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Classifying Contingency in the Social Sciences: Diachronic, Synchronic, and Deterministic Contingency

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Abstract

This article makes three claims concerning the concept of contingency. First, we argue that the word contingency is used in far too many ways to be useful. Its many meanings are detrimental to clarity of discussion and thought in history and the social sciences. We show how there are eight distinct uses of the word and illustrate this with numerous examples from the social sciences and history, highlighting the scope for confusion caused by the many, often contradictory uses of the term. Second, we impose some order on these uses through developing a threefold classification of contingency based on assumptions about possible worlds and determinism. Finally, we discuss why we believe that one of the classes is a special use of the word without relevance to the social sciences, while the two remaining classes are nothing more than a variety of the "no hidden factors" argument in the debate on indeterminism and determinism.


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