

AN EPISTEMIC PARADOX

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Consider the following statement made by R. Aron:

“It can no doubt be maintained, in the spirit of philosophical exactness, that every historical fact is a construct, and that it therefore implies selection and interpretation. But, when applied, these distinctions (facts vs. interpretations) preserve their full implications. It is either true or false that Trotsky played a considerable role in organizing the Red Army; it is either true or false that Zinoviev or Bukharin plotted the assassination of Stalin...

Every totalitarian state exaggerates, to the point of absurdity, the link between fact and interpretation.”

We may paraphrase Aron's point as follows: in actual politics, when the truth-conditional element (truth or falsehood) that differentiates a fact from an interpretation is completely obliterated, then the upshot would be a situation in which force becomes the only way of carrying one's views. The *paradoxical* nature of this conclusion rests on the idea that, once facts collapse into nothing but interpretations and indeed to any one event there correspond more than one equally plausible interpretations, then it needs only one more step for those who wield political power to select and impose a single interpretation. This means that in order to understand the logic of this use of force we must first realize that it is precisely generated by the very idea which it purports to eliminate: namely, the idea that there is no distinction between a fact and its interpretation. But then the ensuing plurality of voices and freedom of opinion is stifled on the grounds that a particular event is given only one interpretation. If facts did not need any understanding, that is, if they were self-evident and transparent (i.e. when their inner constitution was in public space and in full view), force would be unnecessary. Thus a conception of facts which starts with this distinction ends up, in the political context of totalitarian ideology, by annihilating this distinction and thus being at odds with the initial conception.

This paradox which I am claiming lurks behind the logic (i.e. its rationale) of the use of such force at the political level can also be viewed from a different angle. The political manifestation of totalitarian suppression is underwritten by more basic and rather traditional epistemological issues. In particular, what Aron considers as the danger resulting from a refusal to accept the legitimization of rival accounts, etc., can also be seen as the upshot of a dogmatic strategy *par excellence* whereby a two-fold attitude ensures the political use of such force: on the one hand, only the holders of political power are entitled to make claims to knowledge in general; and on the other, such knowledge claims are taken to imply strict incorrigibility.

It is significant to realize that the second of these two steps is the more important one since it is responsible for the generation of the same paradox, this time not on the political level, but on the epistemological one. From the logical point of view such an extremely strong constraint on the notion of knowledge that a dogmatist needs in order to justify the use of force stems from precisely his own opponent, that is the sceptic. It is the latter who both historically and logically has put forward the challenge in this particular form: namely, that genuine knowledge is unattainable because knowledge presupposes incorrigibility; and the latter is always, in principle, impossible to guarantee.

Thus we arrive at the point at which Aron's fear that force would be used to impose only one interpretation acquires its analogue in the conviction of the total elimination of error. The two sides of the paradox are thus generated, respectively, by the logic of *political force* and of *epistemic error*.

To illustrate the latter one could use the following words of Dewey's (who was of course advancing a pragmatic solution to the total factual sceptic's problem):

"That which satisfactorily terminates inquiry is, by definition, knowledge; it is knowledge because it is the appropriate close of the inquiry." ⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ John DEWEY, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, N. York, 1938, p. 8 quoted in Nicholas Rescher, *Scepticism* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1980), p. 113; the following paragraph's sketch of this type of scepticism is taken from chap. III of this book where a comprehensive survey of the history of this issue can be found.

One of the arguments that the factual sceptic puts forward is the so called "No Correction" Argument, usually given as an instance of the following schema:

- I. In order to claim that genuine knowledge has been attained every circumstance of a possibility of error must have been eliminated.
- II. But the possibilities of error can never be eliminated totally and completely in the domain of factual claims.

Ergo: Genuine knowledge cannot be attained in the factual domain. ⁽²⁾

Several kinds of refutations can and have been given to this argument; my concern however is different for I want to show that the rationale of the use of political force is intimately linked to this "No Correction" Argument.

Thus what the paradox amounts to can be seen if we concentrate on premiss I above. The totalitarian imposition of a single interpretation or account of a state of affairs is based on the conflation of facts with interpretations. This implies that the proffered account is *tantamount* to genuine knowledge because every circumstance of possible error has been – so it is claimed – eliminated. But the latter itself further implies that there might have been such a *possibility* of error. This, however, is equivalent to acknowledging the *possibility* of constructing alternative and thus false accounts. But this proves, contrary to the initial assumption or contention, that facts are not to be conflated with interpretations: *reductio ad absurdum*. ⁽³⁾

Hence a dogmatic attitude, in order to justify its political upshot, must borrow premiss I above from the sceptic (who is vying precisely against such a dogmatism). This means that a totalitarian as described by Aron has to make use of a very strong presupposition with respect to the definition of knowledge. Such a condition, however, undermines the prior assumption or independent result that states of affairs exist only *qua* interpretations. The additional step consists in, as I mentioned above, the forceful imposition of this single interpretation. For if my argument is

⁽²⁾ See RESCHER, *ibid.*, chap. VI, for those who currently hold such a view.

⁽³⁾ This may be viewed on a par with self-refuting positions that the reality of time or of evil is an illusion: cf. M. Dummett, "A Defence of McTaggart's Proof of the 'Unreality of Time'", in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, at p. 356.

sound, the proffered conflation of states of affairs with their accounts (descriptions plus evaluations) entails the conclusion that: since a political event's truth conditions (out there in the real world) are nothing over and above what is expressed by their linguistic descriptions (i.e. the referents thereof), then it follows that there can be *only one* interpretation or account.

The dogmatist, of course, being committed to absolute infallibility would require in addition that the evidential guarantee for such total certainty encompasses every reason to think that further evidence will never alter the interpretation given. That is to say, future developments will, in principle, never falsify it (which again leads to more forceful imposition). But it is quite interesting to examine again here the epistemological contention that tacitly underwrites it. Certainty at one level (generated by the stringent condition of premiss I with the attendant paradox I brought out) needs an additional condition of certainty at the second level: viz., that the dogmatic attitude I am here investigating has to satisfy the following thesis: knowing entails knowing that one knows. ⁽⁴⁾

In symbols this thesis is commonly rendered as:

$$(K) \quad Kxp \rightarrow KxKxp$$

[where " Kxp " reads " x knows that p " and " \rightarrow " is "entails"]

Now the problem here is that this thesis (K) is shared by some opponents of a dogmatic definition of truth, that is, by those who espouse certain fallibilist accounts of factual knowledge. But such accounts can avoid the charge of having enmeshed our human knowledge claims in dogmatism in the following way. ⁽⁵⁾ A pragmatic or "effective" fallibilist does not hold that the person who maintains that there is adequate rational warrant for holding that p is known (for certain, etc.) thereby asserts that it is known to be known. The inference:

x has adequate rational warrant for accepting "I know that p "
(or "It is certain that p ")

$\therefore x$ knows that "I know that p " (or "It is certain that p ")

⁽⁴⁾ In *Knowledge and Belief* (Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 1962), chap. 5, J. Hintikka argues that KK is virtually equivalent to K but he is there concerned with the semantics of "to know" and not with the problem of justifiability of knowledge as an epistemic issue I am dealing with here.

⁽⁵⁾ Taken from Rescher, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

is not accepted as valid by someone for whom even an adequately warranted claim to knowledge may in the end have to be altogether withdrawn or partially altered. Such a fallibilistic position admits only that it is a sufficient and rational justification to hold $KxKxp$; it does not follow that $KxKxp$ must be true.

Although this is a sound defence of a fallibilist thesis and although it further avoids the unwanted consequence of infinite regress, ⁽⁶⁾ it is I think unnecessary. For someone who construes knowledge claims on the basis of sufficient conditions of rational assertibility does not need to hold thesis (K) in addition. This is because only one kind of inference is needed in order to eschew dogmatism: namely, that one is aware of the conditions of assertibility for p . Due to such a characterization of knowledge claims, one asserts only that one is justified in believing p , that is, one is hereby presenting one's reasons for believing that p . So within this framework the "logic" of knowledge is *already reflexive* in character and thus thesis (K) is redundant. By construing the claims to knowledge in the manner of sufficient and rational warrants of assertibility we are focusing on the epistemic aspect (the reasons or justifications for our belief that p) and not on the truth of p as such. But such a construal or "grammar" of the concept of knowledge precludes *ab initio* any question arising with respect to the dogmatism engendered by an absolutist reading of thesis (K). And therefore a fallibilistic position of this sort does not need to justify itself against such a possibility inherent in (K).

In contrast to this a position which cannot tolerate such a fallibilist framework is perforce in need of thesis (K). My criticism above with regard to one version of fallibilist knowledge (e.g., Rescher's) was meant to show that, if my argumentation is sound, the reflexivity trait that I pointed to above is by definition excluded from a non-fallibilist characterization of knowledge claims. For if one holds that premiss I of "No Correction" Argument as given above is required in order to attain knowledge, then one must also hold thesis (K). The latter is an additional requirement which provides the closure of knowledge claims under certainty. ⁽⁷⁾ A totalitarian situation demands a justification for the imposed certainty of the first level. And such a justification must be obtained from without

⁽⁶⁾ See *ibid.*, p. 117, n. 43.

⁽⁷⁾ For closure in general see R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981), chap. 3, II.

because, in contraposition to fallibilism as previously argued, in the totalitarian case we have a different "logic" of the concept "to know". Because the ground-level knowledge is supposed to be (i.e. is imposed as) incorrigible it might be argued that it necessarily follows from this that:

Strengthened Thesis (K') $Kxp \rightarrow \Box KxKxp$

from which follows:

$$\Diamond \neg KxKxp \rightarrow \neg Kxp$$

But the latter is an unacceptable conclusion for an incorrigibilist position such as the one we are exploring. For it subverts its very rationale.

Therefore to avoid this we need instead the form:-

$$\Box (Kxp \rightarrow KxKxp)$$

This is in fact what a non-fallibilistic position requires. It amounts to saying that the epistemological counterpart of a totalitarian state of affairs generates certainty at the next to the ground-level. In this case infinite regress is also avoided albeit at the political level of forceful imposition.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that in the real world of government only such a use of force guarantees success. My discussion of the epistemological side of this issue shows, I believe, that the requirement of thesis (K) is sufficient in itself in providing the legitimating basis for the belief in a single interpretation of an event. In fact I think that it is precisely when thesis (K) is neglected that Aron's fear is justified with respect to the rise of force. When, unlike a fallibilistic framework as above, one gives an absolute characterization of the conditions of knowledge one thereby claims, when asserting that *p*, that all possible errors have been eliminated: this is premiss I above.

But in order to avoid the sceptic's conclusion which would follow had premiss II been accepted as well, our non-fallibilist must rescue his position (conflation of facts with interpretations) by denying premiss II. And this is the move which brings us to the additional requirement conveyed by thesis (K).

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