

# University of Washington

## PHILOSOPHY *Spring 2017*

### Colloquium

#### **Elliott Sober**

Hans Reichenbach Professor  
of Philosophy  
University of Wisconsin-Madison



*"Ockham's Razor – When is the  
Simpler Theory Better?"*

**April 28, 2017**

**Friday, 3:30 – 5:30 pm**

**SAV 264**

Ockham's razor, the principle of parsimony, says that a theory that postulates fewer entities, causes, or processes is "better" than a theory that postulates more, so long as the simpler theory is compatible with what we observe. But what does "better" mean? It is obvious that simpler theories are easier to remember, manipulate, and test. The hard problem is to say why the fact that one theory is simpler than another is relevant to deciding what the world is like. In this lecture, I'll describe two or three "parsimony paradigms" within which this hard problem can be solved.

**Elliott Sober** is Hans Reichenbach Professor of Philosophy and William F. Vilas Research Professor at University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research is in the philosophy of science, especially in the philosophy of evolutionary biology. In philosophy of biology, he has worked on the units of selection problem and on phylogenetic inference. In more general philosophy of science, he has worked on the conflict between Bayesianism and Frequentism, on the role of parsimony in scientific reasoning, on the mind/body problem, and on causality, explanation, and reductionism.

Professor Sober's books include *The Nature of Selection -- Evolutionary Theory in Philosophical Focus* (1984), *Reconstructing the Past -- Parsimony, Evolution, and Inference* (1988), *Philosophy of Biology* (1993), *Unto Others -- The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (1998, coauthored with David Sloan Wilson), *Evidence and Evolution – the Logic Behind the Science* (2008), *Did Darwin Write the Origin Backwards?* (2011), *Ockham's Razors – A User's Manual* (2015). Professor Sober won the Lakatos Prize in 1991. In 2008, the American Philosophical Association named him Prometheus Laureate. In 2014, the Philosophy of Science Association gave him the Carl Gustav Hempel Award. He has been president of the Philosophy of Science Association, the American Philosophical Association (Central Division), and the International Union for History and Philosophy of Science (Division of Logic, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science).

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