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POPPER'S CRITICAL RATIONALISM AND THE RATIONALE FOR PRAGMA-DIALECTICS

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Abstract:

My focus will be on the rationale van Eemeren and Grootendorst offer for their theory of Pragma-Dialectics. I will discuss their claims regarding deductivism, the omni-competence of Pragma-Dialectics (values, for example), rules of method, and their rejection of geometrical as well as anthropological approaches. I will criticize the rationale offered for Pragma-Dialectics and finish by offering what I think is needed as a supplement for a complete theory of argumentation. This is *a set of default principles* that solves the problem of establishing a non-arbitrary starting point that is simultaneously undogmatic yet foundational.

The main defenders of Pragma-Dialectics, van Eemeren and Grootendorst frequently point out similarities between their view point and that of Popper's Critical Rationalism.¹ The focus of this paper will be on several crucial points where there does seem to be a significant overlap, especially with the views of Hans Albert, perhaps Popper's foremost Continental expositor and defender.

My focus will be on the rationale van Eemeren and Grootendorst offer for their theory of Pragma-Dialectics as an alternative to competing theories of argumentation, as well as on the sweeping claims they make for it. Thus I will discuss: 1. deductivism; 2. their rejection of geometrical as well as anthropological approaches; 3. the rationale for rules of method; and 4. the omni-competence of Pragma-Dialectics (values especially).

I will criticize the rationale offered for Pragma-Dialectics and offer what I think is needed as a supplement for a complete theory of argumentation. This is *a set of default principles* that solves the problem of establishing a non-arbitrary starting point that is simultaneously undogmatic yet foundational. I will also suggest how they can more adequately cash out their claim of omni-competence. (On this point their claim is sound but not their argument).

The former point will sound like an oxymoron both to traditional foundationalists and to orthodox Popperian "critical rationalists", but when adequately defined and defended it helps solve a fundamental problem in both epistemology and argumentation theory.²

1. Deductivism. One of the key debates in argumentation theory is whether or not "arguments are either deductive or defective" (to use Alasdair MacIntyre's well-phrased description of the basic dichotomy)³. Perhaps it would be more accurate to make this a trichotomy: Arguments are either (a) deductive or (b) fallacious ("defective") or (c) enthymematic. As is conceded on all sides in this debate, any invalid or inconclusive argument can be converted into a deductively valid argument by the addition of (one or more) appropriate premises.

This is generally objected to on the grounds that⁴ it merely shifts the problem. But it is a significant shift and leads to the next point: the advantages of refutation, criticism and falsifiability over justification, verification and proof. It also helps us handle, I would argue, the problem about fallacies both formal and informal.⁵ The putative logical sinner is given a choice; she either repents of her (logical) sin and admits she used an enthymeme or she persists in her illicit conduct and faces the wages of sin, i.e. expulsion from logician's heaven or faces the purgatory of defending the needed premises to save her rational virtue from defamation.

But are the P-D and CR approaches really more logically virtuous than the justificationist approach traditionally defended? The two main arguments relied on by Popperians concern the problems of induction and of infinite regress. The focus of both van Eemeren and Grootendorst is on the latter so I will concentrate on it also.⁶

2. *Rejection of geometrical as well as anthropological approaches.* Van Eemeren and Grootendorst approach this by consideration of Toulmin's distinction between the "geometrical and "anthropological" approaches. Toulmin favours the latter, whereas Albert rejects both because they run into the problem of Fries' trilemma (Albert calls it Munchhausen-trilemma). But the Popperian approach, I will argue, suffers from two defects: First, this approach is not really immune from the same trilemma; second, it is not at all convincing in its claims regarding the omni-competence of Critical Rationalism.

(The first claim I will argue in the teeth of numerous protestations to the contrary by the orthodox Popperians. This is because what serves as ersatz first principles, axioms, self-evident truths, revelation or whatever (long list could be added here) are rules of method and/or conventions.⁷)

But let us start with the ostensible advantages claimed for the approach by van Eemeren and Grootendorst:

If one adopts the viewpoint of a Popperian critical rationalist, one pursues the development of a reasonableness model that takes the *fallibility* of human reason explicitly into account, and elevates the concept of *systematic critical testing* in all areas of human thought and action to the guiding principle of problem solving".⁸

On the vexed question of the inclusion of values within the domain of critical discussion they argue, following Albert, that "In a discussion of values too, reasonableness knows only those boundaries established by the participants themselves".⁹ Toulmin's argument as cited by van Eemeren and Grootendorst is worth quoting here:

We "know" something ... if-and-only-if we have a *well-founded belief* in it: our belief in it is well-founded if-and-only-if we can produce *good reasons* in its support; and our reasons are really "good" ... if-and-only-if we can produce a "conclusive" or *formally-valid* argument, linking the belief to an *unchallenged (and preferably unchallengeable) starting point*.¹⁰

Now, interestingly, Toulmin himself in the end resorts to the same (or an ersatz) strategy. He too argued for an 'unchallenged (unchallengeable?) starting point':

We must study the ways of arguing which have established themselves in any sphere accepting them as historical facts; knowing that they may be superseded, but only as a result of a revolutionary advance in our methods of thought. In some case these methods will not be further justifiable—at

any rate by argument; the fact that they have established themselves in praxis may have to be enough for us.[11](#)

So in the end Toulmin's (earlier) 'anthropological' approach requires (as does the 'geometrical' approach) an unchallenged (if not quite unchallengeable) starting point (empirical historical facts rather than self-evident axioms).

This is where Fries' trilemma becomes relevant. According to its proponents any argument must terminate ultimately either by facing an infinite regress or by psychologism or dogmatism i.e. a linguistically formulated statement or a non-linguistical experience (intuition, revelation, mystical experience, ordinary run-of-the-mill sense-experience itself, Pascal's reasons of the heart, Descartes clear and distinct ideas, Leibnitz' natural light of reason, Newton's rules of method *inter alia*). It is important to realize that this problem applies both to purely logical/mathematical reasoning as well as empirical argumentation and thus van Eemeren and Grootendorst are correct to claim that this is just as fatal to Toulmin's anthropological (and Perelman's rhetorical) approach as it is to the geometrical approach (more fatal I would argue). But it is also, I will argue, just as fatal to the Popperian program.

Justificationism,...can never escape from the *Munchhausen-trilemma* ... the problem of justificationists being eventually forced to chose between the following unacceptable options: (1) an infinite regress, (2) a logical circle, or (3) breaking off the justification process at an arbitrary point. Justificationists usually generally choose the last option ... [so that] the foundation requirement is dropped, and at the point where the process of justification is interrupted, the ... claim is declared a more or less axiomatic basic assumption which requires no further foundations because its truth is evident on the grounds of intuition or experience.[12](#)

They go on to add their basic criticism of this 'solution':

In this way a certain starting-point is rendered immune to criticism and serves as *a priori* or can even be elevated to a dogma of reasonableness. Such a justificatory starting-point in one form or other, plays a part in both the geometrical and the anthropological conceptions of reasonableness.[13](#)

Since justification is not aimed for, it is claimed, the problem disappears. However refutation still needs empirical evidence and all empirical evidence runs into Fries' trilemma whether it is 'supporting' or counter evidence.

3. *The rationale for rules of method and conventions.* In this section I concede (and not merely for the sake of argument) both that rules of method and conventions are essential in argumentation theory and that those of van Eemeren and Grootendorst are very plausible and appropriate. What I will criticize is the rationale, i.e., the arguments for their version of argumentation theory are unconvincing (they fail in their perlocutionary force).

(i) As a preliminary point we should ask: Why does the so-called geometrical approach have to be dogmatic?

(ii) The major criticism of van Eemeren and Grootendorst (as well as Albert and Popper) of justificationism is

that they have to resort to "breaking off the justification process at an arbitrary point" usually experience (in the case of facts) and intuition (in the case of logical and mathematical axioms). But since both Pragma-Dialectics and Critical Rationalism stress the radical fallibility of knowledge claims then it seems to me that it has the same problem in spades. For experience to work we need counter-evidence (scientific experiments, historical evidence, eye-witness testimony, common experience of, say, crows, swans, sunrise, mortal humans etc.). Popper says we simply make a decision or convention to accept certain basic statements that are not justified or justifiable and that we assume background knowledge in any discussion. But why stop our criticism at this point? I will attempt (in part four) to answer this point in my discussion of Default Principles and while I feel that it is the best answer we can give I am prepared [as a fallibilist] to concede a better answer could be forthcoming. Suppose it is. Suppose also that the stopping point is the same for both justificationist and a Critical Rationalism or Pragma-Dialectics spokesperson. (Consider the well-known experiments of Millikan, Eddington, and Michelson-Morley, e.g.) Whatever answer is given is equally available to the justificationist. The same applies to the rules of method Popper advocates or the decalogue van Eemeren and Grootendorst advance. In summary van Eemeren and Grootendorst are correct that the justificationist needs to terminate his argument somewhere—preferably in a non-arbitrary fashion. But the critic must also terminate somewhere. Let us call their termination or, (ironically enough, just as appropriately) their starting points, J and C respectively. So the tough question for both P-D and CR are why is C any less arbitrary than J?

After all if C is available for purposes of criticism, refutation and falsification why not J for proof, justification and verification? For example, if the methodological rules of Popper (against ad-hoc hypotheses e.g.) or the decalogue of van Eemeren and Grootendorst are acceptable why not justificationist rules such as Newton's four rules of method or Baysean probabilities (which are, after all, strictly deductive also?) I will suggest a third way out preserving both our rational virtue and simultaneously avoiding the unacceptable alternatives in Freis' trilemma. (Which I will label DP).

(iii) Default principles as needed supplement. In my home town there is a Restaurant-Bar that had the striking sign in its window (in large letters) 'ELVIS ATE HERE'. Underneath in small letters were printed the words: 'Prove that he didn't'. This interesting example illustrates some important principles as wide-ranging as a basic principle of Roman law (*affirmandi probandi*), and a key distinction in Fregean logic with enormous implications for epistemology and argumentation theory. We assume the burden of proof is on anyone making an existential assertion not on the one denying it. Fregean Logic with its distinction between universal and existential affirmations helps provide a rationale when supplemented with Popper's asymmetry principle.

Of course in any dialectical discussion the *onus probandi* can shift. Here is where empirical evidence and an interesting incident (in of all places Dicken's *Christmas Carol*) becomes strangely relevant. Scrooge is initially sceptical of Marley's existence. Marley shifts the *onus probandi* by asking why he doubts his senses. Scrooge then offers possible explanations. It is not his explanations per se, but the tacit premise both seem to assume (they are both arguing enthymematically at this point as is common, I would suspect, in novels) that is relevant to our point. The assumption is more-or-less to the effect that we should have as a DP: "Accept the verdict of sense experience unless you have a reason not to".

It is important to stress that we need default principles both at the abstract level of axioms and first principles and at the mundane, concrete level of sense-experience and factual knowledge. This is because if we adopt fallibility as a pervasive feature of our knowledge it applies at all levels— from low level facts to rules of method and logic to axioms and first principles. (In fact I tend to think of Newton's third rule—an alleged inductive principle as a default principle and as highly reasonable one as well without which we would have neither scientific nor ordinary

run-of-the mill everyday reasoning).

Default principles have the advantage of (a) serving as ersatz first principles and thus (b) "grounding" our arguments, (c) being unchallenged but not unchallengeable, thus (d) serving as fallible starting points and thus (e) avoiding or rather solving Freis' trilemma without (f) resorting to scepticism or relativism. This cannot be done on a purely Popperian basis since the logical outcome of it (just as with traditional justificationism) is also scepticism or relativism (as curiously philosophers as different as Stove, Feyerabend, and David Miller have seen).[14](#)

DP fit in with a deductivist, fallibilist perspective. They are not indubitable, incorrigible, infallible, indefeasible axioms, first principles, self-evident truths but fallible starting points that can be challenged and corrected. It is at this point however that the differences between justificationism and critical rationalism seem to be reduced or even trivialized (van Eemeren and Grootendorst however are very ecumenical in their approach and so are critical but not hostile unlike the more polemical Popperians: this is meant as praise for van Eemeren and Grootendorst).

DP explain also why we need neither self-evident, intuitively obvious, indubitable axioms, clear and distinct ideas, necessary categories, or linguistic authoritarianism but merely fallible default principles to get our reasoning off the ground. But if such is available for purposes of criticism, refutation and falsification why not for proof, justification and verification? For example, if the methodological rules of Popper (anti ad-hoc conventionalism etc.) or the decalogue of van Eemeren and Grootendorst are acceptable why not justificationist rules such as Newton's four rules of method or Baysean rules for probability calculations of expected utility?

4. *The omni-competence of Pragma-Dialectics (values especially)*. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst also claim (as noted and quoted above) that there is no reason to limit argumentation theory to strict cognitive claims and not include value judgements and while they provide the example of abortion they don't really show how ethical criticism is possible given the other major problem usually (albeit erroneously)[15](#) attribute to Hume (the is/ought problem), but in this case no rationale is provided. The only way in which they could cash in this claim is by showing the same principles applicable to cognitive argumentation apply to evaluative; for instance that while we cannot go validly from is to ought we can do the reverse and thus ethical criticism is possible.

For these purposes then consider the following examples:

- (m1) We ought to enforce perfect equality,
- (m2) we ought to be pious,
- (m3) Some witches ought to be executed,
- (m4) some criminals deserve to be punished,
- (m5) All humans have both positive and negative rights.









It is surprisingly easy to show that they have existential implications that make them criticizable, by conflicting with propositions such as:


- (p1) Perfect equality is impossible,
- (p2) There is no God,
- (p3) There are no witches,
- (p4) Crime is due to factors beyond the criminals control.


Interestingly the claim that existential implications follow from the set of m-sentences can be justified by reference to Fregean logic. In the case of the m5 it can be broken down into two sub-sentence both with different implications. The former, negative rights entail that (A) "All humans have negative duties to all other humans"; whereas the latter, positive rights logically entails that (E) "There exists at least one person (or perhaps an institution) with a corresponding positive duty". Again Dickens is as relevant as Frege here! Another Christmas Carol incident involving the young Scrooge makes the interesting point that "There is nothing on which the world is harder than poverty and nothing it professes to condemn so much as the pursuit of wealth". What Scrooge is pointing out is the existence of contradictory values or principles held by 'the world'. Reasons of space prevent me from a thorough and adequate discussion of this matter but enough has been said, I think, to indicate the possibilities of ethical criticism within a CR and P-D framework.


In conclusion then I have tried to argue that (1) we need to supplement P-D and CR with DP in order to 'justify' the claim that they have superior solutions to Fries' trilemma than the geometrical and anthropological approaches, and that (2) we need a much more tightly argued account of the nature of Ethical Criticism to justify the claims about the omni-competence of P-D and CR.


Notes

1. We will refer to Critical Rationalism as CR and to Pragma-Dialectics as P-D. 
2. If I didn't think we already suffer from a surfeit of unnecessary philosophical labels I would advocate the term Dialectical Deductivism instead of either Critical Rationalism or Pragma-Dialectics. 
3. In his article in V.C. Chappel, ed., *Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1966). p. 243. 
4. Salmon makes this objection in his logic text (*Logic*, 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973) p. 17. Susanne Gerritsen discusses similar objections in her "A defense of deductivism in reconstructing unexpressed premises", pp. 41-47, in Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (eds.) *Studies in Pragma-Dialectics* (Amsterdam: Sic Sat 1994). 
5. On this I tend to agree with van Eemeren and Grootendorst, but reasons of space prevent an adequate discussion. 
6. Notice that there must be a suppressed premise in this argument. 
7. Elizabeth Stoker has an excellent discussion of the problem here in "Does Popper's conventionalism contradict his critical rationalism? Objections against Popper in German philosophy and some metacritical remarks" in R. Cohen and M. Wartofsky (Eds.) *Methodology, metaphysics and history of science* (D.Reidel Publishing Co., 1984) pp. 263-82. 
8. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, "Rationale for a pragma-dialectic perspective," *Studies in Pragma-Dialectics*, p. 20. 


9. *Ibid.*, p. 20. 


10 *Ibid.*, p. 15. 

11. *Ibid.*, p. 18. 

12. *Ibid.*, p. 19. It will be noted that this differs slightly from my exposition of Freis' trilemma but this difference has no effect on the philosophical profundity or difficulty of the problem nor on its relevance for argumentation theory. 

13. *Idem.* 

14. David Miller (*Critical Rationalism: A Restatement and Defense*, Oxford University Press, 1994) argues that we do not make inferences and that we do not have any reason for what we believe. The latter claim, if taken literally, and there is no reason not to, (I am tempted to say we have every reason to take it literally) entails that we have no reason to accept any of the following (or their negations either) 1. O.J. was guilty. 2. Tobacco causes cancer. 3. Hitler was responsible for World War II and the Holocaust. 

15. Leibnitz, in a fascinating letter to Queen Charlotte of Prussia in 1702, (9 years before Hume was born) clearly outlines both the is/ought and induction problems (see Phillip P. Weiner, ed., *Leibnitz Selections*, New York, Scribners', 1951), p. 361. 

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