

Paradoxes of Human Nature

Robert C. Trundle

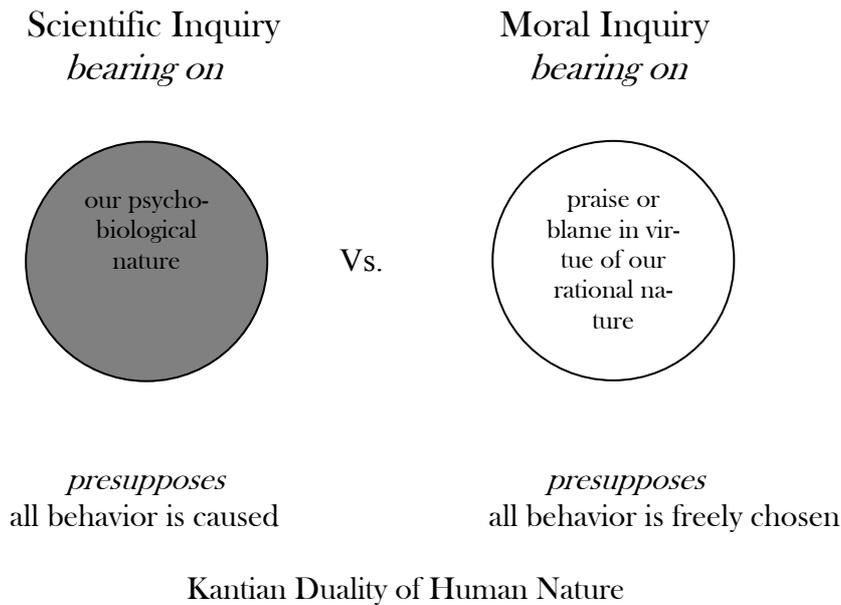
Department of Social Sciences & Philosophy
Northern Kentucky University, USA
trundle@nku.edu

ABSTRACT

Our psychobiological nature is characterized paradoxically by our limitedly having and not having free will – our having this will and being subject to causes understood scientifically. Both characteristics are necessary for an intelligible ethics, politics, and political science. In particular, political science *as a science* must admit of our behavior being partially caused *and* of political rights and responsibilities in virtue of our limited free will. Admitting of either only this will or only the determinism is a central error of modern totalitarian ideology.

1. A view of human nature inspired by Immanuel Kant continues to skew science, ethics and politics: Insofar as a causal principle is presupposed by scientific inquiries about our behavior, our behavior is excluded from moral inquiries that presuppose our free choice of will. And insofar as this will is supposed, the inquiries of science are equally precluded. In short, the presupposed judgments that ‘all behavior is caused’ and that ‘all persons are free agents’ are held to be logically inconsistent and mutually exclusive:¹

¹ For example, see Howard Smith’s *Let There be Light: Modern Cosmology and Kabbalah* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2006), p. 183. The logical inconsistency is allegedly resolved by Kant’s relegation of ‘free will’ to something affirmed by practical reason. This reason assumes for practical purposes that there is free will. That is, despite being unable to show how our will is consistent with a causally deterministic science (quantum physics being deterministic of probabilities), we must act *as if* we have free will for the sake of morality. Dr. Smith, a senior astrophysicist at the Harvard Smithsonian Center, typifies this Kantian shift: “Even were a conceptual breakthrough to someday prove we do not actually have free will, we may still need to *act* as though we do. Taking responsibility by acting as if there is free will, whether proven or not, is part of being aware.” Precisely, the point herein is that to be aware incontrovertibly of our behavior is to be implicitly aware of our *limited* will to either behave or not behave in given ways. Free will is not proven in some formally deductive manner. Rather, it is established by appealing to the integrity of our immediate phenomenological experience; the experience of our limited free will, as discussed below, being as necessary for a coherent ‘truth’ in science as our limitedly being understood scientifically is for a coherent ‘truth’ in ethics!



Besides being mutually exclusive because inconsistent, the judgments are held to be *a priori* in terms of being supposed prior to the inquiries. Hence either a vicious circle arises if the inquiries are held to establish their truth or their truth is undercut by a notorious K-K Thesis: We cannot *Know we Know* because ‘knowledge’ afforded by the inquiries presupposes judgments that are not known to be empirically or otherwise non-trivially true. Thus the truth-less judgments are relegated to an unknowable metaphysics.² Indeed, Kant took refuge from this theoretical problem in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which “knowledge... is possible *a priori*, though only from a practical point of view”,³ in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. The latter became the central apologetics for the practicality of applied studies. Today, these studies range from business and health-care ethics to ethnic and women’s studies.⁴ However, their practical focus tends to blind one to the

² The metaphysical judgments, following Kant, are understood as being both *a priori* and *synthetic*. Insofar as the judgments are *synthetic*, they are not logically true because their subject and predicate concepts are different, say ‘events’ and ‘causes’ as well as ‘persons’ and ‘free agents’. And inasmuch as the judgments are *a priori*, they are supposed prior to the inquiries for their intelligibility and cannot be shown by them to be empirically true – precisely, our free agency being relegated by Kant to a *Noumenon* (a mere possible reality). The Anglo-American heirs of Kant disregarded approaches of both phenomenology and modal logic for certifying the truth of the judgments. For these approaches, see Robert C. Trundle’s *A Theology of Science: From Science to Ethics to an Ethical Politics* (Boca Raton, FL: BrownWalker Press, 2007).

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Tr. by N. K. Smith, Unabridged Edition (NY: Macmillan & Co., 1965), p. 25.

⁴ In regard to an unknowable metaphysics that undercuts truth-claims of applied ethics, for instance, see Robert C. Trundle’s “Is There Any Ethics in Business Ethics?” *Journal of Business Ethics*, 8 (1989) No. 3-4, pp. 261-269. Applied ethicist Richard T. De George, President of the Central Division of American Philosophical Association 1989-90, never explained how the

seeming theoretical problem of there being no known 'truth' that can be defended epistemologically!

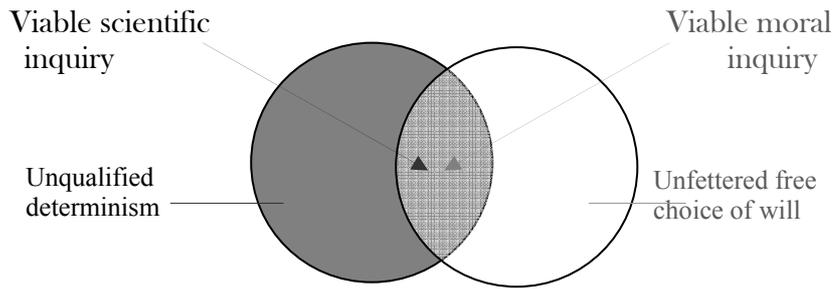
Consequently, epistemological defenses were often replaced by slogans to zealously pursue the practical. For example, Karl Marx exalted the practical and eschewed the theoretical when he proclaimed that philosophy should not just interpret the world differently but change it. Yet change without the epistemic defense is blind and dangerous, as political ideologies in the twentieth century bear mute witness. And the danger is aggravated by scientific truth-claims being no more coherent apart from our having free will than claims in ethics are without admitting of causal influences on our behavior to evaluate praise and blame. How can we be blamed entirely for being unsociable, for instance, if we suffer from a manic depression whose behavioral effects are known medically? In struggling to be sociable, would we not be morally heroic and deserve praise? But a coherence of the praise in limitedly overcoming the scientifically predictable behavior is intelligible only insofar as we are aware of our behavior and thus implicitly aware of our limited will to try to behave sociably.

Finally, societal praise and blame notwithstanding, another compelling case can be made for a freely choosing element of our nature. Unless our nature is at least limitedly characterized by our having free choice of will, logically inconsistent truth-claims would be equally true because equally caused. That is, if we were subject to an entirely determined reality, then this reality would be the truth-condition for truth. And the contrary truth-claims that *all* claims are determined and that *no* claims are determined would both be equally true. In short, our limited free will is as necessary for intelligible scientific inquiries as a limited determinism is for moral inquiries. And although these inquiries may have sub-contrary presuppositions that can both be true, whereby some behavior is freely chosen and some is not, it is typical for *all* behavior to be limitedly both chosen and not chosen (via exactly or inexactly measurable causes presupposed by science). But this inconsistency arises from an immediate, incontrovertible, and phenomenological experience of our selves and not *a priori* by imposing either ideas or judgments on our nature.⁵

A schema depicts our nature in terms of viable moral and scientific inquiries:

'truth' is not undercut in his retort, "There is Ethics in Business Ethics; But There's More As Well," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 8 (1989) No. 5, pp. 337-339. See my rejoinder to his retort in "Business, Ethics, & Business Ethics: Second Thoughts on the Business-Ethics Revolution," *Thought: A Review of Culture and Idea*, 66, No. 262, (1991) pp. 297-309.

⁵ See Robert C. Trundle's "Physics and Phenomenology," *New Horizons in the Philosophy of Science*, Ed. by Dr. David Lamb, Medical School, University of Birmingham (London: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1992), pp. 66-86.



Overlapping center area:
human behavior is limitedly *both*
free and not free (causally determined)

2. Let us recall that we do not demand that phenomena abide by the Principle of Non-Contradiction, expressed $\sim(p \wedge \sim p)$. Rather we demand that our statements *about* phenomena are in accord with the Principle! The Principle may be violated rationally, nevertheless, when inconsistent truth-claims are inferred from an experienced reality, as when we infer that we really are limitedly both free and not free from our immediate and irrefutable experience of ourselves; for example, when we are conscious of our being caused to fall on a bus when it suddenly stops but are, at the same time, aware also of our willing to not fall by putting out our hands. This point underscores some limitations of logic.

In terms of logic, there is nothing self-contradictory in asserting that reality need not abide by the Principle of Non-contradiction. Its tenable violations are illustrated from the Scripture which says that Christ was both *man* and *not man* (God) to St. Augustine noting that we are undeniably aware of ourselves as both *one* and *not one* life (body, will, and mind),⁶ to physicist Saul Youssef's point that light both *is* and *is not* a particle (wave),⁷ and to juries in courtrooms who weigh freely chosen behavior against its scientifically understood causes.

⁶ Cf. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Tr. by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984), p. 318.

⁷ Saul Youssef, "Is Quantum Mechanics An Exotic Probability Theory?" *Fundamental Problems in Quantum Theory: A Conference Held in Honor of Professor John A. Wheeler*, Ed. by D.M Greenberger and A. Zeilinger (NY: Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1995), p. 904. Consider this widely ignored but important point: Yousseff does not appeal to inconsistent theoretical constructs apart from evidence. He is *not* allowing for an epistemic relativism that was feared misguidedly by Sir Karl Popper. Popper confused a top-down reasoning from

In courts of law, for example, defense attorneys may posit causes of behavior by psychiatric testimony that mitigates culpability. And prosecutors may stress that the same behavior was consciously chosen and warrants punishment. A jury can decide that punishment is justified if causal influences are not deemed to outweigh a defendant's will to do what is right. Conversely, doing the right thing may be largely rendered moot by physiological or environmental causes, in spite of free will, in a jury's ruling. This archetypal example bears on an undeniable but paradoxical experience of our selves.

The foregoing reflects the legal communities of open societies that avoid a one-dimensional human nature. An apologetics for fascism, by contrast, affirmed an unfettered free will for the will-to-power of *Übermenschen* (supermen, demigods, or leaders) to creatively shape 'truth' in order to deny the inconsistent causal determinism.⁸ But the determinism was affirmed by Marxian science, its dialectic notwithstanding, to both explain how dominating classes can cause our truth-claims and avoid the inconsistency of free will. Both a supposed freedom to create moral truth and the notion that this truth is related deterministically to the end of history, whereby whatever impedes the end is bad and whatever promotes it is good (including terrorism), are ineluctably linked to the heinous justification of mass murder. Leaving over 100 million persons dead in the twentieth century by ignoring our *full* nature and rendering senseless any conscionable common-sense ethics, these practical ideologies sprang in part from ignoring the theoretical problems of 'truth'. And they reveal profound lessons.

These lessons range from ethicists needing to admit of causes and scientists of free will to the possibility that inconsistent empirical properties can be ascribed to reality by science, despite an alleged burden to philosophers of science of an Underdetermination-of-Theory-by-Data (UTD) Thesis. In terms of this Thesis, all scientific theories admit of logically inconsistent but empirically equivalent rival theories. But why cannot both theories be true? Although it is logically possible for the theories to be entirely false when they make systematically true predictions in terms of a truth-functional logic, it is an epistemic impossibility in terms of a modal logic.⁹ How would it be possible for the theories to make systematically true predictions of phenomena unless the phenomena were reflected truly by the theories, at least approximately in a given domain? In sum, admitting that reality need not conform to our reason – that reason should not be imposed on reality – is as necessary for scientific truth as it is for truth in ethics and politics. In regard

logically inconsistent theoretical constructs to reality, allowing *a priori* for inconsistent truth-claims, with a bottom-up reasoning from evidence to the constructs. See Popper's *Quantum Theory and the Schism in Physics* (NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982), p. 142.

⁸ Cf. Robert C. Trundle's "Cold-War Ideology: An Apologetics for Global Conflict?" *Res Publica: Belgian Journal of Political Science*, Leuven Politologisch Instituut, 37 (1996) 61-84.

⁹ For a discussion of this modal reasoning in science, see Robert C. Trundle's "A First Cause and the Causal Principle: How the Principle Binds Theology to Science," *Philosophy in Science* X. Ed. W. Stoeger, S.J., Ph.D. Astrophysics, Cambridge University. Kraków: Papal Academy of Theology, Vatican Astronomical Observatory & University of Arizona, 2003, 107-135.

to politics in particular, political science *as a science* must presuppose that all behavior is limitedly subject to causes and, at the same time, acknowledge political rights and responsibilities that presuppose the limited free will of citizens. The logical attempts by intellectuals to make “all things clear,” as Albert Camus once lamented, do not merely ignore the indisputable experience we have of our selves and the world. Also, the attempts defeat an epistemological humility that is necessary for a humane human condition.