

Alle Menschen sind Philosophen

K. Popper

June 22-24, 2008

Popper is no professional philosopher. Or at least many, if not most, professional philosophers would be rather suspicious of him finding him somewhat pedestrian. It is true that he comes across as very clear. Clarity is often brought about by simplicity, and simplicity may often be an attribute of a simpleton. Popper has a few ideas which he presents over and over again. They are simple but yet surprisingly fecund and interconnected. He is mostly known for his characterization of science and of a democratic society, both of which are intimately connected.

All people are philosophers, as the title tells the reader, but maybe even more appropriate would be the more radical title to the effect that all organisms are scientists. Everything that lives learns. It learns by solving problems, and problems arise as it strives to survive and improve its setting. Problems are solved by trial and error. Trial means setting up hypothesis and concomitant expectations, those are modified by error. No one learns passively. The world tells you nothing unbidden. Learning is always active, questions are posed and nature reacts. This is what drives evolution, hypothesis culled by error, and as a consequence organisms selected. With the appearance of advanced language this process is transformed to a higher level. Language is representation, and by representation error is no longer fatal. The world can so to speak be modeled, and Popper would here speak about a world 3, the world of the constructs of world 2, which constitute the world of human consciousness, and the battle can be moved from world 1 to world 3, in particular with non-fatal consequences to the organisms. Science is characterized by falsifiability, meaning that it consists of hypotheses that can be tested. In this way hypothesis evolve, similarly to evolution, approaching asymptotically Truth, or what is in concordance with what is. This is simple, in a sense almost tautological, what matters is how it can be interpreted in particular situations. And also what it is not. It rejects an inductive approach to learning and discovery. We discover nothing lest we ask specific questions¹ This shows that the theory presented by Popper is not quite as trivial as one may think, because the majority of people still think that science is observing, finding patterns and extrapolating. That it proceeds by induction, drawing reasonable and probable conclusions from the limited data available. By the unbiased observing we see what really is. This is all wrong. Induction plays no role really in science. Deduction does, but really it is a question of what C.S. Peirce termed ablation. Working out necessary consequences and to see whether they are concordant. The notion of falsifiability is connected with criticism. Falsifiability is not mainly related to empirical testing, this is usually the last resort, but predominantly in relation to other theories and intrinsic consistency, thus mostly an process taking place within the World 3. Now in some sense falsifiability involves in principle an infinite regress, the way out of this impasse is to take a pragmatic attitude. Science can never be done in

¹ This is also very much emphasized by Collingwood in connection with the recreation of history.

isolation, it is a social enterprise and does not make sense otherwise. Thus ultimately a testing of a theory, a hypothesis, is always done confronting others, and the level of precision at which it is done, is determined by the observers. What constitutes conviction for one person, may not to another² This crucial point, usually missing in the presentations of the falsifiability criterion, even in the writings of Popper himself, connects the pursuit of science with democracy. What makes science progress is the acceptance of criticism. The acceptance of error and thereby the awareness of that the other might be right. This makes dogmatism untenable in the long run. The same with democracy, the open discussion of ideas and the right to engage in such³. Democracy is not the answer to the question of whom should govern, because any such answer is bound to lead to despotism, whether or not government is headed by an elite or by the so called people⁴. True democracy is instead the answer to a much more modest question, namely how should we arrange things so as to avoid bad government, in other words how should things be arranged such that bad government can be removed without bloodshed? Democracy is not perfect, it is in the words of Churchill simply the least imperfect of all the ways we can be ruled. Democracy is not about trying to represent the will of the people as faithfully as possible, this leads only to a lack of responsibility. Hence Popper is incidentally against a proportional system leading to a variety of parties, preferring a system with only two clear alternatives. In this way each party is totally responsible for governing, and the result of the polls will have a more direct influence on who governs⁵ Thus the true notion of democracy is somewhat counterintuitive, being more concerned with institutions and protected rights than with majority rule. The majority, as already Plato realized, can decide to dismantle democratic institutions and hence democracy itself. This has happened in history, even in modern history. But this is something that still is not generally understood, even if the overriding purpose of school education supposedly is to instill the respect, the understanding and the acceptance of democratic values.

Are higher animals like dogs and apes conscious? This is a question that intrigues Popper. But is it a philosophical question? Can it be solved by pure thinking? Of course any question involves thinking, and mostly thinking, even in science. The interesting thing is to what an extent such a question is philosophical. Is it in the consequences? That whether the answer to that question should impinge on the rights of animals, maybe to the extent of making their killing murder? Or in the phrasing of it. What really constitutes consciousness, what criteria should we design in order to look for it? In this way the distinction between science and philosophy becomes fluid, philosophy setting up the machinery, defining the rules, acting as a judge, interpreting the results. And, as noted

² This ties in with Poppers pragmatic approach to precision, be it in the meaning of words or in translations. There is no ultimate precision, precision is determined by the situation in hand.

³ This is why the right to express yourself, even when it hurts other people, is so crucial an institution in a democracy.

⁴ Democracy is Greek for the might of the people, and is as such a misnomer

⁵ In a parliament fragmented in many small parties, governing by coalition will be the exception rather than the exception. This often means that small parties may wield disproportionate influence (what proportional representation was meant to guard against), and that a defeat in the polls may lead just to a rearrangement of coalitions, not a change in policy.

before, assessing the consequences. But whether in science or philosophy speculation is not only allowed but is legion. Popper wonders whether only young animal have consciousness, when they get older they recede back into an automated existence. Not only consciousness but also its disappearance are phenomena with which we are familiar. Every time we wake up from sleep we reintegrate our emerging consciousness with our previous one. This is a mystery.

June 25, 2008 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se