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PANCRITICAL RATIONALISM RE EXAMINED

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Abstract

Critical and pancritical rationalism were mainly debated in the second half of the XXth century, however a new important paper on pancritical rationalism has been published recently, and hence a critical commentary of this recent publication is required, one is offered here.

Keywords: *Critical rationalism; Pancritical Rationalism; Circularity; Logical Paradox; Scientific Creationism; Taliga.*

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REDISCUSIÓN DEL RACIONALISMO PANCRÍTICO

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Resumen

Los racionalismos crítico y pancrítico fueron principalmente debatidos en la segunda mitad del siglo XX. Sin embargo, un nuevo e importante ensayo sobre el racionalismo pancrítico ha sido publicado recientemente, por lo que se requiere de un comentario crítico de esta nueva publicación, aquí se ofrece uno.

Palabras clave: *racionalismo crítico; racionalismo pancrítico; circularidad; paradoja lógica; creacionismo científico; Taliga.*

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Any rationality theory is rationally acceptable by its own lights (circularity), or by other lights (potential infinite regress and actual circularity again), or is not rationally acceptable at all (irrationalism) (A. Musgrave).

I. Preamble

The argumentative structure of this paper is as follows: a) some historical antecedents of pancritical rationalism (PCR) are examined, b) logical difficulties of Bartley's PCR, c) Taliga's reformulation of PCR so as to avoid its logical problems, d) is Taliga's reformulation of PCR too permissive? e) conclusions.

The identity of the epistemic rational attitude has long been debated, in particular by the popperian tradition, where pancritical rationalism is one of two competing theses about the character of this attitude.

Popper described an uncritical rationalism 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 which 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).

An example of an uncritical rationalism is provided by W. K. Clifford's principle: "It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (Clifford, [1877] 1886, p. 5).

For the uncritical rationalist justification is a necessary and sufficient condition for rational belief², where only argument or experience can justify; she won't believe anything not justified by them, but she cannot in turn justify her belief in the justificatory value of argument or experience without begging the question, that is without circularity, and if this begging of the question is vicious, then her criterion of rational identity is not rational by her own standards; hence she naively proposes a self referential inconsistent criterion of rationality.

Given the impossibility of a comprehensive, i.e., self inclusive justificationist rationalism, Popper then proposed an alternative to naive uncritical rationalism, critical rationalism (CR):

(...) whoever adopts the rationalist attitude does so because without [non circular] reasoning he has adopted some decision, or belief, or habit, or behaviour, 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 which frankly admits its limitations, and its basis in an irrational decision, and in so far, a certain priority of irrationalism (Popper, 1945, p. 218).

Popper went to add that for moral reasons the CR should opt for a minimal dogmatism or minimal irrationalism³ (where a dogma is a belief that is adopted or accepted as true without non circular justification), because a full fledged irrationalism may lead to violence and crime,

... 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

² For these rationalists (leaving aside Gettier considerations) a true rational belief would be a case of knowledge.

³ The distinction between CR and a full irrationalism is that the first aims to be minimally dogmatic, while the second can opt to be baroque in her dogmatism.

human reason, must lead to an appeal to violence and brutal force as the ultimate arbiter in any dispute (Popper, 1945, p. 221).

The critical rationalist recognises that for her the justificatory value of argument and evidence has to be believed without non circular justification, that this belief of hers has the character of an irrational stipulation or dogma, but then a crisis of integrity arises for the critical rationalist, since her rational identity requires a leap of faith, which by her own lights is irrational; this form of limited rationality, then provides a rational excuse for irrational commitments, it supplies the irrationalist with the *tu quoque* argument, an argument 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 criticise him (or anyone else) for making such a commitment... (Bartley, [1962] 1984, pp. 272-273).

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II. Bartley's pancritical rationalism

Given this unpalatable situation, Bartley then proposed a new rational identity, one that allegedly does not lead into conflicts of rational integrity, and to the possibility of *tu quoque* rejoinders: pancritical rationalism (PCR), this new rationalist can be characterised 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, [1962] 1984, p. 118).

According to PCR a position can be held rationally *pro temp* even without any justification⁴ iff it is criticisable and has overcome vigorous criticism, thus PCR can block the *tu quoque*,

⁴ Hence, the problem of induction dissolves for PCR, since induction could be rational without any justification, iff it is criticisable and has overcome severe criticism.

... although every criticism must involve some statement (or theory, position, etc.) that is presently uncriticised, it is possible to criticise every statement (or theory, position, etc.) in the future. This means that nothing is excluded from criticism,... It follows that there is no room for any dogmatic faith in comprehensively critical rationalism⁵ because every “faith” is criticizable. This way, the irrationalist’s charge of *tu quoque* is blocked ... (Taliga, 2022, p. 14).

On the other hand, PCR is primary a property of some ideal people, and not a property of some statements, thus,

...one of the merits of pancritical rationalism... [is] that it presents a theory about people, not statements... statements are intrinsically neither rational nor irrational... rationality is not a property of statements but is a matter of the way in which a statement is held, and also of the history of that statement, of the way in which the statement has been examined (Bartley, [1962]1984, pp. 233-234).

6 PCR, however, was shown by Bartley himself (inspired by a critique of J. F. Post) to be paradoxical, thus,

(A) All positions are open to criticism. And because of PCR’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 criticising it) shows (B) to be true. Thus, if (B) is false, then (B) is true. Any attempt to criticise (B) demonstrates (B); thus (B) is uncriticisable, and (A) is false (Bartley [1962] 1984, p. 224)⁶.

Because of these logical problems of PCR, “... according to Cíntora... the best option *malgré tout* is Popper’s critical rationalism with its minimum of irrationalism, with its dogmatic faith in reason” (Taliga, 2022, p. 3.). But, Taliga disagrees: “I reject this claim. (...) [PCR] can be comprehensive and free from the paradox at the same time” (Taliga, 2022, p. 3).

⁵ The terms comprehensive and pancritical rationalism are used indistinctly by Bartley.

⁶ This paradoxicalness has been discussed by various authors, I won’t review their work here, for this debate please cf. Cíntora (2002), Miller (1994), Post (1972), and Taliga (2022).

Taliga proceeds to argue that Bartley's previous argument is flawed, and that with an adequate conception of criticisability PCR's paradoxicalness can be avoided.

III. Taliga's reformulation PCR

Taliga argues that some of the premises of Bartley's previous argument are wrong,

It is worth noting a core assumption in Bartley's formulation of the paradox, an assumption that is accepted by both Miller and Cíntora. I mean the view that "a criticism of (B) argues that (B) is false" (Bartley, [1962] 1984, p. 224), which is necessary for the paradox to be produced, but which is highly controversial. For Bartley (and others) to generate the paradox (or a response to it), the words "X is open to criticism" must mean, more or less, "X can be shown to be false". Someone might protest that this reading of "X is open to criticism" is too strong and that more appropriate is the weaker reading "X can be argued to be false". However, the weaker reading does not lead to the paradox because X can be argued to be false, i.e. criticized, unsuccessfully. (...)

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The trouble is that assuming that a criticism of (B) argues that (B) is false does not entitle us to assume that (B) is false, as Bartley says (Taliga, 2022, p. 9).

This is a fair criticism, and one must grant Taliga this point, but Taliga then goes to argue that Bartley's previous characterisation of criticisability is also incorrect, because it clearly cannot be applied to true statements, and furthermore, this type of criticism is too narrow, since it would be suitable only if the goal were truth or knowledge. He then proposes an alternative theory of criticisability,

... statements (as well as positions, etc.) are criticizable if and only if it is possible to derive consequences from them in order to find out whether they are not in conflict with our preferred values. To guarantee this possibility, we have to adhere to at least one value; we have to be able to understand a criticised statement, to derive consequences from it, to confront them with our value, and to see the result (Taliga, 2022, p. 13).

Taliga then concludes that with this alternative characterisation of criticism PCR is rational by its own lights, and it avoids logical paradox, this claim seems correct, but at what cost?

IV. Is Taliga's reformulation of PCR too permissive?

Let's test Taliga's understanding of criticability and his reconstruction of PCR by examining whether a literalist contemporary 'scientific' creationism (or *mutatis mutandis* contemporary flat earthism) could be held rationally according to Taliga's reconstruction of PCR. Our creationist is one that does a literal reading of Genesis, and takes this reading as a true history of the origin of our cosmos and biosphere⁷, furthermore let's suppose that this scientific creationist criticises his posture, and then he discovers that his literalist reading of Genesis is contradicted by abundant contemporary scientific arguments and evidence, but that then he opts to defeat these criticisms invoking as many *ad hoc* hypotheses as may be necessary; and if we were to criticise his methodology he could retort that amongst his methodological values and norms is not theoretical parsimony, nor the avoidance of *ad hoc* hypotheses, that his methodology instead prioritises that his beliefs be coherent with his literalist reading of the Biblical text.

He could go on to argue that his belief in a literal reading of Genesis is a rational one, since he has criticised his belief and it has overcome severe criticisms, it has overcome them given his methodological norms and values, and if his set of methodological values and norms -once they have been properly hierarchised- forms a coherent whole there is not much else that criticism can achieve.

But, is intuitive to evaluate this putative attitude of his as rational?⁸ Analogous examples can be found or be constructed in the ethical domain, such as the frequent ethical thought experiments involving Nazis, or we could imagine the values that animated, say, the Caligula of historical legend, we could criticise their set of values searching for lack of coherence amongst their values, but beyond that, if these subjects were to find attractive the consequences of coherent and idiosyncratic axiological choices, there is

⁷ Notice that the subject of our example is a contemporary scientific creationism, and not the creationism of somebody as I. Newton, when much of the paleontological, biological, geological, cosmological and physical contemporary evidence was lacking, to know more about scientific creationism, cf. Kitcher (1982).

⁸ From the popperian CR perspective this creationist would be a full fledged irrationalist since he is far from having a minimalist set of logically independent dogmatic assumptions.

nothing more to argue, however odious or eccentric these values might be to most of us, this because their conscience is the ultimate judge.

Popper puts it as follows:

... 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 realisation in what we call our 'imagination', makes the difference between a blind decision and a decision made with open eyes (...) The rational and imaginative analysis of the consequences of a moral theory has a certain analogy in scientific method... But there is a fundamental difference. In the case of a scientific theory, our decision depends upon the results of experiments. If these confirm the theory, we may accept it until we find a better one. If they contradict the theory, we reject it. But in the case of a moral theory, we can only confront its consequences with our conscience. And while the verdict of experiments does not depend upon ourselves, the verdict of our conscience does... the analysis of consequences may influence our decision without determining it (Popper, 1945, p. 220).

If so, individual or collective conscience is the judge of last resort, so it seems that Taliga's characterisation of PCR could not qualify as irrational our literalist scientific creationist, or a flat-earther (or any other position that indefinitely defeats refutatory evidence or arguments by *ad hoc* manoeuvres), nor a Caligula, since in both cases these subjects could defeat criticisms invoking their eccentric methodological or moral values and norms. This opens the gates to a relativism of incompatible rational attitudes (although all sharing PCR's meta attitude).

The only irrationalists for Taliga's PCR would be those subjects that are closed to any criticism, i.e., those that having received criticisms, ignore them indefinitely⁹, without even trying to answer them, without even trying to neutralise them. Taliga may retort, though, that while the attitude of our scientific creationist is wrong, it is not irrational. If so, wrong in which sense? Clearly cannot be wrong in terms of rationality, then would it be wrong pragmatically or morally?

On the other hand, the value of argument (and the value of pertinent evidence) for criticism, cannot be criticised, nor justified, without circularity, since to criticise or justify this value, one has to offer arguments (or evidence), and thus assume them while doing it. They are criticisable, but

⁹ 'Ignore them *indefinitely*', this to take into account possible kuhnian normal scientists that ignore refutations for *some time* by degrading them to mere anomalies.

they cannot be criticised successfully, thus, they are not revisable. The value of argument [and of pertinent evidence] is an "... absolute presupposition of critical argument" (Bartley, [1962] 1984, p. 253).

This absolute presupposition, this bedrock of criticisability, seems, however, analogous to a dogmatic assumption, where a dogma' would now be an accepted assumption, value or norm that lacks both non circular justification, and non circular criticism (recall that for Popper a dogma is just a position accepted or believed as true, while lacking non circular justification.) A minimal logic the one indispensable for criticism (such as the principle of non contradiction, *modus ponens*, etc.) will be also in a similar situation: criticisable, hence rational, but not revisable, since to criticise it, one must assume it.

A further problem of PCR is that being an attitude it seems to emphasise a voluntarist psychologist, or subjectivist, conception of criticism, if not what to understand by severe or vigorous criticism? Although, in the case of theories we can criticise them by testing their novel predictions¹⁰, if any, and this may provide an objective criterion of criticism for scientific theories: do they make novel predictions?, are these predictions refuted?, are they corroborated? For this type of criticism, the value of theoretical novel predictions and their testing, would have to be amongst the methodological values of the individual or collective rational subject, but in Taliga's *laissez faire* axiology, this is just one possible value preference, amongst many. Thus, Taliga's interpretation of PCR opens up the gates to a relativism of incompatible rational evaluations, leaving only emotions to try to close them, but as Popper argued above "It is my firm conviction that this irrational emphasis upon emotion and passion leads ultimately to what I can only describe as crime" (Popper, 1945, p. 221).

Furthermore, "... the basic weakness of this position is its emptiness. There is not much point in affirming the criticisability of any position we hold without concretely specifying the forms such criticism might take" (Lakatos, 1974, footnote 29, p. 264).

V. Conclusion

We have seen that the uncritical rationalist is naïf, since she was not aware that her position was self referentially incoherent, on the other hand, we

¹⁰ There is an old debate on what to understand by a novel prediction or explanation Alai's three requirements for predictions to be genuinely novel, and to be distinguished from *ad hoc* accommodations are: (1) the predicted data must not be used essentially in building the theory or choosing the auxiliary assumptions, the predicted data must be (2) a priori improbable, and (3) heterogeneous to the essentially used data (Alai, 2014, p. 297).

discovered that the critical rationalist with his constrained rationality with fideistic assumptions, and with his undisguised and frank minimal dogmatism, opened itself to a *tu quoque* from all types of irrationalists; and finally we found that pancritical rationalism (in Taliga's reconstruction, while not paradoxical, and not open to the *tu quoque*) might have counterintuitive consequences, the result of its being very permissive, and that it creates a potential relativism of many incompatible rational attitudes. Therefore these three positions are problematic, but which of the non naive last two positions is less problematic?

Justificationist critical rationalism frankly admits the logical limits of his position, and recognises 'certain priority of irrationalism', while pancritical rationalism has other logical limits ('the absolute presuppositions of critical argument'), but still, given the PCR's rational identity, it can label these presuppositions as rational.

In the end, the choice between these two positions (CR, PCR) might be a matter of taste since some might prefer a frank and honest admission that some unjustifiable and thus irrational dogmas are unavoidable, while others might prefer the liberal position that allows to relabel these dogmas as rational presuppositions, because while unjustifiable they are criticisable, or in the case of the value of argument and evidence themselves, they would also be rational, although they lack both non circular justification, and non circular criticism, and hence they are unrevisable.

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