

PhD student: Rosa Runhardt

1. Can you summarize your research in three sentences?

I investigate causation in the social sciences, and in particular, what kind of evidence for causation is justified there. For instance, is mechanistic evidence (popular in e.g. biology) also applicable? Moreover, I study how social scientists ought to conceptualise the phenomena they make causal claims about, and what consequences different conceptualisations have for the conclusions they draw.

2. Why is your research important? What does it change? What do you want it to change?

There is a lot of quick and dirty philosophising going on in the social sciences. By studying causation in a more structured, analytic way, I provide social scientists with the foundations they are now often lacking. For instance, thinking about mechanisms all sounds fine, but what assumptions are you making about the nature of the social realm when you do? I have found that social scientists are open to new suggestions - I helped write a working paper for a new conflict research programme at LSE, for instance, and I have presented my work on causation at an interdisciplinary social science conference.

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3. Who influenced you? Who do you dramatically disagree with?

I was trained as a mathematician, and I came by philosophy more or less by accident. I remember the first time I went to a philosophy lecture quite vividly. The lecturer, James McAllister, opened my eyes to a whole new way of thinking. I don't think I would have been where I am today if it weren't for his lectures and his support. Then, when I came to the LSE, my world expanded again; I went to a lecture by Nancy Cartwright, and she taught me to think about the messier, social side of science. Though I don't agree with everything James or Nancy argue, both have influenced my thinking.

4. Have you ever had an aha-moment that proved pivotal?

I don't believe in aha-moments; I do believe in writing every day, always putting your thoughts on paper and challenging them, and reading other authors carefully. If you believe in aha-moments, all you'll do is take long country walks and showers waiting for inspiration to strike. You'll feel guilty when it doesn't, and that's not a good motivation to keep at it.

5. What is the most important thing for a philosopher?

Never skip over the details of what you're arguing. Challenge every argument: do you really believe in what you just wrote down? Can you dig deeper? Are there any assumptions hiding in the corner of your eye, assumptions that you don't really want to think about? And what if those are wrong? This goes not only for your own writing, but also for reading others' work: don't trust them.