CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Despite our personal commitments to what we regard as the fruitful examination of the relationship between social research and philosophy, we approached the writing of this book with a mixture of fear and trepidation. Although we are convinced that a consideration of this relationship is not only important for the practical purpose of clarifying issues, as well as the more abstract but equally important motive of intellectual curiosity, we sit somewhat uneasily in a path between these disciplines.

In each of these disciplines there are those who would regard any examination of their interplay as a dilution of the distinct contribution that each makes to our understandings of the social world. As it stands this is an unfortunate state of affairs, for each, while often aiming to achieve different ends, has much to offer the other. It is this belief that motivates us to write this book. At the same time, we recognize that for many social science students the study of philosophy is viewed as anything from difficult to irrelevant. We wish to correct the latter view, although having considerable sympathy with the former.

Yes, philosophy is difficult. So is social research and cooking. If you will forgive the metaphor, we wish to introduce you to a recipe, involving the ingredients of philosophy and social research, that when put together will provide a pleasant, rather than unsavoury taste. Our aim is also to enable you to see the important relations between its parts. This will allow a consideration of the philosophical nature of the social sciences in general and research practice in particular. In turn, this discussion of what is normally regarded as the "background" to social research, has the potential to refine, through reflection, the decisions that are routinely made

in theresearch process itself. To achieve these broad aims, the actual content of the chapters are as follows. The section below is devoted to clarification. Here, we consider the aims, content and relationship between the two disciplines in order that you have a foundation upon which to proceed through the book.

Chapter 2 seeks to clarify what seems like an obvious question: what is science? This, of course, reflects the very nature of philosophical inquiry: to ask the obvious and, in so doing, to cause us to reflect upon our assumptions. What science actually "is" and what it is capable "of", are questions so often taken for granted. Science is frequently seen to represent the production of a body of knowledge that is assumed, in one way or another, to represent the "truth" about the phenomena with which it is concerned. However, on what basis are such claims made and how does science proceed in order to produce the truth?

By asking such questions, philosophy shakes the foundations of scientific practice. However, this should not be seen as a negative endeavour, for it enables us to examine not only the nature of science, but the foundations and subject matter of the social sciences. This is the subject of Chapter 3. In this chapter, we consider the extent to which the social sciences are similar to, or different from, the natural sciences. This is an important debate. Quite simply, if the sciences are capable of producing the truth about the natural world, then the social sciences may achieve, in adopting their methods, the same end in relation to the social world. Nevertheless, there is a tradition within the social sciences which argues that their aims and subject matter are different, but this does not mean that they are inferior. Given these arguments, Chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion of these issues in relation to how it is that we can "know" and "understand" social phenomena and what strategies we may adopt for this purpose.

For many, to follow in the path of the natural sciences is to replicate what is assumed to be, along with explanation, generalization and prediction, a central feature of their practice: value-freedom. In the age of genetic research, nuclear technology and environmental concerns, this ideal has found itself under increasing scrutiny. The motivations that underlie scientific curiosity are not always "disinterested". Plus, as large corporations and governments increasingly control the purse strings of such research, value-freedom may be invoked as often as a means of protecting oneself from undue encroachments on the process of research, as an attainable and ideal mode of scientific practice. As a result, this

question isat the heart of research practice and for this reason we devote Chapter 6 to a discussion of the issue of values in social research.

Chapter 5 seeks to turn around our examination of the relationship between philosophy and social research. In this chapter we seek to unravel the philosophical issues that emerge in the research process itself. This allows a more focused discussion of the ideas contained in the previous chapters. Of course, we do not suggest that this is exhaustive. However, we hope this enables you, the reader, to locate and reflect upon the routine ways in which our decisions may be informed by a consideration of philosophical questions. Therefore, we are seeking to clarify further the relationship between research practice and philosophical ideas.

Chapter 7 would, for reasons that will become apparent, seem out of place in any book that seeks some linear progression in fulfilling its aims. Here we examine the poststructuralist and postmodernist movements in social science and philosophy that have appeared over the last few decades. These are said to aim at the very heart of our assumptions and practices, with a growing body of literature appearing by the day on these traditions and their implications for the social and physical sciences, as well as politics and social life in general. Given this, its inclusion is necessary in order to complete the picture of the relationship between philosophy and social research.

While it is our contention that philosophy is centrally important to understanding social research, it is clear that a great deal of research is not philosophically informed, whilst philosophy itself could do more for this relationship by understanding the daily decisions and actual contexts of research practice. Quite simply, reflection can be a luxury if one is on a temporary research contract, or is working for a large corporation or agency who want what they call "concrete" or "relevant" results, not "idle speculations". These and other considerations must be part of a more complete understanding of social research in the contemporary world. However, before moving on to Chapter 2, we first wish to clarify what is meant by philosophy and social research and the potential nature of the relationship between these two disciplines.

What is philosophy?

The concerns of philosophy often underlie and shape other disciplines. It seeks to clarify our concepts, transcend the particularity of disciplinary boundaries and ask questions about those very things that we often take for granted: for example, the nature of "truth". Let us examine a little more closely what it is that philosophers do and why they do it?

We all philosophize whenever we attempt to handle abstract ideas (Emmett 1964: ii). What is meant by abstract ideas? The nature of beauty, the purpose of life and whether we have free will encompass such ideas. We could add more mundane items to this list such as: where do flies go in the winter and why do we lose single socks and not pairs? You might object, quite reasonably, that the last two examples are problems for entomology and probability theory and have nothing to do with abstract reasoning. You would of course be right in that both questions are potentially answerable in concrete terms. In other words, they can be explained "scientifically". The question then becomes: what divides the abstract thinking of philosophy from scientific investigation? In the first case, the activity consists of thinking and in the second case, there is at least some engagement, via our senses, with the social and natural worlds of which we are a part. Yet there are problems that begin with abstract thoughts and end up being concrete and soluble problems in science. For example, for centuries philosophers have speculated on what "space"— that which lies between celestial bodies—consists of. The idea that it consisted of nothing, a vacuum, was the product of scientific discovery. This scientific "fact" is now questioned (Kraus 1989), indicating that science itself may not be assured of its findings. Nevertheless, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that what is now thought of as science was once the province of philosophical speculation.

That point noted, not all philosophical problems become scientific ones. There remain scientific problems with a large philosophical content. Other problems, such as the nature of the origin of the universe, or the workings of the mind, while the subjects of science, remain deeply philosophical; not least because the theories that claim to "solve" these problems are highly speculative and often incommensurate with each other. From this point of view, can we say that philosophy is pre-scientific thought?

A key area of philosophy is that of metaphysics. Literally, this means that which is beyond physics. This is a form of abstract thought that attempts to establish some "first principles" as foundations for knowledge.

Perhaps the most famous example of this is the work of Descartes (1596–1650). As our experiences can play tricks on us, according to Descartes, they cannot be considered a satisfactory foundation for our knowledge. For instance, how do we know we are not dreaming and that our dreams are not just the tricks of an evil demon? Descartes believed that as long as you believe you are "something", the demons cannot deceive you. Therefore, in believing in yourself, he said that something called an "I" exists. For Descartes, this is the basic "truth" and the foundation for all our knowledge. To put it into its famous phrase, we can make only one statement with any degree of certainty, "I think, therefore I am" *(cogito ergo sum).* Later on in his career, Descartes moved from metaphysical first principles of existence, to an attempt to establish the location of the mind or the soul in the pineal gland—which led to some rather dubious experiments on cats!

If Descartes' curiosity, and that of philosophers in general, gives rise to the curiosity of science, an important question then follows: on what basis may we conduct science or even the philosophy that might have preceded it? This centres upon questions of knowledge. Where does our knowledge come from and how reliable is it? These are the concerns of the branch of philosophy known as epistemology.

The status of our knowledge claims is well illustrated by Bertrand Russell (1872–1970). He asked how can we know the world around us has any physical reality? How can he know, for example, that when he sees a cat move from one part of the room to another, but pass from his view in its journey, that the cat has continued to "exist" while out of his gaze? The only sense data available are to see the cat at one point and later at another. Our working assumption is that the cat continued to exist, but how can we know that? As Descartes argued, the cat may just be a dream. However, if we assume that the cat exists whether we see it or not:

> we can understand from our own experience how it gets hungry between one meal and the next; but if it does not exist when I am not seeing it, it seems odd that its appetite should grow during non existence as fast as during existence (Russell 1980:10).

In this example, we can see how Russell makes a knowledge claim for the existence of the cat. A less trivial and important concern of this book is what is the status of knowledge claims in social sciences and sciences in general? While we are concerned with metaphysical problems, we tend

to be more concerned with epistemological ones. However, these are not our only concerns, nor those of philosophy. We can see the mechanism by which Russell claims that there is a continued existence of his cat, despite its absence from his gaze. Yet there is still the question of the nature of the cat's existence. Two possible states are offered by Russell. First, that the cat had no "real" existence and was a product of the mind. Secondly, that the cat does exist and the epistemological "proof" of this resides in its appetite. Such questions form a branch of metaphysical enquiry called ontology. While we promise that the nature of the existence of cats is now a closed matter, the book will be concerned with more serious ontological questions concerning the nature of assumptions that underlie scientific theories. Quite simply, if we make a claim concerning the social and natural worlds, what are the presuppositions that are built into our ideas regarding their nature?

By now you may have formed the distinct impression that philosophy can be likened to games that young children play with their parents. When told something the child will reply, "why"? A further explanation is then given and the parent believes she or he has answered the question, only to be confronted with another inquiry. The game continues until either the child or the parent become tired or the questioning has arrived at something that is imponderable.

"Don't hit your brother."

"Why?"

"Because its naughty."

"Why?"

"Because brothers should be kind to each other."

"Why?"

"Because the social fabric of the nuclear family and western civilization itself will collapse if we don't show consideration for others."

"Why?"

(Smack)

Descartes' method of "radical doubt" can be likened to the questioning child. Persistent questions may be annoying to parents, but asking them can help the child develop an enquiring and questioning mind. Likewise, awkward philosophical questions may seem irrelevant to the practitioners of, say, physics or social research. However, questions such as these "enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination, and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind

against speculation" (Russell 1983:93–4). In this way, they possess the potential to make us better physicists or social researchers.

Finally we should note that philosophers are concerned with what it is that makes human beings what they are. Are there certain things that we should, or should not, do? Are there values that transcend history and different societies? Can we say what can counts as the "good life" is the same for all? These are moral questions. As we will see, they form a central part of research practice. Indeed, the philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–73) described what we now call the social sciences as "moral" sciences. In all of those things that concern us as researchers, we will find epistemological, ontological and moral issues.

What is social research?

Although the spirit of curiosity motivates social researchers as much as it does philosophers, by necessity, the former are moved to address those questions that are of concern to their disciplines or to those organizations or institutions for whom they work and/or are funded. They must be technically minded in their search for the best ways of achieving their aims. Therefore, they are not usually in the daily business of asking philosophical questions about the social world. It is usually the process of investigation that defines something as being "research", rather than being driven by more abstract concerns.

The research process is made up of a series of steps and judgements that involve the application of techniques. For this reason, the methods of research can be used in the service of curiosity. These may be everyday concerns, like whether or not to buy a pair of shoes, or those that are of general social concern: for example, the issues of homelessness, crime or poverty. The first may require an examination of our current funds and the state of our shoes, whereas the second will require funded research programmes with clear policy objectives. Both involve curiosity and necessitate techniques peculiar to the questions being asked.

Research may be characterized as methodical investigations into a subject or problem. To "research" is to seek answers that involve understanding and explanation, whereas the credibility of its outcomes will rest heavily upon the conduct of the investigation. Those whose job it is to conduct research will, hopefully, apply systematic methods in their practice. Most social research is conducted through the following methods

of data collection: social surveys, field observations, interviews and the use of existing data. The method chosen will depend on the resources available and the nature of the phenomenon we wish to study. Despite these caveats, we are usually concerned with the quantity or quality of a phenomeon and different research methods reflect these concerns. At the same time, they reflect a philosophically inspired debate about whether social research can successfully "quantify" human behaviour. While we will have more to say on this topic, let us first ask what are the main styles of "quantitative" or "qualitative" research?

Social surveys are quantitative. In the main, they are single "one-off" studies of specific "target" populations at particular points in time. They are carried out in order to describe and explain sets of circumstances, behaviours and attitudes. Although a complete enumeration of a population would tell researchers what they wished to know, time and resources do not permit this and so attributes are "counted" in a population by drawing a sample that is taken to be representative of the total population in which the researcher is interested. For instance, though it is common to claim "smoking causes cancer", this claim is based on the observation that a great number of people who smoke subsequently develop cancer.

There are cases where researchers will want to say with a great degree of certainty that X was caused by Y. In psychology, for example, experiments are designed to investigate the causes of particular phenomena. The cornerstone of classic experimental design is termed "randomization", whereby the investigator manipulates or controls some feature of the environment and then observes any resulting change in the behaviour of the subjects under investigation in order to ascertain the relationship between cause and effect. Exposed subjects are thus compared to non-exposed subjects and conclusions drawn. The difficulty for the experimenter lies in isolating what it is that "really" does cause something else to happen. In fact, such associations are not always obvious and the whole question of cause and effect in human behaviour is questioned by both philosophers and some social researchers.

The concern of "qualitative research" is primarily with the qualities of given phenomena and less with their quantities. Unlike experimental methods, there is no desire to isolate specific or certain causes. Qualitative research encompasses a range of strategies that allow researchers to "get close to the data". They are often characterized as being concerned with the daily actions of people and the meanings that they attach to their

environments and relationships. They take various forms that include ethnography, case studies, biography and autobiography. As we shall see, there is a debate in the social sciences, which has methodological and technical implications, that revolves around the question of meaning in social life.

Ethnography lays appropriate emphasis on its anthropological origins by direct observation of behaviours in a particular society. Its method is principally that of participant observation, whereas case studies rely on intense observation, tape recorded interviews and the collection of documents: for example, records of speeches, photos, diaries, letters, etc. In qualitative research, the understandings of the action of participants is gained by placing emphasis on the way in which action arises from and reflects back on, individual experiences. Qualitative research, in its various forms, thus becomes a complex interaction between the researcher and the researched (see Hobbs & May 1993). It is thus concerned with a reflexive understanding of the process of research activity, as well as the technicalities of method.

Lastly, research that uses available data or secondary analysis, stands apart from experiments, surveys, ethnography or case studies. The data does not originate as a result of the research, but is the product of earlier research activity or some form of record-keeping. Here, the variety of data appears to be limited only by the researcher's imagination (Singleton et al. 1993). Examples of secondary data can be found in official records, public and private documents, the print and broadcast media, physical material (clothing, works of art), as well as vast data archives covering both quantitative surveys and qualitative material (see Dale et al. 1988, Scott 1990).

The relationship between philosophy and social research

Both philosophy and social research aim to improve our knowledge of the world. The ways in which they go about this may seem strange to those immersed in only one of the disciplines, yet there is actually a great deal of common interest between them. Whereas philosophy is concerned to know what kind of things exist in the world and what is our warrant to know them, social research is concerned with their knowable properties. In this sense, ontological and epistemological outcomes of philosophical investigations will have a direct impact on what we can say of social

properties. Philosophy thus possesses the potential to construct a frame of reference for the researcher. Sometimes, however, the researcher must choose between frames of reference: for example, whether we regard social groups such as classes, or communities of different kinds, as "things in themselves" with particular analyzable properties, or whether we simply see them as a collections of individuals. The former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, once asserted that there was no such thing as society, just individual men and women and their families. This assertion had an enormous political impact and though, on the face of it, Lady Thatcher was not being overtly philosophical in her argument, her utterance was actually an articulation of a philosophical position that has both methodological and moral, as well as political and economic consequences.

It is occasionally said that social research could get along quite nicely without philosophy, or philosophical reflection. Yes, the practice of social research would probably continue, but it would still have philosophical implications. Take two researchers engaged in separate projects on the existence and nature of poverty. The first might be informed by the individualist assumptions of Lady Thatcher and the second may take an opposite, collectivist, viewpoint. Each could claim not to be touched by philosophy, yet the outcomes of the research would probably be very different simply because they began from different starting points that, in turn, were grounded in particular philosophical assumptions. Philosophy will not go away. While we would maintain that philosophy can be interesting and rewarding for its own sake, it underwrites our research activity and that is enough of a reason for engaging with its ideas and insights.

Philosophy also needs social research, though this relationship is perhaps not quite so obvious. The philosophy of the social sciences emerged out of the special considerations and problems associated with knowing the social world. As such, it needs to be relevant to the concerns of researchers in social science and the way this is achieved is via an awareness and appreciation of the key issues of research practice. This does not mean that philosophy must simply reflect the preoccupations of the social or the physical sciences, for that would undermine many of its insights, but that the questions philosophers ask should be informed by current debates in research. For example, there has long been a symbiotic relationship between probability theory and philosophy, whereby developments in the former have had implications for the

latter—particularly in the area of statistics (see Chapter 4). Likewise, philosophical debates concerned with social causality have been shaped as a result of practical research experiences (see Chapter 3). Some of the most important work in both areas actually straddles disciplines to the extent that philosophers themselves now work within research programmes and research centres alongside researchers whose concerns are more instrumentally based.

The above noted, philosophy and social research do not just rely on each other, they are two different, yet complementary, views of the world. Methodological decisions are implicitly ontological and epistemological, whereas moral considerations underwrite everything we do as researchers, philosophers or citizens. Whether you send bibles, bread or both to the starving, will rest very much on whether you prioritize spiritual or material considerations, or a combination of these.

A note on reading this book

This book is not intended as a definitive statement on either philosophy or social research, but simply as a tool (maybe even a blunt instrument!) to aid an understanding of the relationship between the disciplines. Throughout you will find references to research and occasionally a highlighted illustration of a particular research project. The intention of the latter is to give some flavour of the philosophical implications of research. The examples are neither definitive nor detailed and in many cases simply reflect the authors' own research interests! Moreover by no means all philosophical questions raised in the text are addressed in the research examples. The challenge for the reader is to consider the philosophical implications for her own research.

At the end of each chapter you will find some recommended further reading and some questions for consideration. Once again the former are not necessarily definitive, but represent texts we have found interesting or useful, while the latter should be considered food for thought and not a whole meal!