

Andy Blunden, February 2026

The Impasse of Western Philosophy

The Copernican Revolution (1543)

The Reformation not only licensed the faithful to find spiritual guidance in the light within, without reference to Scripture or the mediation of priests, it also opened the door for the Copernican Revolution in natural science.

Though now separated from Theology, Science and Philosophy were not yet fully distinct disciplines. Dispute over how to understand Nature and our place in it became for the next three centuries the central line of development of Philosophy in Europe.

I have already discussed the work of Spinoza, who was a follower and critic of Rene Descartes (1596–1650), and together they constituted the Rationalist camp in Philosophy. Rationalism arose as a critique of Empiricism, whose founding light was the Englishman, Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Both Rationalism and Empiricism belittled the value of ancient texts as sources of knowledge of God and His works. The Rationalists taught that we must consult the faculty of Reason with which we are endowed and be sceptical of experience as a reliable source of fundamental knowledge. The Empiricists advised, on the contrary, that nothing could be more fruitful than experience, especially experiments designed to shed light on the underlying laws at work in Nature, and were sceptical of theorising which was not immediately based on experiment.

As to the Will, we have seen that in the person of Spinoza, Rationalism had arrived at the conclusion that Free Will was a delusion – human beings were slaves of their own emotions and the best that could be hoped for was to *understand* those emotions and in a sense to rise above them.

I shall turn to see where Empiricism took us in our understanding of the Will.

Empiricism

Francis Bacon formulated his program as follows:

For in nothing else does the aspiration to deserve well show itself than in that things are so arranged that people, freed both from the hobgoblins of belief and blindness of experiments, may enter into a more reliable and sound partnership with things by, as it were, a certain literate experience.

Bacon, 1607

As to the Will as such, Bacon was not so troubled by conundrums such as those posed by Spinoza. However, although seeing himself as a devout Anglican, Bacon did not exclude the human body from Nature, so like any other aspect of the human being, the Will had to be understood by the same means as any other phenomenon of Nature. His response to Spinoza can then be taken to implicit in his famous aphorism:

Natura non vincitur nisi parendo

(Nature cannot be vanquished until she is obeyed).

(Bacon, 1620, Book 1, Aphorism 3)

To this day, this aphorism stands up to sceptical criticism. However, the argument about how Nature can be understood was far from settled by Bacon's

Empiricism. The sceptical critique of Empiricism had already begun with Descartes and it continued for another century.

Dogmatism vs Scepticism

The struggle between Rationalism and Empiricism was not resolved. The criticism of Empiricism continued and defenders of experience as an essential source of knowledge responded by building various kinds of “system” to rationalise what was given in experience. Natural science has continued to this day, but it always demands a reasonable degree of epistemological tolerance, so to speak, to withstand criticism. I characterise the next phase in the history of European Philosophy as Dogmatism *vs.* Scepticism.

I shall clarify the Sceptical position by reference to the philosophy of David Hume (1711-1776).

David Hume

That the sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than that it will rise. ... All inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past.

Hume, 1772, §IV

No present-day science exercises this degree of scepticism in relation to their own experience, despite the fact that present-day conceptions of materiality rely on perceptions which are mediated by sophisticated instruments and arcane mathematical theories.

Kant's Answer to Scepticism

I freely confess that it was the remembrance of David Hume which, many years ago, first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a completely different direction.

Kant, 1787, Preface to the second edition, B xiii.

Hume claimed that causality is not given in experience

If all necessity were derived from experience, then natural science would have no objective validity..Therefore the conditions of scientific knowledge must lie a priori in the understanding.

The first step in regard to the subjects of pure reason, and which marks the infancy of that faculty, is *dogmatic*. The second, which we have just mentioned, is *sceptical*, and it gives evidence that our judgement has been improved by experience. But a third step, such as can be taken only by fully matured judgment, based on assured principles of proved universality, is now necessary, namely to subject to examination, not the facts of reason, but reason itself, in

the whole extent of its powers, and as regards its aptitude for pure *a priori* modes of knowledge. This is not the censorship but the *criticism* of reason, whereby not its present *bounds* but its determinate and necessary *limits*, not its ignorance, in regard to all possible questions of a certain kind, are demonstrated from principles, and not merely arrived at by way of conjecture. Thus scepticism is a resting place for reason, in which it may reflect on its dogmatic wanderings and gain some knowledge of the region in which it happens to be, that it may pursue its way with greater certainty; but it cannot be its permanent dwelling-place. It must take up its abode only in the region of complete certitude, whether this relates to the cognition of objects themselves, or to the limits which bound all our cognition.

Critique of Pure Reason, II, 1787

Outline of Kant's moral philosophy; legislate the laws of one's own actions
Hegel's critique of Kant on Morality

Critique of Kant

Fichte on recognition and the source of self-consciousness

Herder and Goethe on Nature as striving and the *Urphänomen*.

Bacon, F. (1772). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

Bacon, F. (1620). *Novum Organum Scientiarum*

Hume, D (1787). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*,

Kant, I. (1787). *Critique of Pure Reason*