

‘Impossible conversations’ across ideological frameworks: a Critical Rationalist view – ISSA 2023, Leiden University

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I shall restate the case for a Critical Rationalist approach to the way we view argumentation practice. This philosophical stance will not be unfamiliar to argumentation scholars, given the grounding of Pragma-Dialectics in Critical Rationalism (CR). I shall draw directly on the writings of Karl Popper and David Miller, and also on the enthusiasm for CR in the natural sciences (e.g. physics) where, unlike in the social sciences, CR is generally accepted as the correct logic of scientific discovery. Both scientific hypotheses (aimed at truth) and practical proposals (aimed at meeting goals) are falsifiable conjectures put forward in response to problems. Practical conjectures, unlike scientific ones, are not explanations of reality, but alleged solutions, and it is desirable to examine them in advance of experience, without having to suffer their (possibly undesirable) consequences. There is no systematic account in Popper’s work of how we criticize practical proposals, though Miller has tried to fill this gap, in relation to a single individual’s decision-making process. I will suggest the broad lines of what a CR perspective might suggest for multi-agent deliberation and decision-making, then point out some difficulties that have not yet been addressed. For example, in testing the consequences of alternative proposals, the foreseeable consequences in the light of which deliberating agents criticize each other’s proposal are themselves ‘framed’ in terms of their own preferred (theoretical, ideological) framework. This raises the prospect of deep, irresolvable disagreements, unless those different frameworks can be transcended. Deep disagreements are rife in the world around us, exacerbated – I will argue – by the rise of identity politics. Popper was optimistic about deep disagreements and addressed the doctrine (which he judged to be false) that it is not possible to have a rational debate between (scientific, moral or political) frameworks as the ‘myth of the framework’. Using examples from current political discourse, I shall suggest a few ways in which standpoints can be rendered open to critical scrutiny, thus allowing the prospect of at least a qualified Popperian optimism.

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