# Philosophy of Psychology

## Prof. Nicolò Maria Gaj

### **COURSE AIMS AND INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES**

The main aim of the course is to critically investigate the most important schools of contemporary psychology by using the conceptual tools provided by the philosophy of science. For this purpose, an analysis of the various psychological paradigms will be preceded by the illustration of the basic concepts of the general philosophy of science and the philosophy of human sciences. The course also includes an in-depth investigation: this year’s topic is the history of psychological objects.

*Knowledge and understanding:*

At the end of the course, students will be able to critically outline the concepts learned and demonstrate a firm grasp of the specificity of the epistemological point of view presupposed by a critical examination of the various psychological positions.

*Applying knowledge and understanding:*

Students will be able to acquire the capacity to grasp the core features of the psychological orientations analyzed, in order to argue for or against them. The in-depth investigation of the history of psychological objects will raise awareness of psychological constructs’ social and historical character.

***COURSE CONTENT***

The course presents the fundamental elements of the general philosophy of science, the philosophy of human sciences, and the philosophy of psychology. It also includes an in-depth investigation of the history of psychological objects.

MODULE 1: *General Philosophy of Science*

*Unit 1*: Scientific theories

What scientific theories are

The relationship between the notions of theory, hypothesis, and law

*Unit 2*: Explanation and prediction in science

Deductive-nomological vs. inductive statistical explanations

Philosophical interpretations of the notion of probability

Explanation and prediction

*Unit 3*: Justification in science

Logical positivism from the first to the third phase

Popper’s rejection of the inductive method

Inductivism vs. anti-inductivism: Reichenbach vs. Popper

Popper’s hypothetico-deductive method

Corroboration and rational prediction: Salmon’s criticism of Popper

Theory-ladenness and evolutionary epistemology in Popper’s thought

Post-Popperian philosophy of science: T. Kuhn and P. Feyerabend

Theory-ladenness: moderate vs. radical versions

*Unit 4*: The dynamics of science

The dynamics of science: comparison of Logical positivism, Popperianism and Post-Popperian philosophy of science

*Unit 5*: Scientific realism

Truth and verisimilitude in Popper’s thought

Realism vs. anti-realism in science

MODULE 2: *Philosophy of the Human Sciences*

*Unit 1*: Historical development and contemporary perspectives in the debate between the human and the natural sciences

Explanation vs. understanding: the debate’s rise in the 19th Century and contemporary perspectives

*Unit 2*: Explanation in the human sciences

Popper’s situational logic

G.H. von Wright’s practical inference

Deductive-nomological explanation model and practical inference: similarities and differences

MODULE 3: *Philosophy of Psychology*

*Unit 1*: The debate on the scientificity of psychoanalysis: Grünbaum vs. Popper

*Unit 2*: The epistemological status of psychology according to W. Wundt

*Unit 3*: The epistemological foundations of behaviorism

*Unit 4*: The epistemological foundations of the cognitive sciences

*Unit 5*: The epistemological foundations of constructionism

MODULE 4: *In-depth investigation: The history of psychological objects*

*Unit 1:* Naïve Naturalism and its problems

*Unit 2:* The work of K. Danziger: its theoretical and philosophical implications

***READING LIST[[1]](#footnote-1)***

Gaj, N. (ed.). *Essays on the philosophy of science*. Anthology of essays available at Centro Stampa, Catholic University, Largo Gemelli 1.

Gaj, N. (ed.). *The history of psychological objects*. Anthology of essays available at Centro Stampa, Catholic University, Largo Gemelli 1.

***TEACHING METHOD***

Classroom lectures, group discussions, and lectures by experts. The course includes 6 hours of practical activities designed to complement the traditional lecture format. These activities may include group work, case studies, and simulations, and are intended to deepen students' understanding of the course material and foster active engagement with the subject matter.

***ASSESSMENT METHOD AND CRITERIA***

The examination takes place in written form. It consists of four open questions, the first three out of the three modules of the course and the fourth on the topic of the fourth module. The question on the in-depth investigation has no line limit. Each answer will be scored from insufficient to 30 and the overall grade is given by the average score of the four answers.

The outcomes of the practical activities will be evaluated and factored into the final grade. The assessment criteria and methods will be explained in detail during class.

Overall, the exam aims to assess the degree to which students have succeeded in understanding the contents of the course and in identifying the specificity of the epistemological point of view when examining the various psychological models. To this end, specific consideration will be given to the ability to explain and critically elaborate the arguments presented and to argue and critically assess problems.

***NOTES AND PREREQUISITES***

Attendance of the course is highly recommended, even if not mandatory.

No prerequisites are required for this course in terms of content knowledge. However, students are expected to have a genuine interest and intellectual curiosity in the topics covered in the course

*Times and place of reception*

Prof. Nicolò Gaj meets students on Thursdays afternoon at his office, Department of Psychology, third floor, room n. 302. Students are required to get in contact via email: [nicolo.gaj@unicatt.it](mailto:nicolo.gaj@unicatt.it). Both in-person and online meetings are possible.

1. I testi indicati nella bibliografia sono acquistabili presso le librerie di Ateneo; è possibile acquistarli anche presso altri rivenditori. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)