

Review of *The Paradoxical Primate* by Colin Talbot

Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic

Reviewed by Rick O'Gorman, Department of Psychology, University of Essex, Colchester CO4 3SQ, UK (as of August 1, 2005, Department of Psychology, Keynes College, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NP)

Colin Talbot's *The Paradoxical Primate* takes as its purpose a bold and challenging task, "to establish a new framework for understanding human nature, from an evolutionary perspective but drawing on existing social sciences", as the book's back cover promises. Sadly, it comes nowhere near to achieving this. The back cover states that the book "draws on a new branch of human sciences, paradoxical systems theory, to reconceptualise...the...fields of evolutionary psychology, ethology, and behavioural genetics", but I would suggest that a possibly more viable purpose for this book would be as a demonstration to those in economics, public policy and related social science fields, Talbot's own comrades, that an evolutionary approach to human behaviour could contribute to those disciplines, and indeed, is needed. That said, the book is short and could serve only as a teaser to outline both the current shortcomings in human behavioural theory in those disciplines and the alternative conceptualisation and data that an evolutionary framework offers.

The gist of the book is that human nature is full of contradictions, or paradoxes, and that this can best be explained by paradoxical systems theory. Frankly, I was never very clear on what this (new to me, at least) theory entails. Or rather, I feared that it was as straightforward as it seemed. Essentially, Talbot's thesis is that humans are permanently contradictory and that for many

human behavioural dimensions, there are counterbalancing (contradictory) ones. Hence, the paradox in the paradoxical primate (though Talbot suggests that other primates also share some of humanity's paradoxical nature, thus reducing the uniqueness implied in the book's title).

Talbot sets out his case by first taking us on a whirlwind tour through the latest and greatest theories found in Management, Government and Public Policy (such as blank slate approaches, rational choice theory, utility maximisation and so on) used to account for human behaviour. In each case, he shows that there is a school of thought, usually held by a minority, which claims that humans cannot be conceptualised by theories that predict rationally consistent behaviour. Instead, the argument goes, humans are contradictory. Talbot ties together this central thread found in a number of theories across the aforementioned disciplines to argue that human behaviour is paradoxical. That humans cannot be straitjacketed into these theories I needed no convincing of, which is just as well, as Talbot takes a light-handed approach to providing evidence to support his perspective (he states that humans engaging in acts of pure altruism is so obvious that we need hardly bother to marshal evidence—somehow, I imagine there are plenty potential readers less inclined to simply go with that one than I, particularly as altruism is not defined herein). The little evidence he offers--mostly theoretical and descriptive writings rather than empirical-- is heavily drawn from the social sciences. Understandable enough, I suppose, as that is where Talbot's expertise lies, but unsatisfying to me if he seeks to argue about the fundamentals of human nature—examples from organisational situations of contradictions in such abstract behaviours as strategic practices in business planning somehow seem too complex to provide categorical evidence for the paradox hypothesis.

Well over half the book is spent making the case that humans are paradoxical, before we get to where I wanted to go—on to how this new-fangled paradoxical systems theory could shed useful light on human nature. By this stage, I was already growing suspicious though that the (hypothetical) paradoxical nature of humanity might be the body of the theory. So it proved. The evolutionary bit of this book consisted of arguing why humans might have such contradictory facets. Again, Talbot ticked off the boxes showing that he was familiar with the main thinkers in evolutionary psychology, although his omission of Chris Boehm's work was surprising, given that Talbot touches upon both morality and organisational behaviour in humans.

Talbot's story is reasonable enough, except that he wants to go further than just showing that humans appear paradoxical. And this is when we parted company (to the degree that we were on the same journey to begin with): Talbot suggests that not only can humans have contrary dimensions (think selfish and altruistic, cooperative and competitive) but that this is some kind of evolved endpoint, that the collective bag of contrary dispositions together represent a behavioural complex. He does not quite use that particular phrase, but try this on for size: "Paradoxical human nature is an evolved trait that is highly adaptive for social animals" (p.82) or "paradoxical instincts may have helped individuals become more adaptable" (p.68). I have to confess, the warnings were there in the Introduction: "What is proposed systematically in these pages is that human instincts and behaviour are permanently contradictory" (p.1), and "humans have evolved paradoxical instincts. We are weird because we evolved that way" (p.2). Talbot is not just using the framing of human nature as paradoxical-in-some-sense as a vehicle to draw in the reader, identify a quandary and demonstrate both why an evolutionary approach is needed and can resolve the apparent paradox. Rather, he goes beyond this to argue that the paradoxical and contradictory properties are an essential feature of human behaviour. At this I balked. Okay, one

could view some human traits as contradictory, but come on, is that why humans can both cooperate and compete, to just be paradoxical? Contradictory behaviour can be adaptive in cases, where an organism needs to keep competitors or predators off balance, but such behaviour lies within one trait, not across a spectrum. Furthermore, Talbot does not really provide any rationale for why a suite of paradoxical traits would be adaptive but simply discusses how such a suite could be produced by natural selection.

There are a number of other inconsistencies in the book (paradoxes?). Talbot suggests that “in some ways the more biologically and behaviourally complex species become they seem to (mostly) become less environmentally adaptable” (p.72). Aside from the apparent missing words in this sentence, I am not sure that this is an observed rule in biology, and Talbot offers no evidence except to show that a certain type of rove beetle can produce (relatively) complex behaviour. In fact, he seems to argue against his point both prior to and after the last quotation. He also speculates that a sunflower might twist its own flower off if a light were to consistently circle the flower (sunflowers turn to follow the sun as the earth rotates), but I am unclear how this could happen as it would be akin to suggesting that if I keep twisting my head (using the muscles in my neck) it would fall off. It is also suggested in the book that “within a limited possibility space there may be an infinite number of possibilities” (p.94). Am I missing something?

Talbot may not be surprised by my reaction to his book—he suggests that the paradoxical element of human nature is not yet widely recognised in evolutionary psychology (p.71). I wouldn't suggest that he hold his breath. That human beings are adapted to be paradoxical needs a lot more evidence than is in this book, and I do not really expect that such evidence will be forthcoming. Talbot draws on a good breadth of material for his thesis, he has a reasonably good

handle on evolutionary thought (although I have a few objections also, most obviously his main hypothesis!) and he sees a link between social and natural sciences as provided by evolutionary psychology. With a little re-working, this book might open some social scientists to the value of evolutionary psychology. But I cannot possibly recommend it for an evolutionary audience.