

# Fallibilism: A Terrible Mistake

KENNETH R. CONKLIN

## INTRODUCTION

FALLIBILISM is a firm commitment to the notion that we should not make firm commitments. Obviously, fallibilism is self-contradictory and therefore it is a mistake. But the case is much more complex and interesting than that. Fallibilism is not just an ordinary mistake, it is a terrible mistake. There are a growing number of fallibilists. Innocent, well-meaning people often adopt this philosophy unknowingly, while a growing number of scholars deliberately adopt this philosophy without, perhaps, realizing its long-range consequences. The influence of fallibilism is being felt in our social institutions, including the schools, and even THE EDUCATIONAL FORUM.

In the January, 1971 issue of EDUCATIONAL FORUM (Vol. 35, No. 2), Henry Perkinson, in an article entitled "Fallibilism: An Alternative for Now," explicitly outlined and endorsed fallibilism. It is that article which provides a focus for my attack. However, at least two other articles in the same issue also "deserve" mention here. Martin A. Ber-

tram's "Education and Absurdism" suggests that absurdist literature, based on the claim that life is absurd because there is no meaningful truth, can be helpful in provoking us to discover the limits of rationality and to laugh at ourselves when we fail to achieve rationality. If I am correct in trying to show that fallibilism turns out to be the same as absurdism, then, much to my chagrin, I shall have corroborated Bertram's thesis, since a piece of absurdist literature (i.e., Perkinson's article on "Fallibilism") will have indeed provoked me to explore the limits of rationality.

A third article in the January, 1971 FORUM, by Joseph Agassi, is entitled, "Qualifying Exams, Do They Qualify?" I mention this article only to show the disguised infiltration of fallibilism into the FORUM. Professor Agassi does not discuss fallibilism in his essay, but he is well known among philosophers as a member of the Karl Popper school of fallibilists. Agassi uses his unstated fallibilist assumptions to claim (without proof) that the purpose of examinations is to help teachers avoid making the mistake of allowing unqualified students to get through, and that the doctoral qualifying exam should be abolished because it has failed in that task. Agassi's whole article is based on the fallibilist assumption that to be rational means, not to ensure success, but to correct our mistakes and to plan to avoid

---

*This article speaks for itself, and it must be noted that CONKLIN has the courage to speak in a vein that is not now fashionable. If some of what he says is rather rough theoretical going, the theme is important enough for us to make the effort to understand what is at issue and the point he is trying to make. PROFESSOR CONKLIN is on the faculty of Emory University.*

the bad consequences of mistakes that get made. The task of an exam, then, is not to ensure that a student has learned something or will learn something by studying for it, but rather to protect society and a profession by eliminating weak or improperly prepared students who somehow got that far in the program. Whether I agree with Agassi's substantive conclusions regarding the qualifying exam is unimportant here, since that conclusion might also be reachable from different premises. My point is to cite Agassi's article as an example of the infiltration of unstated fallibilist assumptions into arguments over practical matters affecting educational procedure.

I hope to show that fallibilism is a mistake: not only a harmless philosophical mistake, but also a terrible mistake in view of its long-range social and educational consequences. Then we shall see what can be done to remedy this mistake.

#### WHY FALLIBILISM IS A "TERRIBLE" MISTAKE

Fallibilism begins with the recognition of the old maxim that "to be human is to err." But, this doctrine goes on to say that since we do make mistakes, we should organize our social institutions (and perhaps also our private lives) in such a way that, if belief or action turns out to have been mistaken, then the bad consequences we have suffered will not have been too frequent or too severe. Instead of hoping for the best and gambling on a favorable outcome, the fallibilist pessimistically assumes the worst and works to minimize

his losses. All action must be based on the premise that we cannot be sure we are right, so we should protect ourselves from the bad consequences of error by not going too far in the direction we consider right.

This is indeed an anxious age we live in. Young people afraid of being rejected decide to play safe and not commit themselves to loving someone; citizens decide not to participate in social action groups because the problems are too complex to be understood and because the citizens fear they might support the wrong group or policy; spectators remain on the sidelines and watch mayhem rather than getting involved or committed. Teachers (especially at the college level) decide not to give grades, or else to give the same grade to everyone. Impartial testing procedures, which teachers traditionally used to shift the responsibility for judging grades, have been shown to have limited reliability and validity, and the teachers are afraid to make intuitive judgments. Whether they know it or not, these people are all behaving in conformity with fallibilist theory.

The fallibilists warn us of the dire consequences of totalitarianism. Typically, when one group forces its will upon another, the ruling group justifies its use of force by claiming that it possesses Truth so its judgments are Right. Such claims are usually mistaken, and tyrants typically make such claims cynically with full awareness of pulling a hoax. Given the present moral vacuum and the absence of trust and community, we are indeed vulnerable to a totalitarian takeover. But the fallibilist remedy

is too sweeping and is itself totalitarian. The fallibilist remedy is either to deny that there is Truth or to deny that anyone could possess and implement it. If such a doctrine is adopted, the practical result will be a further erosion of trust and community *without hope of restoration*. Hope is predicated on the assumption that there is an answer and we might find it, but fallibilism would refuse to acknowledge Truth even if it were discovered and proclaimed. The way to refute a totalitarian is to show that his conception of Truth or Right is mistaken, not to deny that there are such things. If someone really does know the Truth and is benevolent, then we should follow him. The proper question is "Does he really know the Truth?" or "Is he really benevolent?"

In the absence of faith, trust, and community, the fallibilist relies upon empirical data, methodology, and due process. Unwilling to trust an intuitive judgment, he demands evidence or a method for producing evidence. The result is that our society has come to define truth as whatever works, or whatever science proves to us. For example, in the area of law, we may know intuitively or even from scientific evidence that someone is guilty of a crime, but because we do not trust ourselves or others to determine guilt, we set up a method known as "due process of law." If a truly guilty person can hire a sufficiently skillful lawyer to play the game of due process, the criminal may be judged "not guilty." Likewise, truly innocent people may be judged "guilty." If we rely entirely upon methodology and proof, the result is that, so far as the social system

is concerned, a person *is* what he is judged to be according to the rules of due process. A person *is* what he is treated as, and how he is treated depends upon his skill in manipulating the system (or the skill of those he hires to help him). An idea which has been shown to be false by the scientific method *is* false. A student whose record is poor *is* a poor student. Someone's I.Q. *is* the adjusted score he gets on the I.Q. test. Motives *are* actions, concepts *are* operations, and the message *is* the medium.

C. S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* shows how this orientation has penetrated into the school curriculum. Children are taught that values are nothing more than superstitious private sentiments, and that value statements are nothing more than meaningless mumblings or propaganda aimed at making someone else have the same sentiments. Lewis points out that two choices are open if this view is correct: either abolish value commitments, in which case society will fall apart due to lack of community, or else those in power may cynically adopt and propagandize some value for private motives. Lewis demonstrates that if science succeeds in giving us more powerful controls over natural forces while education teaches people to debunk values, man will destroy his own humanity to become an efficient slave of his crudest and strongest passions. We are already seeing the beginnings of such outcomes in our own society as fallibilism is more pervasively adopted.

Strictly speaking, it is relativism that is to blame for the present chaos. Relativism is the belief that there are no



Truths, so that each person has a legitimate right to create his own beliefs and make his own choices. Relativism is one face of a two-faced Janus whose other side is called "absurdism": the belief that life has no inherent meaning and that we must create our own meanings in the face of chaos. Pure fallibilism is neutral on the question whether there is Truth. Perhaps there are fallibilists who believe there is Truth, but in any event all fallibilists emphasize the importance of doubting, hedging one's bets, and living in fear of error. The point is that a fallibilist is committed to the idea that we should not make commitments. He believes that Truth is not yet known (or known to *be* Truth), and he would refuse to pledge his total allegiance to any particular Truth even if it came right up and punched him in the nose, for fear that it might be Error instead. Fallibilists have a kind of paranoia, which they share with the philosopher Descartes, who wondered whether we can ever be sure the Devil isn't fooling us.

The practical result is that fallibilists who are true to their doctrine of fallibilism always behave exactly like relativists and nervous absurdists—they always choose without hope of being sure that their choice is really right. Fallibilists who do believe there is Truth may be nervous about making a choice, while those who are out-and-out absurdists may gleefully or cynically grab the golden ring. But fallibilists make choices the same way relativists do, and are committed to keeping it that way. Hence, according to his own Pragmatist criterion that truth *is* what happens (as

discussed above), or that what is true for *all* practical purposes *is* true, the fallibilist *is* a relativist. Accordingly, the fallibilist must accept blame for the evil consequences of relativism. In addition, the fallibilist must accept special blame for robbing people of hope that Truth might be found and acted upon with commitment. And since, according to the fallibilists, a doctrine is to be rejected if it leads to bad consequences, then by this very criterion of their own they must reject their doctrine of fallibilism on account of the bad consequences it has already led to and the worse consequences that lie ahead if the doctrine spreads further.

#### WHY FALLIBILISM IS A FALSE DOCTRINE

It is important to realize that fallibilism is a normative theory of methodology. That is, fallibilism is a theory which tries to tell us how we *should* behave, and how we *should* go about accepting or rejecting beliefs. In the area of fact, fallibilism says that we should use scientific method to disprove theories that are false, and we should temporarily accept as working hypotheses those theories which have been well tested but have not yet been disproved. We accept such corroborated, un-disproved theories without strong commitment, however, and we never have any way of being sure they are true, since tomorrow may bring new evidence which would refute them. In the area of value, fallibilism is less clear about the details of how we should choose our preferences, although the general idea remains the same: if action

based on a given value leads to grief, then the value should be rejected; also, no value should ever be the object of permanent commitment, because tomorrow it may lead us to undesirable consequences.

Since fallibilism is itself a value prescription (about how we should conduct the activities of theory-construction and commitment-making), and since fallibilism leads to disastrous consequences (as shown previously), and since fallibilism tells us to reject values that lead to bad consequences, therefore fallibilism tells us that fallibilism should be rejected. There are some philosophers who would not agree with fallibilism's contention that theories leading to bad consequences should be rejected. Perhaps a theory may be true or acceptable even though it does lead to bad consequences. Thus, it is important to find additional reasons to reject fallibilism, not by showing that it leads to bad consequences, but by showing that there is something intrinsically wrong with the theory apart from its consequences.

As a matter of fact, we have already shown some reasons why fallibilism is intrinsically unacceptable. Virtually everyone agrees that a theory must be internally consistent if it is to be acceptable. Yet, we have just now seen how the theory of fallibilism rejects itself according to its own criterion for rejecting theories (i.e., we should reject theories that lead to bad consequences). Perhaps some will think that this self-rejection is not truly a case of internal self-contradiction because it depends upon a judgment of contingent fact. Very well,

then, we recall the opening sentence in this paper: fallibilism is a firm commitment to the notion that we should not make firm commitments. Now, that is obviously a most blatant case of internal self-contradiction!

However, the fallibilist may say that we have not represented his theory accurately. He may say that his theory should be defined as follows: fallibilism is the temporarily accepted working principle that we should not make firm commitments. Another way of saying the same thing is: hold everything open to criticism and possible rejection (including this principle itself), and accept temporarily whatever can be tested, has been well tested, and has not been rejected. According to this new characterization, known as "comprehensively critical rationalism" (CCR), fallibilism appears to be self consistent, because it holds even fallibilism itself open to criticism and possible rejection. We might well question whether in practice the fallibilists hold their own theory only tentatively. In fact, every fallibilist I know of is extremely dogmatic about his commitment to fallibilism. Nevertheless, we must now consider whether CCR (comprehensively critical rationalist) fallibilism is theoretically possible.

One of the things emphasized in the CCR theory of fallibilism is testability. Any statement or theory must be meaningful before it can even be considered as a candidate for a temporarily accepted working hypothesis, and in order to be meaningful it is necessary that a statement or theory be testable (i.e., capable

of being shown to be false if it is false). *But CCR is not itself testable.* If everything is held open to criticism and possible rejection, then nothing is ever completely accepted. This means that when a statement is criticized, the criticism itself must be forever held open to criticism and possible rejection. Therefore no criticism (and no number of criticisms) can ever fully succeed in overturning any statement or theory. This means that CCR is unworkable in practice as applied to other theories. It also means that CCR is itself unfalsifiable, since CCR would require that all criticisms of CCR must remain open to doubt, no criticism of CCR could ever be completely accepted, and nothing could ever succeed in overturning CCR. But if CCR is unfalsifiable and untestable, then according to its own criterion for meaningfulness and temporary acceptability, CCR is not meaningful and should not be entertained as even a temporary working hypothesis. Thus we have shown that the CCR theory of fallibilism is internally self-contradictory.

#### FAITH, HOPE, AND CHARITY

There is a famous old proverb of unknown origin, which is obviously relevant to our concerns here. According to this proverb, there are four kinds of people:

He who knows not, and knows not he knows not:

He is a fool—shun him;

He who knows not, and knows he knows not:

He is simple—teach him;

He who knows and knows not he knows:

He is asleep—wake him;

He who knows and knows he knows:

He is wise—follow him.

Fallibilists are people who claim that nobody knows anything for certain, but that they, the fallibilists, are at least aware of their own ignorance and are seeking to alert the rest of us to our common ignorance. According to a fallibilist interpretation of the proverb, then, most people are fools and should be shunned, while fallibilists are simple and are open to instruction. The trouble is that fallibilists may be simple, but they are also extremely full of pride and are therefore unteachable. The plain fact is that fallibilists are proud of knowing that they are ignorant, for they feel that this is what distinguishes them from everyone else who is ignorant. Fallibilists dogmatically refuse to give up ignorance—their doctrine requires them always to doubt everything, and they would never make a commitment even if Truth came riding down the street heralded by trumpets.

As Plato shows in *Meno*, a student is not ready for instruction until he has recognized his own ignorance and has enough humility to make a genuine and contrite confession of ignorance. A student must beg for enlightenment. But begging for enlightenment, or seeking the Truth, is based on the assumption that enlightenment or Truth exists and can be known. A student must have faith that there is something for him to discover, and that he is capable of discovering it. Also, a student must trust



his teacher to help him. Finally, when truth is discovered, the student knows he has discovered it and makes a firm personal commitment to what he knows. Fallibilists are not at all humble, they are proud of knowing that they are ignorant, they have no faith that Truth can be known (if indeed it exists at all), they trust nobody, and they are unwilling to make firm commitments to beliefs. Fallibilists would make very bad students.

But the last half of the proverb gives us cause for hope, especially in view of Plato's theory. According to Plato, everyone begins life asleep. The great Truths are present in all of us, but are buried and forgotten. The task of the teacher is to help us remember them. We know, but have forgotten that we know, and the teacher can help us come to know that we know. Those who not only have knowledge but are also aware of their knowledge are wise. The rest of us, in the absence of wisdom, have the duty to follow the teachings of wise men while seeking wisdom for ourselves.

The fallibilists observed that nothing can be successfully proved by justification, and correctly concluded that justificational rationalism should be abandoned. But then they mistakenly drew the further conclusion that firm commitments should not be made. Likewise, we have seen in this paper that nothing can be successfully disproved by criticism, and we have concluded that (comprehensively) critical rationalism should be abandoned. But it would be a mistake to draw the further conclusion that firm rejections should not be made. There can

be knowledge, commitment, and rejection without justificational or critical proof. Truth is its own credential, and requires no proof to the knower. But knowledge is ineffable. The task of so-called "proof" (either justification or criticism) is to explain the unexplainable to someone else. Obviously, proof must always fail to be complete. But it can help lead someone to the point where he can take a leap beyond the proof to understand Truth. Although proof technically fails, Truth exists and can be discovered. The existence of Truth and its discoverability give us hope for finding it, and we should commit ourselves to search for it.

Of course we must take precautions in the absence of wisdom. If everyone is completely ignorant about something, then the only sane thing to do is to adopt fallibilist techniques for minimizing the effects of decisions that might turn out to be bad. When total ignorance prevails, an ounce of fallibilism can prevent a pound of dangerous, vacuum-filling over-commitment. But the use of fallibilist techniques for curbing speculative excesses must be carefully separated from the vicious, dogmatic commitment to fallibilism described earlier as a *terrible* mistake. If fallibilism succeeds in robbing us of hope that truth might yet be discovered and implemented, then all is lost. This is the great danger of modern times.

Very seldom is everyone totally ignorant. Even when a puzzle or mystery remains unsolved, we can tell whether we are getting closer to a solution, and some people make progress faster than

others. There are degrees of wisdom, and those who have more wisdom should be in positions of greater social power and pedagogical influence. Let us have faith that Truth exists, let us hope to find, teach, and implement it, and let us be charitable in helping those less wise than ourselves.

#### ANNOTATED REFERENCES

A newly published book describes fallibilism simply and tells how curriculum, school organization, and teaching methods should be changed according to a fallibilist philosophy of education. See Henry J. Perkinson, *The Possibilities of Error: An Approach to Education* (New York: David McKay, 1971).

The modern classics of fallibilism are four books by Karl R. Popper:

*Conjectures and Refutations* and *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* make difficult reading, and are concerned mainly with scientific method and the nature of scientific knowledge. *The Open Society and its Enemies* (in two volumes) is a study of traditional utopias and what is wrong with them from a fallibilist viewpoint. *The Poverty of Historicism* is an excellent little book which claims to refute some of the basic assumptions underlying holist approaches to history and social change.

For a readable explicit statement of comprehensively critical rationalism, see

William Warren Bartley III, *The Retreat to Commitment*, chapters 4 and 5. For a more technical discussion of CCR, see Bartley's essay "Rationality and the Theory of Rationality" in *The Critical Approach to Science and Philosophy*, edited by Mario Bunge. This entire anthology is dedicated to fallibilism, and the authors appearing there (especially Bunge) have written numerous other fallibilist treatises.

The best classical author to read for an antidote to fallibilism is Plato. In the *Republic* Plato affirms that there is Truth, it is present in all of us, some people are wiser than others, those who are wise should be given power to govern in the best interests of all, and those who are capable should receive special education designed to lead them to wisdom. In *Meno* Plato illustrates how a teacher can help awaken the wisdom lying dormant within a student.

As mentioned in the present article, *The Abolition of Man*, by C. S. Lewis, exposes the infiltration of relativism and fallibilism into the school curriculum, where children are indoctrinated with such views before they are old enough to choose. Lewis shows the long-range disaster mankind faces if scientific and ethical relativism go unchecked.

The following books are also useful as antidotes to specific fallibilist errors:

Michael Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge* shows that firm commitment is procedurally necessary to scientists and justifiable for everyone. In *The Tacit Dimension* he tells how discovery and commitment come about, and he explains why Truth cannot be explained.

Jacques Maritain's many writings are all excellent antidotes to fallibilism. Specifically, *The Degrees of Wisdom* describes what it means to say that different people have attained different levels of wisdom.

Pitirim Sorokin's *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (4 vols.) describes historical cycles in a way that Popper opposes. Sorokin's semi-popular work, *The Crisis of our Age*, shows the decline of civilization presently being caused by relativism, and describes the coming revival of Truth-seeking.

Charles Reich, *The Greening of America*, is a best-selling current description of the quiet revolution now underway, in which people are beginning to re-cultivate the gentle, benevolent consciousness of Truth.