

## Popper

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A short presentation of Popper by a philosopher and socialist politician. Not exactly a hagiography, but still very little criticism of Popper as a thinker. Maybe Popper cannot be criticized, maybe he is not falsifiable. All what he writes is so clear, so reasonable, that you cannot but concur. Two things characterize Poppers work. First and foremost his elucidation of the scientific method. Secondly his advocacy of the Open society. The two things are of course intimately related. As to the scientific method, he did of course not invent it, and what he writes was known before, at least implicitly. Scientists have not followed his lead, he has simply observed what they do, and what it is really all about. Popper comes with a solution to the paradox of induction which was first put by Hume. Induction cannot be proved by induction, hence science cannot rest on science. Popper explains why this is not a problem, it only becomes a problem with the ambition of perfect certitude, once you give that up, taking a more pragmatic attitude, the problem of induction evaporates. Science is only peripherally, if fundamentally and crucially, concerned with empirical confrontation. Most of the time and effort spent by a scientist is not in empirical observation. Science is the creative activity of putting up hypothesis, but those have to be tested in order that we be able to weed out what does not work. In this way one is forced to penetrate deeper and deeper into the configuration space of ideas. It is basically a principle of trial and error, contiguous with the evolution of the organic world. A scientific hypothesis is not formed from observation and generalization, it is forced as a response to a problem. Solutions can never be verified, there is no such thing as scientific proof, everything is provisional, truth can never be attained, just as perfect measurements cannot. The approximation will depend on the purpose, the same with truth, the attitude has to be based on pragmatism. Typical it is of Popper always to stress 'How to' questions and to avoid 'What is' questions. The former highlight the purpose and make no claims beyond the present and provisional, the latter are static and pertain ultimately to finding the inner and permanent truth.

Now Popper has been confused both with Post-Modernism and Logical Positivism. His eschewing absolute truth and his claim that nothing is certain may be naively be thought of as a Post-Modernist approach, reducing truth to just a social construct. Popper may concede that truth may be time-dependent, but ultimately he claim that there is an absolute truth, which we can never know and fathom, but to which we may approach asymptotically. Just as we can never measure accurately, but continually improve our measurements. That the Positivists of the Vienna Circle may have claimed him as one of their own is more serious. Carnap famously remarked that the distance between him and Popper was small, while the distance between Popper and him was large. Their aims might have been similar but ultimately diverging. The positivists believed in verification and wanted to separate meaningful statements (liable to verification) from meaningless. The ambition of Popper was more modest and focused, he simply wanted to make a

demarcation between science and non-science, in particular to separate the former from Marxism and Psychoanalysis, which were both quite influential and fashionable in the Vienna of his youth. The criteria was of course his famous 'falsifiability criterion'. Science does not progress by verification but by refutation. Criticism with the aim to refute forms and develops science and prevents it from being ossified by dogmatism. This does not mean that Popper dismisses everything non-scientific as meaningless. On the contrary, critical as he is of both psychoanalysis and marxism he is also quite appreciative of them seeing in them many very fruitful ideas. More fundamentally meta-physics itself, disparaged by the Vienna Circle as nonsense is highly regarded by Popper, not only as a proto-science. His firmly held beliefs as to the regularity of the universe, that scientific inquiry lead to an asymptotic approach to truth, are examples of meta-physical convictions, although non-falsifiable and hence not scientific, they are very important as sources of inspiration. In fact the core of the work of a scientist is in the forming of hypothesis, and what matters is ultimately not the way those are being formed, but how they stand up to tests. Thus the scientist is free to use whatever personal idiosyncrasies, be they of religious or metaphysical nature, in order to aid and inspire him in his work. Thus unscientific beliefs and personal intuition may prove to be quite fruitful even if not objective and reproducible.

Although the focused fame of Popper rests on his falsifiability condition his more widespread notoriety are based on his attacks on Plato and Marx. His attacks on Marx may have been somewhat untimely in the 40's, and may have earned him a misleading reputation as a political reactionary in certain circles in the decades to come, but it was really his attack on Plato that may have bruised most peoples ego. Plato, for very good reason, is a philosophical demi-god for most Classicists, and as Whitehead famously remarked, all of Western Philosophy is but footnotes to Plato. Thus the reaction was expected, people accused Popper of negligent scholarship and not being sensitive to the irony in Plato. After all cannot the entire argument presented in the Republic be seen as just reasoning by contradiction, a favorite gambit of mathematicians? (In effect does not Plato say so explicitly at one point?). Now Plato may very well have been ironic, but this is ultimately irrelevant. The critics of Popper miss a crucial point. Plato is not only dead, but dead since a very long time. Thus we cannot have any personal relations with him. This is of course obvious on one level, but on a social instinctive one it is not. To study Plato and his writings does stimulate our social instincts to become friends with him, to worry about what he really meant or not, and be concerned lest he be unfairly treated and hurt. But Plato is for all intents and purposes a fictional figure, what should matter to us, even if it is somewhat counterintuitive, are his arguments, objective expressions of thoughts which are exportable and hence common property, and not his ultimately unknowable quale, that forever remain private. Plato can be seen as an embodiment of certain seductive ideas about Society, whether he really entertained them or not, can just be a matter of speculation. Now Popper is of course not entirely immune against this socialization urge, he does profess that he admires Plato, and that he sees Platos intellectual development as a tragedy of a highly intelligent and moral man under social pressure and specious loyalty turning against his better instincts.

As to Marx, Magee remarks that the attack on Marx is devastating, because rather than attack the weak points, as has been the habit of any polemicists throughout the ages,

and which only strengthens an opponent, he attacks him on the strongest. Thus, according to author, Marxism has never intellectually recovered. About this one may of course argue, but one thing seems certain, namely that one needs to distinguish between Marx himself and his vulgar interpreters. Marx himself was not basically dogmatic, even if he may have been seduced to succumb to dogmatism, and did at the end of his life declare himself not to be a Marxist. Popper, a socialist at heart, admires Marx and treats him respectfully, in particular, Popper who seems to be a Christian in the ethical sense, credits Marx with having rejuvenated Christian ethics by pointing back to its initial moral passion<sup>1</sup>. The real villain in Poppers treatise is neither Plato nor Marx, but Hegel, a so called philosopher, who is simply beneath notice. If Schopenhauer would be known for nothing else, at least his diatribes against the specious influence of that German professor, would be enough to endear him to posterity. In fact whatever is bad about Marx, seems to have been due to a delayed but pernicious influence of Hegel, most notably the notion of historicism and the idea that history as a social affair can be predicted.

Popper is fascinated by physics, and of course his ideas of science are best illustrated by the physicists. In fact he claims that the less a discipline is concerned with the exact meaning of words, the more lucid and successful it is. Thus he disparages all attempts at trying to clarify the meaning of words before discussions can even begin. Any such attempts must be circular, or if sustained leading to an infinite regress. This idea can be traced back at least to Aristotle, with his project of establishing the true meaning of all definitions<sup>2</sup>. Thus Popper is quite contemptuous of the modern fashion of philosophy to turn into a mere analysis of how we use words, a development no doubt brought about by the influence of the latter Wittgenstein<sup>3</sup>.

As to Popper as a political thinker, it must be admitted that he is rather indifferent. His ideas of social science are not very exciting with his emphasis on piecemeal changes and social engineering. Magee takes some cautious exception to Poppers dictum that a State should not be concerned with the improvement of the happiness of its citizens, but rather with their unhappiness, the two not, as little as verification and refutation, being symmetric. The former is impossible and invariably tempts Utopian schemes, while the latter necessarily eschews such general and sweeping ambitions and instead focuses on the acute and the concrete. Magee wonders what would happen to such charitable initiatives such as the State support of the Arts. What Popper is concerned about is the free discussion, the right to criticize and the possibility of peaceful exchange of power. Poppers ideas are not necessarily based on democracy, especially not the vulgar interpretations of it as the rule by the majority, but they inevitably foster a democratic spirit as well as

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<sup>1</sup> That there are many parallels between Christianity and Marxism has been pointed out by many commentators in a sarcastic vein, notably by Russell. I used to refer to Marxism as secular Christianity. It is noteworthy how many disillusioned priests and ministers or their rebellious progeny have been drawn to Marxism.

<sup>2</sup> Popper thinks of definitions as macros, to use modern computer jargon . But it is of course also true that definitions are not just conventions, there are such things as good and bad definitions, and some definitions capture something essential better than others.

<sup>3</sup> Russell, a champion of the younger Wittgenstein, deplored the attempts of the latter to turn philosophy into a mere parlour-game.

democratic institutions. He is well aware of the intrinsic contradictions in majority rule and the nature of freedom, contradictions well known in antiquity and eminently articulated by Plato. But Popper claims to transcend Plato and other critics, by focusing not on who should rule, to achieve the optimal rule and happiness, but how to create institutions that limit the damage of bad rule. Ultimately democracy is about taking full responsibility of being human, an awesome responsibility most people might instinctively want to shirk.

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