

ON COMPREHENSIVELY CRITICAL RATIONALISM,  
RELATIVISM, AND FAKE CRITICISM (A REPLY TO  
ARMANDO CÍNTORA)

Sobre el racionalismo crítico integral, el relativismo y la crítica  
falsa (Una respuesta a Armando Cíntora)

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*Abstract*

*In his paper, Armando Cíntora (2024) argues that the notion of criticizability, I proposed in my paper (Taliga, 2022) to show that critical rationalism can be comprehensive and non-paradoxical at the same time, faces the challenge of relativism. In this reply, I shall first summarize the notion of criticizability and Cíntora's objection to it (Section II), then I shall argue that creationists or flat-earthers introduced by Cíntora (2024) do not do criticism, but fake criticism (Section III), and, finally, I shall explain why, and how, that blocks Cíntora's charge of comprehensively critical rationalism from relativism (Section IV).*

**Keywords:** *Comprehensively critical rationalism; Criticizability; Values; Relativism; Fake criticism.*

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# Sobre el racionalismo crítico integral, el relativismo y la crítica falsa (Una respuesta a Armando Cíntora)

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## *Resumen*

*En su artículo, Armando Cíntora (2024) sostiene que la noción de criticabilidad, que propuse en mi artículo (Taliga, 2022) para mostrar que el racionalismo crítico puede ser al mismo tiempo integral y no paradójico, se enfrenta al desafío del relativismo. En esta respuesta, primero resumiré la noción de criticabilidad y la objeción que Cíntora formula contra ella (sección II); luego, argumentaré que los creacionistas o los terraplanistas presentados por Cíntora (2024) no realizan una crítica, sino una crítica falsa (sección III); y, por último, explicaré por qué y cómo eso bloquea la acusación de relativismo que Cíntora dirige contra el racionalismo crítico integral (sección IV).*

**Palabras clave:** *racionalismo crítico integral; criticabilidad; valores; relativismo; crítica falsa.*

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# ON COMPREHENSIVELY CRITICAL RATIONALISM, RELATIVISM, AND FAKE CRITICISM (A REPLY TO ARMANDO CÍNTORA)

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*To the memory of David Miller  
(19. 8. 1942 – 20. 11. 2024)*

## **I. Introduction**

Critical rationalism is well known for its complete rejection of justification and anchoring of rationality in criticism (see e.g. Popper, 1982, chapter 1, section 2). Popper argued that *uncritical* or *comprehensive* rationalism is self-defeating as it embodies “the principle that any assumption which cannot be supported either by argument or by experience is to be discarded” (Popper, 2013, p. 435) but “neither logical argument nor experience can establish the rationalist attitude; for only those who are ready to consider argument or experience, and who have therefore adopted this attitude already, will be impressed by them. That is to say, a rationalist attitude must be first adopted if any argument or experience is to be effective, and it cannot therefore be based upon argument or experience” (Popper, 2013, p. 436). Popper therefore concluded that “whoever adopts the rationalist attitude does so because he has adopted, consciously or unconsciously, some proposal, or decision, or belief, or behavior; an adoption which may be called ‘irrational’. Whether

this adoption is tentative or leads to a settled habit, we may describe it as an irrational *faith in reason*” (Popper, 2013, p. 436).

However, at the same time Popper promoted the “principle that *everything is open to criticism* (from which this principle itself is not exempt)” (Popper, 2013, p. 493), so if criticism is what defines rationality, in critical rationalism there should be no irrational faith in reason. What is more, William Bartley argued that “if everyone – as a matter of logic – must make an irrational commitment at some point..., then no one can be criticized simply because he has made such a commitment, no matter how idiosyncratic. ‘Error’ in these important matters would be only a matter of submission to a *different authority*” (Bartley, 1984, p. 74). He tried to solve this problem by developing *comprehensively critical rationalism*, but struggled with the trouble akin to the paradox of liar, namely: if everything is open to criticism, as the comprehensively critical rationalist together with Popper holds (Bartley, 1984, p. 120), then the statement that everything is open to criticism must itself be open to criticism, but if it is criticized and shown to be false, then it will be both, true (since it has been criticized) and false (since it has been criticized successfully). Hence, comprehensively critical rationalism is inconsistent.

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In my paper (Taliga, 2022), I tried to show both that the alleged paradox of comprehensively critical rationalism is based on a faulty understanding of criticizability, and that if the understanding of criticizability is remedied, then critical rationalism can be comprehensive and non-paradoxical at the same time. However, Armando Cíntora (2024) thinks that my attempted solution invites unacceptable relativism. This reply hopefully intends to provide acceptable answers to the problems formulated by Cíntora.

## II. On criticizability and Cíntora’s objection

Cíntora (2024, section IV) claims that in my paper (Taliga, 2022) I reformulated Bartley’s comprehensively critical rationalism too permissively because my notion of criticizability leads to an unacceptable relativistic theory of rationality. However, my proposal (Taliga, 2022) of how to understand the notion of criticizability is not a proposal of how to demarcate rationality from irrationality. A criticizable statement or position or whatever is not automatically a rational one. If not for other reasons, then because rationality is, according to critical rationalism, a matter of our approach to and handling with statements, positions, etc., that is, *rationality is not pertinent to the content we deal with, but to the way we deal with that content*. If we want to have a near definition of rationality, then, we may

say that to deal with some content rationally means to criticize it<sup>2</sup>. If we ask, in turn, what does it mean to criticize the content, we may exploit the near definition of criticizability I offered in my paper (Taliga, 2022). I speak about near definitions of criticizability and rationality because they could be, no doubt, sharpened. The aim of my paper (Taliga, 2022) was not to provide a watertight definition of criticizability, but to show how to understand criticizability to avoid the alleged paradox of comprehensively critical rationalism.

Cíntora (2024, p. 8) concedes that my loose characterization of criticizability did this job. What he objects to is that it opens the door to relativism (Cíntora, 2024, p. 9). However, his objection assumes that my paper (Taliga, 2022) introduced a full-fledged theory of criticizability and rationality, which it clearly did not. Understandably, the view of rationality I endorse comes from Bartley's comprehensively critical rationalism that has been, in turn, inspired by Popper's idea of critical rationalism. In a nutshell, as Bartley says, "[a] position may be held rationally without needing justification at all – *provided that it can be and is held open to criticism and survives severe examination*" (Bartley, 1984, p. 119). As already said, Bartley claimed that the idea that all positions are open to criticism collapses to a logical paradox. I argued that his claim is based on a faulty understanding of criticizability, and offered a new understanding that helps to realize his project of comprehensively critical rationalism free of any concession to irrationalism, or to any dogmatic faith, including the faith in reason. According to the new understanding, some "X is criticizable if and only if it is possible to derive consequences from X in order to find out whether they are not in conflict with our preferred values (say, of truth over falsity, or of justice over injustice, etc.)" (Taliga, 2022, section 5).

Cíntora is ready to accept these proposals and results (Cíntora, 2024, p. 8), but thinks they lead a critical rationalist to opinion that creationism or flat-earthism in their contemporary variants can be held rationally (Cíntora, 2024, p. 8). He imagines a creationist to argue that her views are rational because they withstood "severe criticisms" (Cíntora, 2024, p. 8) guided by her "methodological norms and values" (Cíntora, 2024, p. 8) among which not-avoidance of *ad hoc* hypotheses and a literal reading of the Bible are at the top (Cíntora, 2024, p. 8). After citing Popper's view that in ethics our conscience is the final arbiter (Popper, 2013, p. 438), Cíntora argues that my interpretation of comprehensively critical rationalism "could not qualify as

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<sup>2</sup> Critical rationalism refuses from the outset the idea that rationality could consist in justifying the content we deal with – see e.g. (Popper, 1982, chapter 1, section 2) or (Miller, 1994, chapter 3) for details.

irrational our literalist scientific creationist, or a flat-earthier (or any other position that indefinitely defeats refutatory evidence or arguments by *ad hoc* manoeuvres)” because “these subjects could defeat criticisms invoking their eccentric methodological or moral values and norms” (Cíntora, 2024, p. 9), and concludes, finally, that I have opened “the gates to a relativism of incompatible rational attitudes” (Cíntora, 2024, p. 9; see also p. 11).

It seems to be clear what is going on here. Cíntora believes that I rescued Bartley’s project of comprehensively critical rationalism at the cost of welcoming a relativist theory of rationality, because my understanding of criticizability ascribes rationality to many incompatible attitudes, including very weird ones. Notice that for Cíntora to reach this conclusion, he must presuppose that if an attitude is criticizable, criticized, and survives criticism, then it is rational, no matter what values and methodological norms go with it. Given suitable values and norms, we can criticize our beliefs severely, and when they will stand up in this criticism, we can be proud of behaving rationally. In short, for Cíntora, the words “criticizable” and “rational” are near synonyms<sup>3</sup>.

6 I strongly reject this view. It is a caricature of criticism and rationality. First of all, creationists and/or flat-earthiers are not criticizing their views severely, if they are criticizing them at all. Furthermore, to behave rationally, it is not enough to set suitable values and norms and then pretend to criticize one’s views in accordance with them. And, finally, it is possible to expose any value and/or norm to a real criticism, and to avoid relativism at the same time. Let me elaborate briefly on all of these points.

### III. On fake criticism and rationality

In Cíntora’s description, a creationist, or a flat-earthier, or any other people whose views we commonly find weird, “defeats refutatory evidence or arguments by *ad hoc* manoeuvres”, or by “invoking their eccentric methodological or moral values and norms” (Cíntora, 2024, p. 9). That alone is a sufficient sign of why these people are not criticizing their views *severely*. As Popper taught us a long time ago, the severity of criticism is related to the avoidance of immunization strategies, that is, strategies that attempt to block criticism in any way, including the use of *ad hoc* manoeuvres (Popper, 1959, section 20). Moreover, it is doubtful whether these people are criticizing their views *at all*. As Miller taught us some time ago, criticism is always destructive in its focus, i.e. its aim is to refute a criticized view, and

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g. his passage (Cíntora, 2024, p. 10) about “minimal logic”, which he finds “criticisable, hence rational”.

that is why a successful criticism always yields a negative result (Miller, 2006, chapter 5). Therefore, someone who defeats refutatory evidence by *ad hoc* manoeuvres with the aim to save her favored view is clearly not criticizing that view. In short, *fake criticism is no criticism at all*.

I fully acknowledge that all this is not visible in my paper (Taliga, 2022) at first sight simply because its aim was not to make such things explicit. So let me repeat that someone who sets suitable values and norms for being able to deduce consequences from her views and to compare them with the values she prefers does not automatically engage in criticism, let alone rational decision-making. To set values and norms, to deduce consequences from a view, and to compare them with our values is all necessary but not sufficient for criticism. And criticism is necessary but not sufficient for rational decision-making. One can criticize a view without deciding its truth, falsity, acceptability or anything else. And one can only pretend to engage in criticism without adhering to proper values and norms.

This leads us to the core issue. Cíntora seems to suggest that deducing any consequences from any view according to any methodological norms and rules, and subsequently comparing these consequences with any values one prefers, is a sign of criticism and makes such an attitude rational. I am very sorry if anything of this was inspired by my paper (Taliga, 2022). For I claim that it is impossible to engage in criticism and rational decision-making without adopting the right values and norms. These norms and values include, among others, the ideas of objective truth and justice; the principle of charity; the fallibility principle; and the clarity principle. Many of these are advocated by thinkers far away from critical rationalism (see e.g. Damer, 2009, pp. 6-12), but Popper (2013) himself emphasized that the choice of critical rationalism “is a moral decision” (p. 437). Indeed, there is no rationality without morality. One cannot sincerely and severely criticize any view if one does not adopt, say, the principle of charity because without that principle one will never understand the view correctly and will produce just fallacies (like strawman or *ad hominem*)<sup>4</sup>. And similarly with all the other principles governing a fair criticism.

It is no news that critical rationalism without proper ethics is empty (see e.g. Koertge, 2009 or Artigas, 1999), but it is rarely recognized that, and explained why, this moral element does not make the critical rationalist attitude irrational. To show or, at least, to outline that was a secondary aim

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<sup>4</sup> The principle of charity was brilliantly captured, albeit perhaps unintentionally, by Popper in (1959, section 80, note \*5): “we should always try to clarify and to strengthen our opponent’s position as much as possible before criticizing him, if we wish our criticism to be worth while”.

of my paper (Taliga, 2022). Popper (1945) was simply wrong to claim that the critical rationalist attitude “is based upon an irrational decision, or upon faith in reason” (p. 218)<sup>5</sup>. That a critical rationalist must first decide to use reason and trust it, and only then use it, does not make her decision irrational. On the contrary, her decision is criticizable and trust in reason can be tested. However, the fact that her decision is criticizable does not make the decision rational either. Rationality is a matter of the way we are handling with or making our decisions, not of the content of our decisions. And since criticism is necessary for rational behavior, rational decision-making works only when the result of our decision-making (i.e. the content of our decision) is a negative one. Otherwise, there is no decision that can be made using reason. But once more again: such a negative result (say, “Do not prefer that course of action!”) is not rational in its content, it is simply arrived at by reason. And when the result cannot be reached (or is not reached) by the use of reason, it can still be criticized.

That is the fate of the alleged faith in reason Popper spoke of. In fact, *the critical rationalist’s decision to use reason is no faith in reason*. It is a decision to use reason and to see where the reason leads. If it leads to views or actions that are unacceptable for us because they clash with our values, we are free to defy it. No critical rationalist would tolerate the view that reason is to be trusted when it commands us to torture innocent people, for instance, or to spread fake news for pleasure. In fact, the critical reason never commands (Miller, 2006, chapter 3.3). But we can use it for critical control, even for control of our most favorite values, and of the reason itself. So, if critical reason tells us, for instance, that telling the truth and nothing but the truth would cause unjust harm to someone, we are free to ignore the ideal of telling the truth for that moment. There are no fundamental “presuppositions” or “bedrocks” of anything, let alone “the bedrocks of criticisability” (Cíntora, 2024, p. 10). Paraphrasing Feyerabend, it could be said that anything goes if temporarily at least something does not. That is, everything can be criticized, but only in a piecemeal way because to criticize anything now, at least something must be now uncriticized. What is important, however, is that this “something” can be criticized in turn, and therefore there is no room for any dogmatic faith in comprehensively critical rationalism (see Taliga, 2022, section 6, for details).

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<sup>5</sup> Note that these words do not appear in later editions of (Popper, 1945), such as e.g. (Popper, 2013). Under the pressure of discussions with Bartley, Popper changed them to: “results from an (at least tentative) act of faith – from faith in reason” (Popper, 2013, p. 437). See also (Sepetyi, 2024, p. 600).

#### IV. On criticizability of values and relativism

It is already transparent from what I wrote above, I hope, that I adopt no “*laissez faire* axiology” as Cíntora (2024, p. 10) thinks. The real question is, however, whether values can be criticized at all, and if they can, whether we thus open “the gates to a relativism of incompatible rational evaluations, leaving only emotions to try to close them” (Cíntora, 2024, p. 10).

So, why could not someone adopt, say, the principle of uncharity and combine it with not-avoidance of *ad hoc* hypotheses and a literal reading of the Bible, for instance? To be sure, one can do that but in that case one can only engage in a fake criticism. *Fair severe criticism is incompatible with argumentative fallacies, immunization strategies, and blind stubbornness.* This way, values and norms that are highlighted, according to Cíntora (2024, p. 8), by a creationist or a flat-earther are criticized from without – from the viewpoint of critical rationalism. As I argued above, creationists or flat-earthers cannot criticize any views because they adopt moral values and methodological norms inappropriate for doing criticism. However, once one adopts proper values and norms, one can criticize not only views but also those values and norms<sup>6</sup>. And that means to criticize them from within.

Here I may only sketch the ways of how to criticize values internally<sup>7</sup>. First, one value can conflict with other values we prefer, so to consider what consequences would a championed value yield is to criticize it in the sense of my paper (Taliga, 2022). (For instance, someone might understand and espouse the values of liberty and equality in a way, which makes them incompatible.) Second, promoting some value may result in unintended unwanted consequences that clash with some aim we pursue. (For instance, preferring the value of liberty might run counter with our aim to protect the health of citizens.) We could elaborate these ways of criticizability of values in terms of Hirschman’s perversity thesis, futility thesis, and jeopardy thesis (Hirschman, 1991). A value is perverse if its promoting exacerbates the condition we wish to remedy; it is futile if its promoting does not lead us to the aim we would like to achieve; and it is jeopardous if its promoting endangers some other value we prefer. In each case, we have to take into account the consequences, which our endorsing of a criticized value would have, and compare them with other values we prefer.

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<sup>6</sup> That is why I wrote about the appropriate conditions under which all positions are criticizable (see Taliga, 2022, section 6, for details).

<sup>7</sup> The sketch is inspired by the proposals of C. von Mettenheim (1999, pp. 116-117) of how to criticize legal decisions and by the comments of J. Buráň (2020, pp. 479-480) on those proposals.

In this sense, of course, our criticism of values is always *relational* (i.e. one value is criticized in the light of another value), but it is *not relativistic* because it does not put all values (or norms) on an equal footing. *The fact that there are no fundamental values and norms* (i.e. relationism) *does not mean that all values and norms are equally good or bad* (i.e. relativism). Especially fake criticism, based on adoption of eccentric methodological or moral values and norms, can be thus – by relational criticism of values and norms – eliminated. This brings us to expected questions: “By what right do you, critical rationalists, find some norms eccentric or weird? And how can you claim that your values and norms are better than others?”

10 Here is the answer: Above all, we are aware that we cannot justify our values and norms as the right ones. So, we do not claim that our preference for them is rational in the sense that we have good reasons to expect that they will help us achieve our aim (be it truth, justice, or anything else) – see (Popper, 1972, p. 22) and (Popper, 1982, pp. 19-21). However, we do claim that the values and norms of creationists and flat-earthers are inferior to ours because, when criticized internally and externally, they are shown to be misleading, dangerous, and faulty. They are misleading because the use of immunization strategies diminishes chances for growth of our knowledge; they are dangerous because they introduce deification of unrevisable dogmas; and they are faulty because they misconstrue the aim of human cognition. So, if creationists or flat-earthers nevertheless insist on their values and norms, they are behaving irrationally. All this gives us the right *to guess* that our values and norms are better than those of creationists and flat-earthers. However, if you disagree, your criticism is welcome, just please do not address fake criticisms to us.

## V. Conclusion

We have reached the last point. Someone could object that I am begging the question now because by inviting criticism of critical rationalism, I am endorsing the very values and norms that, according to critical rationalism, guide a fair criticism. As far as I know, begging the question is a justificatory fallacy, so since I already conceded that the attitude of critical rationalism cannot be justified, I hope that settles the matter. However, it is important to see that fair criticism is analogous to any game in the sense that you cannot play chess, for instance, if you do not follow the rules of chess. Similarly, you cannot criticize anything, if you do not follow the rules of criticism. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that critical rationalism can only be fairly criticized if standards of criticism are accepted. If one were to object

against critical rationalism by, say, a literal reading of the Bible, then one would be playing a game that is a far cry from fair criticism.

This is not to say that critical rationalism cannot be criticized from the outside. On the contrary, it can be and has been criticized externally, even more often than internally<sup>8</sup>. It is to say that criticism takes place within the framework of certain rules, values, and norms, all of which can in turn be criticized. As for me, I am happy that is the case, and that we do not have to respond to every weird fake criticism. What is much less satisfying, however, is that fake criticism is too often confused with real criticism. I can only hope that this paper will help expose such “criticism” for what it really is – just a fake<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> There are many internal and external criticisms of critical rationalism. Examples of successful internal criticisms are (Miller, 1974) and (Tichý, 1974) as far as Tichý's criticism of Popper's qualitative theory of verisimilitude is concerned. Tichý's criticism of Popper's quantitative theory of verisimilitude from (Tichý, 1974) is an example of external criticism stemming from Tichý's own understanding of verisimilitude, which itself is problematic (see e.g. Miller, 1976 or Miller, 2006, chap. 11 for details). For more examples of various criticisms attacking different areas of critical rationalism see e.g. (Miller, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> To avoid any misunderstanding, I do not consider Cíntora's (2024) criticism of my paper (Taliga, 2022) to be a case of fake criticism. On the contrary, it has made me think more about the relations between criticizability, rationality, and morality, for which I am grateful.

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The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this article.