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Commentary on E. Popa's "Argumentation, Decision, and Rationality"

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1. Introduction

In this paper Popa takes up a challenge from Trudy Govier's 1992 paper "What is a good argument?". This challenge, as Govier put it, is to "reexamine the quest itself" for normative standards of argumentative cogency. Popa's intriguing answer to this challenge is to attempt to mark out space for what he calls a "pancritical" normativity where argumentative goodness is concerned. This novel proposal leads to some interesting suggestions for the concept of 'fallacy', which he also spells out. My primary aim in these comments will be to explore what I take to be the salient points in this paper, and to draw connections within argumentation that demonstrate the plausibility of Popa's thesis.

Before proceeding to my analysis, I should like to begin with a quote from Rupert Crawshay-Williams:

Assuming that we wish to clear up our controversies, we need to be sure that agreed criteria have been established and that these criteria are adequate to their job. This means that we must query the existence of adequate and agreed criteria even in fields where it is usually taken quite for granted. Sometimes this will involve winking out assumptions which are ordinarily hidden behind implicit agreements and—to that end—questioning the grounds upon which statements are taken to be "obvious" by nearly everybody. But I think that such apparently captious enquiries will usually turn out to be justified; the obvious notoriously obscures the true. (Crawshay-Williams 1957, p. 7)

I choose this quote from the early part of Crawshay-Williams 1957 classic *Methods and Criteria of Reasoning* for two reasons. The first and most obvious reason is because, as the section just quoted shows, it demonstrates quite clearly that Popa's suggestions in this paper are far less radical than they may seem at first blush. There is a long-standing tradition within the tradition of argumentation theory of attempting to stand apart from one's own preferred methodology, however briefly, for the purpose of ascertaining whether or not that methodology misses anything of importance, or involves implicit assumptions that may be questionable or problematic. This tradition notwithstanding there are always some who are allergic to such reflective investigation of their methods. My hope is that by reasserting the historical importance of what I might call the "reflectively critical" task in argumentation theory and by connecting Popa's efforts with that tradition, that those who are allergic might be persuaded to wait a moment or two before reaching for the tissues. The second reason I choose to open with this particular quote is because it comes from a section in the work where Crawshay-Williams is

grappling with very much the same demons as is Popa in his paper—and to somewhat similar results. But before proceeding to those remarks it will perhaps be worthwhile to summarize, very briefly, what I take to be the salient points of Popa's account of pancritical normativity.

2. Against idealist normativity

As I read Popa's account there are two parts to the case for noncritical normativity. The first part is negative. This is Popa's argument that claims of “idealist normativity” (which he means to capture any particular theory of ideal argumentative goodness) must ultimately fail. This argument proceeds in two stages. The first of these involves Popa's principal example, the theory of pragma-dialectics. Claims made for the normativity of the rules of pragma-dialectics, Popa tells us, are afflicted by a vicious circularity. This is because those claims are based on a concept of “problem validity” that itself can only be accounted for in terms of the very rules whose normativity it is supposed to justify (p. 7).

The second part of the negative case against idealist normativity is more general. In this part of the case Popa raises the same sort of problem for idealist normativity that philosophers have raised for other, similar problems about the application of criteria to particular cases since Plato. “What grounds does the analyst have for making sure that the success conditions for application of a rule to a specific case have been met?”, he asks. The answer, of course, is that the analyst is pushed into an all-too familiar dilemma of having either to face an infinite regress of justificatory demands or of having to stipulate an arbitrary (and ultimately circular, or perhaps at least question-begging) stopping place (p. 8). Popa ends this part of his negative case by arguing that it applies equally well to informal logic-style textbook treatments of fallacy identification as it does to pragma-dialectics (p. 9). Popa's aim here is not partisan. Rather it is, as Crawshaw-Williams might have put it, to say something of broader importance about “the methodology of methodology” in argumentation theory.

I find Popa's negative arguments intriguing and worthy of serious consideration by partisans and nonpartisans alike but his positive case is, I think, his most novel contribution in this paper. I also take it to be the main point, as the primary import of the negative case against idealist normativity (in my view at least) is to make room for the pancritical account. After very briefly summarizing this account I should like to make it the focus the remainder of my remarks.

3. Pancritical normativity

Popa's positive account of pancritical normativity in this paper has three main components. I will label these the Equality Principle, the Intra-traditional Principle, and the Particularist Principle, and say a few words about each.

3.1. The Equality Principle

- (i) The critic regards all ideals of 'good' argumentative discourse as traditions of equal value. None is a *summum bonum* and no scholar has privileged access to an Archimedean point from which other traditions can be judged. (p. 10)

There are a number of possible interpretations of what this principle might entail. After all, traditions may be considered equally worthless and still be considered as being of equal value.

This does not seem to be what Popa intends, however. He tells us that “These traditions are formed naturally in contexts where individuals need to coordinate their argumentative behavior (e.g. courts of law)” (p. 10). This is somewhat reminiscent of the characterization of the field-dependence of backings for warrants given in (Toulmin 2003, p. 96), but writ large for whole traditions of argument analysis and evaluation. If this Toulminian reading of what I've called the Equality Principle is correct this flexibility may be a mark in favor of the pancritical approach, as it would have suggestive results for disagreements like those concerning the analysis and evaluation of multimodal argumentation. Perhaps more to the point the Equality Principle relieves the analyst of the burden of having to search for the “one true theory” to unite them all. Instead, she may borrow bits of one or the other, or synthesize approaches, or strike out on her own as the case in front of her requires.

There is a price to pay for this freedom, and Popa acknowledges this, but it is hard to imagine the pancritical project being possible without it. Because what appears obvious to an analyst often is heavily conditioned by her preferred theory of argumentation, the methodological liberty provided by the Equality Principle is needed to keep the pancritical analyst's work from failing in those cases where, as Crawshaw-Williams puts it, that the “obvious notoriously obscures the true”.

3.2. The Intra-traditional Principle

- (ii) There are two ways in which one can be said to 'criticize': either by making a comparison between the tradition under investigation and one's own tradition or by finding anomalies in one and the same tradition. The pancritical agenda seeks to develop the second. (p. 10)

This is an important principle for understanding exactly what the aim of the proposal on offer is. For one natural way of reading the Equality Principle would be to read it as recommending an approach that would treat traditions as analogous to contributory forms of generalism about moral principles. (see, e.g. Dancy 2004, pp. 17-25) On such an understanding one might treat traditions as capable of providing non-decisive but still important reasons in favor (or against) the evaluation of any particular occurrence of argumentation as bad, good, fallacious, etc. The Intra-traditional Principle makes clear that this is not what is intended. As I understand it, what is intended here is not that argumentation theorists ought to give up their theoretical allegiances and adopt some sort of pluralism, but that argumentation theorists ought to make room *within their traditions* for pancritical analysts to test the limits of the explanatory and predictive powers of *those traditions themselves*. The Equality Principle gives the pancritical analyst license to go outside the boundaries of her tradition in choosing concepts, ideas and frameworks for her analyses. The Intra-traditional Principle shows her where to use them, and *in whose service*. Here again, no partisanship is implied. One could just as easily be a pancritical analyst within informal logic as within pragma-dialectics.

3.3. The Particularist Principle

- (iii) There is neither a pre-defined definition of anomaly, nor any pre-defined method for finding anomalies or checking 'objectively' whether some discovery constitutes an anomaly. One must judge on a case-by-case basis. (p. 11)

From this principle and the one preceding it, it becomes clear that pancritical critic is not a contributory generalist about argumentation, borrowing from whatever traditions seem relevant at the time to deal with ground-level argumentative phenomena. On the contrary, the pancritical critic is engaged in a higher-order metatheoretical task of probing the limits of specific traditions in argumentation theory by attempting to discover anomalies for their rules, frameworks, predictions, and practical recommendations. In order to accomplish this task she must step outside of those frameworks and maintain a clinical distance from them while at the same time employing them rigorously in working out what they say about particular cases in the context in which they occur. The focus must be on the case at hand if any of this is to happen. This is why what I have called the Particularist Principle is necessary for Popa's account.

4. The development of multimodal argumentation as a case of pancritical criticism

Assuming that I have understood the pancritical agenda suggested by Popa correctly, a number of points emerge that are suggestive of what its strengths and weaknesses might be. Rather than simply listing them, I should like to elucidate them by means of a case where I think something rather like a pancritical approach has already yielded results. This is the case of multimodal argumentation.

“In looking for anomalies”, Popa tells us,

The pancritical scholar highlights problems that can be employed as a point of departure for improving the tradition in question, for any anomaly suggests the possibility of an alternative account. Those interested in maintaining that tradition can follow this suggestion and 'process' the anomaly. (p. 11)

One way of looking at the recent history of thinking about multimodal argumentation is to look at it precisely as suggested here. Circa the mid-to-late nineteen nineties, arguments with non-verbal components were anomalous to the degree that there was substantial skepticism that they were arguments at all and there remains, to this day, at least some resistance to the idea. As Kjeldsen (2015), Godden (2015), and others tell us, however, the last twenty years have seen this anomaly increasingly become “processed” by almost every camp within argumentation theory. Whereas the discussion began with skepticism, it is fair to say now that the consensus is overwhelmingly on the side of acceptance where multimodal arguments are concerned. The tale of that “processing” seems one that comports with Popa's idea of pancritical analysis very well.

We might begin that tale with the Equality Principle. Kjeldsen's excellent study details the way in which various theorists working on multimodal arguments have, from the very beginning, needed to go outside the boundaries of their own traditions—indeed sometimes outside their own academic disciplines entirely—in order to gather conceptual and analytical resources to make sense of multimodal arguments. Though they did not think of themselves as engaged in pancritical analysis, the actions of those early researchers in branching out as they did fits very well with the Equality Principle. Similarly, that we may now talk sensibly about approaches to multimodal argumentation that are primarily “pragma-dialectical” or primarily “rhetorical”, say, suggests that the conceptual resources those early researchers gathered from afar was brought back to their own traditions and transformed so that multimodal arguments could be incorporated *into those traditions*. This suggests the work done by early theorists of

multimodal argumentation theorists would also be consistent with the Intra-traditional Principle. Finally, anyone familiar with the corpus on multimodal arguments would almost certainly agree that the work has gone forward largely owing to persuasive treatments first of particular cases, then of classes of similar cases (e.g. advertising or political propaganda). Something like the particularism inherent in Popa's pancritical approach would therefore seem to have been a part of the development of theorizing about multimodal arguments too.

Obviously none of theorists working on multimodal argumentation since 1996 could have thought of themselves as explicitly following something like Popa's "pancritical agenda". That said, the fit between the way progress has been made in theorizing about multimodal arguments and the pancritical agenda as described in Popa's paper seems fairly evident. There is another dimension of fit too. This comes in Popa's account of the disadvantages faced by the pancritical critic, who

...is in a very disadvantageous position. The success of her endeavors is determined by those who participate in a certain tradition. Namely, she must attempt to convince those involved in a certain tradition to not only accept a situation as anomalous, but to accept it as an anomaly worth corroborating (to accept it as a symbol of *crisis*, to use Kuhn's terminology). (p. 11)

One need only recall the title of Groarke's 2003 paper "Why do argumentation theorists find it so difficult to recognize visual arguments?" to see that theorists of multimodal argumentation have faced the sorts of challenges that face Popa's pancritical critic.

5. Conclusion

If the foregoing observations are apt then they suggests that Popa's notion of pancritical criticism has a great deal of promise. Not only can it be brought to bear as a means of exploring the limits of particular traditions within argumentation theory, but it potentially can be deployed in explanations of historical shifts in position within argumentation theory writ large too. If this promise bears out, it constitutes a very important strength in Popa's proposal. This is not to say that the theory will not need some work too. To take just one example, the grounding of the normativity claimed for pancritical analysis in Popa's paper needs some extended explication. While Popa is surely right in pointing out that normativity cannot be reduced to a matter of rule-following within a tradition upon pain of vicious circularity, this does leave open the question of how *better* to think of the source of the normativity inherent in argument evaluation and criticism, *generally*. This is perhaps too tall a task to expect from a single paper, however. For present purposes, then, we shall be content to observe that Popa's suggestion in this paper certainly merits further exploration.

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