

Ontology, epistemology and interparadigm debates

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The concern

The strongest definition of the term "paradigm"[1] links metaphysical-level ontological and epistemological presuppositions with interconnected sets of world-level theoretical propositions ranging across the macro, meso, and micro levels of political life. In the strongest definitions of "paradigm" metaphysical presuppositions and world level propositions form a whole that stand or fall together.[2]

Using this strong definition has two unfortunate consequences for political science.

1. It carries an assumption that getting the metaphysical right is both necessary and sufficient for understanding and explaining world-level phenomena.
2. It promotes accepting strong forms of the "incommensurability thesis" that adherents of different paradigms cannot understand one another and that their respective research work yields results that cannot be compared to each other in any analytically useful way.

Reasons for concern

All study of politics -- whether done as "science" defined by strictest formulations of logical positivism, as "human science" incorporating the view that conscious humans have to be studied differently than unconscious physical things, or as "humanistic" study -- is motivated by desire to understand and explain world-level phenomena. If, as suggested by the diagrams in the middle column, there is no close correspondence between metaphysical-level propositions and the solidity* of world-level phenomena, then getting the metaphysics right is not sufficient.

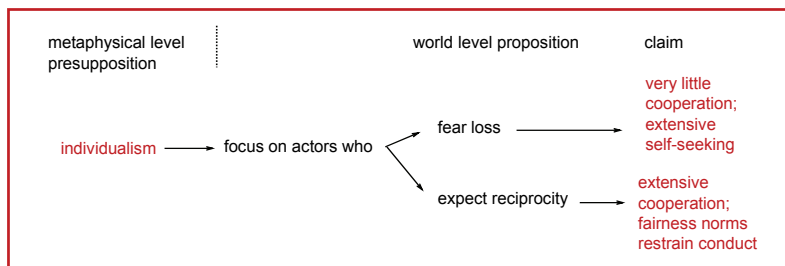
Recent studies of deliberation have shown that insulated conversations among the like-minded reinforce already-held beliefs and promote development of increasingly extreme formulations of them.[3] Applied to the academic world, these studies suggest that restricting serious intellectual interchange to fellow holders of the same paradigm will produce increasingly tight logical arguments driven by the metaphysical assumptions. Since metaphysical presuppositions are not sufficient for establishing the solidity of propositions about world level phenomena, there is no reason to expect that these metaphysically-driven logics will always produce propositions that help understand or explain world-level interactions, processes, or outcomes.

* The truth value, ethical value, pragmatic value, or value by any other criterion used to decide whether to adopt a proposition into one's "toolkit" for understanding and explaining the world.

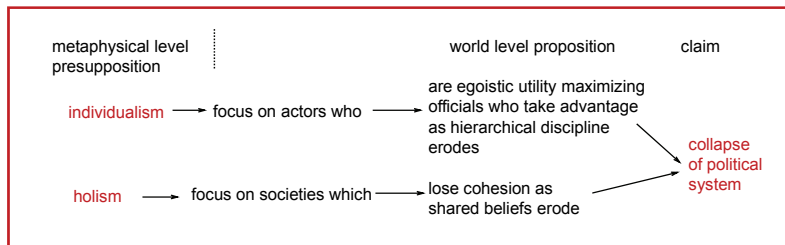
Metaphysical presuppositions and world-level results

Two patterns of observed connection between metaphysical-level presuppositions and world-level phenomena cast doubt on the notion that there is any one-to-one link between them:

Pattern A. One metaphysical presupposition : Two world-level propositions



Pattern B. Two metaphysical presuppositions : One world-level proposition



In the first example, individualism alone does not define what actors will do sufficiently to guide understanding or yield explanations of world-level activity. Analysts conceiving of actors as loss-averse expect prisoners' dilemma calculations to lead to noncooperation driven by fear of being suckered.[4] Analysts conceiving of them as confident others will reciprocate expect to see more cooperation [5] In the second example, an individualist[6] and a holist[7] ontology support alternate specifications of conditions likely to produce collapse of an existing political order that offer plausible accounts of the internal roots of Soviet collapse.

Implications

This warning against allowing metaphysical debate to become all-consuming of intellectual energy is not a complete rejection of efforts to formulate the metaphysical. It is simply a warning against assuming that ontology and epistemology will solve all analytical problems.

Metaphysical presuppositions are a necessary part of all research: they provide the deep warrants[8] connecting the concepts and relational terms in theories purporting to illuminate world-level phenomena. Ontology directs a researcher's attention to some entities and relations and away from others; epistemology encourages use of particular ways of demonstrating the solidity of claims. Each provides handles helping researchers maintain the internal consistency in their own arguments.[9] However, internal consistency of an argument does not guarantee the solidity of claims about the real world that it contains.

References

- [1] From readings of Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
- [2] This formulation intentionally pushes "incommensurability" to its limit.
- [3] E.g., Cass Sunstein, "The polarization of extremes," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54#16 (14 Dec. 2007).
- [4] E.g., John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).
- [5] E.g., Andreas Diekmann, "The power of reciprocity: fairness, reciprocity, and stakes in variants of the dictator game," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48#4: 487-505.
- [6] Steven L. Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- [7] E.g., Ken Jowett, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
- [8] In the sense used by Wayne C. Booth, Gregory C. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research* (3rd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
- [9] Noted in different ways by Friedrich Kratochwil and John G. Ruggie, "International organization: a state of the art on an art of the state," *International Organization* 40/4: 753-775 (fall 1986) and Peter A. Hall, "Aligning ontology and methodology in comparative research," in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschmeyer, editors, *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 373-404.

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For further information

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