

- Popper, Karl Raimund. 1999i. The collapse of communism: understanding the past and influencing the future. In Karl Raimund Popper. *All Life Is Problem Solving* [P. Camiller trans.]. London: Routledge, pp. 126–138.
- Popper, Karl Raimund. 1999j. Waging wars for peace. In Karl Raimund Popper. *All Life Is Problem Solving* [P. Camiller trans.]. London: Routledge, pp. 116–125.

## Critical Rationalism and Ethics<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** This paper examines Popper's views about ethics and metaethics, drawing on a wide variety of sources. It notes the presence of Kantian and utilitarian themes, and discusses some ideas about how they might be interpreted and inter-related. It argues that there are various problems about Popper's views – notably that his Kantian-influenced ideas about the significance of the individual conscience would appear to conflict with the emphasis on inter-subjectivity in his more general epistemology. The author suggests that it is not likely that a resolution to the issues which he raises will be found in Popper's own work, and advocates, as a research programme for critical rationalism, the adoption of a strong form of ethical realism, and argues that Popper's own treatment of reduction suggests the legitimacy of exploration of these matters in a non-reductionistic manner, prior to the attempting of reductions.

### Ethics and the Open Society

As Alan Ryan notes in his 'Popper and Liberalism' (Ryan 1985), there are two strong but contrasting ethical themes in Popper's *Open Society*, of a Kantian and a utilitarian character. More specifically, one might say that on the one side, there is Popper's 'protectionism'. This has a strongly Kantian, or as one might say today, 'republican' flavour to it.<sup>2</sup> Popper's protectionism involves the protection of individual liberty in a manner reminiscent of liberalism. However, despite the fact that Popper has sometimes referred to his views in ways that would invite their assimilation to liberalism,<sup>3</sup> I think that we need to note the distinctive character of his views here. Not only does Popper see the protections that he favours as something that has to be created and enforced by the state in response to our moral demands. (That is, there is no hint of a suggestion that they are to be understood in terms of either moral practises – as in Locke – that pre-date the state, or as, after the fashion of J. S. Mill, something that is rooted in utilitarianism.) But it is clear from a comment that Popper

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made in his (unpublished) lectures at Emory University in 1956, that for Popper it is not acceptable that people are not, say, killed because of the good character of others; rather, they need to have rights protected by the power of the state.<sup>4</sup> (Compare also Popper's discussion of similar themes in his 'Public Opinion and Legal Principles'.<sup>5</sup>) In addition, Popper stresses that there should be the protection not only of the negative rights favoured by classical liberals, but also that they should not be subject to economic exploitation. Indeed, in the course of *The Open Society* and elsewhere, Popper favoured the idea that people should have an income guaranteed out of taxation; while in a discussion comment at the first meeting of the Mont Pélerin Society, Popper suggested that this should be at the level of the average wage.<sup>6</sup>

To these ideas, one might also relate Popper's passionate ethical individualism – something that he emphasised, in a manner that contemporary 'communitarians' might well consider, should be distinguished from egoism. What Popper favoured, here, was a concern for each individual, and for the idea that what was desirable was a combination of individualism and altruism.

On the other side, Popper is well-known for commending, as an approach to public policy, what has become known as 'negative utilitarianism'. Popper here urged that, rather than pursuing the aim of making people happy, government might, instead, be concerned with an agenda of the relief of suffering. It should be noted, at once, that this is not something that Popper was arguing which should be the only concern of public policy. Accordingly, Ninian Smart's amusing criticism of negative utilitarianism that from such a perspective, we should kill people painlessly; see (Smart 1958) does not hit Popper's approach; no more than does John Stuart Mill's earlier development of the same idea, in (Mill 1864).

There is, however, rather more to all this that meets the eye. For while Popper was clearly concerned about the relief of suffering – a response to which is a deep-seated theme in his work<sup>7</sup> – and while Popper seems to me to ignore the problem of what the extent of our responsibilities to others should be, on this score it is not altogether clear that the character of these ideas is quite utilitarian in its spirit. The reason for making this perhaps strange-sounding claim, is that Popper set out, in a paper called 'Public and Private Values', which seems to have been written in 1946,<sup>8</sup> an argument which clarifies ideas on this score already to be found in his *Open Society*. The paper is interesting, because in it Popper starts from the problem that people – his concerns seem to have been, especially with humanitarian democrats<sup>9</sup> – may bring to politics attachments to conflicting ideals, points at issue between which cannot be resolved rationally. (The pursuit of any one of which, he criticized as 'utopian'.) In the face of this, Popper proposed the suggestion that, in the formulation of an agenda for public policy, they should concentrate on what they could agree upon, and suggested, more specifically, that they consider what is *unacceptable*: concrete evils 'such as starvation, pain, humiliation, injustice, exploitation' (Popper 2008, p. 119). This, he was arguing, should furnish an agenda for politics. He further suggested that this might make it possible for those who would be in disagreement about positive ideals – Popper here refers to liberals, socialists, utilitarians and Christians – to discover an agenda that they could agree to.

How would politics itself function? Here his ideas about 'piecemeal social engineering' come to the fore. We start by way of the characterization of an agenda for government policy, along the lines indicated above, in which suggestions are advanced which, in principle, are open to inter-subjective assessment as to whether there is an agreement that they are acceptable. Next, ideas about how these are to be addressed are formulated – implicitly, by an elite. (Popper does not say this explicitly, but the very material in which he stresses that criticism may be offered by anyone, also seems to suggest that not everyone will necessarily be capable of formulating cogent policy suggestions.<sup>10</sup>) This is then presumably opened to criticism. What is crucial, from Popper's perspective, is that experiments be tried out in such a way that we can expect to learn from them; it is striking that, for example, in correspondence with Rudolf Carnap, Popper seems ready to accept that this could even include limited experimentation with the socialization of the means of production.<sup>11</sup> Ideas then need to be assessed both for their effectiveness, and also as to whether they have given rise to problematic unintended consequences. Popper seemed, here, to favour assessment by the public at large – he quoted both Pericles, at the start of Chap. 1 of his *Open Society*, and Burke immediately before the Preface to the First Edition of *The Open Society* on the significance of assessment by ordinary people. He refers, in this context, also to the theme of the 'rational unity of mankind' – in which mankind share a unity, in respect of their reason, which for Popper is a matter of their being able to exercise criticism. In addition, Popper valued elections as a way in which the efforts of politicians could be assessed by the people at large, and he was critical, on this score, of list-based forms of proportional representation for making it more difficult to vote people out of power.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Popper favoured the idea that there should be independent specialists who would be employed by government to conduct such assessments.<sup>13</sup>

If we turn back to what all this implies for the philosophical character of Popper's 'negative utilitarianism', what this means, or so it seems to me, is that while the substance of these ideas may be identified as negative utilitarian in their character, one can equally well take Popper's emphasis to be procedural or methodological in its character. That is, he is offering us a procedure by means of which reasonable democrats who might otherwise be attached to contrasting ideals, between which rational decision-making is not possible,<sup>14</sup> might nonetheless be able to agree. In this sense, one might look at it as suggesting the kind of view that one finds, more recently, in Rawls' later 'political' approach, or in Cass Sunstein's ideas about 'incompletely theorized agreements' cf. (Sunstein 1996).

If one takes this view, there opens up, as I have suggested elsewhere (Shearmur 1996a) and (Shearmur 1996b), an interesting link between these two strands in Popper's work. It relates to the idea upon which I have earlier remarked: 'the rational unity of mankind'. For clearly, if one wishes that people should be able to offer critical feedback – of which we stand in need if we are concerned about truth, about the validity of our moral ideas, or about the cogency of our ideas concerning public policy – then it is important that they enjoy autonomy. The argument that John Stuart Mill developed in his *The Subjection of Women* here applies with full force: unless people enjoy autonomy, including, one might stress, material

autonomy, then it is not clear that they will be in any position to voice criticism. Accordingly – though I am *not* suggesting that this was Popper's own motivation – and there is a risk that it might, even if cogent, be seen as 'the wrong kind of argument'<sup>15</sup> – there is a way in which we might link Popper's negative consensus and criticism approach to public policy, with those aspects of the individual which would benefit from his 'protectionism'. For it would not be implausible to suggest that one might find people pursuing Popper's 'negative utilitarian' methodology, arriving at substantive results which serve to secure the autonomy of those people who are the objects of their moral consideration. Clearly, the possibility of their making a contribution to dialogue as cognitive agents could not be the only reason for protecting people. It is obvious enough that Popper would, for example, press that we especially protect, say, those people who would not be capable of making a contribution as what one might term critical, Popperian moral agents; not least because of his deep concern about suffering. But the link seems to me interesting and suggestive, and it has well-known parallels to Mill's argument from a truth-seeking fallibilism to toleration.

### Metaethics and the Open Society: Brief Remarks

I will here explore (only very briefly for reasons that I will explain in the next section), Popper's views about the status of ethical claims in *The Open Society* and elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Three issues are here worth noting.

First, Popper strongly emphasises the autonomy of ethics, by way of an emphasis on the dualism of facts and decisions. As I have argued elsewhere, his concern here seems to me driven by a wish to resist ethical naturalism, and attempts to collapse ethics into sociology or to offer a historicist form of ethical futurism. Indeed, one could see a key motif running through this discussion of Popper's to be the autonomy of ethics, and a desire to defend it against various kinds of heteronomy. This, however, leads to a difficulty, which is that while Popper stresses that our decisions are not to be seen as necessarily arbitrary, he does not offer us an account of that by which our ethical decisions are to be understood as constrained. There is a risk, there, that because of Popper's wish to stress the autonomy of ethics, Popper's views sometimes come over as highly decisionistic in their character, and almost existentialist in their spirit (although Popper was critical of existentialism).

In a lecture that he delivered in New Zealand as part of a series which contained material that went into *The Open Society*, Popper clearly took the view that it was the individual's conscience which was 'the ultimate court of appeal'.<sup>17</sup> The conscience is also stressed in *The Open Society*. It is, however, worth noting that at the end of a broadcast lecture which Popper delivered in 1954, in which he addressed Kant's philosophy, Popper's discussion concluded with a discussion of Kant's ideas about autonomy. Popper here stressed the Kantian theme of – in the face of a command by God – its being 'our responsibility to judge whether the command is moral or immoral'. This Popper continues to redescribe as 'a man's

conscience is his moral authority', and then to describe aspects of Kant's ethics as offering a formulation of 'what our conscience may demand from us' (See Popper 1963, Chap. 7, Sect. 6). It would thus seem plausible to interpret Popper's own stress on the individual conscience, as being in a similar Kantian spirit.

What might we say about Popper's views concerning how these things might work? In one interesting passage in *The Open Society* (Popper 1945, Chap. 24, Sect. iii), Popper discusses the way in which, in George Bernard Shaw's *St Joan*, a figure who had been calling for the death of Joan of Arc breaks down, when confronted with the actual reality of what he had been calling for. He was thus led to repudiate his earlier views, when he was confronted with their consequences.

At the same time, it is by no means clear that a person's conscience has sufficient autonomy from their substantive ethical views, to generally play this role. In our own day, Peter Singer has offered a hard-hitting criticism of appeals to individual ethical intuitions, noting that these may carry the residues of mistaken philosophical or religious ideas, or issues relating to the quirks of our personal upbringing (Singer 1974).<sup>18</sup> Further – or so it seems to me – one might use against reliance upon the individual's conscience the very argument that Popper himself used in his *Logic of Scientific Discovery* against subjectivistic epistemology: that there is no reason to take individual subjective certainty as indicating truth. (See Popper 1959, Sect. 8; the quotation is from p. 46.) If I may edit Popper's statement there slightly, eliminating references to a scientific conscience, it would seem to me to apply perfectly well to the judgements of our conscience:

No matter how intense a feeling [I may have] it can never justify a statement. I may be utterly convinced of the truth of a statement...overwhelmed by the intensity of my experience: every doubt may seem to be absurd. But does this afford the slightest reason... to accept my statement. Can any statement be justified by the fact that K. R. P. is convinced of its truth? The answer is, 'No'; and any other answer would be incompatible with the idea of...objectivity.

The reference here to 'truth' in the context of Popper's ideas about ethics might seem far-fetched. But in fact, already in places in *The Open Society*, there are various passages which seem suggestive of an ethical objectivism.<sup>19</sup> However, Popper also criticized there explicitly both the idea of a science of ethics, and took issue with the idea of our making judgements on others – something that, it seems to me, would be needed if we were to endorse an objectivistic approach.

It is, however, worth noting that in Popper's 'Emory Lectures' of 1956 (which exist only in a fragmentary form<sup>20</sup>) Popper discusses in passing the theme of natural law.<sup>21</sup> He is critical of it, but because of the aspect to it which suggests that it was instituted, once and for all, by a god. Popper also indicates that he disagrees with moral positivism. He offers instead an account in which we criticize in the light of *developing* intuitions about justice – his account of which, while sketchy, seems to me to parallel his more general ideas about epistemology.

Finally, there is, of course, Popper's 1961 Appendix to *The Open Society*, 'Facts, Standards and Truth: A Further Criticism of Relativism'. Most of this is concerned with general issues in epistemology. But it is interesting that in Sect. 5, when he discusses fallibilism and the growth of knowledge, he illustrates his discussion

of the discovery of mistakes as constituting real advance in our knowledge by reference also to 'the known examples of miscarriage of justice' (Popper 1966, Vol. II, Sect. 5), which already suggests a continuity between his discussion of factual and of moral issues. However, rather than offering a straightforward parallel between ourselves as engaged in the quest to discover both factual and moral truth, Popper initially seems to suggest that criticism in the moral sphere is in the light of 'standards which we have decided to adopt', and he concludes his detailed discussion by saying 'the logical situation of the regulative ideas, of "right", say, or "good", is far less clear than that of the idea of correspondence to the facts' (Sect. 13). However, he also then goes on to write:

we may take the idea of absolute truth – of correspondence to the facts – as a kind of model for the realm of standards, in order to make it clear to ourselves that, just as we may *seek* for absolutely true propositions in the realm of facts or at least for propositions which come nearer to the truth, we may *seek* for absolutely right or valid proposals in the realm of standards – or at least for better, or more valid, proposals.

He then goes on to say, more substantively:

As in the realm of facts, we can make discoveries. That cruelty is always 'bad'; that it should be avoided where possible; that the golden rule is a good standard which can perhaps even be improved by doing unto others, wherever possible, as they want to be done by: these are elementary and extremely important examples of discoveries in the realm of standards. These discoveries create standards, we might say, out of nothing: as in the field of factual discovery, we have to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps. This is the incredible fact: that we can learn; by our mistakes, and by criticism; and that we can learn in the realm of standards just as well as in the realm of facts.

This, however, is about as much as Popper says. I will explore something of why this is the case, in the next section. But it seems to me that there is enough by way of explicit objectivism here, to offer a basis for my earlier critique of the judgments of an individual conscience, in the name of a Popperian stress on inter-subjective appraisal.

### Ethics and the Bounds of Reason

Given that Popper wrote extensively about epistemology, and also about moral and political issues, one might therefore expect that one would find, in his writings, a well-developed epistemology and meta-ethics. This, however, is not the case. Indeed, writing to an otherwise sympathetic correspondent who suggested that there was a 'hole' in his argument at this point, Popper responded that there indeed was:<sup>22</sup>

a hole in my argument, very loosely filled by a few hints (to which you refer) and by the addendum to vol ii [of *The Open Society*] (to which you also refer). There is a reason for this: I did not want to be drawn into a discussion of meta ethics. Almost all philosophic discussions in those days were of meta ethics and they seemed to me endless and not profitable. There were other reasons too. I preferred to make my ethical position clear in discussing (criticizing) opposing positions. However, I have lectured on Ethics, both in

New Zealand and in London (one course, on request, at the L.S.E.). But I have never felt that I should publish my views on meta ethics – on what you call 'the logic of moral discovery'. Thus the hole of which you complain does exist.

This, however, was not half of the matter. For it is important to bear in mind, when approaching Popper's work, an important issue concerning his ideas about rationality. It is this. In *Logik der Forschung* – and thus the text of his *Logic of Scientific Discovery* – Popper, while recognizing that he held various metaphysical theories (e.g. that he was a realist; that he had particular views about the aims of science; that he favoured an 'Aristotelian' correspondence theory of truth), did not have to hand a theory about what made such views rational. Accordingly – and understandably – in *Logik der Forschung*, ideas about the aim of science played a role, but their status was made a matter of decision. That is to say, while it is clear what Popper's own views were about the preferred aims for science, and while the substantive approach offered in the book was written with an eye to those aims, at bottom the issue of what view should be taken of the aims of science (and thus also of what methodology should be adopted) was left as a matter of decision. The book was also written in such a way that it was possible not – in considering its contents – to refer to truth. The issue of the aim of science – which plays a key role in the book – is thus explicitly made, by Popper, a matter of decision. (Popper makes clear that it is open for people who do not share his views as to the aims of science – conventionalists, for example – to prefer different methodological rules to the ones which he is recommending.)

Popper himself has explained this issue in notes added to the English translation of *Logic of Scientific Discovery* and, for example, in his *Objective Knowledge*, where he wrote (Popper 1972, p. 40, Note 9):

In my *Logik der Forschung*... I describe myself as a metaphysical realist. In those days I identified wrongly the limits of science with those of arguability. I later changed my mind and argued that non-testable (i.e. irrefutable) metaphysical theories may be rationally arguable...

Now, the reason why I have stressed this point is as follows. While Popper's views about this issue changed (as I will describe shortly), the change took place *after* he wrote his *Open Society*. This I believe to be of considerable importance if we approach the text of that book. For it serves to explain several important features of it. In particular, if we consider that, for Popper at the time at which he wrote, it is only the empirical, the formal and – *given* a view as to what our aims should be – the methodological that falls within the scope of the rational, it becomes clear why Popper's discussion of ethical issues is rather strange. For while one might say that – as in *Logik der Forschung* – aspects of Popper's actual views keep breaking out, there is an oddly 'decisionistic' feel to a lot of what he wrote.

In 1948, Popper gave a paper, 'Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences', at a conference in the Netherlands. While he was there, he heard a paper delivered by a Professor L. J. Russell from Birmingham. The paper, 'Propositions and Proposals' suggested to Popper the important idea that proposals can be discussed; and it was of such significance for him that he added a reference to Russell's paper in a footnote to his 'Prediction and Prophecy', when it appeared in 1949.<sup>23</sup>

He subsequently referred to it, in his *Open Society*. At the same time, while Popper revised his *Open Society* for the first American edition (in 1950) he did no more, on this score, than add some references to Russell. He also used the terminology of 'proposals' in his appendix 'Facts, Standards and Truth'.

Subsequently, two developments took place. The first of these was the idea – which formed part of Popper's *Postscript* – that the rational discussion of metaphysical ideas was possible, if they were understood and evaluated as solutions to a problem. These ideas were first published as his 'The Problem of the Irrefutability of Philosophical Theories', which was given as a talk for Radio Free-University Berlin, and first published in *Ratio* in 1958. This marks the generalization of his views about the empirical evaluation of theories in terms of their testability, to the wider idea of the discussion of theories in terms of their inter-subjective appraisal. Popper, however, applies these ideas – both in the *Ratio* piece, and also in the fuller discussion in the *Postscript* – to metaphysical rather than to ethical theories.

The second theme related to a striking idea in Popper's *Open Society*. This was the notion that rationality itself was a matter of commitment – that the rationalist was involved in an irrational commitment to reason. This is an idea that seems to have an echo in Popper's personal history. As Bartley and Hacohen (Hacohen 2000) have explored, a first draft of Popper's *Unended Quest* seems to suggest that, at the point when, as a result of people dying in a demonstration, he lost faith in Marxism, he seems also to have lost faith in reason. He read Kierkegaard, pondered issues about Kierkegaard's treatment of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, Isaac, and seems to have come under his baleful influence – to the point, Bartley argues, of adopting a Kantian ethics on something like Kierkegaardian grounds (Bartley 1989).

Now, if one reads this into Popper's brief comments in *The Open Society* about an irrational commitment to reason, one gets onto the ground of Bartley's concerns, in his *Retreat to Commitment*, about rationalism, commitment and the 'tu-quoque' argument. As Bartley argued in his *Retreat to Commitment* (Bartley 1962), there is a problem facing the rationalist if rationalism is itself to be understood as involving 'an irrational faith in reason' (as Popper put it in the first edition of his *Open Society* (Popper 1945, Chap. 24, Sect. II, final page). The problem is that it would mean that the rationalist could not then criticize some other kind of fideist – whether religious or political – for their irrational leap of faith. In the fourth edition of the book in 1962, Popper modified the language of Chap. 24 in the light of Bartley's criticism, and also added his Appendix 'Facts, Standards and Truth: a further criticism of relativism'.

As has been explained in material that has been reproduced and commented on in Mariano Artigas's *The Ethical Nature of Karl Popper's Theory of Knowledge* (Artigas 1999), Popper has said that the changes that he made – with acknowledgement to Bartley – in *The Open Society* were, in fact, written by Bartley. Popper – and Artigas, who defends him on this point – seems to have been left unconvinced that there was a genuine philosophical problem here. But it seems to me that there were two, both related to the fact that *The Open Society* often seems decisionistic in its view of ethics.

The first problem – with which Bartley was concerned – relates to the question of whether or not what Popper had to say about 'faith in reason' was implicitly fideistic. I will not discuss this issue here, other than to say that it seems to me that Bartley was correct in seeking to bring out the way in which Popper's work replaced justification by openness to criticism, and that in this context the issue of whether critical rationalism was, itself, open to criticism then becomes a serious issue.

The second problem relates to the status of ethics. Here, I have suggested that there are some problems. For understandable enough reasons, Popper's treatment of ethics in *The Open Society* seems decisionistic. At the same time, Popper's stress on our ability to learn in ethics, and the parallels that he draws with his epistemology, would seem to suggest an ethical realism. Popper, as I have indicated, had an aversion to addressing this topic, and more generally, to ethical theory. As he wrote in 'Public and Private Values' (see Popper 2008, p. 120):

For a long time I have been dissatisfied with the speculations of most of our philosophers on matters of Ethics. Especially the discussions of such problems as the Nature of Good or of the Objectivity of Values etc. appeared to me as hopelessly barren. It appeared to me that such a simple principle or imperative as 'help those who are in distress' or 'fight for those who have suffered injustice' or, if you like, the Golden Rule, was capable of covering at least nine tenths of what was needed in ethics. But the philosophy of this sort had practically nothing whatever to do with these simple principles or imperatives. On the other hand, I do not wish to suggest that abstract thought in ethical matters is superfluous or that it must be barren. On the contrary, I do feel that it is very important to think about these matters, as long as we do not forget what our thoughts should yield. They should yield a better understanding of such practical principles or imperatives as those mentioned before, and specially a kind of hierarchy of urgency among those principles, that is to say, a hierarchy which can serve as a guide in case of conflicts between such principles.

But this reaction while understandable in personal terms, and while intellectually understandable when Popper did not have to hand an expansive theory of the character of rationality, is surely insufficient. There is an intellectual *problem* here: can we give an account that can make sense, cosmologically, of the kind of common-sense realism which is part of our day-to-day ethical attitudes?<sup>24</sup>

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The situation with which all this leaves us, seems to me not altogether satisfactory. There is an immense amount of really interesting material in Popper's work which relates to ethical issues (on which my remarks here have only touched). But it would seem to me clear that Popper's own early ideas about the limited scope of reason, together with his personal aversion to writing on issues of metaethics, meant that he did not produce much by way of either an extended discussion of his own views about ethics, metaethics, or the epistemology of ethics.

It would in principle have been possible for him to offer such a thing, from the perspective of his later ideas. But although he admitted – in his letter to Sharratt – that there was such a gap in his work, it is clear that it was not a gap which he had

any inclination to fill. More might be extracted, to try to fill the gap, from remarks scattered through Popper's work. But it is not clear that there is any magic bullet to be found.<sup>25</sup> While as far as I can see, any attempt to do so would face the problem that it would be inconsistent with some of the things that Popper has written, because of the terms in which he wrote about these matters in his *Open Society*.

### What Is To Be Done?

Here I will offer some brief and speculative suggestions.

What is needed would seem to me to have three aspects to it. First, there are important problems about Popper's substantive ethical views. At one level, the picture is clear enough. He favours a liberal/republican protection of the individual. Second, he favours an approach to public policy which addresses – in an experimental manner – a negative utilitarian (or perhaps better, consensually agreed) negative agenda.<sup>26</sup> Third, he favoured the pursuit of positive values about the good life by individuals and their friends. (This would seem open also to what one might call private-collective arrangements as in the pursuit of a particular positive vision of life in a cooperative or a commercial setting. See, in this context, the Disney Corporation's town of 'Celebration' (cf. Shearmur 2002).)

What seems to me to be left open as a problem by all this is the *extent* to which we should be committed to relieving the suffering of others. Here, Peter Singer's 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' raises this issue in a stark manner (Singer 1972). For if the relief of famine and, more generally, the remedying of the dire conditions in which others are currently living features on our moral agenda, the key problem is: just what should our commitment to this amount to? Singer's own response – in which we are faced with the prospect of living our lives as joyless slaves to distant need – is clearly unacceptable.<sup>27</sup> What seems clearly called-for, is an account of how different ethical concerns are to be properly inter-related.

Second, we stand in need of an epistemology of ethics. And, finally, we need a coherent metaphysical defence of the kind of moral realism that a critical rationalist approach to ethics would involve. Each of these would merit a much fuller discussion than I can offer here, but let me say a very little about them, in turn.

Popper, as I have indicated above, drew certain parallels between his ordinary epistemology and ethics. It seems to me that this needs to be developed in much more detail. If we were to do so, however, we would need to make one significant change to Popper's ethical views. For if we are to take a 'Popperian' view of objectivity in ethics, then we would, surely, have to adopt his own emphasis, in this context, on objectivity as being the product of inter-subjective discussion. This, in turn, would mean that we would have to qualify the role that Popper gives to the individual's conscience. Indeed, as I suggested above, not only might an individual's view simply be wrong, but it may also be influenced by mistaken general theories. We have – as Popper has stressed – no means of detecting if this is the case on our own (compare, in this context, his important discussion of objectivity in

*The Open Society*, Chap. 23). While our own subjective convictions here, however strong, don't provide us with a means of detecting that we are right, we may learn by means of the critical judgements of others.

Here, Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* offers us an interesting model, if it is read not just as description, but rather as a theory directed towards the attainment of moral truth – this being what an impartial spectator would approve of. On Smith's account, we learn by way of the (fallible) moral judgements of others upon our conduct.<sup>28</sup> But there is something more specifically Popperian upon which we might draw, as well. It is Popper's theory of the 'empirical basis' – in which we take, as a guide to what is true, those particular judgements upon which we can, for the time being, reach an inter-subjective consensus. (I have offered an account of how I think that this is best to be understood, and a defence of it against some critics, elsewhere (See Shearmur 2007).)

In what I wrote above, I referred to 'particular judgements', and I did so advisedly. For while I have no reason to doubt that there may be general ethical truths, a knowledge of these would seem to me more of what we would expect to discover at the *end* of moral enquiry, rather than something that can sensibly be invoked as having authoritative status in the course of such enquiry. As in science, so in morality: we can surely take our tentative 'basic statements' as things that can be used to evaluate general moral claims, rather than as things the correctness of which is to be settled by invoking general moral claims. To be sure, we may wish to refer to general claims; but their value would seem to me restricted to their character as tentative generalizations about other cases, rather than to have any kind of authority in their own right – after all, from where could such authority stem, epistemologically?

What all this would amount to, is a kind of inter-subjective *methodological* ethical particularism. We would, thus, see what our intuitions are with respect to a particular case. If we were in disagreement, we would draw attention to the features of the action etc. that seemed to us to be significant, ask for clarification from the other people, and would argue by analogy with other cases actual or hypothetical. In the course of this, claims of a general character might be made; but they would then be open to testing in other cases rather than things the invocation of which could be expected to settle such cases. It would resemble a form of reflective equilibrium, but in which less weight is given to general statements or principles, and which is envisaged as an actual social process, in which we are engaged with other people who are typically in disagreement with us.

Two further comments are worth adding here.

The first is that, as compared with Popper's account, it would mean that the individual's conscience cannot be considered the final court of appeal. We can endorse, fully, Popper's concern for the autonomy of ethics. But his own parallel with truth surely points us towards the significance for ethics of his own critique of the epistemological significance of subjective certainty, and towards an inter-subjective theory of objectivity.

Does this mean that we must discount the significance of the individual conscience entirely? I think that three arguments may be offered for according it some significance.

First, we may find that we are simply not able to get any measure of inter-subjective agreement about some issues, despite our attempts to learn from one another. (After all, Popper's own discussions in 'The Myth of the Framework' and of the Bohr-Einstein arguments in his 'On Toleration' brought out the way in which learning may take place without our being able to reach agreement, in some areas.<sup>29</sup>) What this would suggest is an obligation on our own part at least to listen to the views of those who disagree with us and to see what we can learn from them. But if we discover that we are operating in areas in which the possibilities of inter-subjective agreement are limited, we should then still bear in mind that the strength of our subjective convictions is not to be equated with truth. Where there are persisting disagreements, this recognition of fallibility – in a context in which it may be difficult to correct our errors – should incline us towards compromise. But at the same time, it surely indicates that there are advantages to, as far as possible, allowing people who disagree to consensually make their own arrangements with those who agree with them, rather than trying to force a single way or proceeding on everybody. (One might, say, explore whether there could be separate hospital systems for those who favour or abhor euthanasia.)

Second, if there is a fair measure of dialogue and learning, we may, with an eye to the conscience, take heart from fallibilism. Just because there seems to be very wide discussion-based agreement on something, this does not show that what people have agreed on is correct. In such a setting, people may clearly retain their conscientious judgement that the preponderant view is false. This view would have a status comparable to that of a metaphysical research programme, as distinct from a scientific theory.<sup>30</sup> This means that one should be aiming to develop arguments that, in the end, others should find telling, and that one should not confuse the status of one's programmatic ideas with something for which there are intersubjectively telling arguments. The idea that everyone else is out of step with the truth, is not a view to be assumed lightly.

Third, we may accord people freedom of conscience not for reasons relating to truth, but out of respect for their subjective feelings. If someone is, individually, deeply unhappy about something, it would seem churlish to disregard their feelings even if they cannot offer any telling arguments for their view (or if we feel that such arguments that they do offer, are poor). On the face of it, provided that their actions largely concern just themselves, we can surely respect their feelings, as we would a matter of purely subjective, but deeply felt, taste.

The second issue relates to a complexity of the material with which we are dealing. I have suggested that a critical rationalist approach to ethics should take up a methodological form of ethical particularism, but one in which the actions of each individual are, in principle, open to critical scrutiny from all other moral agents (in the sense, here, of people who have the capacity to evaluate them). I should, thus, aim to act in such a way that the action that I am taking would be judged as the right thing for me – a named individual, at a particular point in time, in particular circumstances – to do.

Now circumstances are, clearly, important here. If I am a member of a particular hunter-gatherer society in certain particular circumstances, and where the society has

in place certain particular traditions and conventions, what it may be right for me to do may be very different from how a different 'I' should act in other circumstances. The setting must be taken account of by those judging the action, as must, say, differences between what is obligatory and what is supererogatory. We also need to recognize that it is morally possible for societies to organize themselves in different, systematic, ways. That is, there are clearly different, morally possible, ways in which modern Western societies may be organized – compare, say, Sweden or the U.S. While each of these societies may be open to moral criticism and improvement, the kind of differences in the sort of individualism to which they give prominence are, surely, morally viable options; and the same is surely true of various other social formations. Further, what our history has been – both at a social and an individual level – may introduce significant path-dependency. We can also surely sympathize with Thomas Jefferson's judgement that slavery may be wrong, but not seeing what could have been done about it in the situation that he was facing, and with the kinds of cases that Thomas Nagel discussed in his 'Moral Luck' (Nagel, 1979), in which people may or may not face difficult moral issues simply as a consequence of how chance has affected their personal circumstances.

But what of the metaphysical status of ethics? The key features of the account that seems to me suggested by Popper's work, are, first its objectivism: we clearly may learn things, morally – both individually, and in terms of the history of mankind. This seems to me difficult to deny, yet – as McNaughton has argued in his *Moral Vision*<sup>31</sup> – to be a key argument in favour of moral realism. How should we approach such a view? I would suggest that we should look at it in cosmological terms; i.e. in terms of our offering an account of what the world might be like, such that there could be moral truths.

At the same time, we need first to appreciate the complexity of what is involved. As I have suggested, what is right for us to do will differ depending on not just the specifics of an agent's situation, but also on the kind of society in which we are living, and the sort of social and moral institutions that have been adopted within it (where clearly, various different kinds of systematic choices may have been made, or various different institutions and customs may have been inherited). Not only may this mean that *different* actions may be morally mandatory, depending on the institutional system in which someone happens to be living. But the fact that people may be living within a system which has undesirable features to it, may mean that people may recognize that there are some things which it would be right to do, but which, given their circumstances, it would require an act of almost reckless supererogation to actually undertake. All this – in line with the epistemological approach suggested above – suggests that our focus should be on actions in specific situations, and that it could well be the case that there are no true *general* moral principles.

But let us turn from this, back to the metaphysics of morals more narrowly understood. I suspect that any theory which would be adequate to our common-sense experience, and to the phenomenon of learning, needs to have the following features. First, there must be truth-makers. Second, these must have what one might call a Platonic rather than a Humean relation to our motivation – i.e. that if we

have the appropriate capacities to appreciate it, then our discerning of a moral truth brings with it a predisposition to act in accordance with it. At the same time, there are other things involved, too – our various other sentiments, concerns for our own well-being, aesthetic feelings, and so on. Inter-subjective appraisal, however, can operate so as to tell us what, all told, we should do – or, more typically, about the relative acceptability of different kinds of action, judgement etc.

It might be thought: but merely to set out such ideas shows that they are obviously untenable. And, clearly, it might turn out that such views will prove to be unsustainable (e.g. that an ‘error’ theorist such as J. L. Mackie might be right), or that all that can be sustained is a much less radical view (e.g. the kind of ethical realism that has been defended by Michael Smith (see Smith 1994, 2000)).

However, I think that we should not be premature in dismissing the more radical form of these ideas. Compare, in this context, Popper’s suggestion – from his ‘A Realist View of Logic, Physics and History’ – that we should fluff Plato’s beard before attempting reductions.<sup>32</sup> Popper’s argument – made in the context of metaphysics – was that we should be careful lest we adopt a premature reductionism (and especially a ‘philosophical’ reductionism, which gets rid of problems and issues by simply finding ways to avoid talking about them). Rather, we should initially explore matters in a realist mode, with an eye to grasping their full prima facie character, prior to attempting any form of reduction.

From such a perspective, a priority should be given to actual moral engagement, and to moral epistemology. As with Popper’s non-moral epistemology, we should concentrate on the growth of our knowledge – on what has been learned (and, I would suggest, in what circumstances). We might also treasure such diversity as currently exists, not so much for its own sake, but as offering different perspectives from which, if we approach matters in a spirit of critical rationalism – recognizing our own fallibility and that we might hope to learn from one another – we might, indeed, learn.

What, however, of wider epistemological and metaphysical issues? What, say, of J. L. Mackie’s arguments, in his *Ethics*, against exactly the kind of theory that I am suggesting that we should be seeking to develop? This is not the place for an extended discussion, but three comments seem to me worth making.

First, my argument here suggests that the time to engage fully with Mackie is not now, but only after substantive efforts have been put into the substance and epistemology of ethics, along the lines of the critical rationalist approach suggested above. While there is clearly no harm in philosophical discussion of matters of ontological issues taking place at any point, we can – I would suggest – only expect to get close to the truth about these things, when we know a lot more than we do, currently.

Second, part of the argument would be connected with Popper’s own case for prima facie emergence, more generally. That is, while I think that Popper’s arguments on this theme are best interpreted in the context of his ideas about fluffing Plato’s beard, and thus as tentative and as subject to subsequent attempts at reduction, Popper has argued more broadly for a non-reductionist view of cosmology, in which there is genuine emergence. If this can be sustained, then the idea that there

are indeed values with the kinds of characteristics that ethical realism would require them to have, would look less ‘queer’.

Third, Mackie offers an epistemological argument against the existence of such values. If they existed, he asks, how could we have the knowledge of them? But his argument would seem to me to depend crucially on our willingness to adopt an empiricist epistemology of exactly the kind that Popper’s work has furnished so many telling arguments against. This aspect of Mackie’s case, it seems to me, does not pose a serious problem for the ideas being suggested here.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to survey and where necessary to reconstruct some features of Popper’s approach to ethics. I have suggested that, while interesting, there are some problems which should be of concern to those interested in ‘critical rationalism’, and that there is a lot of work to be done. This relates to the substance of a critical rationalist ethics, to its epistemology, and also to its metaphysics.

In the latter parts of the paper, I have offered some suggestions as to the direction in which I think that critical rationalism should go. While I have made use, here, of some ideas from Popper’s work, the substance is very much my responsibility, rather than anything for which Popper should be blamed. Of the arguments that I have offered, I would take the case for extending the inter-subjectivity of Popper’s more general approach into ethics, to be the most important. The fate of the other, more speculative, suggestions I suspect may be less likely to survive intersubjective assessment.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank participants in the ‘Rethinking Popper’ conference for their comments on an earlier version of this paper, and also members of the graduate seminar on Popper’s Political Thought at the ANU in our first semester in 2008, notably Cavit Hacıhamdioglu and John Shellard, for discussion on related issues.
2. For the Kantian parallels, see (Reiss 1970). For the recent revival of republicanism, which has some striking parallels to this strand in Popper’s work, see (Pettit 1997) and Skinner (1998).
3. Cf., for example, his ‘Public Opinion and Liberal Principles’ in (Popper 1963).
4. Karl Popper, Emory Lectures 1956, Popper Archive, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Disk 11, side 2. Tape 10, side B. The theme is similar in spirit to Pettit’s concerns about the slave with an indulgent master. It should, however, also be stressed that Popper wished to minimize the role of the state, and that he also mentions the theme that the existence of the state is a source of humiliation to us – a decidedly un-republican thought! I have discussed these lectures more fully in (Shearmur 2004).
5. See (Popper 1963, Chap. 17, Sect. 3, p. 350). I would like to thank Alain Boyer for drawing my attention to this material which – including Popper’s reference to angels – is very similar to that in the Emory Lectures.
6. Hoover Institution Archive, Mont Pèlerin Society Archive, Box 14.

7. Compare, in this context, Sect. 2 of (Popper 1976), and his impatience with non-realist philosophy in the face of human suffering (see the start of Chap. 2 of (Popper 1972)), and the end of Sect. 26 of (Popper 1976) – a view perhaps not unexpected from someone who had been involved in the translation into German of (Lenin 1927). See Popper Archive, 504.17. That this may have made an impact, may be seen also by Popper's 'Berkeley as a Precursor of Mach and of Einstein' in (Popper 1963).
8. Popper indicates in a letter to Ernst Gombrich on October 24th, 1944 that it was a paper that he was planning to write (Popper Archive 300.3); a version has now been published in (Popper 2008).
9. This is important in thinking about the feasibility of Popper's ideas; it also relates closely to concerns in his letters at the time; see, in this context, the material brought together under the title of 'Uniting the Camp of Humanitarianism', in (Popper 2008).
10. Compare the remark that he quotes from Pericles at the start of Chap. 1 of (Popper 1945): 'Although only a few may originate a policy, we are all able to judge it.'
11. See Popper's letter to Carnap of January 6th, 1947, now included in (Popper 2008).
12. See (Popper 1988), now reprinted as 'On Democracy' in (Popper 2008).
13. See Popper's note 'On the New Liberty', in (Popper 2008).
14. Popper, of course, emphasised the importance of discussion, and criticized what he called 'The Myth of the Framework' cf. (Popper 1994); but he also stressed that while we may learn from such discussion, we should not expect that it will lead to consensus. Cf., on this, his 'On Toleration' in (Popper 2008).
15. Cf. Bernard Williams' various criticisms of utilitarianism as being, sometimes, able to save certain phenomena of moral life, such as the significance of friendship, from within a utilitarian perspective, but by offering a rationale for them which was of an unacceptable kind.
16. I have also discussed these issues, with extensive documentation, in (Shearmur 1996a).
17. See Popper's 'Science and Religion', now in (Popper 2008).
18. I would emphatically not wish to endorse what seems to me the quasi-Cartesian resolution of this problem, which Singer himself advances in this paper.
19. See, for the identification and discussion of these, (Shearmur 1996a).
20. All that exist are notes, and some limited recordings.
21. See Popper's Emory Lectures, Tape 6, side A.
22. Popper to Michael Sharratt, 24th October 1974; the quotation is now included in the editorial introduction to (Popper 2008).
23. Compare, in this connection, his reference in material subsequently added to Note 5 of Chap. 5 of Popper, 1945, to (Russell 1949), and the idea that proposals can be discussed. Popper first cited Russell's paper in his 'Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences', which appeared in the proceedings of the same conference, and has since been reprinted in (Popper 1963).
24. I would like to thank Hatha McDivitt for extensive discussion on this issue, upon which she is currently writing her Ph.D. thesis (from a perspective critical of the realism that I would wish to endorse).
25. As I argued in (Shearmur 1996a), Note 27 to Chap. 4, it is not clear that the interesting paper 'A Non-Psychological Justification of the Categorical Imperative' (which one might argue to offer what he should have said), is by Popper. We have notes from his New Zealand lectures on ethics; these, while interesting, are historical – and were given at a time when Popper's own views about the scope of reason would preclude his contributing much of his own. I do not know if anything remains from Popper's lectures on these issues at the L.S.E. There is also a range of material relating to ethics included in (Popper 2008), but it does not seem to me to add much to our substantive concerns.
26. Popper was willing to extend this – under the probing of Lord Boyle – to include wider enabling measures (see his response to Boyle in [Schilpp 1974]), while in his 'For a Better World', he suggested that the government might encourage workers' participation in industrial enterprises, experiments in community life by young people, and experimental schools. See (Popper 2008, Chap. 32, pp. 294ff).
27. See, for what seems to me an acute criticism (McGinn 1999).

28. I would thus suggest that it is Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, rather than Hegel (contrast, here, (Benhabib 1986)), who should be looked at as the key figure in the development of an account which stresses intersubjectivity – and thus as a precursor of both Popper and the later Habermas.
29. See 'The Myth of the Framework', now (Popper 1994), and 'On Toleration', in (Popper 2008).
30. Compare, for a brief account (Popper 1976, Sect. 33).
31. (McNaughton 1988). McNaughton's approach to moral realism seems to me, along with Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a key starting-point for a critical rationalist approach to ethics, despite his dalliance with Davidson.
32. Karl Popper, 'A Realist View of Logic, Physics and History', in (Popper 1972).

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## Popper's Insights into the State of Economics

Joseph Agassi

**Abstract** Popper's ideas on economics are interesting regardless of his philosophy in general. They were taken as test-case for his theory of the demarcation of empirical science. This chapter begins with the popular criticism of his theory of science and proceeds to discuss economics within the framework of his views.

### Critique of Popper Left and Right

The Vienna Circle demarcated science as verifiable, Popper demarcated it as refutable. They launched against him the first popular criticism of his criterion of demarcation of science. It was general. It is also uninteresting, as it rests on a willful distortion: they ascribed to him the new, Wittgenstein-style idea that he was demarcating the language of science. (Wittgenstein identified meaningful sentences with the body potential of scientific knowledge and the verified ones with actual science.) Popper, however, was following tradition here and discussing science within some given language. Since a reasonably rich language includes the negation of every sentence within it, refutability and verifiability are usually identical as demarcations of meanings there, so that by the distortion, Popper's demarcation was identical with that of the targets of his criticism. Indeed, both within tradition and within Popper's system, the negations of scientific theories are not scientific; by contradistinction, Wittgenstein and his Viennese followers took it for granted that as the negation of a meaningful sentence is meaningful, it is also scientific. Wittgenstein's fans have meanwhile gracelessly withdrawn their Wittgenstein-style views on language (for reasons that are irrelevant here); consequently, the early popular criticism of Popper's criterion of demarcation of science has silently sunk into oblivion. What remained is the idea, usually ascribed to Carl Hempel, that just as verification is impossible, so is refutation. This way it is possible to keep the idea that a theory has the same scientific status as its negation, even though the rationale

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