

A Dilemma for Bartley's Pancritical Rationalism

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In the second edition of his *Retreat to Commitment*, the late W. W. Bartley (1984) defended a species of critical rationalism which he called "pancritical rationalism." Bartley believed that earlier rationalists sacrificed their "integrity" and encouraged skepticism and fideism because they defended "limited" theories of rationality. Like the skeptics and fideists, these rationalists accepted some beliefs, theories, or commitments which they could not rationally defend or criticize.

According to Bartley, "comprehensive" rationalists attempted to justify each of their theories or beliefs, and the attachment to justificationalism was their undoing. Because they were unable to rationally justify their commitment to rationalism without begging the question or falling prey to an infinite regress, they ultimately had to sacrifice their integrity. "Critical" rationalists (the early Popper, for example) avoided this result because they rejected justificationalism. They held that individuals should hold only those beliefs, theories, or commitments which were subject to critical scrutiny. Unfortunately, these theorists also sacrificed their integrity. They were not thoroughgoing, according to Bartley—they did not subject their commitment to the critical enterprise to criticism and thus limited rationalism.

Bartley's "pancritical" rationalism was designed to allow rationalists to retain their integrity by demanding that *all* of their beliefs, theories and commitments (*including their commitment to the critical methodology*) be open to criticism. In short, Bartley advanced a version of rationalism which was to allow rationalists to be thoroughly rational (or, better, critical) while avoiding skepticism and fideism. Unfortunately, Bartley's rationalist cannot have everything he or she wants—at least not if the following argument is correct.

Bartley held that the feature of pancritical rationalism which set it apart from critical rationalism was the fact that the pancritical rationalists' commitment to criticism was itself held critically—pancritical

rationalists allow that it is possible (though unlikely) that their commitment to criticism could itself be successfully criticized. While critical rationalists are not critical of their commitment to criticism (and thus lack "integrity"), pancritical rationalists are to be comprehensive in their commitment to criticism—*every* belief, theory, and commitment must be held critically:

just as it is possible for a democracy, through democratic processes, to commit suicide (e.g., through a majority vote to abolish democracy in favor of dictatorship), so a pancritical rationalist who was not *committed* to the belief that his position was the correct one could be argued, or argue himself, out of his rationalism. Continued subjection to criticism of his allegiance to rationality is explicitly *part* of this kind of rationalism. (Pp. 119-20)

Clearly, the "committed" pancritical rationalist would *not* be willing to be argued out of his or her commitment to criticism and thus would sacrifice some "integrity"—such a "commitment" to criticism would not be "comprehensive," and Bartley wished to avoid a "retreat" to commitment.

Bartley accepted the idea that pancritical rationalism might be successfully criticized. Indeed, his version of the critical methodology has been the object of continuing critical scrutiny. Writers have maintained that his view is subject to various inconsistencies or paradoxes.¹ Bartley responded to these criticisms by offering counterarguments which argued that the criticisms were mistaken.

For my argument, it does not matter which side is correct in these controversies. What is important is that Bartley was committed to the possibility that a successful criticism of pancritical rationalism might emerge. *If* such a criticism were to arise (if there were no counterargument to some criticism of his version of the critical methodology), pancritical rationalists would have to abandon their commitment to pancritical rationalism (that is, to criticism). Should they fail to do so, they would show that their commitment to criticism was beyond critical scrutiny. This would be for them to make the same mistake which the critical rationalists made—they would "limit" their rationalism and, in effect, allow for an irrational commitment. Bartley wished to avoid this consequence.

To complete the dilemma which I want to draw attention to, one need only note that pancritical rationalists must maintain that *all criticism is tentative*—whenever they accept a criticism of a belief, theory, or commitment, they must recognize that this acceptance itself

must be entertained critically. Nontentative criticisms are those which are held without the possibility that they might have to be relinquished as a result of further criticism—which is to say that they are not held (pan)critically. Bartley's pancritical rationalists may not reject this implication of their critical rationalism without allowing that some beliefs, theories, or commitments are not held critically.

But this means that a "successful" criticism of pancritical rationalism must be a tentative criticism. This could not be the case, however—if the criticism successfully undercuts the (pan)critical methodology, pancritical rationalists who are not (irrationally) *committed* to the critical methodology must abandon it. Such individuals "limit" the scope of criticism and fall prey to the error which Bartley found in critical rationalism. This means that pancritical rationalists who confront a "successful" criticism of pancritical rationalism will have to cease to subscribe to the view that we should subject our beliefs, theories, and commitments to unrelenting criticism. Like the errant democrats in the foregoing citation who vote to abolish their democracy (and thus forswear a commitment to democratic ideals, procedures, and values), such individuals will have abandoned their thoroughgoing commitment to the critical and rational orientation.

In short, since they are no longer rationalists, they will not be committed to critical scrutiny of the arguments which led to the abandonment of rationalism, and thus the "successful" criticism of pancritical rationalism cannot be termed "tentative" (it is not held to be "successful" subject to correction by the further application of the [pan]critical methodology). Such correction cannot occur in this case since the critical methodology has been rejected or abandoned.

Thus Bartley's pancritical rationalists face a dilemma: They must either accept that not all criticism is tentative, claim that pancritical rationalism is only tentatively criticizable, or accept that pancritical rationalism is not criticizable. No matter which alternative they choose, they must allow that pancritical rationalism is not "comprehensive." They cannot allow that there are criticisms which are not tentative without compromising their version of rationalism by "limiting" the scope of criticism. They cannot claim that pancritical rationalism is only tentatively criticizable without showing an irrational "commitment" to criticism—such a claim would require that the "successful" criticism of pancritical rationalism allowed the pancritical rationalist to remain committed to pancritical rationalism and this would amount to a limitation on criticism. Finally, if the pancritical rationalists allow

that their commitment to rationalism is not criticizable, they "limit" criticism and sacrifice "integrity." None of these alternatives appears acceptable, and thus pancritical rationalism (at least in its present guise) should be abandoned.

NOTE

1. Putative criticisms of comprehensively critical rationalism are raised or addressed by Watkins (1969, 1971, 1987), Agassi, Jarvie, and Settle (1971), Kekes (1971), Post (1987a, 1987b, 1987c), Radnitzky (1987), and Bartley (1984, apps. 4 and 5; 1987).

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