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**Abstract:** Recently, a leading sociologist claimed that the phrase “trained incapacity” does not appear in the works of Thorstein Veblen. Kenneth Burke, who attributed the phrase to Veblen in *Permanence and Change*, was later unsure of its origins. This essay shows that, indeed, Veblen did coin the term, using it particularly in reference to problematic tendencies in business. Burke, on the other hand, gave the term an expansive application to human symbol-using generally.

IN A 2003 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS to the American Sociological Association, Robert Stallings challenged conventional wisdom and charged that the widespread attribution of the term “trained incapacity” to Thorstein Veblen is erroneous. Stallings reported that he himself had spent a significant amount of time searching for the term in Veblen's works, to no avail; thus, he was comfortable in challenging anyone to “find the term ‘trained incapacity’ in any of the published works of Thorstein Veblen.” Given his certainty that the term could not be located, he suggested that the connection of “trained incapacity” with Veblen was an example of misattribution in sociology (Stallings 1).

Kenneth Burke made good use of the term “trained incapacity,” devoting an entire section to it in his book *Permanence and Change*. Here he typically attributed the phrase to Veblen, although he later admitted uncertainty as to its origins. As early as a 1946 letter to David Cox, Burke noted that he had tried to remember where he had first heard the phrase “trained incapacity,” and even returned to Veblen's books, but was unable to determine where he had originally found the term (“Letter to David Cox” 1). Asked in the 1983 “Counter-Gridlock” interview about the term, Burke stated that he either took the term from Veblen or from Randolph Bourne, who Burke states he was reading at the time he was also reading Veblen (Burke, *On Human Nature* 336).

Veblen did in fact coin the phrase “trained incapacity.”<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I clarify its genealogy and explain Veblen's particular use of the phrase. I then compare Veblen's use of the phrase in discussing problems in business and organizations with Burke's own use, which explored the concept within the broader context of symbol using generally. I argue that Burke drew upon Veblen's initial idea, but teased out its larger implications for human symbol users much more thoroughly than Veblen.

### Veblen's Use of *Trained Incapacity*

Despite Stallings' assurance that the term “trained incapacity” cannot be found in any of Veblen's published works, Veblen did indeed coin the phrase. It appears first in his 1914 book, *The Instinct of Workmanship and the Industrial Arts (IWIA)*, though the roots of the concept in Veblen's thinking go back at least as far as his 1898 essay in the *American Journal of Sociology*. This essay, with the similar title of “The Instinct of Workmanship and The Irksomeness of Labor” (“IWIL”), was largely incorporated into his 1914 book. The essay considers whether humans are predisposed to loathe or to enjoy work. Veblen notes that most economists of his time assumed the former (187), while his essay makes a case for the latter.

Veblen's argument draws upon evolution theory to suggest that it would hurt the survival of the species if humans loathed and avoided work. He attempts to explain how purposes of survival, goal-directed behavior supporting that survival, and habits of mind and thought have shaped humans as creatures with an “instinct of workmanship.” One of the consequences of this shaping is that humans have evolved to think easily and habitually about things that support this instinct of workmanship (and, thereby, our survival). The implications of this evolutionary imperative, Veblen argues, are significant for human action, thought, and social judgment:

What men can do easily is what they do habitually, and this decides what they can think and know easily. They feel at home in the range of ideas which is familiar through their everyday line of action. A habitual line of action constitutes a habitual line of thought, and gives the point of view from which facts and events are apprehended and reduced to a body of knowledge. What is consistent with the habitual course of action is consistent with the habitual line of thought, and gives the definitive ground of knowledge as well as the conventional standard of complacency or approval in any community. (“IWIL” 195)

On this last point, Veblen makes ethical judgment a product of this evolutionary process, insisting that “[w]hat is apprehended with facility and is consistent with the process of life and knowledge is thereby apprehended as right and good” (195).

Business people develop their own particular habitual lines of thought and action, leading to problems in their focus on business purposes, as Veblen shows sixteen years later in *The Instinct of Workmanship and the Industrial Arts*. He notes: “It is but a slight exaggeration to say that [business] transactions, which govern the course of industry, are carried out with an eye single to pecuniary gain,—the industrial consequences, and their bearing on the community's welfare, being matters incidental to the transaction of business” (351). Veblen insists that “an eye single to pecuniary gain” puts workers, the community, and business people at cross purposes. It is not simply that different interests are at stake; it is that businesspeople are trained to ignore larger concerns associated with “the industrial situation.” As Veblen explains it, coining the new phrase:

Of course, all this working at cross purposes is not altogether due to trained incapacity on the part of the several contestants to appreciate the large and general requirements of the industrial situation; perhaps it is not even chiefly due to such inability, but rather to an habitual, and conventionally righteous disregard of other than pecuniary considerations. (*IWIA* 347)

Here “trained incapacity” is distinguished from the “righteous disregard of other than pecuniary considerations,” but they actually function as two sides of the same coin, as the focus on pecuniary interests leads business people to ignore other concerns, such as “the large and general requirements of the industrial situation.”

That the singular focus on pecuniary interest is a type of trained incapacity is confirmed in the comments that follow this passage, where Veblen insists that even workers who are employed in modern factories may suffer from this pecuniary “blindness”—which he also calls “a trained inability”—though not quite as badly as their bosses:

It would doubtless appear that a trained inability to apprehend any other than the immediate pecuniary bearing of their manoeuvres accounts for a larger share in the conduct of the businessmen who control industrial affairs than it does in that of their workmen, since the habitual employment of the former holds them more rigorously and consistently to the pecuniary valuation of whatever passes, under their hands; and the like should be true only in a higher degree of those who have to do exclusively with the financial side of business. (347-48)

Four years later, in *Higher Learning in America (HLA)*, Veblen complains about one kind of training that leads to blindnesses through the overall focus and specialization of business schools:

[These schools'] specialization on commerce is like other specializations in that it draws off attention and interest from other lines than those in which the specialization falls, thereby widening the candidate's field of ignorance while it intensifies his effectiveness within his specialty. The effect, as touches the community's interest in the matter, should be an enhancement of the candidate's proficiency in all the futile ways and means of salesmanship and "conspiracy in restraint of trade" together with a heightened incapacity and ignorance bearing on such work as is of material use. (HLA 152)

This concern over business students' “widening...field of ignorance” is discussed in a footnote in a chapter concerning the larger, inherent problems with business schools being housed in universities. Although Veblen does not use the phrase that he coined four years earlier, he appears to be dealing with the same problem as the trend toward specialization in business schools sacrifices the breadth of knowledge that more traditional colleges attempt to impart, creating a kind of blindness in business school graduates that has negative consequences.

Although Veblen discusses trained incapacity as a way to account for problems in the modern industrial organization, Veblen's concerns point beyond an interest in business. In part, this is because he perceives the impact of business practices as wide-ranging, since he holds that business is “a modern force upon cultural growth” (*Theory of Business Enterprise* vii). Additionally, Veblen's sociological and cultural investigations led him to explore concepts related to or drawing upon trained incapacity. For example, Veblen's discussion of human nature in *The Theory of the Leisure Class (TLC)* offers a broader theoretical backdrop for understanding how business people's focus on pecuniary interests becomes a kind of trained incapacity. He argues that humans are agents “seeking in every act the accomplishment of some concrete, objective, impersonal end” (*TLC* 15). Veblen describes this need for accomplishment as a driving force underlying trained incapacity. It is the focus on a specific goal or end that causes the worker to perceive only what directly affects the specific goal. It is this “end focused” part of every human psyche that allows for humans to have goals, and also makes it possible for such a focus to become an incapacitation. More simply, if a population did not have a specific end to be trained to accomplish, it could not suffer from trained incapacity.

In addition to this need to work toward a goal, Veblen asserts that such goals are parts of a larger complex present in humans. The need for an end to work toward is not socially constructed or culturally imposed; a need for a goal is part of the human need for a “sense of purpose,” which Veblen highlights in *Instinct of Workmanship*. This sense of purpose is the part of the human condition that Veblen refers to as the “instinct of workmanship” (*IWIA* 27). This sense of purpose, which underlies human goal seeking, provides the impetus for “trained incapacity.” Because Veblen establishes purpose as something that is innately part of the human condition, he implies that incapacity, which is attendant to that sense of purpose, is also something tied to being human.

Veblen further attaches action (behavior) to instinct (thought) by stating that man has a purpose that is innate, and that this purpose is reflected in man's behavior. For Veblen, recurring instinctual thoughts are reflected in recurring or habitual actions. This link between thought and action is key to “trained incapacity”; humans may be trained to value certain ideas which are then acted upon. As I noted earlier, Veblen's “Instinct of Workmanship and the Irksomeness of Labor” argues that “a line of action constitutes a line of thought” (195). Frequent repetition of an action leads to a lack of thought in undertaking that action—a kind of incapacitation. A worker's training includes ensuring his or her acceptance of preferred goals, leading that worker to take action in support of those preferred goals. It is those actions (and therefore those thoughts), to the exclusion of others, that causes incapacitation. Thus, for Veblen, human nature provides an impetus toward goal-seeking behavior, while specific training regimens (as in business schools) can build on those impulses to make particular goals and values preeminent in guiding human action. Such training, in turn, is the root of trained incapacity.

This thought-behavior link highlights the place of habit in trained incapacity. Without the initial thoughts, the behavior would never take place, but once these thoughts have been ingrained, behavior can cease being the result of a carefully considered process and instead occur automatically. Veblen states that “man is a creature of habits and propensities” (*IWIA* 193). Since a habitual action is easier and faster, it is preferred by both the trainer and the trainee, but, in switching from thoughtful action to action out of habit, incapacitation may insinuate itself. Action prompted by habit may be faster, but it does not take into consideration other incidents or actions that are not allowed for in the training.

A move away from habit is a move toward inefficiency. Once a regimen is learned, less thought is required to perform the task and less time is required to complete the task. The more thought that goes into an action, the more time the action will take. Whereas

efficiency increases as the amount of thought and questioning decreases, there is also a concomitant increase in rate of incapacitation. Not only is inefficiency bad for assembly line work, for example, it is also “innately distasteful” according to Veblen (*HLA* 197). In fact, inefficiency goes against what it means to be human; according to Veblen, humans recoil from inefficiency. Thus, Veblen asserts, humans both seek accomplishment and shun inefficiency. As humans and human organizations become more successful at achieving efficiency, they become less aware of the unintended and unsought consequences of their actions. To the extent that “training” (e.g., education, work experience, socialization) supports this efficiency, it supports a blindness to broader concerns, a “trained incapacity.” Veblen, offers no solution to this problem, but he notes how it influences modern culture (Spindler 49). In fact, in keeping with his typical worldview, Veblen seems resigned to the fact that this training phenomenon is a problem that will always plague humankind.

The next section considers Burke’s references to “trained incapacity” and to Veblen, establishing how and when Burke gives Veblen credit for his ideas, and discussing how Burke works to take Veblen’s initial concept and to extend and adapt it to his own sociological theory.

### **Burke’s Extension of *Trained Incapacity***

Kenneth Burke speaks about trained incapacity in an entire section in *Permanence and Change* appropriately titled “Veblen’s Concept of ‘Trained Incapacity’” (7). While the phrase *trained incapacity* is mentioned only in Burke’s *Permanence and Change*, references to its author, Thorstein Veblen, occur throughout Burke’s many texts. *Permanence and Change* is the first place Burke refers to Veblen. Here Burke speaks of “trained incapacity” as a phrase he believes was coined by Veblen (7). Burke does not give a specific source or page citation, but instead simply attributes the phrase to Veblen. Burke defines the phrase as “that state of affairs whereby one’s very abilities can function as blindnesses” (7). Burke illustrates this concept with a modified Pavlovian example of training chickens, showing how training can “work against” any trainable animal. He notes that chickens trained to come for food upon hearing a bell may suffer trained incapacity when the same bell is used to call them for punishment (7).

Burke notes that Veblen “generally restricts the concept to the care of business men who, through long training in competitive finance, have so built their scheme of orientation . . . they cannot see serious possibilities in any other system of production and distribution” (7). Because he is exploring the concept, rather than simply deploying it to explain one aspect of business culture, Burke is more explicit than Veblen in asserting that trained incapacity “properly applies to all men,” not just those in business. Burke notes that this phenomenon is so predictable and evident throughout the population that it even “seems to be experimentally verifiable” (10).

Burke argues that trained incapacity is also a way to discuss “matters of orientation” without using the terms *escape* and *avoidance* (9). That is, Burke says that there is no need to assume that the chickens in his example “refuse to face reality” or that they are using an “escape mechanism,” if their illogical behavior can be explained as a form of trained incapacity (10). Finally, Burke notes that trained incapacity is identical to John Dewey’s notion of “occupational psychosis,” insisting that the terms are “interchangeable” (48-49).

While the term *trained incapacity* is only cited in *Permanence and Change*, Veblen and his philosophy appear in two other texts of Burke’s—*Philosophy of Literary Form* (*PLF*) and *Rhetoric of Motives* (*RM*). Burke refers to Veblen in his book, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, urging that Veblen, along with Marx and Bentham, consider “material interests” of both “private and class structure” (111). Burke notes that such interests are a part of the “contexts of situation.” These contexts significantly shape action, yet they are constantly in flux, giving rise to paradoxes. Thus, following Veblen, Burke asserts that contexts are “opportunities to get ahead [and] are also opportunities to fall behind” (*PLF* 247). Burke suggests adopting different perspectives on a situation to see the opportunities and pitfalls that various contexts offer.

By the time a more mature Burke wrote *Rhetoric of Motives* in 1950, he had moved beyond Veblen’s observations and was looking to construct a more comprehensive theory. At this point Burke insists that Veblen’s “terminology of motives” is too limited in scope, and that his tendency to rationalize wide areas of human relationships is a mistake (*RM* 127). More specific to our concerns here, Burke insists that Veblen’s distinction between pecuniary motive and instinct of workmanship is “neither pliant nor comprehensive enough” (*RM* 127). Burke sees Veblen’s “pecuniary motive” not as dramatic, but instead as a “special case of linguistic motive” (*RM* 129). He also describes Veblen’s work as “a superficial rhetoric in human relations” (*RM* 129). Veblen’s psychology, according to Burke, is “not so much dramatic, as dramatized” (*RM* 127). Finally, Burke urges that Veblen is “rhetorically bland,” using “satire masked as science.” Veblen uses partisan words, according to Burke, but then wants there to be “no partisan connotations,” something that Burke finds ludicrous (*RM* 132).

If Veblen failed to develop a comprehensive theory of human culture, he nonetheless laid important groundwork for Burke’s own work. And Burke gives him credit, though he is vague (and later, forgetful) about the sources from which “trained incapacity” was drawn. Specifically, Burke gives authorial credit to Veblen throughout the “trained incapacity” section in *Permanence and Change*. Not only does the title of the section indicate Veblen is the source of the idea of trained incapacity; the section begins with the statement “Veblen had a concept of ‘trained incapacity’” (7). However, since Burke failed to cite any specific page number or even a particular text of Veblen’s, we must reconstruct his sources.

When Burke discussed the concept of trained incapacity in his “Counter-Gridlock” interview, he obviously had in mind Veblen’s discussion of the concept in *Higher Learning in America*. As I noted above, Veblen discusses the situation of the education of business students in America in a footnote in *Higher Learning*. Veblen urges that because these students are taught business methods and are taught to be exclusively economically motivated, the students are unable to see larger social concerns (*HLA* 152). Veblen sees these students as unable to think beyond their training as business people.

Burke is also discussing Veblen's *Higher Learning* example when he writes about "business men" in *Permanence and Change* (7). Burke's reference to Veblen is not specific, but the content he discusses is unique to a footnote in Veblen's *Higher Learning*. Additionally, Burke must have either read or been exposed to *The Instinct of Workmanship and the Industrial Arts*, where Veblen first used the phrase *trained incapacity* in 1914. Again, Veblen was describing the behaviors of those operating in the business community and industry, noting their failure "to appreciate the large and general requirements of the industrial situation" (*IWIA* 347).

One reason Burke might have been unclear about the origins of the term is that the source of Burke's own notion of the meaning of trained incapacity is derived from *Higher Learning*, where Veblen does not use the phrase, but discusses the concept. It is likely then that after reading the *Higher Learning* passage Burke connected it with the phrase that he had read earlier in *Instinct of Workmanship and the Industrial Arts*.

In any case, Burke quickly leaves Veblen's narrow use of the phrase behind, expanding it to include broad sociological and cultural implications. Veblen's singular use of the phrase *trained incapacity* in *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts* did not indicate that it carried more than a concern for business, business students, and a culture that relies on them. Likewise, his reference to the concept of trained incapacity in *Higher Learning in America* also appears to restrict the term to businesses and business students. Veblen's larger body of work, however, while not using the term *trained incapacity* specifically, does support a broader application of the term. What is of value here to Burke scholars is that Burke manages to take this one phrase and one description and understand it in terms of Veblen's larger sociological research, drawing his own conclusions about the broad potential for the concept.

Burke's reference to chickens suffering from trained incapacity may sound absurd, but it clearly makes the point that trained incapacity is not restricted to business students, industrial workers, or even humans in general. Indeed, it follows on Burke's opening example of a trout that learns a valuable distinction between "food" and "bait," examining critical distinctions at the most basic level of meaning. Burke's use of trained incapacity not only expands Veblen's use of that term, but provides a fecund concept that probably contributed to Burke's thinking about orientation, perspective by incongruity, terministic screens, and other concepts that make up Burke's theory of the symbol-using animal.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup> That Veblen did indeed use this phrase was verified by John Gagnon, who successfully tracked it down in *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts* after its "absence" was discussed on the Kenneth Burke discussion list.

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