

KARL POPPER

Sir Karl Popper was a major thinker of the twentieth century, one who – as Anthony O’Hear writes in his new Preface – ‘has had a beneficent influence on those who have come under the spell of his thought and of the inimitable prose in which he articulates it’. It is now twenty-five years since Popper died, and thus seems – after a quarter of a century – an apposite moment to reevaluate his impact, significance and influence. The several chapters in this classic volume focus on many key elements of Popper’s thought and philosophy. They are by no means uncritical, but afford Popper the respect due to a philosopher who wrote always with a degree of clarity, precision and directness rare in the academic world of his time, and – as O’Hear puts it – ‘even rarer subsequently’. This important book constitutes an essential introduction to some of the most esteemed philosophical writing of our times.

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PREFACE

It is twenty-five years since Karl Popper died, and twenty-five years since the lecture series on which this book is based. In the original introduction to the book, I wrote that those interested in assessing Sir Karl's philosophical stature would find the essays contained therein a good place to start. This still seems to me to be the case. The essays focus on key elements of Popper's thought. They are not uncritical, but each of the contributors accords Popper a degree of respect and of respectful attention to his writing, and rightly so. For, whatever weaknesses there are in Popper's thought, he was and is a major thinker in the context of the twentieth century, and he has had a beneficent influence on those who have come under the spell of his thought and of the inimitable prose in which he articulates it. His style is all the more remarkable because he was writing in his second language, and always with a degree of clarity, precision and directness rare in the academic world of his time, and even rarer subsequently. Twenty-five years on, it also still seems to be the case that Popper had what I referred to in 1995 as 'a preternatural sense of where the deep issues lie' – again, something one would find it hard to discern in some of the most esteemed philosophical writing of the first decades of the twenty-first century.

In Popper's philosophy of science, the themes of induction, demarcation and progress dominate, topics

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which are taken up in a number of the essays in the book. It has to be said that these themes are not so prominent in the philosophy of science now as they were then, maybe because the questions Popper raised in these areas admit of no easy solution, at least in the terms in which he posed them. Moreover, Popper's thought in these areas had already been pretty exhaustively examined, even by 1995, at least in the terms in which he put the questions.

Pace Popper, induction in a broad sense is part of what our lives are based on. Learning from the past is part of what rationality consists in, and – again, *pace* Popper – it is hard to make sense of this without some inductive attitudes. Demarcation between science and other human activities, including morality and politics, remains a hot topic for a number of reasons, not least because scientists are increasingly brought into the political domain, and also because, for many, science is taken to be the touchstone of truth and rationality. What is not so clear is how helpful Popper's actual demarcation criterion is, subject as it has been to rather severe testing against actual scientific practice. Even so, there is still a lot to be said for his insistence on science's inherent fallibility – more than many are prepared to grant, especially when science is seen by so many as the benchmark of veracity. It is hard to admit the fallibility of scientific theories (all our theories?); but it is even harder to grant fallibility while at the same time also recognizing the extraordinary progress science has made over the past three or four centuries. What remains crucial and valuable in Popper's approach to science, if not in the detail of his philosophy, is the insistence both on science's progress and

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on its fallibility – the way he tries to give due credit to each element of the situation. In Popper's thought, there is a pessimistic meta-induction, if you like – a sense that even the best theories at any time, including our own, will in the end almost inevitably be falsified; but he balances this pessimism with an optimistic assessment of science's propensity to progress – via the very critical spirit which leads us to recognize its fallibility.

Popper was well known for his hostility to the picture of science proposed by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.¹ Indeed, in a paper entitled 'Normal Science and its Dangers',² Popper wrote that the picture Kuhn gives of 'normal science' (that is, when scientists train and work unquestioningly within a generally accepted theory or 'paradigm') is 'a danger to science and, indeed, to our civilization'. Popper does not deny that there is some truth in Kuhn's *description* of the scientific community, as it actually operates. In this picture, the community is at any one time dominated by some leading idea, and it is run by those propounding that idea in such a way as to crowd out dissent. With this goes all the institutional baggage we are familiar with in big science: funding, promotion, honours, initiation of students and researchers into the paradigm, peer review and all the rest of it. What Popper

¹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

² Thomas Kuhn, 'Normal Science and its Dangers', in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds.), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 51–8, at p. 53.

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denies is that this picture, true as it might be of the actual practice of science, can make room for the relentlessly critical activity he thinks science should be. Indeed, an institution of the type Kuhn describes will not be scientific in the way Popper wants. It will not encourage severe criticism of its own presuppositions. Hence, in Popper's view, the danger to civilization, given that he believes science and a properly scientific attitude is central to that civilization.

Can we say that both are right, on their own terms? What Kuhn describes is pretty much what goes on in the academic world in general – in science certainly, but also not unheard of in philosophy. This mode of existence may indeed be integral to any mature and smooth-running institution, including the institution of science, which would be Kuhn's point. Indeed, he argues that a subject not describable in his terms, and not dominated by a single ruling paradigm, would not *be* scientific: it would at best be pre-scientific, as he thinks psychology currently is. But if carried to the extreme, so that it is the whole story, a Kuhnian institution would suppress the spirit of criticism which Popper sees at work in the moments of science he so admires, and what for him makes science so central to our civilization. The key example of such a moment for Popper was, as he tells us, when, after two or more centuries of pretty well universal acceptance in the scientific community, Newton's theory was refuted by Einstein's. Popper would not, I think, be impressed to be told that 97 per cent of scientific publications say so and so, as if that were an argument in their favour. For Popper, if not for Kuhn, that would be quite the wrong sort of argument, and quite the

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wrong sort of attitude. It is an attitude which is inherently suspicious of the type of openness which Popper thinks should characterize good science, where even (or, perhaps, especially) the best theories are continually subjected to the severest criticisms and thus tested in confrontation with competing theories.

And this brings us to openness more generally. For Popper sees his ideal open society as the scientific method – or what he conceives as the scientific method – writ large, ruling over society as a whole. An open society is one in which laws, policies and institutions are subjected to continuous criticism from any quarter, particularly from the least privileged, from the people most likely to be adversely affected by any policy or institutional set-up. An open society will not be ham-strung by taboos or uncriticizable traditions, and its members will be regarded as individuals, rather than as members of groups or as determined by their birth or the traditions into which they are born. Even in initially expounding a vision of what he calls the abstract society, Popper admits that there is a degree of utopianism in his picture: there can never be ‘a completely abstract or even a predominantly abstract society’, nor can there ever be a completely rational society. Our emotional needs are such that we need social and spiritual bonds of various sorts, beyond the rational-critical.³ And, later on, Popper came to recognize that the type of liberal, open society he

³ See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (5th edition) (Abingdon: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), Vol. I, 175.

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advocated itself needed traditions of liberal openness to guide its members and to pre-dispose them to liberal attitudes.

However, none of these qualifications, necessary as they may be, ever deflected Popper from his conviction that a decent society will treat its members primarily as individuals, rather than as members of groups or collectives – and also that in such a society anyone should have a right to be heard, whatever his or her origin or status in that society. His anti-collectivism went in hand with his admirable repugnance for those theories of history which saw history as moving in a given direction, with those unsuited to that movement being dispensable and disposable. History has no determinate direction, and its outcomes are unpredictable. It is not just immoral to sacrifice today’s individuals for some future utopia or goal; it is also epistemologically unsound, because we cannot predict the future course of history. And one key reason for this epistemological incapacity is that we cannot know now what scientific or technological developments there will be. If we knew now what would be available in, say, twenty-five years, we could do it now – which, of course, we can’t. When this volume came out twenty-five years ago, we had no clue as to the way the Internet and all its associated paraphernalia would have developed by 2020 (and probably a less than complete understanding even now of what it all means or amounts to).

It seems to me that, given the way that identity politics and group thinking have developed in recent years, if this current volume were to be produced now, more might be said about the implications of Popper’s anti-collectivist

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views, and also about his insistence that the source of an opinion should always be distinguished from its validity. A valid opinion is valid, whatever its source; and all opinions should be judged on their merits, regardless of their source or the ethnicity or social standing of their proponent. And disagreement, even if unpalatable, should be welcomed, as a key part of the critical spirit. Further, while he was as attuned as anyone to environmental threats and dangers (particularly those arising from the disposal of nuclear waste), Popper would also have something to say about the hazards involved in impoverishing people living now in the light of futures half a century ahead, especially given that we cannot know now what technological developments there will be over the next half-century. And, more generally, he would have been more alive than perhaps many were in 1994 to rhetoric about the need for change and the obligation to prepare for the future, which is usually rhetoric aimed at promoting things the speaker is keen on. But the speaker knows no more than any of us about what the future will bring, or about the paths changes will take and make. In speaking of the need to prepare for change, most of us are too ready to assume we know what will come about. This is not a mistake a Popperian should make – and not just because of his or her general fallibilism and doubts about inductivism. It is also a feeling ingrained in Popper's humane approach to social questions, as manifested in his writings on the open society.

Looking back at where Popper stood twenty-five years ago, and might stand in the future, we might conclude that his philosophy of science is well established as one of

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the landmarks in the subject's development. But, because it is so well established and so well known, it has somewhat fallen out of the current limelight. His views on society and politics are less well developed and their implications less well explored. But, as they were important and influential in the battles against communism and totalitarianism in the 1940s and 1950s – and bravely so in the climate of those times – so they have relevance in the issues confronting us in the 2020s. They deserve consideration and study, and more consideration and study than we gave them twenty-five years ago.