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PLAYING DEVIL'S ADVOCATE  
METHODOLOGICAL RELATIVISM  
AND SCIENTIFIC CREATIONISM

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ABSTRACT. It is argued that *if* our most basic methodological, axiological and metaphysical scientific presuppositions are not justified, this creates the possibility of a relativism of these very basic presuppositions or foundations.

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KEYWORD. Justification, induction, inferential strategy, belief, relativism, dogmatism, rationality, scientific outlook, circularity

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FIRST MOVEMENT

The old problem of the justification of induction and deduction continues being a topic of interest and debate, as illustrated by the recent efforts of D. Papineau to justify induction and those of P. Boghossian, C. Wright and N. Tennant to do so for *modus ponens*. Further, Susan Haack in her classic paper "*The Justification of Deduction*" argued that both induction and deduction either lack an *objective*<sup>1</sup> justification or don't need any. To claim, however, that induction and deduction don't need an objective justification appears as an ad hoc stipulation to evade the difficulty, or impossibility, of objectively justifying these most basic inferential strategies. Even more, to assert that our most basic methodological rules don't need a justification contradicts our search for rational, or justified, beliefs and methods. Therefore, we require an objective justification for both induction and deduction, *a justification that doesn't seem to be available without begging the question, stipulation or mysterious intellectual intuitions*, as argued by S. Haack in her paper, and more recently by A. Cíntora.

Haack's old pessimist conclusion about the justificability of deduction and induction can be generalized, and so it has been argued (for example, by K. Popper in his *Open Society*) that the rational attitude itself requires a minimum of irrationalism or faith. Popper claimed that reason is not self-inclusive or comprehensive; he argued that reason requires—if it is to

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be consistent—an irrational faith in reason, because it cannot justify itself without vicious circularity. On the other hand, the value of our fundamental epistemic ends don't seem to be justifiable without falling into an infinite regression of ulterior meta-ends and, again, to stop this regression we ultimately require circularity or dogmatism concerning the desirability of some very basic meta-ends, such as the survival of our species or the biosphere<sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, scientists also make unjustified *metaphysical* assumptions, such as the universe being (more or less) an understandable or comprehensible cosmos. This is an assumption that scientists must make if science is to proceed at all and it is something that scientists believe as an article of faith, because it is something they don't *know*<sup>3</sup>.

Being so, all these basic presuppositions (methodological, axiological, metaphysical) if not genuinely justified, will infect much of our conceptual scheme with their lack of foundation.

Skeptical doubts—about ever having genuine ultimate justifications—are compatible with the existence of objective facts on the matter, for example, about which methodological standards are correct. Indeed, our present methodological rules could well be the objectively correct ones; it is just that these objectively correct methodological standards don't seem to be justifiable or knowable.

Now, an absence of objective justifications for our ultimate presuppositions would open the gates to the logical possibility of a relativism where all alternative conceptual schemes sustain incompatible presuppositions (it would also open up as a psychological possibility, as exemplified by the various types of 'scientific' creationism now in vogue amongst some Christian fundamentalists), all of them equally unjustified or unjustifiable, and all equally irrational or a-rational.

An alternative methodological framework could, for example, include within its methodological injunctions some of our methodological rules, say, the following idiosyncratic three:

*M: Amongst competing theories prefer theories which are coherent or consistent with a literal reading of the Genesis.*

*P: Welcome ad hoc hypotheses whenever the empirical evidence endangers one of your unjustified central metaphysical presuppositions or dogmas<sup>4</sup>, such as the belief that the Genesis is literally true.*

*Q: Exclude Occam's Razor from amongst your methodological prescriptions whenever M or P requires this.*

## SECOND MOVEMENT

Then, *if*, say, the believer in the theory of evolution by natural selection were to criticize the 'scientific' creationist (or its more recent morph, the 'intelligent design' theorist <sup>5</sup>) as non-rational, the intelligent scientific creationist could retort with a *tu quoque* and respond as follows:

"You Darwinist and I 'scientific' creationist are both in the same boat; the two of us have non-justified (possibly because they are unjustifiable) fundamental methodological commitments, epistemic aims, and metaphysical beliefs. We just differ in some of our dogmatic methodological presuppositions (this scientific creationist could for instance embrace the previous rules M, P and Q); we differ in some of our dogmatic preferences or tastes. Therefore you, Darwinist, don't have any right to criticize me as non-rational or irrational, because your outlook also requires some non-rational or non-justified ultimate presuppositions."

And if it were to be argued that our conceptual scheme is clearly superior because of its reliability, its predictive and explanatory power, its simplicity, elegance, fertility, and so forth, this creationist could answer that while he might consider these epistemic aims as valuable, he doesn't grant them the priority we do, because for him the utmost epistemic value will be coherence with the holy scripture, since the scripture, he would claim, is a source of knowledge by revelation. And any inconsistency between this creationist's world outlook and scientific evidence can always be explained away with a generous amount of *ad hoc* hypotheses, even if Occam's Razor has to be put aside.

Thus, if we don't justify as the objectively correct ones our methodological standards, our epistemic aims—and the hierarchy we accept amongst our aims—then the creationist can always argue via *tu quoque* that his alternative epistemic aims, value hierarchy and methodological standards are just another unjustified alternative. Thus, the objectively correct standards (in case they can be shown to exist) would be unknown, if not unknowable.

If correct, this argument provides a possible defense to the relativism of competing intellectual schemes, a defense for an epistemic and axiological tribalism, and provides an argument for cynicism about science. And if there were to arise any conflict between civilizations, this situation would promote a possible a-rational or irrational collision (instead of a rational debate) between civilizations or between civilization and various forms of de-civilization or barbarism.

If this is so, the central difference between our scientific world view and other irrational or a-rational views might be, following Popper, that our scientific outlook *should* aim to be minimally dogmatic or irrational <sup>6</sup>, while

alternative non-rational world outlooks can choose to be exuberantly irrational or dogmatic.

Let me emphasize that I believe, as most of us do, that our contemporary scientific world outlook is the best one available at the present time, and that it is the best candidate to be true—or the most empirically adequate one—but I also believe that *if* it is the case that many other world views share with ours the property of having dogmatic methodological and axiological foundations, then these other outlooks can claim to be rational (or non-rational) legitimate alternatives to science, even if to us these other outlooks may appear as absurd alternatives.

Popperians could argue, though, that even if these unpalatable to us world outlooks can be legitimate alternatives to science, they are not as rational (or rather, they are not as minimally non rational) as science is. This is because rationality admits degrees and because science aspires to be minimally non-rational, therefore science is hopefully less dogmatic, less non-rational, than other cognitive outlooks.

#### THIRD MOVEMENT

Now, *if* a Peircean, were to advise:

“Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts (*mutatis mutandis*, let us not pretend to doubt induction, deduction and our most basic epistemic aims, given that we have a natural psychological predisposition to believe them). And given that we believe in them to search for their justification is an idle task, specially since this justification seems to be unavailable.”

I would retort that this Peircean conflates two different types of doubts: logical and psychological ones. Our philosophical doubts—about the objective justifiability of our most basic methodological and axiological standards—result from logical arguments (these arguments inhabit Popper’s World Three) and these arguments are independent of our psychological state of doubt, a psychological state that inhabits Popper’s World Two.

Moreover, since what we can “doubt in our hearts” depends on subjective variables such as temperament, this Peircean’s prescription is ambiguous, since his prescription would mean one thing to someone with an skeptical inclination and something else to somebody with a credulous disposition, and given that there is a wide spectrum of degrees of skepticism and credulity there would also be a wide spectrum of doubts which could be philosophically legitimate according to the Peircean injunction.

Besides, what is the justification for the Peircean injunction? If this prescription were not justified, why, if rational, should we follow it?

## CONCLUSION

If we are to avoid epistemic tribalism or relativism we should take seriously the search for a justification of our ultimate methodological and axiological presuppositions, but while these objective justifications are provided (if ever) we may abide by the following slogan, inspired by J. Worrall: *Yes, to an intellectually honest methodological and axiological dogmatism, and no to pretended virtuous circularity or to the stipulation that skeptical doubts are idle doubts*<sup>7</sup>.

## NOTES

- 1 An objective justification is one that should be acceptable to any rational community or capable rational agent; one which is correct in Popper's World Three and not only considered so in Popper's World Two.
- 2 Brown claims that a regress of justifications can often be avoided, because we are really interested in justifying change of belief rather than belief: "When we try to explain beliefs in terms of their rational merits, it is actually change of belief that we are trying to explain () When we wonder why people believed *T*, we are often asking the more complicated question, 'Why did they abandon *T'* and adopt *T* in its place?' *This simple point obviates the regress problem*" (Brown, p. 159; emphasis added).
- However, we are dealing here with ultimate methodological and axiological presuppositions and if a historical relativism *a la* Kuhn is to be avoided these most basic assumptions must stay fixed, that is, if these foundations can change, then historical relativism is unavoidable (cf., Worrall and also chaps. V-VI of Cíntora).
- 3 N. Maxwell argues this point.
- 4 A dogma will be understood as a presupposition that is accepted as correct or true without any genuine justification.
- 5 Intelligent design is the view that an unseen force—say, God or a demiurge—caused the development of living beings (though one may ask: if our bodies were intelligently designed, how to explain, for example, the apparently useless human appendix.)  
Intelligent design is a matter of ongoing concern. For instance, Pope Benedict XVI claimed that the universe was made as an "intelligent project" and criticized those who say its creation was without direction (*The New York Times*, November 11, 2005). President Bush also recently remarked that school children should be taught about intelligent design. (*The Washington Post*, August 3, 2005, p. A01.)

- 6 Popper provides in his *Open Society* a problematic moral argument for this injunction; for a criticism of this moral argument consult Cíntora, chapter 2. On the other hand, it is not clear how it could be decided which conceptual scheme, amongst a collection of competing ones, would be minimally dogmatic. For example, should the least non-rational scheme be that with the fewer atomic, logically independent and logically 'weaker' dogmas? Thus, the more general or universal dogmas would be the 'stronger' ones?
- 7 Another plausible attitude (given the lack of objective justifications for our ultimate presuppositions) could be a Pyrrhonian one: that is, withheld assent to, suspend judgment of, propositions concerning our biological past.

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