

FROM CRITICAL RATIONALISM TO LOGIC OF HUMAN ACTION

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“Abstract problems of logic and methodology have a close bearing on the life of every individual and on the fate of our entire culture.” So writes Ludwig von Mises in the preface to the German edition of his *Epistemological Problems of Economics*. Abstract thought can often lead you to unexpected conclusions. This is due to the autonomy of what Karl Popper calls “World Three”, the world of the products of the human mind. My first involvement with abstract ideas in an appreciative sense stems from my sixth form acquaintance with mathematics and physics. It was the more esoteric areas of physics such as quantum theory and relativity which stimulated my interest in philosophy, mainly philosophy of science. Political questions were, at that time furthest from my thoughts.

KARL POPPER

My interest in philosophy of science can be traced back to an A-level physics question of the more speculative type. It was here that I first encountered the ideas of Karl Popper. I then acquired copies of the Fontana Modern Masters paperback on Popper by Bryan Magee and Popper’s autobiography *Unended Quest*. It was fortunate that Popper provided my point of entry into philosophy. Had my introduction been *via* linguistic analysis, I might well have concluded that there was nothing of value in philosophy at all. Popper’s main virtues for me are that he writes extremely clearly and that he is interested in solving real problems. These problems are not necessarily of obvious relevance to everyday life. But they have far-reaching implications.

Popper’s ideas are largely concerned with the growth and status of scientific knowledge, predominantly in the natural

sciences and predominantly in physics (physics being the most fundamental of the natural sciences). Ploughing through Popper’s work one finds such topics of discussion as the problem of induction (which Popper claims to have solved but which most philosophers think he has not), the supersession of Newtonian mechanics by Einsteinian mechanics, the body-mind problem, the nature of human creativity, the value of indeterminism, the poverty of linguistic analysis and so on.

The recurring theme running through Popper’s work is the fallibility of empirical theories and, therefore, the necessity for everything to be open to criticism. Although Popper is mainly a philosopher of science he took ideas originally worked out in the natural sciences and applied them to the social sciences. I have reservations about the extent to which this is valid because there is a fundamental difference in methodology between sciences which deal with human action and those which deal with the reaction of objects to stimuli according to regular patterns or laws. This fact has tended to be obscured by some critics of Popper such as Imre Lakatos and A. F. Chalmers. For example, they object to Popper’s use of his falsifiability criterion as a technique for dismissing Marxism as pseudo-scientific. But their principal objection is to Popper’s falsifiability criterion as such which they regard as overly restrictive. Instead they prefer to appraise Marxism in the light of Lakatos’ more sophisticated methodology of research programmes (in which Marxism is seen as “degenerate” rather than either falsified or unfalsifiable). However, their criticisms are misleading. Popper does not merely assess Marxism by means of its falsifiability or unfalsifiability. He also attacks Marxism on logical and moral grounds, i.e. categories which are extra-scientific (in Popper’s terminology).

LESSONS AND CONSEQUENCES

If one wishes to use a general description which captures the essence of Popper’s philosophy it is *critical rationalism*. It implies the necessity for intellectual freedom, for the critical discussion of all ideas. After all, if a theory is true its proponents should have nothing to fear from criticism. For by being able to withstand a critical assault it re-asserts its strength.

Popper’s distinction between World Two (thoughts in the sense of subjective thought processes), and World Three (thoughts in the sense of contents or statements in them-

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selves) enable us to separate “disembodied” theories from the persons uttering those theories. To put this more simply, given a language, propositions within it will have properties whether individuals are aware of them or not or believe them or not. For example the proposition “my cat and I live in a house that no animals inhabit” has the property of being contradictory. That is a very simple example, but it is clear that in more complicated systems of statements or theories there will be logical consequences which will not be immediately clear to anyone acquainted with that system. Thus, human knowledge cannot be said to have a one-to-one correspondence with our mental states. This, in fact, is a decisive argument against reductionism (the theory that all human knowledge can ultimately be reduced to electro-chemical reactions in the brain). Since our theories do have objective properties one consequence is that criticism can be directed at the theories rather than the person(s) articulating those theories. Such an attitude can be tactically as well as ethically valuable. For example, in political philosophy theories may have consequences and implications which are not immediately clear to the proponents of those theories but are, in fact, evil or undesirable.

But one should not necessarily brand an opponent as immoral merely because some of his ideas appear to be evil or irrational or whatever. Unfortunately the truth is not obvious. An exemplar of this attitude of quick-fire moral denunciation is Ayn Rand. She appeared to believe that once something was demonstrated rationally, any intelligent person must automatically accept the arguments. But, in fact, it can take time to grasp long chains of reasoning. Therefore, it is improper to dismiss an opponent as “immoral” merely because he does not agree with you even after you have stated your case. It is, I think, the attitude of your opponent towards reason as such which should elicit your moral judgement if necessary. (More about Rand later.)

The issue of intellectual freedom, freedom of thought and expression was really my only contact with the political world during my early Popperian period (from sixth form to the first years of university). It led me to tackle books such as George Orwell’s *1984* (which I read just before entering university) and *Animal Farm*. I acquired the conviction that the totalitarian countries were inherently inferior to those of the West.

PROBLEMS OF CHRISTIANITY

My disagreements with Christianity first occurred at a time when I largely accepted its basic values. My main objections were due to its prevalent anti-intellectual stance. The consequences of such an attitude are the belittling of man’s achievements and abilities and the tendency to regard “love” as the solution to all problems. Unfortunately, the concept “love” requires some considerable intellectual unpacking before one can utter a statement such as: “love is the solution to all problems”. With most Christians of my acquaintance one can engage in a debate with them up to a certain point. But then their responses will usually degenerate into mystical nonsense. “If there are contradictions in the Bible these are resolved by faith. If you don’t understand, this is because you have not received the light.”

This type of irrationalism is also found in Marxism. Criticism of Marxism is rejected on the grounds of the bour-

geois class interests of the critic. If the critic is from the working class then he has merely been corrupted by capitalism. Both Christianity and Marxism share an implicit Utopianism. Christianity identifies all the world’s problems as being rooted in Man’s sin. Therefore, universal love is the answer. But Man cannot do this unless he embraces Christianity. Marxism identifies all the world’s problems as being rooted in capitalism. Therefore, replace capitalism by socialism and all will be harmonious.

Unfortunately, libertarianism does have a tendency towards utopianism too, though not to the same extent. It is, however, the fault of certain libertarians who are inclined to over-dramatise the evils of state intervention in the economy. In other words, the state replaces capitalism as the source of all evil.

Despite these disagreements with Christianity there are some aspects which I consider to be valuable, at least, as interpreted by me. For example, there is a degree of rationality in loving one’s enemies — if this is taken to mean that one should try to turn an enemy into a friend, if this is possible. Related to this is the concept of forgiveness. That is, it is rational to forgive someone whom you regard as morally despicable if that person subsequently repents of his former behaviour and becomes good. It is to your self-interest if enemies can be turned into friends. However, a blanket forgiveness which simply forgives evil people while they remain evil is clearly immoral. This is, in part, implicitly recognised in Christianity. For while universal forgiveness is the message preached by Christianity the fact is that if you reject God you will go to Hell. So clearly the forgiveness is an offer of forgiveness. It is conditional on mankind’s repentance. However this issue is rarely, if at all, explained by Christians. It is another aspect of the intellectual sloppiness of Christianity.

RUSH

This section concerns a trio of musicians collectively known as Rush. Since musical tastes are entirely subjective there may seem to be little point in discussing the brilliance of Rush’s music. However, I should be discussing ideas rather than music.

Rush are an intellectual rock group. Most of their lyrics concern the efficacy of freedom and technology or the wonders of life in general. Sometimes this is expressed positively and sometimes the songs are of a more questioning nature, e.g. the song *The Trees* with its attack on the idea of enforced equality. Many of their early songs were couched in the guise of Tolkienesque fantasies. e.g. *Rivendell*, *By-Tor and the Snow Dog*, *The Necromancer*. But in recent albums the songs have become more direct and realistic. There is *Red Sector A* which is a stinging indictment of Iron Curtain totalitarianism; *Territories* which questions the idea of nationalism and tribal/collective identities in general; and *Red Barchetta* which is about an individual in the distant future (of the type which would be relished by some anti-life ecologists) violating the “Motor Law”, a law banning motor cars. The individual rebels by stealing a ride in his uncle’s old “Red Barchetta” in defiance of the authorities. Musically, *Red Barchetta* is one of Rush’s best integrated songs.

In 1976 Rush had just completed a disastrous tour having previously released the “non-commercial” *Careless of Steel*

album. This marked a temporary downturn in their growing success at this time. Their response was to create the fast and furious *2112* album, with its acknowledgement to a mysterious person called Ayn Rand. The title tract is based on Rand's novel *Anthem* and is about the discovery of a guitar by the hero and its rejection by the technocratic-collectivist overlords of a future society. It was many years before I actually discovered Ayn Rand, by accident (about 1982). At this time I was a sort of liberal type of socialist so her ideas were something of a shock.

RAND

Many libertarians detest Rand and there are good reasons for doing so (which I do not intend to discuss in detail). Interestingly, at a philosophical level, there are some similarities between Rand and Popper, especially in relation to the philosophical theories to which they are both opposed. For example, both Popper and Rand reject determinism, subjectivism, pragmatism, logical positivism, linguistic analysis, behaviourism and existentialism. Both regard Man as an independent, active animal. Excellent arguments for this position can be found in Popper's *The Self and Its Brain*.

The main lessons I learnt from Rand were her identification of the nature of the capitalist system — the relationship between the mind and the creation of wealth — the moral nature of the principle of trade, the reasonableness of the entrepreneur and the skilled worker in any field of endeavour commanding a higher salary than those lower down the ladder of ability. The existence of men and women of ability enables those lower down the scale to live at a higher standard of living than they would do if such people did not exist. This compensates for the "unfair" distribution of talents.

In a free market system, to the extent that people are engaged in voluntary production and trade, wealth accrues to individuals in proportion to their value/service to the consumer. There will, of course, be wealth which accrues to people through inheritance, favouritism and so on. This may appear unjust. Yet the original producers of the wealth must have the right to dispose of it as they see fit (provided they do not resort to coercion and fraud). And, in the long run, control of production passes to those most adept at satisfying the wishes of the consumer. This is one of the functions of profit and loss signals.

Prior to discovering the nature of capitalism I had only been concerned with the value of "ivory tower" intellectual freedom. It now became apparent that what was required was freedom of action as well as freedom of thought. Ayn Rand opened the door to a new universe which was to include things such as Austrian economics and radical concepts such as anarcho-capitalism.

One of the attractions of libertarianism is that it is so rich in ideas. Even if one rejects its arguments it still provides much to think about. It devotes considerable attention to discussing the possible problems of its projected future society - unlike the Marxists, who tell you nothing. If Marxists dislike the Soviet Union they are unable to tell you what genuine socialism would look like. However, judging from their thoughts and actions in the present it is reasonable to assume that their future revolution will merely recreate the Soviet Union.

MORAL OBJECTIVISM?

The major problem in Rand's philosophy is the difficulty in establishing an objective morality. The important question in ethics is not whether one can establish, objectively, what one ought to do but whether one can establish what one ought not to do to other human beings. For example, Rand claims that "the fact that a living entity is determines what it ought to do" (*The Virtue of Selfishness*). She holds that, for Man, the fact that his natural bodily processes operate so as to maintain his organism implies that he ought to act so as to further his own life. (Of course, with Man we must deal with a hierarchical system of values.)

Whether Rand's thesis is valid or not is beside the point. The fact is that most people will ordinarily prefer life to death. But it is by no means certain that everyone's idea of "life" will correspond to what Rand defines as "rational" self-interest. There are many ways in which Man can act self-interestedly. In other words, "value" ("that which one acts to gain and/or keep" as Rand would say) is subjective. "Of value to whom and for what?" (Rand). Now consider the following problem. How does one establish objectively that one ought not to kill or steal? The murderer may be serving his own interests, for example, by obtaining greater wealth in the process. Rand's claim that living as a looter is not to Man's self-interest strikes me as only conditionally valid. It depends on the extent to which one can get away with it. A criminal who indulges in drug-trafficking may earn a vast fortune, probably much more than he could earn in a legal profession. He likes wealth a lot. He calculates that the benefits to be obtained sufficiently outweigh the risks of being caught that he opts for crime. If wealth obtained dishonestly either through criminal action or through state coercion (legalised crime) is able to last the criminal's or the dictator's lifetime it is difficult to see how this can be deemed to be not in [an individual] Man's interest.

CONDITIONAL OBJECTIVISM

Moral rules can only be objectively established in a conditional or consequential manner. For example one can say: "If you wish to achieve objective A then you ought to pursue course of action B." Or "Strategy A will have such and such consequences which will conflict with other desired objectives or status of affairs. Therefore you ought not to pursue strategy A."

When two people have a moral argument with one another they usually do so on the basis that each adheres to moral values of some sort. Each then tries to show that the other is inconsistent — that he is espousing views which conflict with other views in his moral system. If the two disputants both uphold internally consistent moral systems then all either can do is to state his case and "hope" that the other is persuaded by it.

Concerning matters such as killing and stealing, one can, I think, apply an objective "ought not" to the criminal's actions only to the extent that the criminal believes that he himself should not be aggressed against, in the same manner in which he aggresses against others. His insistence that no-one should aggress against him is then seen to be vacuous. He cannot expect to be taken seriously and should be prepared to face the prospect of being dealt similar treatment to that which he deals to others. If he is not so prepared then he ought not to aggress against others. (If

I insist in not being stolen from, it is for just this reason that I ought not to steal from others. Due to moral weakness I may still do so on occasion but then I would be acting wrongly by the standard of my own professed morality.)

The situation is different if the criminal does not believe in moral rules. Then no objective arguments can be raised against his actions. To the actions of an amoral person who does not demand any “moral space” from other people in which to act an objective “ought not” cannot be applied.

However, in practice virtually everybody believes in moral rules so the kind of consequential and conditional moral reasoning alluded to earlier can be relied upon. The reason why people believe in morality is, I think, that everyone requires a freedom from other people, a moral space in which to engage in successful action. To the extent that this moral space is encroached upon by other people they will demand that these other people ought to be more reasonable etc.. On a localised individual level criminal (coercive) pursuits can be successful and to a person’s self-interest. But the criminal is only successful because there are others who have relied on honest production and trade.

Employing the consequential approach to morality and taking a long-term view of the effects of human action in society it is possible to demonstrate objectively that a social order based on the freedom of production and trade permits the simultaneous maximisation of every individual’s utility. It is precisely this demonstration which has been effected repeatedly for the past two hundred years by classical liberal and libertarian philosophers and economists. To the extent that, at a macro-level, political philosophers aim at general utility maximisation it is possible to show that laissez-faire capitalism is superior to any other system. If a political philosophy explicitly does not aim at maximising general utility then no arguments can be brought against it (other than appraising the means it employs to obtain whatever ends it does pursue). However, in practice, even the most dictatorial rulers have to claim to be serving the people’s interest so as to avoid being overthrown.

THE ARROGANT PERSONALITY

There is much in Rand’s philosophy with which I disagree (as well as much with which I agree) but I do not intend to discuss everything here. However, there are some aspects of her personality which I shall criticise. She seemed to be particularly keen on apparent one-line dismissals of philosophies which she disagreed with, such as linguistic analysis and positivism. This seems to suggest that she could not be bothered to take the trouble to analyse these philosophies, regarding their philosophical errors as “errors of morality” rather than errors of knowledge. This is very different from Karl Popper’s approach. With Popper one always finds an abundance of arguments against the philosophies he opposes. For example, his *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* can be considered to be a general refutation of logical positivism, although that was not its intended purpose. (Nevertheless, Popper has often been mistakenly identified as a logical positivist, even by as acute a thinker as Ludwig von Mises in his *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science*.)

Another unsatisfactory feature of Rand is her frequent stupid comments concerning the inferiority of artistic tastes which differed from her own. Despite her explicit statement that musical tastes are subjective (see *The Romantic Manifesto*) it seems she hoped that they could be shown to be objective.

ECONOMICS

After Rand my interests turned largely to economics, mainly of the Austrian School type. Particularly interesting is the characterisation of economics as a science of human action - of Man’s purposeful striving towards the attainment of ends chosen whatever those ends may be. An implication of this definition of economics is that one can apply economic reasoning to problems which lie outside the orbit of what is normally considered to be economics. Thus, Thomas Sowell is able to apply rigorous economic analysis to problems involving racial discrimination. Traditionally such problems have tended to be regarded as sociological since economics is supposed to deal only with matters such as business transactions and so on.

Perhaps the most novel concept within libertarianism is that of anarcho-capitalism. (This is a somewhat cumbersome term but I assume it arose from the need to differentiate itself from traditional anarchy.) I do not yet know whether I would venture as far as dispensing with the state. I am not even sure how much of a minimal statist I am. This is an ongoing private research programme of mine. Nevertheless many of the ideas within anarcho-capitalism concerned with private police and criminal restitution are very interesting and could be tried regardless of whether any residual activity is left to a monopolistic state.

A widely recommended introduction to anarcho-capitalism is David Friedman’s *The Machinery of Freedom*. (Some say it is a good introduction to libertarianism in general. I disagree. It strikes me as being more suitable for those who are already libertarians but are minimal statists.) I personally found Morris and Linda Tannehill’s *The Market For Liberty* far more persuasive and extensive. The authors lean heavily on Randian Objectivism but this is easily disentangled from their analysis of the mechanics of anarcho-capitalism, and it is this which interested me.

CURRENT STATE

A present I am thinking about epistemological aspects of economics, having acquainted myself with Ludwig von Mises’ works in this area. Mises holds that the methodology of the natural sciences is inapplicable to the field of human action. In the latter the universal laws are *a priori* (therefore true) rather than empirical (i.e. hypothetical) in character even though in both fields reference must be made to reality. It should be noted, however, that since a praxeological theorem depends for its validity on the fact that certain human ends are being pursued some sort of procedure is necessary to ascertain which ends are relevant in a given situation.

Libertarianism is the most radical political philosophy in existence today. Love it or hate it, it cannot be denied that it is superabundantly rich in ideas and therefore worthy of serious study.