

PROBLEMS WITH INTERPRETIVISM:
PROBLEMS, AIMS, AND METHODS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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The purpose of this presentation is to reconsider problems, aims, and methods in a sub-discipline of philosophy, namely, the philosophy of the social sciences. In doing so, I shall critically examine some interpretive approaches to the social sciences (particularly, P. Winch, C. Taylor, and C. Geertz). Following Hayek and Popper, I shall claim that interpretivism has some methodological deficits and we need a better approach than interpretivism. One of the deepest issues in the philosophy of the social sciences is this: should we study cultural or social phenomena in the same way as we study natural phenomena? Interpretivists try to argue that, since the social is different from the natural in certain ways, the social sciences should proceed differently from the natural sciences. In particular, the social sciences aim to interpret or understand agents' thoughts and actions. This necessitates a subjective or internal perspective. I offer two principal objections. First, interpretivists exaggerate the differences between the social/cultural world and the natural world, and hence they also exaggerate the differences between the social sciences and the natural sciences. Second, the interpretivists ignore important social science problems where internal perspectives are unenlightening, particularly outcomes due to the unintended consequences of agents' actions.