformly good, and despite a few limitations the *Handbook* successfully hits its mark. Together, the articles give an accessible yet comprehensive overview of this enormous field, surveying historical theories, giving a snapshot of the state of the art, and serving as a launching pad for further work.

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