



The rationalist tradition and the problem of induction: Karl Popper's rejection of epistemological optimism

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ABSTRACT

This article evaluates Karl Popper's contribution to analytic philosophy, and outlines some of the contradictions in his work which make it difficult to locate in any particular tradition. In particular, the article investigates Popper's own claims to be a member of the rationalist tradition. Although Popper described himself as a member of this tradition, his definition of it diverged quite radically from that offered by other supporters of rationalism, like, for example, Mach, Carnap, and the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle. The reason for this was that Popper believed the rationalist tradition, if it were to remain coherent and relevant, needed to overcome the dilemma posed by Hume's problem of induction. Popper believed that this problem rendered conventional understandings of rationalism, science, and inductive reasoning incoherent. This article suggests that Popper's principal contribution to modern philosophy was to reconfigure the rationalist tradition in such a way as to circumvent the problem of induction while preserving the rationalist commitment to reason, rational debate, and objective knowledge. Popper's reconfiguration of the epistemological bases of the rationalist tradition challenged dominant understandings of rationalist and analytic philosophy, and may be appropriately understood as part of a wider move among philosophers like Quine and Putnam to challenge conventional understandings of analytic philosophy, and of what philosophy itself could and could not achieve. It also informed a vision of social and political life (and of the social and political sciences) as rooted in principles of freedom, equality, and rational debate, but which cannot be fit within the traditional ideological landscape.

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Karl Popper had an ambivalent attitude toward tradition. On the one hand, he believed it was not a fitting subject for intellectual inquiry: the point of academic inquiry, he thought, was not to engage in the 'essentialist' practice of defining particular traditions, or to locate oneself or others in such traditions, or to 'construct appropriate traditions to explain the ideas, events, and practices of the past', but rather to identify and resolve concrete problems which exist in the world.¹ On the other hand, it is clear that he sought to define, and then to defend, a particular tradition of philosophical and intellectual inquiry against others – for example, the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, the (different) language theories of Wittgenstein, Austin, and Ryle, and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. That is, Popper was not merely content to present his own ideas in abstraction from the alternative approaches taken by his contemporaries and by figures in history.²

Rather, he presented himself as a member of a particular tradition (the rationalist tradition), which he sought to defend against those *within* it who he thought had interpreted it incorrectly, and those outside of it who sought to replace it either with some amalgam of subjectivism, irrationalism, or historicism, or an appeal to scientism or positivism.

This ambivalence toward tradition is at least partly traceable to his more general attitude towards intellectuals and intellectual inquiry which he developed in his formative years in interwar Vienna.³ Popper was an iconoclast and a trenchant critic of much of what passed for philosophical inquiry during this time. Even before the outbreak of the first world war, Vienna had become known for its literary, intellectual, and cultural life. It had seen the blooming of Freudian and Adlerian psychotherapy, and of Marxism; as well as the scientific theories of Ernst Mach, the music of Schoenberg,

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¹ M. Bevir, 'On Tradition', *Humanitas* 13/2 (2000), 28–53, 53.

² K. Popper, 'The Myth of the Framework' (1976); K. Popper, M.A. Notturmo, *The Myth of the Framework: In Defence of Science and Rationality* (London, 1994), 33–64.

³ K. Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography* (1974) (London, 2002); M. Hacothen, *Karl Popper: The Formative Years, 1902–1945: Politics and Philosophy in Interwar Vienna* (Cambridge, 2000); J. Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper* (London, 1996).

and the rise of the Vienna Circle. As a young scholar studying in the fields of mathematics and, later, psychology and epistemology, Popper found himself increasingly infuriated by much of the intellectual scene, viewing it as a self-indulgence among the affluent, and dominated by passing fashions.⁴ In particular, Popper was dismissive of those intellectuals who indulged in the kind of holistic theorising which preached irrationalism or subjectivism, or which assumed the impossibility of human freedom in the face of such things as historical laws (Marx and Marxists),⁵ implicit power structures (Critical theorists),⁶ or the ‘unconscious’ (Freud).⁷ He criticised what he later called the ‘bumptiousness and pretentiousness’ of many of the philosophers who populated the intellectual community of Vienna during those years (and after), and the arrogance with which they offered their conclusions to the world without argument or humility.⁸ Popper was a consistent and vehement critic of what we might call the cult of the expert: the assumption that certain people, on account of their intellect or insight, were capable of pronouncing as to the true nature of reality, or contributing to knowledge, in a way that suggested they were beyond criticism, or that their ideas would be seen to be true to anyone who possessed the requisite intelligence or empathy. Thus, Popper dismissed much of the intellectual scene in interwar Vienna as arrogant and complacent, and characterised by passing trends rather than an enduring commitment to the methods dedicated to the genuine growth of knowledge.

This arrogance found its most obvious expression in what Popper saw as the unwillingness of many philosophers at that time to present their ideas clearly, in order that they might be widely criticized and debated by other philosophers as well as non-philosophers. Popper believed widespread critique across disciplines was the engine which drove the growth of knowledge in all areas of intellectual endeavour, and he was infuriated by what he perceived as the unwillingness of many philosophers to present their ideas in ways which invited widespread critique. Popper therefore loathed the tendency among many thinkers to dress their ideas up in baffling language only understood by their own cliques, so as to insulate them from critique. The fashionable thinkers who held court in Viennese coffee shops ‘did not want to be understood.’⁹ This, he thought, betrayed both arrogance and cowardice, and it lay at the heart of his dismissal of many revered thinkers in the history of philosophy. For example, it lay at the heart of his rejection of Hegel who, in *The Open Society*, Popper described as ‘bombastic and hysterical’, and ‘indigestible’: a thinker ‘outstanding in his lack of originality’ who deliberately wrote in an impenetrable style in order to fool people into thinking that he was intelligent and original, when he was neither.¹⁰ It is obvious, too, in his attitude toward the theorists of the Frankfurt School, which he described as ‘irrationalist and intelligence-destroying’.¹¹ The critical theorists were, he said, like Hegel, caught up in a ‘cult of incomprehensibility’ which merely fed their own vanity, and placed limits on the growth of knowledge.

Habermas, he said, did ‘not know how to put things simply, clearly, or modestly’.¹² Adorno, he felt, had ‘nothing whatever to say’ and defended a philosophical position best described as ‘mumbo jumbo’, and Horkheimer’s work was, he believed, ‘uninteresting’ and ‘empty’.¹³ He also described Marx as a ‘false prophet’, Fichte as a ‘fraud’ and a ‘windbag’, and is reported to have suggested that Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* ‘smelled of the coffee house’, implying that it exemplified all that was wrong about the kind of ideas swirling around in the cosseted world of philosophers who felt little need to engage with others clearly and straightforwardly.¹⁴

Against the view that the problems of the world could be solved – or, more accurately, ignored or wished away – by experts, Popper argued that all people were ‘problem solvers’ and that ‘all life is problem solving’.¹⁵ Furthermore, against the obfuscation of the Idealists, Romantics, and the irrationalists, and the complacent mystification common among the subjectivists and historicists, Popper defended an approach in which ‘the thinker speaks as simply as possible’ in order that her claims might be criticised and discussed as widely as possible.¹⁶ Looking back in his *Unended Quest* on the early years of his intellectual life, during which he was beginning to form his ideas with regard to the connections between psychology, epistemology, and mathematics, Popper allied himself with Carnap, who pleaded for ‘rationality, [and] greater intellectual responsibility’ among those who presumed to engage in philosophical inquiry. For Carnap, he said, ‘asks us to learn from the way in which mathematicians and scientists proceed, and he contrasted this with the depressing ways of philosophers: their pretentious wisdom, and their arrogation of knowledge which they present to us with a minimum of rational or critical argument.’¹⁷ This contempt for the obfuscatory mysticism and ‘meaningless verbiage’ of many philosophers ran through Popper’s writings on a diverse range of subjects, from philosophy and science to music and history, as did his continued dismissal of those philosophical and intellectual claims made by the likes of Freud, Adler, and Marx, which he thought were framed in such a way as to insulate them from criticism.¹⁸ For all the changes that Popper’s ideas underwent throughout his career, this dismissal of fads and fashions, and of the esoteric theorising of those who he believed replaced clarity with obfuscation in a way that rendered them redundant in the overarching quest for knowledge, is present throughout.

For Popper, then, there was a right way and a wrong way to seek knowledge about the world. The right way was to confront the world as an open-minded, humble, rational individual concerned to offer theoretical explanations of some aspect of our lived experience in a way that invites debate. It was to hold that debate and rational dialogue could bring one closer to truth, and that ‘the truth’ (rather than certainty) was a thing worth pursuing, and it was to commit oneself to the power of reason (appropriately understood) to produce knowledge. Against this, stood the overlapping perspectives of the irrationalists, subjectivists, traditionalists, and historicists who, he thought, rejected the power of reason to deliver truth, diminished the role of the individual as merely a pawn pushed around by wider social, economic, or historical forces, preached a dangerous and incoherent form of relativism, and, ultimately, adopted an arrogant perspective with

⁴ See e.g. K. Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography*; ‘Author’s Note, 1993’, *The Myth of the Framework*, ix–x; J. Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*.

⁵ See e.g. K. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 2: *Hegel & Marx* (1945) (London, 2003).

⁶ See e.g. K. Popper, ‘Against Big Words’, in *In Search of a Better World: Lectures and Essays from Thirty Years* (London, 1994), 82–95; ‘Reason or Revolution?’, *The Myth of the Framework* (1970), 65–81.

⁷ See e.g. K. Popper, *Unended Quest*, esp. 36–8; ‘Science: Conjectures and Refutations’, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (1957), 43–86.

⁸ K. Popper, ‘Letter to Fritz Hellin’, in *After The Open Society: Selected Social and Political Writings*, ed. J. Shearmur, P.N. Turner (1943) (London, 2008), 109–11, 109.

⁹ K. Popper, ‘On Freedom’ (1958/1967), *All Life is Problem Solving* (London, 1999), 81–92, 83 and 85.

¹⁰ K. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. 2: *Hegel and Marx* (1945) (London, 2003), 35.

¹¹ K. Popper, ‘Reason or Revolution?’, *The Myth of the Framework*, 66.

¹² K. Popper, ‘Reason or Revolution?’, *The Myth of the Framework*, 78.

¹³ K. Popper, ‘Reason or Revolution?’, *The Myth of the Framework*, 78–80.

¹⁴ K. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Vol. 2: *Hegel and Marx*, 91, 59; D. Edmonds, J. Eidenow, *Wittgenstein’s Poker: The Story of a Ten Minute Argument Between Two Great Philosophers* (London, 2002).

¹⁵ K. Popper, *All Life is Problem Solving*.

¹⁶ K. Popper, ‘All Life is Problem Solving’, *All Life is Problem Solving*, 99–104.

¹⁷ K. Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography*, 100.

¹⁸ See e.g. K. Popper, ‘Science: Conjectures and Refutations’, *Conjectures and Refutations*; ‘The Nature of Philosophical Problems and Their Roots in Science’, *Conjectures and Refutations*; ‘Reason or Revolution?’, *The Myth of the Framework*.

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