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Paranoia and Reinforced Dogmatism Beyond Critical Rationality

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Deviant forms of human thought may provide insight into epistemic standards, such as rationality. A comparative analysis of paranoia and reinforced dogmatism suggests that reinforced dogmatism, such as pseudo-science a-la-Popper, demonstrates a primary epistemic lack of critical rationality, that is, of testability, whereas paranoia demonstrates a lack of range of alternative statements leading secondarily to a lack of testability. This reflects the importance to both epistemology and psychiatry of epistemic standards in addition to testability, such as relevance to problems, and emphasizes the distinction of the context of introduction from the contexts of discovery and of justification.

Keywords: context of introduction; paranoia; reinforced dogmatism; relevance; testability

Epistemic standards, such as those of rationality, are notoriously controversial (Goldman 1986, 27). Yet the attempt to fulfill some such standards seems to play a central role in human thought, most prominently in paradigm endeavors such as modern science. The difficulty of establishing these standards, combined with their importance, suggests that it might be useful to get closer to characterizing some of them to explore seemingly deviant forms of human thought that most clearly do not fulfill such standards. In particular, a comparison between different deviant forms of human thought may prove helpful for epistemology (here taken in the sense of a theory of continuous growth of empirical knowledge, as final—conclusive—empirical knowledge may not be possible).

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One such infamous form of human thought is that of dogmatism, of which a special and apparently extreme case is reinforced dogmatism. Reinforced dogmatism was characterized by Karl Popper (and termed by him pseudo-science in the context of the philosophy of science) as a system of thought that is protected from refutation at the price of reducing its empirical content, possibly to null; this, illustrated according to Popper by systems of thought such as that of Hegel, as well as early twentieth century psychoanalysis and Marxism, impedes the growth of knowledge à la Popper (1959, 1974). Thus, the characterization of reinforced dogmatism was instrumental in establishing—by negation—Popper's famous (critical) rationality standard of the falsifiability/refutability, or testability, of science.

Another deviant form of human thought, which is also extreme, is that of paranoia. The term *paranoia* refers, at least within modern mainstream psychiatry, to clinical disorders in which the predominant symptoms are delusions; delusions are usually defined as false fixed beliefs that are held with certainty and are incompatible with the surrounding culture (American Psychiatric Association 1994, 765). Surprisingly, although paranoia has been studied both from psychiatric and from philosophical perspectives (Fried and Agassi 1976), this has not been used systematically to explore epistemic standards. The objective of this article is to attempt such an exploration by means of comparing paranoia to reinforced dogmatism, as both seem at first sight to have similar epistemic features, although at the same time they are commonly felt to be distinct. The main starting point will be Fried and Agassi's (1976) application of a critical rationalist theory of knowledge to paranoia.

THE PARADOXES OF PARANOIA

One of the most extensive philosophically informed discussions of paranoia is that of Fried and Agassi (1976). They refer to four seeming paradoxes of (pure) paranoia. First, the paranoid system of thought is logically consistent, sometimes remarkably so. Second, it is supported by accurate perception. Third, it is grounded in particular basic assumptions that do not seem inferior to others and may even be similar to assumptions dominant in other cultures. And fourth, these basic assumptions are integrative for the paranoid system of thought, which thus becomes especially coherent, sometimes remarkably so.

All this seems paradoxical because paranoia is considered a clear-cut case of psychosis, that is, madness, whereby rational or critical reality testing is lacking (Rudnick 1997), yet the four paradoxes demonstrate that the central faculties involved are not flawed and may even be superior. Now, although there is evidence today to show that pure paranoia may be quite rare, as many cases of supposedly pure paranoia manifest flawed logic, distorted perception, unreasonable assumptions and/or disintegration (Garety and Hemsley 1994), this does not reflect on the epistemological impact of the paradoxes of paranoia, which may be theoretically important even if they are only rare or merely hypothetical (as Fried and Agassi 1976 readily concede).

What then is the epistemological impact of the paradoxes of paranoia? It seems that the paradoxes of pure paranoia raise most clearly a problem of demarcation, that between madness and sanity, which is important to address if normal thought and knowledge are to be understood; indeed, Bertrand Russell (1967, 673) construed this demarcation as highly significant for epistemology. Admittedly, such a demarcation has been attempted in the past without much success, as in the use of the truth-value of belief as a criterion (Jaspers 1963, 106). This fails because there are cases of paranoia in which the belief is both plausible and evidently true (Spitzer 1990), or more generally because it falsely assumes that truth can be conclusively known and distinguished from error. Also, paranoia may lie on a continuum with normal thought and knowledge (Garety and Hemsley 1994). Still, its demarcation does not seem completely arbitrary or hopeless and, as such, may be worthy of consideration. This is reminiscent of Popper's (1959, 1974) raising of the problem of demarcation of science by addressing pseudo-science, that is, reinforced dogmatism. Now, paranoia and reinforced dogmatism are similar in that both manifest a fixed system of thought, that is, one that is not refutable. What then may be the epistemic difference(s) between them, if any?

PARANOIA AND REINFORCED DOGMATISM

To compare paranoia and reinforced dogmatism, a more detailed characterization of reinforced dogmatism is first in order. Early on, Popper posited at least two variants of reinforced dogmatism as pseudo-science, one illustrated by Marxism and the other by early

psychoanalytic theories such as those of Freud and Adler—all of which were much debated in the 1930s, when Popper first published his seminal work on the demarcation of science, translated more than two decades later into English (Popper 1959). Marxism illustrates a system of thought that is protected from refutation by amending ad hoc auxiliary assumptions when refuted. Early psychoanalytic theories illustrate systems of thought that are protected from refutation by predicting their refutations (e.g., by means of ad hominem arguments that state that the suggestion of a refutation is unconsciously motivated and hence psychoanalytically explained), thus being corroborated when refuted. The Marxist variant is protected from refutation after the fact (of refutation), whereas the psychoanalytic variant is protected from refutation beforehand. Later, when Popper generalized from pseudo-science and coined the term *reinforced dogmatism*, he posited a third variant illustrated by Hegel's system of thought, where contradictions are incorporated so that the theory in question can be interpreted protectively upon refutation—because any statement follows from a contradiction (Popper 1974, 327). And there may be other variants of reinforced dogmatism, such as systems of thought incorporating ambiguous enough theoretical parts that can be interpreted protectively upon refutation.

If reinforced dogmatism is itself not of one kind, does it have any common denominator that can be compared to paranoia? I think so. Popper astutely argued that science is distinguished not by its logic but rather by its method, which is not reducible to logic but rather is superimposed on it like the rules of the game of chess are. Popper claimed that the ground rule of science that has proved most successful is the strategy of increasing testability so as to abstain from protecting theories from refutation as much as possible, thus increasing empirical content to the utmost. Every variant of reinforced dogmatism seems to break this ground rule. Admittedly, so does a lot of so-called normal reasoning, even in science, although to a lesser extent (Kuhn 1970; Garety and Hemsley 1994). This might make the ground rule a guideline under certain circumstances, such as when a research program degenerates (Lakatos 1978), rather than an absolute dictum, as some dogmatism may be fruitful in giving theories more than one opportunity. Each variant reduces testability in a different way, but the outcome—extreme protection from refutation—seems to be the fundamental flaw in reinforced dogmatism of whatever kind. Does paranoia differ on this account, considering that it too is a fixed system of thought?

Fried and Agassi (1976) argued that paranoia is distinct in that the person afflicted with it does not, and perhaps cannot (in most circumstances), consider alternatives to his or her view:

We claim, as a part of our theory of the diagnosis of paranoia, that it contains a fixation, i.e. an unexpected element of (seeming) certainty which maturity ought to iron out. And, it may be noted, quite simply, fixation excludes doubt—not so much as a logical license but as a real ability to have a set alternative to the one on which there is a fixation, or even to conceive of a possibility of the existence of such an alternative. (P. 71)

I concur. There is as yet no pertinent empirical study of paranoia as such, that is, of delusional disorder, but clinical studies demonstrate that in another psychotic disorder, schizophrenia, there is lack of ability to conceive of contrasting beliefs (Corcoran, Mercer, and Frith 1995). Now, the lack of consideration of alternatives leads to reduced or lack of testing and testability, as the monopolizing theory is deemed uncontested and even uncontestable and hence is untested and even untestable within that framework. Thus, the lack of testability in paranoia may be secondary to the lack of consideration of alternatives, whereas that in reinforced dogmatism may be primary (or secondary to other causes).

Lack of consideration of alternatives leads to difficulty in understanding that one's language (in the sense of semantics) and worldview may not be shared by everybody else, as one is then oblivious to differing points of view that may be held by others. Fried and Agassi (1976) elaborated on this perceived uncontestability of paranoia:

The paranoic lives in a private world, and speaks in a private language. He treats his own idiosyncratic integrative principle the way most people treat the publicly accepted—institutionalized—one, and is almost totally oblivious of or summarily dismisses the publicly accepted one, at least on points of conflict. A scientist who is identical with a paranoic on all points except this, even one who understandably suffers emotionally from the isolation which this condition incurs—such a scientist will not be classed as paranoic as long as he keeps his sense of proportion on it, namely as long as he remains aware of the privacy of his private views and of the conflict they have with the public views which he is aware of in the normal way. (Pp. 72-73)

Fried and Agassi did not explore the implications of this characterization of paranoia for epistemology but rather for general

psychopathology (Fried and Agassi 1976, 99). This is reasonable, as their main objective in this book was to examine psychiatry rather than philosophy. To the best of my knowledge, neither they nor anyone else has systematically attempted such an epistemological exploration. Assuming that this distinction between paranoia and reinforced dogmatism as understood here is sound, what may be its epistemological underpinnings? That is, what may be the epistemological import, if any, of the distinction between lack of testability due to the lack of consideration of alternatives in paranoia and lack of testability due to reinforced dogmatism?

PARANOIA AND THE CONTEXT OF INTRODUCTION

To prepare the ground for an account of an epistemological distinction between paranoia and reinforced dogmatism, a preliminary note is first in order concerning the standard distinction between the context of justification (where both paranoia and reinforced dogmatism seem similarly flawed) and the context of discovery. These terms of the distinction were first coined by the logical positivist Reichenbach (1938), but the distinction itself was and still is held to be sound also by philosophers of other persuasions. This is so even for philosophers such as Popper who reject the notion of (empirical) justification yet distinguish between the origins of knowledge, corresponding to the context of discovery, and the validity of knowledge, corresponding to the context of justification or testing (Popper 1959, 31; Popper 1974, 24-25). Fundamentally, this distinction between the two contexts is that between the discovery of empirical statements, which is held to be a matter for psychological and sociological investigation, and the justification—or more broadly, the testing—of empirical statements, which is held to be a matter for logical inquiry. This distinction has fallen under attack, mainly for the two contexts not being mutually exclusive. Interestingly, both sociological/historical approaches, such as that of Kuhn (1970), and logical approaches, such as that of Quine (1961), have argued that psychology (sociology, history, etc.) and logic are intertwined, and hence also discovery and justification.

For my purposes, a much more neglected difficulty with this distinction is pertinent, that of the two contexts not being mutually exhaustive. Kekes (1980) has suggested that aside from there being a context of discovery and a context of justification, there is also a context of introduction, in which statements are selected as candidates

for empirical testing before entering the context of justification. Such selection is prior to empirical testing (and eventual refutation) and may address issues other than testability (although perhaps also that, in particular excess testability when comparing competing statements [Lakatos 1978, 170-73]). Lakatos (1978) referred to this context, albeit only briefly, and characterized it as dealing with "testworthiness" (pp. 170-73). This is an epistemological matter, as it involves standards conducive to the growth of knowledge. What then can the context of introduction consist of, and in what way can it be pertinent to the epistemological distinction between paranoia and reinforced dogmatism?

The introduction or selection of a statement so that it be empirically tested involves multiple considerations, some of which appear to be independent of testability. Indeed, this is a central suggestion Agassi (1975) presented as an improvement on Popper's theory of science, focusing mainly on the metaphysical correlates of such statements or theories:

But what about the claim that theories manifesting empirical character, i.e., refutable theories, also necessarily manifest the other characteristics of science, i.e., they have informative content, explanatory power, simplicity, abstractness, generality, and precision? I simply reject this claim. As I have said earlier, I interpret a great deal of Popper's discussion in his classical work to be an attempt to support this claim. I consider the value of that part of his discussion as a valid criticism of his opponents and as stimulating heuristic material, but as very far from being a finished product. To maintain my thesis I must contradict Popper here. He would say that research is conducted toward the finding and the testing of highly testable hypotheses, whereas I say that it is very often conducted toward the finding and the testing of metaphysically relevant hypotheses. (Pp. 218-19)

The context of introduction appears to involve more than metaphysical correlates (and testability), as admitted by Agassi. Yet these additional considerations have drawn much less attention, particularly as compared to testability. More important, they have not been discussed systematically, perhaps because the context of introduction as a whole has not been discussed systematically (the contribution of Kekes 1980 here may be less substantive or specific and more in highlighting this context as a whole). One such important consideration is choice of theories according to relevance to the problem at hand. Agassi, for instance, noted this but focused his attention on the choice of problems, which is also important but is a different matter (Agassi

1975, 240-69). He later opted for the workshop notion of rationality, where in a sense anything goes concerning the relevance of theories to problems (Agassi and Jarvie 1987, 440-41). On this latter point Agassi may have been mistaken, if I am correct in postulating criteria or desiderata of relevance to problems that theories must stand up to in order to be accepted (for testing). And Hattiangadi (1987) attempted to characterize relevance of theories to a problem but within intellectual traditions, which may apply to science but may not be the general case with problems and their solutions.

Relevance to a problem refers to the fact that statements are put to the test for a purpose, that is, to solve problems, be they intellectual, practical, or both (Kekes 1980). Some statements appear to be irrelevant as solutions to the problems at hand, or at least much less relevant than others, sometimes to the point of seeming nonsensical in that context. This can be illustrated by attempting to solve a problem in physics with a teleological theory perhaps more suited to psychology—although this is exactly what Aristotle did in explaining the motion of inanimate bodies, and although some contemporary thinking in philosophy of psychology goes against teleological explanations in psychology (Stich 1983). It is also illustrated by some unfortunate reductionist turns in science, such as can be seen in the history of psychiatry, particularly with the advent of biological psychiatry (Rudnick 1990). Of course, the verdict of relevance cannot be final, but then the verdict of testing cannot be final either (Popper 1959). The concept of relevance to a problem awaits more systematic discussion, which may result in the suggestion of criteria or desiderata of relevance, such as the inclusion within a theory of a reference to situational constraints of a problem, for example, initial conditions; this would constitute a move beyond the somewhat general approach of Kekes (1980). And there may be other considerations within the context of introduction that await systematic discussion.

If the various considerations within the context of introduction, aside for testability and perhaps the metaphysical correlates of empirical statements, are not systematically discussed, then indeed it may be difficult to distinguish epistemologically between paranoia and reinforced dogmatism. But if, as I argue, the context of introduction is distinct and complex, involving central considerations in addition to testability that are suitable for epistemological investigation, such as relevance to a problem, then such a distinction between paranoia and reinforced dogmatism may be possible.

Paranoia, on this account, is first and foremost a flaw in the context of introduction and not primarily in testability. Specifically, it is an extreme reduction in the range of alternative statements, possibly to null, practically abolishing the context of introduction. This would result in the delusional person not being able to postulate (and consequently select) any alternative to the delusional system of thought, so that competing systems will be ignored or considered impossible by that person. This is expressed in that it is regularly the case that entertaining a delusional belief is not accompanied by the simultaneous entertaining of rival propositions (Berrios 1991, 8). What may be lacking in paranoia is relevance in the sense of a reference to situational constraints, as the paranoid applies his or her delusional belief indiscriminately, which is associated with lack of alternatives. This latter explanation of paranoia goes beyond that of Fried and Agassi in that it postulates a particular deficit within the context of introduction in paranoia, which is made possible due to the characterization of the context of introduction. Whatever the cause of the lack of alternatives, it leads to testability of the delusional system being reduced, as no comparison to other systems of thought is then possible and as testing is comparative (Lakatos 1978). This construes paranoia as manifesting lack of testability, which is epistemologically secondary to lack of range of alternative statements, as opposed to reinforced dogmatism, which manifests primary epistemic lack of testability (perhaps secondary to nonepistemic factors, such as motivational/emotional ones)—so that indeed paranoia and reinforced dogmatism are similar in lack of testability but differ in that paranoia results from another epistemic flaw, unlike reinforced dogmatism.

This distinction between paranoia and reinforced dogmatism can be put to the test, for example, in comparing the pertinent reasoning patterns of paranoid persons to those of nonparanoid reinforced dogmatists, such as pseudo-scientists. This comparison has not been systematically conducted as yet, in spite of some research tools being available for it, such as a questionnaire on reaction to hypothetical contradiction that can distinguish between refuting evidence being ignored or persistently denied as possible, constituting paranoia, versus refuting evidence being accommodated by some ad hoc alteration of the belief system such that the dogma is not changed, constituting reinforced dogmatism (Garety and Hemsley 1994, 52). Perhaps further theoretical elaboration is required, such as grounding the epistemic flaw of paranoia in an appropriate cognitive mechanism of

operation. A plausible candidate for this may be metarepresentation, or rather an impairment in metarepresentation. Metarepresentation is the cognitive ability to represent representations and hence to postulate alternatives; this ability is supposedly lacking regarding the representation of other minds in autism (Forguson 1989). Perhaps it is similarly lacking in paranoia regarding the representation of other systems of thought, as it may be lacking in other psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia (Corcoran, Mercer, and Frith 1995). A research program could be constructed for this theory, and it could be empirically tested.

This distinction between paranoia and reinforced dogmatism could also be used to explain an otherwise unexplained marker of paranoia as distinguished from reinforced dogmatism (and dogmatism in general, for that matter). This is the fact that paranoia, unlike dogmatism (reinforced or otherwise), is as a rule self-centered (Oltmanns 1988, 5). That is, the paranoid system of thought refers to the delusional person, usually as a victim of some conspiracy, whether the main theme involves persecution, infidelity, or any other common theme of paranoia (Fried and Agassi 1976, 171). In contrast, the dogmatic system of thought may address themes that do not involve the dogmatic person, such as social or political ideology. The self-centeredness of paranoia may result from the paranoid person not being able to conceive of alternative views, whether true or false, so that disagreement with him or her cannot be conceived by the paranoid as a honest mistake (of the other) but rather as a disguised agreement or an unadmitted lie—hence the sense of self-centered conspiracy so pervasive in paranoia. In contrast, the reinforced dogmatist can and regularly does admit of false alternatives to his own view, so that he or she can and regularly does dismiss disagreement as mistaken rather than dishonest, although perhaps as foolish.

Even if actual clinical paranoia turns out not to stand up to the test, that is, not to be distinguished from reinforced dogmatism as suggested, this will not make the suggested epistemological distinction useless. Pure paranoia and its theoretical distinction from reinforced dogmatism may serve as a thought experiment, highlighting the context of introduction and considerations within it other than testability, such as relevance to problems and range of alternatives. This may serve to fruitfully broaden the scope of epistemological discussion beyond its traditional boundaries.

CONCLUSION

It seems then that the study of paranoia supports the argument that the epistemic standard of critical rationality, formulated by Popper (1959, 1974) in philosophy of science as testing and testability, is insufficient. This insufficiency has been addressed by later critical rationalists, such as Agassi (1975), yet to date additional epistemic standards have been studied only in part. More specifically, paranoia results in a lack of testability, but unlike reinforced dogmatism, this does not seem to be epistemologically primary in paranoia but rather secondary to another epistemic flaw, that of a lack of range of alternative statements to select from and test. This posits the range of alternative statements as a general epistemic standard and suggests that considerations other than testability that have not been studied in depth and that are involved in the context of introduction, such as relevance to problems, may also serve as epistemic standards. Further study of various components of the context of introduction, beyond critical rationality, may prove fruitful for both epistemology and psychiatry.

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