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PANCRITICAL RATIONALISM

1. The Pattern of Failure

The failure of critical rationalism, like that of panrationalism, was foreordained by the structure of the questions it emphasized and the criticism it permitted.[1] Any theory of rationality that is to succeed where these have failed in resolving the dilemma of ultimate commitment must bring this hidden structure to light, break it, and put forward an alternative. I shall attempt to do this in this chapter. My argument revolves around two historical observations, the first of which is the following.

The Western philosophical tradition is authoritarian in structure, even in its most liberal forms. This structure has been concealed by oversimplified traditional presentations of the rise of modern philosophy as part of a *rebellion against authority.* In fact, modern philosophy is the story of the rebellion of one authority against another authority, and the clash between competing authorities. Far from repudiating the appeal to authority as such, modern philosophy has entertained only one alternative to the practice of basing opinions on traditional and perhaps *irrational* authority: namely, that of basing them on a rational *authority.*

This no doubt at first served an urgent need. Those challenging ecclesiastical and political authorities needed to be able to show that disputes could nevertheless be settled in an orderly way: that traditional political, religious, and intellectual authorities could be displaced without producing social anarchy and intellectual chaos since they would be replaced by the authority of reason. Thus arose the various schools of modern philosophy whose careers we have sketched in reviewing panrationalism. These hoped to adjudicate among competing positions by providing rational authorities to substitute for unwanted forms of traditional authority. The structure embodied in these schools has been meticulously maintained. Each successive philosophical revolution, each being a phase in the search for an adequate theory of rationality, disclosed that the previous candidate for rational authority was unsatisfactory and proposed a new, supposedly more satisfactory, rational authority. The church was to be replaced by intellectual intuition; intellectual intuition by sense experience; sense experience by a certain language system, and so on. The story is always the same: past

[1]Both panrationalism and critical rationalism arise within the polluted metacontext of justificationist philosophy of true belief. (See appendix 1.)

philosophical error is to be given a positive explanation by attributing it to the acceptance of a false rational authority.

This may be seen by examining the main questions asked in all these philosophies. Questions like: How do you know? How do you justify your beliefs? With what do you guarantee your opinions? *all beg authoritarian answers*—whether those answers be: the Bible, the leader, the social class, the nation, the fortuneteller, the Word of God, the intellect, or sense experience. One of the main tasks within Western philosophies has long been to extricate these supposedly infallible epistemological authorities from difficulties. For not only did they all prove fallible and questionable in themselves; even if they were assumed, *per impossible,* to be indubitable, they still turned out to be inadequate justifications or guarantees for all the positions that the rationalist wished to hold—including the rationalist position itself.

This historical observation about the structure of Western philosophy I owe to an address by Karl Popper before the British Academy in 1960.[2] His simple observation—the sort of simple observation it requires genius to make—has an almost revelatory character that throws a very different light on the history and problems of philosophy. I shall try to build on this observation, first by putting it in some philosophical context, then by explaining it, and finally by suggesting the principal outlines of my own account of rationality—pancritical rationalism—which can be erected within the new, roomier, structure which the observation makes possible.

Since the entire argument which follows—which calls for a fundamental change in traditional ways of thinking about these matters—depends on this observation, I wish to make as clear as possible what is meant by it. Perhaps what is involved can be illustrated initially in terms of the related but far more concrete case of political philosophy.

Among the most important questions of traditional political philosophy are: Who should rule? What is the supreme political authority? Both questions beg authoritarian answers, such as: the people, the proletariat, the king, or the dictator. This authoritarian character of traditional political philosophy—although also generally unrecognized—is one of the most important causes today of the so-called theoretical breakdown of traditional political theory. The liberal democratic attempt to locate political authority in the people was largely motivated by the desire to replace the irrational, arbitrary, and often absentee rule of traditional monarchs by a rational authority. Political authority, it was argued, should, rationally speaking, stem from the people because, among other reasons, they would know their

[2]"On the Sources of Knowledge and of Ignorance", *Proceedings of the British Academy,* 1960; published separately in 1961 by Oxford University Press (Henriette Hertz Trust monographs); also published as the introduction to *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963). A preliminary statement of the view appeared in his "On the Sources of Our Knowledge", *Indian Journal of Philosophy,* August 1959.

own needs best. However, as Walter Lippmann and others have argued, illustrating their cases with historical examples, a populace can also become an arbitrary and irrational political authority. And political affairs might in certain situations become so complex that the average man would not in fact be able to judge his own best interests. A ballot-box majority in such a situation might be as irrational an authority as the most arbitrary king. So democratic liberalism, by tying itself to *traditional* forms of democracy, is in danger of embracing *irrationalism* despite its intentions.

The practical problems involved in such situations are far from easy to solve. Nevertheless, the *theoretical* difficulties that have troubled Lippmann and others so much may be escaped with remarkable ease by recognizing the authoritarian character of the traditional questions and simply *changing the political question* from: Who should rule? to: How can we best arrange our political institutions so as to get rid of bad rulers when they appear, or at least restrict the amount of harm they can do?[3]

This seemingly minor change in the political question is enough to topple the authoritarian structure of political philosophy. The recognition that there is *no best kind of supreme political authority for all situations,* but that *any* authority—people, king, or dictator—may turn into a bad ruler, is implicit in the question. The change is important not only because absolute power corrupts absolutely. The ruler may simply become tired and old and lose touch with the realities that should govern the discharge of his responsibilities. Or he may, with the best of motives, become attached to an idea or ideology that thwarts his own intentions while also defeating the best interests of those he is charged with governing.

Even with this change in the traditional political question, practical political answers will not be easy to achieve. Imagination and dedication are required if men are to devise governmental institutions containing built-in mechanisms of self-criticism which will work efficiently in concrete geopolitical and economic contexts. But formulating the problem in this way reopens the door to a *rational* approach and enables one to be a political rationalist and a kind of democrat without committing one to the belief that any majority is right. And it helps explain why apparently undemocratic institutions might perhaps be unavoidable, at least at first, in some situations. If the ballot box itself is not an effective mechanism for eliminating bad leadership, even the ballox box may have to be subjected to institutional checks—which are themselves, in turn, open to check.

In his memoirs, Charles de Gaulle has described the traditional concept of sovereignty or authority as well as anyone: "a last resort designated in advance." It is hardly necessary to add that he was referring to himself. What is challenged by the proposed change of question is the whole idea that political institutions of the last resort need to be designated in advance.

[3]Popper, *The Open Society,* chap. 7.

For conditions may change, and a good last resort in one situation may be disastrous in another. The ballot box, the national assembly, or the general who lives in the country, each may prove a good locus for political authority, and each may conceivably become tyrannical or ineffectual. The problem, then, should not be how to designate in advance an infallible source of political authority, but how to take out *insurance* against the wreck of whatever flagship happens at a particular time to be handling the navigation for the fleet of state. A country that happens to possess a brilliant and humane, if rusticated, general, who is willing and able to assume leadership when needed, has a potentially valuable piece of insurance as well as a potentially dangerous explosive. But a state whose institutions are so broken down that she must rely on such chance occurrence is poorly insured indeed. Perhaps both considerations apply to the Fourth Republic; it was "the fortune of France", as de Gaulle might put it, that the one *happened,* at one point in her history, to balance the other.

What holds true for political philosophy applies perhaps even more significantly to philosophy in general. All proposed intellectual authorities have turned out to be both intrinsically fallible and epistemologically insufficient. Infallible sources of knowledge and intellectual authority appear to be as unavailable as infallible political authorities. Yet those who readily admit the unreliability of political leaders often retain their hope for and trust in manifestly unworkable intellectual authorities. Perhaps the two are connected, so that political instability encourages uncritical escapist faith in intellectual systems within which chaos can more easily be concealed.

2. *A Nonjustificational Approach*

The authoritarian structuring of philosophy's fundamental epistemological questions can be remedied by making a shift comparable to the one suggested for political philosophy. We may not only reject (as did the critical rationalists) the demand for rational proofs of our rational standards. We may go further, and *also* abandon the demand that everything else *except* the standards be proved or justified by appealing to the authority of the standards, or by some other means. *Nothing gets justified.* Instead of following the critical rationalists in replacing philosophical *justification* by philosophical *description,* we may urge the philosophical *criticism* of standards as the main task of the philosopher. *Nothing gets justified; everything gets criticized.* Instead of positing infallible intellectual authorities to justify and guarantee positions, one may build a philosophical

program for counteracting intellectual error. One may create an ecological niche for rationality.

The philosophical questions that would have to be asked within such a program would show a striking structural change. The traditional demand for justification—the "How do you know?" question—would not legitimately arise. And if it arose in fact, the philosopher would have to reply: "I do not know; I have no guarantees."

If he wanted to be a little clearer, he might elaborate: "Some of the beliefs I hold may in fact be true; but since there are no guarantees or criteria of truth, no ways of definitely deciding, I can never know for sure whether what I believe to be true is in fact so." For such a philosopher, a different question would become important: *How can our intellectual life and institutions be arranged so as to expose our beliefs, conjectures, policies, positions, sources of ideas, traditions, and the like—whether or not they are justifiable—to maximum criticism, in order to counteract and eliminate as much intellectual error as possible?* In effect, we shall attempt to learn from our mistakes, to adapt to the unforeseen and unanticipated. Even though we may never reach definitive, authoritative, justified answers any more than we achieve total adaptation, we may learn to pose more and more probing questions. This concern could hardly clash more sharply with that of the traditional rationalist for whom the main intellectual offense was to hold an unjustifiable belief.

The shift from authoritative justification to criticism is a genuine innovation in philosophy whose importance cannot be overemphasized. Nonetheless, it might be objected immediately that there is no real shift or clash here; that the idea of criticizing competing views rationally, far from being novel, has been the main theme of modern philosophy from its outset—as I myself have stressed in the previous chapter. In this case, my so-called shift from justification to criticism would seem to be just another refrain of the song, "You must be critical", which has been in the philosophical litany from the pre-Socratics to Socrates himself, through Descartes and Kant, to Nietzsche, to the latest enthusiastic student of philosophy. Almost everybody is in favor of the critical attitude these days; it has become a rather old story. And one grows bored of paeans to criticism, however eloquent and right-minded, which never grapple with a belief that is so widespread it is taken quite uncritically for granted: that there is a fundamental theoretical limit to the role of criticism and, *ipso facto,* of rationality—as illustrated by the dilemma of ultimate commitment.[4]

So, until the dilemma of ultimate commitment is resolved, this hypotheti-

[4]In writing this paragraph I was thinking in part of Walter Kaufmann's *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper, 1958). A brilliant and exciting book, it neglects to deal significantly with the *tu quoque* argument, and to that extent fails to treat the main defense of much contemporary religious and philosophical thought.

cal objection might continue, stress on the importance of criticism does no good; for this dilemma makes it futile for one philosopher to accuse another of being uncritical. The defendant usually can, and often does, reply that his is the point at which the limit to criticism should be drawn and that his accuser is himself uncritical in forgetting that he, too, limits its role.[5]

Although this objection is invalid, it should be taken very seriously. For in terms of the new theory of criticism to be outlined here, the notion of criticism, far from being trite, becomes one of the most unexplored, puzzling, and rewarding areas of philosophy. To show why such reactions are mistaken, I wish to bring out as clearly as possible the crucial difference between the new idea of criticism which is being advocated here and the old familiar themes of traditional critical philosophy.

This can be done in a straightforward way by asking for an explanation of our historical observation: Why has an authoritarian structure been retained—and even gone unnoticed—in modern philosophies that have been intentionally anti-authoritarian and critical in spirit? Has it perhaps been retained because it is inescapable?

These questions can be answered by a further historical observation. Namely, the task of solving the problems of rational critical arbitration among competing positions has been frustrated from the start by the fact that *in almost all traditional and modern philosophies—those that called themselves critical as well as those that did not—the idea of criticism has been fused with the idea of justification.* Since demands for justification are satisfied by the appeal to authority, the dilemma of ultimate commitment arises *in regard to criticism* within such philosophies; and authoritarianism remains inescapable. (The fusion of justification and criticism in Ayer's thought, for instance, explains why he turned to *description* when justification broke down. For criticism only appears as an *alternative* to justification after the two notions are separated.) As a group, the philosophies in which this fusion of justification and criticism occurs may be called *justificational philosophies of criticism.*

The purpose of the view proposed here is to escape this dilemma—and perhaps help make future hymns to the critical attitude worthwhile—by explicitly eliminating the notion of justification from the notion of criticism,

[5]Such an objection is entirely understandable. Western justificationist philosophy of true belief (see appendix 1) *does* contain many *theories* of criticism; it pays lip service to progress; it avows the critical attitude. Yet within the polluted metacontext of justificationism, criticism can function only within the limitations set down by commitments and attachments. Western justificationist philosophy does not ecologize: it does not provide a metacontext in which avowals of criticism can be effectively pursued. An embryonic fallibilist critical metacontext may, for instance, be interpreted by—and contained and stunted within—a more developed justificationist metacontext. Hitherto, fallibilism has been largely confined to the level of well-intentioned World 2 (in Popper's terminology) resolves, and has been contextualized within a justificationist World 3 institutional framework. Thus its limited success. The progress of criticism, and even the success of Western science, have hitherto occurred *in spite of* the context in which they have been couched. (For an account of Worlds 1, 2, and 3, see Popper's *Objective Knowledge* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972].)

and by aiming not simply to encourage criticism and objection but to do so within the framework of a *nonjustificational philosophy of criticism.* In this lies the difference between the view advocated here and many other critical philosophies.[6]

But what does it mean to talk of the fusion of justification and criticism? They have been fused in a number of different ways. One way, which is historically probably the most important, is dominant in most kinds of panrationalism. On this view, the way to criticize a view is to see whether it can be logically derived from—i.e., "justified by"—the rational criterion or authority. On an empiricist view, such as Hume's, for instance, the strongest criticism of any particular theory was that it could not be justified or established properly—in his case by an appeal to sense experience. If one examines Hume's philosophical writings, one finds him making fairly consistent use of the following basic strategy of criticism: He takes one idea after another—the idea of God, of the soul, of memory, of other minds—and asks whether it can be justified by being derived from sense experience, which he regards as man's only source of knowledge, or rational authority. If it can be justified as required, he accepts it; and if it cannot, he either rejects it or implies that at least from a rational point of view it *should* be rejected. As he writes: "When we entertain . . . any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is all too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived*? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion."[7]

Descartes's method "for conducting the reason well and for searching for truth in the sciences", however different in other respects, is closely parallel to Hume's in this. Descartes's program of reductive analysis is a form of justificational criticism, and his program of synthesis is a particular form of justification. Ideas that cannot be reduced to clear and distinct ideas, and thus rationally justified, Descartes thinks should be rejected—just as everything that is to be accepted must be so justified. For both philosophers, the rational way to criticize an idea is to see whether or not it can be rationally justified.

Another strategy of criticism which is quite popular, although both weaker in its demands and more difficult to apply than the first, also fuses justification and criticism. It is weaker than the first strategy because it employs a kind of "elastic clause" similar to that in the United States

[6]See, for example, Henry David Aiken, *The Age of Ideology.* Aiken's failure to distinguish explicitly the problems of justification and criticism puts much of his discussion out of focus and results in the following expression which, however well-intentioned, is less than coherent. He writes (pp. 241–42): ". . . a tradition to end all traditions, which is committed, at bottom, only to the principle of reasonableness itself, the principle, that is, that a reason may be properly requested for any proposition whatever, and that no principle is ever exempted from critique, so long, at any rate, as the latter is conducted honestly and in good faith."

[7]*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,* sec. 2.

Constitution. What matters is not whether a belief can be derived from the rational authority but whether it *conflicts* with it. In other words, it is not irrational to hold a belief that cannot be derived from—i.e., justified by—the rational authority unless its denial *can* be derived from the rational authority.

This strategy has been adopted not only in various intellectualist, empiricist, and pragmatist epistemologies, but also in many religious theories of authority. For instance, few theories that grant the Bible preeminence as an authoritative source of truth require that the faithful repudiate any belief that lacks biblical sanction. Beliefs not specifically endorsed or implied by the Bible—such as Newtonian theory—may be held for other reasons provided they do not conflict with views that do enjoy biblical justification. The Roman Catholic church has adopted one variant of this strategy: the authoritative preeminence of the pope applies only to matters of faith and morals.

This second strategy can be varied in many subtle ways. Indeed, a typology of theories of authority, developed in terms of the different possible moves consistent with the general strategy, would illuminate some of the particular twists taken now and then in historical controversies. Yet, all varieties I know continue to fuse justification and criticism in one way or another: to criticize a position, one must show either that it cannot be derived from, or else that it conflicts with, the rational authority, which is itself not open to criticism.

(A semantic account of justification completely in line with the position just outlined, and fusing justification and criticism, has now been reported in *The Journal of Symbolic Logic* as capturing the "intuitive concept of justification"! Thus a sentence is justified on this account if it follows deductively from justified sentences. A sentence not justified at one time may become justified later, but once justified it remains justified. The author notices how justification values assigned at present constrain future assignments. Of those sentences which are not justified at one time, some are consistent with the justified sentences and are thus weakly unjustified, whereas other sentences are inconsistent with the justified sentences and are thus strongly unjustifiable.)[8]

When combined, the two historical observations introduced in this chapter—Popper's observation that traditional philosophy is authoritarian or justificational in structure, and my observation that these philosophies have fused the ideas of justification and of criticism—suggest the conditions under which the dilemma of ultimate commitment might be resolved. In fact, three precise questions may now be posed which, if pursued in turn, lead directly to a resolution of the dilemma:

[8]John T. Kearns, "A Semantics Based on Justification rather than Truth" (Abstract), *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, vol. 43, no. 3 (September 1978), p. 614.

(1) Is it possible, *within* a justificational or authoritarian theory of knowledge, to resolve the dilemma of ultimate commitment? If not, the justificational character of traditional philosophies might explain why all traditional attempts to resolve it have failed.

(2) Is an alternative nonjustificational, or nonauthoritarian, approach to philosophy possible?

(3) Within a nonjustificational approach, is it possible to resolve the dilemma of ultimate commitment? If so, how might this be done?

Definite answers to these questions, even negative ones, would be of considerable value. For example, negative answers to the first two questions would show rationalists that the dilemma could not be escaped at all, and would excuse them for lapsing without further effort or complaint into some candid, if limited, form of rationalism like that of Ayer. On the other hand, positive answers to questions 2 and 3 could lead to a resolution of what I believe is the main intellectual dilemma both of theoretical philosophy and of practical moral reflection.

Previous efforts to resolve the dilemma—many of them made by men like Bertrand Russell who passionately wanted to escape intellectual and moral relativism—have not taken into account the justificational framework in which philosophy is caught. Consequently, the possibility of an alternative has not been raised and the attempts have failed.

The answer to the first question must be negative. The dilemma of ultimate commitment cannot be escaped within an authoritarian theory of knowledge. This should be abundantly clear already from the difficulties encountered by panrationalism and critical rationalism. Indeed, the only fundamental way in which the present question differs from those encountered above is in its limitation in scope to justificational philosophies—an irrelevant limitation if previous philosophies have really all been justificational. Whether that limitation can ever become relevant, or can be escaped, is the problem involved in the second question.

The answer to the second question is affirmative. An alternative nonjustificational philosophy is in fact possible.

I shall try to bring out the character of such an approach in the next two sections.

3. *Pancritical Rationalism—the* Tu Quoque *Reconsidered*

Implicit in such a nonjustificational approach are a new philosophical program and a new conception of rationalist identity. The new framework permits a rationalist to 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. I shall call this conception *pancritical rationalism.*

The new conception of rationalist identity shares its comprehensive aims, but not its justificationism, with the first type of rationalism. It also follows from, or is implied by, the traditional requirement. That is, a panrationalist who succeeds in justifying *all* his positions rationally clearly need not justify any of them irrationally. Nonetheless, the two requirements are not equivalent; if they were, the traditional requirement would also be implied by the new one—and that would mean that any refutation of the traditional requirement would destroy the new conception too. But in fact the new requirement does not imply the traditional one. It does not follow that a man who justifies none of his beliefs irrationally will justify them all rationally.

The last point indicates how much the new conception differs from both its predecessors. It differs from comprehensive or panrationalism in having altogether abandoned the ideal of comprehensive *rational* justification. And it also differs from critical rationalism, wherein a rationalist accepted that his position was rationally unjustifiable but went on to justify it irrationally by his personal and social moral commitment to standards and practices that were not themselves open to assessment or criticism since—as in Ayer's theory—criticism and rational justification are fused. Within a justificational approach, such a move might seem unavoidable. We cannot go on justifying our beliefs forever since the question of the correctness of the conclusion shifts back to the question of the correctness of the premises; and if the premises are never established or justified, neither is the conclusion. Since we want to justify and cannot do so *rationally,* irrational justification or commitment seems the only resort. So, if rationality lies in justification, it is severely limited by the necessity for commitment. But if rationality lies in criticism, and if we can subject everything to criticism and continued test, including the rationalist way of life itself,[9] without leading to infinite regress,

[9]Also including (see appendix 1) *the fallibilist metacontext.*

circularity, the need to justify, or other such difficulty, then rationality is in this sense unlimited. The pancritical rationalist does not justify at all. If all justification—rational as well as irrational—is really abandoned, there is indeed no need to justify irrationally a position that is rationally unjustifiable. The 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.* The question of how well a position is justified differs utterly from the question of how criticizable it is, and how well it is criticized.

The proviso just italicized masks a potential objection. So the hypothetical critic with whose arguments we grappled in the previous section might be revived long enough to make one further sally. "Suppose", he might grant, "that you are probably right in thinking that it is *generally* possible to separate the notions of justification and criticism. But can this separation be extended to the examination of the rationalist position itself? The logical impossibility of the program of comprehensive justification could be shown quite independently of the question whether any particular 'rational standards' were justifiable. Why should the story be different for comprehensive criticism? Would it not meet some of the same difficulties as the former? Indeed, is it really possible to eliminate justification entirely from criticism?"

These questions can perhaps be pinned down in the following formulation: Under traditional conceptions of rationalism the rationalist position itself was not rational. The rationalist identity excluded rationalist integrity. Under the new conception, can a comparable crisis be avoided? Is the new rationalist position itself rational? Does it satisfy its own requirements? Can the program of following an argument where it leads and of holding everything open to severe criticism itself be held open to criticism and survive it? Does not a paradoxical situation arise in regard to the criticism of the practice of argument just as it did in regard to the justification of that practice?

Surprising as it might seem, the practice of critical argument can be criticized without contradiction or any other logical difficulty. The general separation of justification and criticism can be extended to the examination of the rationalist position itself. Under previous conceptions of rationalism, the rationalist position, being unjustifiable, was itself not rational. But pancritical rationalism satisfies its own requirements: without any contradiction or other difficulty the very practice of critical argument can be criticized.[10] Just as it is possible for a democracy, through democratic processes, to commit suicide (e.g., through a majority vote to abolish

[10]Anyone who continues to insist that rationalists just *cannot* hold their basic positions open to criticism and rejection, *or cannot* be willing to contemplate adopting some sort of irrationalism, ought to explain how this view can be reconciled with my own attempt to criticize my position as severely as possible. Again, how would he explain how it happened historically that many other similarly "prejudiced" rationalists nevertheless came to be driven by rational arguments like the *tu quoque* into irrationalism? He also has a more serious task: he must produce detailed argument to show that pancritical rationalists really must be irrationally committed. Then he might find out how sincere they are.