

## Karl Popper

*The Formative years 1902-1945*

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No presentation of Poppers thoughts can compare with that of Popper himself, especially when it comes to clarity and economy of expression. What in the words of Popper appears natural and inevitable, as well as deceptively simple; invariably comes across somewhat heavy-handed and obscure in the words of his interpreters. The present biography being no exception. The purpose of the book is to present an intellectual biography of Popper to correct and to comment the one Autobiography he wrote himself. The life of Popper was entirely subservient to the development of his own thought and philosophy, and although he lived through exciting times and was exposed to a wide variety of milieus, they do not seem to have left any deeper emotional impact on him. He remembered little from his childhood (or chose to forget it), and his subsequent life was barren as to private indulgence. He boasted of his abstentious character, forsaking the pleasures of alcohol and tobacco (and according to the speculations of the biographer, possibly also conjugal pleasures with his wife.) There is little that is not directly related to his work that could titillate the reader. By all accounts he was a difficult character. Self-centered and intellectually aggressive, pursuing an argument well beyond the limits of politeness. He was in many ways somewhat of a megalomaniac, attaching excessive importance to his own person and his accomplishments. He was ambitious to the point of paranoia, complaining that he was not getting his proper due and that others were plagiarizing him. He used his friends ruthlessly and dropped them without ceremony when they were no longer useful to him<sup>1</sup>. He expected his friends to make sacrifices for him, but he seldom if ever reciprocated in any significant measure. In short the subject of the biography is not a very exciting and sympathetic one, unless you have previous exposures to Poppers thought.

Popper was born into the Habsburg empire. Formally he was Lutheran, as his father had converted, but ethnically he was of Jewish stock. The Habsburg monarchy had in the later half of the 19th century enacted liberal laws among them giving full legal rights to the Jews. As a consequence many Jews emigrated into Vienna and quickly formed a dominant part of the cultural and professional life of the Metropolis. Given the relatively modest fraction of the general population, such dominance in elitist circles was rather remarkable<sup>2</sup>. They made up a liberal elite, often with progressive and socialist ideas,

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<sup>1</sup> He did have some stable friendship, notably with another Viennese exile in London, the art historian Gombrich, which was possible because of the deferential attitude of the latter. Maybe the only person with whom he showed some deference was the economist Hayek, instrumental in getting him a position at the London School of Economics

<sup>2</sup> The Austrian elite was but a thin layer of society, and it only took some determination to take possession of it. Immigrant Jews put large store in education, and while finishing the Abitur, gentiles

which would deeply impress Popper. About his own Jewish roots he was very ambivalent. He resented a too obvious Jewish presence as being provocative of anti-Semitism, and he deplored Zionism. In later years he was highly critical of the state of Israel, yet he admitted responsibility through his common roots, something which made him feel ashamed of being a Jew. His ideal was the cosmopolitan, Jewish identity being yet another manifestation of the regretted tribal attitude towards life. The Habsburg empire, which he would idealize in later years, provided exactly this kind of opportunity, transcending as it did national strife and ambition<sup>3</sup>.

Popper was an ambitious boy, yet not a very successful academic one, putting to shame the expectations put on him. Apart from a detour as a cabinet-maker<sup>4</sup> he pursued a career as a school-teacher and an educator, active in the socialist student movement. Still philosophy was his main interest and he pursued with eventual success the writing of a thesis on the subject, although this did not translate into an academic career. His main philosophical interest was epistemology, in particular how to make a demarcation between science and what pretended to be that, such as psychoanalysis<sup>5</sup> and Marxism. It was inevitable that he would be thrown in contact with the Vienna Circle of positivists. A charmed circle, to which he was never allowed admittance, but whose bitter criticism that their participants were unable to completely ignore<sup>6</sup>. Their concerns were very similar, namely to rid philosophy of much nonsense and make it a scientific discipline. For the positivists that meant a trend towards greater and greater precision, in particular the creating of exact and formal languages whose syntactical structure would make silly metaphysics impossible to formulate. Popper, on the other hand sensed that there was no way of exorcising metaphysics from a sincere pursuit of philosophy. You could of course exclude it by definition as being meaningless, but at the cost of narrowing your inquiry. The very program that the positivists engaged in was metaphysical. Faith in reason, however plausible and compelling, was a faith nevertheless, and opposed to the tacit assumption of rationality, Popper suggested the notion of a critical rationality. Poppers attitude to metaphysics was thus more indulgent and far from dismissing it as meaningless he suggested that much metaphysical speculation was in the nature of proto-science, and anyway could supply valuable inspiration in the forming of hypotheses.

It is not very easy to come up with original ideas in philosophy, let alone valuable and fertile ones, thus the task of a philosopher was more of rearranging old ideas in novel ways and to interpret them in different lights and give them new emphasis and interpretation.

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tended to pursue careers in civil service, the Jews became doctors, lawyers, professors or pursued literary careers, maybe as a consequence of a prevalent anti-Semitism, barring them from more networking in civil society, in particular politics

<sup>3</sup> An attitude that is once again coming into vogue.

<sup>4</sup> Reminiscent of similar forays into an idealized working class done by the intermittent intellectual in the 70's

<sup>5</sup> As an educator with an interest in psychology he for some time was close to Adler and his family. Once he was amazed at the swiftness Adler made a psychological diagnosis, asking him what it was based on. One thousand cases of my past experience Adler haughtily explained, and now one thousand and one, Popper quipped.

<sup>6</sup> One of the members Otto Neurath referred to him as the official opposition.

Thus not a single idea of Popper is without precedent, in particular not what he is most famous for, namely falsifiability. In fact the Vienna circle briefly toyed with the idea of falsifiability but rejected it as being too easily circumvented. It was the genius of Popper to realize the true importance of the concept and its implications.

The often bitter antagonism between Popper and his adversaries Schilz, Neurath and to some extent Carnap notwithstanding, Popper was in dire need of them. Apart from the sounding-board to his ideas they provided, and many of Poppers ideas were constructed as responses to theirs, the circle provided him with an invaluable contact with the academic and publishing community, without which it is doubtful whether his epoch-making book - *Die Logik der Forschung*<sup>7</sup> would have been printed, a work unlikely to have any wider popular or commercial appeal, and which, in spite of the enthusiastic endorsement, especially by Carnap, had to be cut down to size in order to be published.

The *'Logik der Forschung'* provided him with a ticket to the intellectual world without which he would never have been invited to England, nor been able to secure a position in New Zealand (of all places). The political climate harshened in the 30's. Socialism (well established in *der rote Wien*) suffered a defeat, much, according to Popper, due to the ineptitude of their leaders<sup>7</sup> and Popper realized that continued residence in Austria was ruled out.

His life in exile was very isolated but fruitful. Exile grated less on him, obsessed as he was by his work, than on his wife whose ties to Vienna were stronger and more dominant for want of other concerns. Her life became subservient to that of her husband, untiringly typing his manuscripts, occasionally providing good advice. Popper complained about his lot, his material hardship, but visitors remarked that he lived well above the means to be expected on the salary of a lecturer. New Zealand academic life was very provincial, research was looked down upon as an infringement on the business of teaching, and libraries were not well-stocked. Carnap and others kept him supplied with some scholarly journals, but postal service with the outside world was slow and erratic. His main preoccupation during the period was his contribution to the fight against Fascism, a contribution taking the form of writing a book. In opposition to current opinions he advocated a methodological unity in all pursuits of knowledge, thus the criteria for social science should be no less demanding than those in natural science. Now science is often held up as anti-democratic because decisions are not made by vote. This is, as Popper was quick to point out, a profound misunderstanding. The democratic nature of Science consists in its willingness to let itself be criticized, what matters is not the identity of the critic but the weight of his arguments. In fact the falsifiability criterion lies at the heart of this, because it allows two adversaries to chose some common ground on which a test should be made. Thus ultimately falsifiability is not absolute, it hinges upon the social situation. Science is a social enterprise, impossible to pursue by a single individual<sup>8</sup>.

The two volumes of what eventually would be titled *'The Open Society and its enemies'*

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<sup>7</sup> Popper was probably off target somewhat here, not having enough of a sympathy for the difficulties of political action, especially facing politicians committed to non-violence when engaging an adversary with few such scruples.

<sup>8</sup> The idea of the community asymptotically deciding on truth, a community necessarily involving future generations as well, can also be traced back to C.S.Peirce.

derived its notoriety from the spirited attacks on three pillars of western philosophy. Plato for the classicists, Hegel for the 19th century metaphysicists, and Marx for the left. Popper obviously ventured on territory where he had no expertise and with very limited means of acquiring one to boot. This did not deter him. His attack on Plato may have been the most damning, because the classicists took him seriously and the subject of Plato has never ever been the same again. Not that previous attacks on Plato had been missing, but Popper made it more cogent and urgent. The problem with Poppers attack, brilliant rhetoric as it may be, is that Plato is for all intents and purposes a fictional figure (and Socrates, the hero of Popper, even more so, only coming alive interestingly in the dialogues of Plato), but Popper did not treat him as such, but vividly engaged him. His attitude was ambivalent, making no bones about his admiration for Plato, but in the end painting a psycho-analytic picture of him as a man tormented by contradictory impulses, eventually succumbing to his bad and anti-democratic ones<sup>9</sup>. The vision of the good society of Plato, a society in which the wise rule, and others know their place, Popper dismissed as a tribal one, the ultimate utopia of fascism, a society that believes it can arrest change by stifling debate and dissidence. Still it is a society which has its deep appeal and to free yourself of its allure requires some counter-intuitive effort. Classicist who still want to keep Plato a hero has little choice but to hide behind the subterfuge that he is but ironic. As Plato is more or less fictional as far as a real human being of flesh and blood, such a question of irony is moot, because you have the option of interpreting Plato differently, and a Plato given to irony is of course the most sophisticated and sympathetic interpretation (at least to those who attain to intellectual sophistication).

While his criticism of Plato was not entirely devoid of torment, as all parricides inevitable are, his treatment of Hegel is brief and dismissing, and few if any Hegel scholars take him seriously. Instead of engaging in the thought of the man, he dismisses him as a fool not worth taking seriously (but is not the essence of the Open democratic society to allow the other guy to get a hearing? the author wonders plaintively). As to Marx he is openly admiring, in particular he sees Marx as being a re-vitalizer of Christianity, bringing back the urgent ethical aspect on which the creed is ultimately founded. His problem is with Marx's theoretical forays, which he found not only misinformed but potentially disastrous leading ultimately to a totalitarian society. His criticism of Marx is honest, as he singles out the basic tenants of his philosophy, trying to formulate them as coherently and powerful as possible in the process, boasting that he is not setting up a man of mere straw, but goes for Marx at his strength not his weakness.

Concomitantly with the writing of the Open Society he also put together his essays on the poverty of historicism, the latter word of his making or at least re-interpretation. His ambition was to effect a revolution in social science (but of course such was never brought about) and his thesis was that there are no historical laws, and that the search and discovery of such laws and their implementations had had disastrous consequences. As against the utopia of a revolutionary, who is intent upon remaking society in all one heroic go, Popper suggested the piecemeal approach of social engineering, arguing that there is

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<sup>9</sup> Such vivid interpretations invariably involves anachronisms and are bad history; yet on the purely personal level such imaginative engagement has all to commend itself. Serious reading should if anything transpose yourself and inspire personal digressions on what you read.

no real difference between natural science and social, and that this spurious notion of a difference is based on the mistaken belief that natural science is about prediction (especially quantitative ones) when in fact science makes few predictions (apart from Celestial mechanics) but is mostly concern with what cannot happen.

But as his wife impressed on him, social science was not his forte, his real love was for natural science, to which he would return after his exile. In social science, maybe as a consequence of Hayeks influence he became more and more conservative and did not really object to his writings being employed to support Cold War politics<sup>10</sup>. Also towards the end of his life living in seclusion in the English countryside he exalted western modern democracies as the pinnacle of Society in the history of Mankind.

It was as an epistemologist of natural science he wanted to be remembered. His dream was to make a scientific contribution and he engaged himself both in a technical and philosophic foundation for probability theory<sup>11</sup> as well as in the ontology of Quantum Theory. He suggested some experiments and some interpretations which were pointed out to him to be mistaken by among others Einstein. This was a big blow to his ego (even if his suggestion may have inspired a later thought experiment by Einstein himself). In the late forties he lectured at Princeton. Both Bohr and Einstein were at the lecture, and well after the disappearance of the rest of the audience, engaged him in discussion. which must have been extremely gratifying to him<sup>12</sup>.

Some words as to his falsifiability criteria need to be tagged on this account, as those have often been grossly misunderstood. One cheap shot at dismissal is to point out that any falsification of a hypothesis is at the same time a verification of the negated hypothesis, and thus there is no formal difference between verification and falsifiability. This remark ignores the basic asymmetry between a statement and its negation. More seriously though, the idea of falsifiability implies that certitude can never be achieved, in the words of Popper, there is no way to reach the bedrock, you can only drive the poles deeper and deeper into the swamp. At the heart of falsifiability is the reinterpretation of induction, the problem of which was first well articulated by Hume. The world does not instruct us, we cannot derive from a series of events a pattern a law, we can only conjecture one, and the way we do that is an act of creativity, not a mechanical calculation out of given data. A hypothesis, often in the nature of a theory, has a lot of consequences which can be deduced out of it (and the stronger the theory, the less likely it is to be correct, as it implies more detailed consequences). If those deductions do not accord with reality, the theory has to be rejected or at least reworked and refined, and we learn about false leads; if they do, acceptance is but provisional, yet a powerful incentive. Of course to test is not such an easy and straightforward thing, as any test is based on some auxiliary (as well as ancillary) theories,

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<sup>10</sup> Probably the greatest political influence his writings had was on the Social Democrats, especially in Germany and Austria, the latter country inviting him back and restoring his citizenship, but he resisted efforts to permanently call him back, happy in his anglophilic exile, and blaming Austrian anti-semitism.

<sup>11</sup> in particular as relevant to the problem of induction. Popper rejected on good grounds a precise probability interpretation of induction. To say that a certain event has such and such a probability is by itself a precise prediction.

<sup>12</sup> Einstein had read him and been very appreciative and had even tried to help him. Popper also carried out a friendship with his fellow Austrian Schrödinger.

but that does not invalidate the basic principles, in which the active asking of questions is the central thing, not some sort of passive learning. In fact the scientific method is congruent with the way we navigate in the everyday world, in which we constantly have to make small predictions and assumptions, either corroborated or denied by experience. In fact the the principle goes beyond humanity and can be recognized in the workings of evolution based as it is on trial and error (and some mechanism of memory to influence future trials. Progress<sup>13</sup> of which involves finding out what does not work, closing off paths in the configuration space of ideas, and thereby allowing us to penetrate deeper into it. In particular Popper does not provide any blue-print for science in the form of some specific methodology in the form of some algorithm, except in the most general and elusive way.

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<sup>13</sup> Progress is of course tantamount in evolution comparing the ascent from lowly amoeba to the subtleties of the human brain and its various manifestations such as language. Yet progress is elusive and there is nothing in evolution that guarantees it, as the evolving of parasites show, evolution could as well go towards increased simplification and primitivism as opposed to increased sophistication. In short there is no intelligent design conscious of some distant goal.