

CRITICAL COMMENTS TO MILLER'S  
DEFENSE OF BARTLEY'S  
PANCRITICAL RATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT. W.W. Bartley argued that Popper's original theory of rationality opened itself to a *tu quoque* argument from the irrationalist and to avoid this Bartley proposed an alternative theory of rationality: pancritical rationalism (PCR). Bartley's PCR leads, however, to a self-referential paradox. David Miller outlaws self-reference (and in this way he avoids PCR's paradoxical nature) by distinguishing between positions and statements. Miller's move looks suspiciously like an ad hoc maneuver or a stipulation that has to be accepted dogmatically. Furthermore, Miller's move seems to be giving up the comprehensive intention of PCR, a comprehensiveness which was PCR's central claim and aim and which distinguished it from the older non-comprehensive Popperian critical rationalism. Moreover, Miller's move is inadequate because it is a second world answer (*i. e.*, it involves attitudes or thoughts) to a third world problem, that is, to logical paradox.

KEY WORDS. Rationality, Critical Rationalism, Pancritical Rationalism, minimal methodological dogmatism, self-referential paradox, *tu quoque* argument.

*To the memory of Karl Popper in the centenary of his birth.*

I. ARGUMENTATIVE BACKGROUND

Popper characterized uncritical rationalism as follows:

Uncritical or comprehensive rationalism can be described as the attitude of the person who says: "I am not prepared to accept anything that cannot be defended by means of argument or experience." We can express this also in the form of the principle that any assumption that cannot be supported either by argument or by experience is to be discarded. Now it is easy to see that this principle of an uncritical rationalism is inconsistent; for since it cannot, in its turn, be supported by argument or by experience, it implies that it should itself be discarded. (...) Uncritical rationalism is therefore logically untenable... (Popper, 1945, p. 217).

Uncritical rationalism can be analyzed in terms of the following two injunctions:

C1: *Anything* (belief, action or aim) justified by non-viciously circular argument is to be accepted as rational.

C2: *Only* that which can be justified by non-viciously circular argument is to be accepted as rational.

Now, from C2 it follows that if rational, one should justify anything one accepts. In particular, one should justify C1 and C2, but C1 cannot be justified without presupposing it, because if one were to try to justify C1 by arguing in its favor, we would be begging the question, that is, we would be presupposing C1. In other words, one would be presupposing that argument and experience are rational justificatory strategies, precisely what C1 says.

Therefore, C1 and C2 cannot both be true.

Let's then first assume we discard C1 and try to keep C2. Then C2 should be justified in a non-viciously circular way, but C2 cannot be justified by non-viciously circular argument, because if we offer an argument in its favor we are again presupposing that argument is valuable as a rational justificatory strategy, something that C2 assumes. Therefore, C2 rejects itself and uncritical rationalism is logically impossible.

Another option would be to discard C2 and keep C1 just by itself; this alternative doesn't lead to a contradiction, it just says that justified beliefs are rational, but it doesn't require us *qua* rationalists to justify all our accepted beliefs, actions or goals. Rationalism without C2 would not aim to be comprehensive and it would be a very weak form of rationalism, so weak that according to C1 a non-justified (or an unjustifiable) absurd belief could still be rational.

Because of all these problems with uncritical rationalism, Popper proposed an alternative: critical rationalism,

(...) whoever adopts the rationalist attitude does so because *without reasoning* he has adopted some decision, or belief, or habit, or behavior, which therefore in its turn must be called irrational. Whatever it may be, we can describe it as *an irrational faith in reason*. Rationalism is therefore far from comprehensive or self-contained.

(...) *a critical form of rationalism*, one that frankly admits its limitations, and its basis in an irrational decision, and in so far, *a certain priority of irrationalism* (Popper, 1945, p. 218. Emphasis added).

The critical rationalist and the irrationalist differ in having different irrational commitments, but they also differ in that the critical rationalist intends to minimize her irrationalism; thus, the critical rationalist argues that a minimal form of irrationalism is *morally* preferable to exuberant forms of irrationalism.

Thus, Popper claims that critical rationalism with his minimum of irrationalism is preferable because,

The choice before us is not simply an intellectual affair, or a matter of taste. It is a moral decision.

(...) It is my firm conviction that this irrational emphasis upon emotion and passion leads ultimately to what I can only describe as crime. One reason for this opinion is that this attitude, which is at best one of resignation towards the irrational nature of human beings, at worst one of scorn for human reason, must lead to an appeal to violence and brutal force as the ultimate arbiter in any dispute (Popper, 1945, pp. 219-21).

In other words, Popper believes that while the rationalist may not be moral <sup>1</sup>, the irrationalist is often immoral, and that this gives us one reason to prefer critical rationalism (with its minimal irrationalism) to full fledged irrationalism. Popper then transfers the decision for critical rationalism to the uncertain domain of moral judgment. On the other hand, Popper holds that moral judgments can be influenced, though not determined, by a *rational* analysis of the practical consequences of our moral decisions, and by contrasting these practical consequences with the prescriptions of our conscience. Popper says,

(...) a *rational analysis* of the consequences of a decision does not make the decision rational; the consequences do not determine our decision; it is always we who decide. But an analysis of the concrete consequences, and their clear realization in what we call our 'imagination', makes the difference between a blind decision and a decision made with open eyes (...) in the case of moral theory, we can only confront its consequences with our conscience (Popper, 1945, p. 220. Emphasis added).

Notice that such a rational analysis already presupposes a favorable valuation of an argumentative or rational attitude, thus a pondered moral decision about whether to be critically rational or not will itself *presuppose a favorable valuation of an argumentative attitude*. Therefore, a moral decision in favor of critical rationalism would be circular and, then, a moral judgment in favor of critical rationalism is in the end justificatory useless, but this is all as well, since the critical rationalist openly admits that she has to assume dogmatically her high valuation of argument.

On the other hand, it could well happen that some consciences would prefer irrationalism even when fully aware of its probable immoral consequences, since it is almost a truism that different individuals or communities often don't agree on what constitutes a crime. This becomes clear when one considers the examples of many Nazi SS who would not consider the Auschwitz camp as criminal, or of many eighteenth century slave traders or owners who neither would deem their metier as criminal. And given this possibility, one can only hope that the conscience of most

of us, as a matter of fact, will side with critical rationalism, but if this were not to happen, that would be the end of the matter for a Popperian.

A crisis of integrity arises, however, for the critical rationalist, since her rational identity requires a leap of faith, which by her own lights is irrational or at least non-rational, and this then provides a rational excuse for all kinds of irrational commitments; it supplies the irrationalist with the *tu quoque* argument, one that says:

... (1) because of logical reasons, rationality is so limited that everyone must make a dogmatic irrational commitment; (2) therefore, the irrationalist (Christian or whatever) has a right to make whatever commitment he pleases, and (3) therefore, no one has a right to criticize him (or anyone else) for making such a commitment... (Bartley, pp. 272-3).

The *tu quoque* tells us that given that rational argument about ultimate commitments is impossible, then any commitments are rationally possible.

## II. BARTLEY'S PANCRITICAL RATIONALISM

W. W. Bartley thought it was possible, however, to reform Popper's critical rationalism into a consistent and comprehensive theory of rationality: pancritical rationalism, also called comprehensive critical rationalism. Bartley claimed that it was possible to remodel critical rationalism into a theory that allegedly does not lead into a fideism of ultimate commitments, and proposed a new rational identity, one that allegedly does not lead into conflicts of rational integrity. Bartley's pancritical rationalist can be characterized as one,

... who is willing to entertain any position *and holds all his positions, including his most fundamental standards, goals, and decisions, and his basic philosophical position itself open to criticism; one who protects nothing from criticism by justifying it irrationally; one who never cuts off an argument by resorting to faith or irrational commitment to justify some belief that has been under severe critical fire; one who is committed, attached, addicted, to no position* (Bartley, p. 118. Emphasis added).

This pancritical rationalist justifies nothing and allegedly criticizes everything, even his own rational attitude or position; he is not committed to any position, not even to a belief in the value of argument. This doesn't mean that the pancritical rationalist is without convictions, only that he is willing to submit his convictions to critical consideration. Pancritical rationalism, however, leads to logical paradox. Consider the following argument, due to Bartley himself and inspired by a critique of J. F. Post; an argument that Bartley finds unobjectionable:

(A) All positions are open to criticism.

And because of pancritical rationalism's intended comprehensiveness, it then follows,

(B) A is open to criticism. And,

Since (B) is implied by (A), any criticism of (B) will constitute a criticism of (A), and thus show that (A) is open to criticism. Assuming that a criticism of (B) argues that (B) is false, we may argue: if (B) is false, then (A) is false; but an argument showing (A) to be false (and thus criticizing it) shows (B) to be true. Thus, if (B) is false, then (B) is true. Any attempt to criticize (B) demonstrates (B); *thus (B) is uncriticizable, and (A) is false* (Bartley, p. 224. Emphasis added).

Hence, pancritical rationalism is refuted and this conclusion is a result of the self-referential character of the proposal itself—a theory that intends to be a theory of all theories itself included, and it recalls the logical difficulties of classical rationalism, which also wanted to be comprehensive. Bartley claims that the paradoxical nature of pancritical rationalism could be dealt,

...by type and language-level solutions, Zermelo-type solutions, category solutions, radical exclusion of all self reference... (Bartley, pp. 219-20).

But, this is too vague, mere *possibilia*.

### III. MILLER'S DEFENSE OF PANCRITICAL RATIONALISM

David Miller outlaws self-reference (and in this way he avoids pancritical rationalism's paradoxical nature) by distinguishing between positions and statements, and declaring that (B) is just a statement—and not a position—and as such it is not in the domain of (A), that is, Miller claims that (B)—being a mere statement—doesn't have to be criticisable on its own,

...I reject the thesis that criticisability is an automatic property of all statements. It is not an intrinsic property of statements at all, but an honor that must be bestowed on them by the development of appropriate methods of criticism. How, it may be asked, is this to be done? In many cases the answer can be only: *by a consideration of the problems that provoked them...*

*Comprehensive critical rationalism must not be understood to hold that every statement that a comprehensively critical rationalist counts as true (rationally accepts) is on its own criticisable.*

...As far as statements... are concerned, what is important for the rationalist, I suggest, is that each statement that he accepts either is itself criticisable *or follows from a statement* that he accepts that is criticisable. Any position adopted must be criticisable, but it is no concession to the irrationalist to allow that some logical consequences of the position may not be criticisable (Miller, pp. 86, 89. Emphasis added).

Miller's proposal is motivated by the fact that falsifiable statements can entail unfalsifiable ones,

All falsifiable hypotheses have amongst their consequences a host of unfalsifiable statements (ranging from tautologies and unrestricted existential statements to meaty metaphysics) that enter science as it were on the coat-tails of their parents (Miller, p. 10).

Metaphysical determinism is, for example, a consequence of Newtonian theory and in the case at hand, *mutatis mutandi*, an uncriticisable statement is allegedly entailed by a criticisable position. Thus,

[(A)] is a position that Bartley recommends that we adopt, and it is essential that it be criticisable. But [(B)] is just a consequence of it—an interesting consequence, in the light of what comprehensive critical rationalism says, and (one hopes) a true consequence; but it cannot be taken up as an independent position ... although [B] is a possible position on its own (though a strange one), *it cannot be adopted at the same time as [(A)] is. Nor, of course, is there the slightest need for it to be adopted along with [(A)], which brings it along for nothing* (Miller, p. 90. Emphasis added).

#### IV. CRITICAL COMMENTS TO MILLER'S DEFENSE OF PANCRITICAL RATIONALISM

1) Miller's demotion of (B), a *core* assumption of the pancritical rationalist to statement status looks, however, suspiciously like an *ad hoc* maneuver introduced *only* to avoid logical paradox. If not, how does Miller's hypothesis increase the criticisability of pancritical rationalism? Moreover, beyond the avoidance of paradox, why should we not take (B) as a position simultaneously to (A)? In other words, is there a criterion that will allow us to distinguish between positions and statements? Or when do positions entail positions, and not just statements? And which statements are criticisable on their own, and why?

If there is no adequate answer to these questions, then it looks that the distinction between positions and statements will be settled by someone's (either by an individual or a community) idiosyncratic judgment.

Miller has not offered any theory of criticisability that would provide some sort of demarcation criterion between positions and non-criticisable statements, except for a hint at a pragmatic criterion, when Miller claims that in many cases the criticism of statements can only be done by a "consideration of the problems that provoked them" (Miller, p. 86, quoted above).

In contrast, Popper propose a theory of falsifiability in which, for example, 'pure existential', 'all-some' and tautological statements are unfalsifiable due either to their syntactical or semantical structure.

2) Furthermore, when Miller says that there is not "the slightest need for (B) to be adopted along with (A), which brings it along for nothing", he seems to be giving up the comprehensive intention of pancritical ration-

alism, a critical comprehensiveness which was pancritical rationalism's main claim and aim, and that distinguished it from the older non-comprehensive Popperian critical rationalism. If pancritical rationalism abandons its comprehensive character, it is giving up what was allegedly its great virtue, what was its main advantage over critical rationalism. This diminished pancritical rationalism could then be confronted by a new *tu quoque*,

If you pancritical rationalist don't hold as criticisable some of your *core* rational assumptions (or, if you prefer, statements), then neither I, an irrationalist, need open to criticism some of my *core* dogmatic suppositions or statements.

Now, in the case at hand, *the problem that motivated pancritical rationalism* and in particular A and therefore B was the *tu quoque* argument made possible by the leap of faith required by critical rationalism. Therefore, once one realizes what B says (*i.e.*, once one realizes that B is a core assumption of pancritical rationalism and not just any statement inferred from A) and if we are to avoid a new *tu quoque*, we should hold B open to criticism; if not, B would have a dogmatic character.

3) Finally, Miller claims that

The rationalist is not at all obliged to try to criticize all the consequences of his ideas, and if, as may happen, some of them are not open to criticism at all—which may mean no more than that *he cannot think of any way, even potentially, of criticizing them*—that need not disturb him... (Miller, p. 90. Emphasis added).

Notice, however, that the paradoxical nature of pancritical rationalism is an objective property of such proposal, *i.e.*, a property pancritical rationalism has in Popper's world III. Therefore, its paradoxicalness cannot be avoided by the rationalist's critical attitudes or thoughts (or lack of these attitudes or thoughts) concerning A and/or B, since these thoughts and attitudes are in Popper's world II while pancritical rationalism is an autonomous object of world III. In other words, the paradoxical nature of pancritical rationalism wouldn't disappear even if (as recommended by Miller) all of the pancritical rationalists were to decide not to hold A and B as simultaneously criticisable.

## V. CONCLUSION

Because of the paradoxicalness of pancritical rationalism (plus other various well known difficulties of this doctrine, *cf.*, for example, Watkins) it seems that the best option *malgré tout* is Popper's critical rationalism with its minimum of irrationalism, with its dogmatic faith in reason.

Now, if Popper's critical rationalism requires a leap of faith in favor of reason, why not accept also other leaps of faith, for instance, a leap of faith

in favor of induction? In other words, the question now arises of how minimal can and should be the irrationalism required by critical rationalism. For example, if Popper's methodology requires a "whiff of inductivism" (Popper in Schlipp, p. 1192), then why not accept more than a mere whiff? J. Worrall has argued, for example, that a minimal methodological dogmatism (beyond Popper's faith in reason) is logically unavoidable in science.



## NOTE

- 1 The rationalist, however, may need to be moral in a minimal sense of morality, given that rationality is a cooperative process of inquiry which values dialogue, intellectual honesty and humility, respect for other people's arguments, etc.

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