

# Search for precision

ROGER POOLE

INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY is a very tricky kind of writing. There are only a few acknowledged successes in this kind—Mill, Collingwood, Russell—and Karl Popper's own intellectual autobiography\* obviously invites comparison with these. Will it join this small and extremely select band?

Intellectual autobiography always makes one major assumption: that the reader is particularly interested in, and fascinated by, the kinds of problem which have absorbed the writer through his thinking life. That is a very daring assumption when it comes to the philosophy of science. There may be perhaps forty professional philosophers of science in this country who will be able to take every subtle twist and turn of Popper's developing intellectual self portrait, who will feel at ease when Einstein and Bohr, Heisenberg and Schrödinger are discussed in terms of the philosophical foundations and assumptions of their work. If *Unended Quest* had appeal only for these adepts, it wouldn't sell more than a few hundred copies. And certainly Popper takes this risk, consciously. He makes no effort whatsoever to temper the wind to the shorn lamb. 'Here is what I have been thinking about for many years', he says, 'do you follow?' There can be few indeed who can honestly answer in the affirmative throughout.

And Popper adds to his austere manner of delivery by writing many chapters as if they were lectures in a university lecture hall. The assumptions he makes about audience-competence are vertiginous. And he does not shape his chapter to fit the reading rhythm, the reading intake. It is well known that intelligent reception of a lecture rarely exceeds about forty minutes of the sixty. And Popper's chapters take more than forty minutes to read, and one is then plunged straight into the next one. Comfort-wise this book is about as easy to read as round after

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\**Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography*

225pp PONTANA £1 paper

round might be for an amateur who was invited to step into the ring for a friendly sparring bout with Mohammed Ali.

But behind the concentric rings of technical barbed wire, there is another, hidden book, a book which the reader has to piece together for himself, a book about Karl Popper the man. I honestly do not know whether, given his own frame of reference, Popper intended the various personal details which he lets drop here and there to be anything more than a rough chronological framework for his developing conceptual life. But, here and there, like green grass peeping through the asphalt, there are little signs of a moral existence lived.

This moral existence Popper (being, I take it, no kind of existentialist) would sharply distinguish from his moral and political opinions, which are indeed given a spacious hearing in the course of the autobiography. Nevertheless it is hard to distinguish the moral experience of a man from the moral utterance which he then makes. And the relation between Popper's own life—leaving Germany, going to New Zealand, returning to England, opposing Fascism and Marxism all his life, bravely going it alone for the most part—and his various political books is striking. It will hardly do to claim that the passion which lies behind *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and its Enemies* fell out of thin air. For the attentive reader of the second, hidden, 'inner' side of *Unended Quest*, then, there are many spin-off benefits. The man who has most intelligently and consistently opposed Marxist unscience and positivist verbalism in our time is here seen by glimpses. But only by glimpses. My own main feeling after reading *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography* is that Sir Karl should now sit down and write Volume II—*The Quest Analysed: A Personal Autobiography*.

For we have some right to know where the existentially committed Popper, as opposed to 'scientific' Popper, springs from. To me anyway, and I think to most potential readers of this *Auto-*

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*Biography*, the man behind the philosophy is much more interesting and relevant to our political times, than the theory of 'falsifiability' for which his name stands in the reference books of the philosophy of science.

Never does this personally winning quality shine forth more clearly than in Popper's decision not to accept the 'academic hospitality' from Cambridge in 1936 but instead to accept the offer of a lectureship in Canterbury University College at Christchurch, New Zealand. Popper wins me over by the simple and methodologically unguarded nature of his next sentence:

This was a normal position, while the hospitality offered by Cambridge was meant for a refugee. Both my wife and I would have preferred to go to Cambridge, but I thought that this offer of hospitality might be transferable to somebody else. So I accepted the invitation to New Zealand, and asked the Academic Assistance Council and Cambridge to invite Fritz Wasmann, of the Vienna Circle, in my stead. They agreed to this request.

The account given by Popper of his reception and treatment in New Zealand makes this selflessness all the more striking. 'I had a desperately heavy teaching load, and the University authorities were not only unhelpful, but tried actively to make difficulties for me'. Typically enough, this beautifully plumaged bird from Europe had obviously attracted the hostility of the local intelligentsia.

I was told that I should be well advised not to publish anything while in New Zealand, and that any time spent on research was a theft from the working time as a lecturer for which I was being paid.

The usual line of the trendy Left.

The situation was such that without the support of my friends in New Zealand, I could hardly have survived. All this we could have foretold: academic petty jealousies and obstructiveness vary little from place to place. What comes next is, for me, the most interesting section of the whole book. Popper tries to get his *Open Society* published in America. There was no reaction to the MS for several months, and then a famous authority' decided that 'the book, because of its irreverence towards Aristotle (not Plato), was not fit to be submitted to a publisher'.

Even here, the pattern runs true to form: any major original work will be blocked by the 'famous authorities' simply because it is original. And Popper was thrown into despair by this blocking, for after all the War was going on (the 'famous authority' doubtless hadn't noticed) and the message of *The Open Society* was vitally relevant and important.

After almost a year, when I was at my wis' end and in terrible low spirits, I obtained, by chance, the English address of my friend Ernst Gombrich, with whom I had lost contact during the war. Together with Hayek, who most generously offered his help (I had not dared to trouble him since I had seen him only a few times in my life) he found a publisher. Both wrote most encouragingly about the book. The relief was immense. I felt that these two had saved my life, and I still feel so.

Later on the same page, Popper acknowledges the help given by Hayek in getting him a post at the LSE. 'I felt that Hayek had saved my life once more'.

The question of the world famous philosopher of science being retrieved from obscurity, misuse and despair by two friends who 'saved his life' is a fascinating one. How nearly it happened that Popper was never heard at all. When Popper says that Gombrich and Hayek 'saved his life', he is not speaking metaphorically, for this is an 'intellectual autobiography'. He means that his intellectual life was saved. And that brings in again the existential dimension which Popper tries to exclude from his thinking, but can't quite efficiently succeed in doing.

It is Popper the liberal thinker who emerges from this book so engagingly. He was right about Hitler as from 1929, when everyone was still burying their heads in the sand. He was right about

the development of Marxism and Soviet Communism. And his political thought and his scientific thought (the great principle for which he will be remembered) interconnect. Writing of Marx, Freud and Adler, Popper notes:

It became clear to me that what made a theory, or a statement, scientific, was its power to rule out, or exclude, the occurrence of some possible events—to prohibit or forbid the occurrence of these events. Thus *the more a theory forbids, the more it tells us*.

It followed for Popper (though it still doesn't seem to follow for the trendy Left) that since Marxism can't exclude anything (except the very things which do in fact empirically happen) then Marxism isn't scientific. No amount of scientific theory could possibly be more *useful* than Popper's has been. One has to read Marx and the Marxists with one's eyes open to whether what is *predicted* actually ever *happens*. The trendy Left deliberately binds itself to Marxist predictions which are falsified.

So, Popper's famous falsifiability theory is actually a theory which takes a certain epistemological pleasure in forbidding and prohibiting. It is to that extent negative. Popper doesn't rule out things that might be true, (say like the assertions of religion or art) if there is no possible way of falsifying them. But he does deny them scientific status. This too clarifies. And Popper never tries to prohibit or forbid within music, say, or literature, where he reads without demanding that the object of his attention be scientific. The chapters on music are amongst the most interesting in the book, and it is surely not many philosophers who could write at such length about the fundamental differences between Beethoven and Bach, in terms of objectivity and subjectivity. Even here he manages to sort out what is legislatively respectable (Bach) from what is legislatively unacceptable (Beethoven). Although one wouldn't want to follow this all down the line (some of the pages on music *do* recall the attitude, and even the tone, of Serenus Zeitblom, Ph.D. in Mann's *Doctor Faustus*) one has to admit that, purely logically, Popper is probably right. Bach (Popper quotes him to this effect) conceived music as serving God and promoting God's glory in the world, whereas Beethoven, in trying to be 'different' and 'original', in trying to 'express his personality' does not so much serve his work as impose himself and his moods upon it. Serenus Zeitblom, Ph.D. deplores the twelve-tone intellectualism of Adrian Leverkühn, seeing in it the total inversion of music's *primo* nature, which is to flow in melodic forms, and insists that this inversion of the nature of music leads to 'the demonic', which he associates with Hitler's Third Reich. Popper has a not dissimilar view of Beethoven. He distrusts the 'subjective' artist profoundly. But then, so does many an intelligent German writer. Günter Grass makes a very similar judgment on the two alternative traditions in German philosophy and art in *From the Diary of a Squirrel*, and Mann himself made not dissimilar judgments on Goethe and Schiller. It runs, so to speak, in the family, to make the distinction between Bach and Beethoven, and always to make Beethoven come off second best. But perhaps there is, in the inner ear of those born into the German and Austrian culture, some tonality in the *Ninth Symphony* which is literally not heard by others, a tonality which intelligent and humane Germans and Austrians hear and fear. Certainly Ludwig Van has taken on a new meaning for non-Germans after *The Clockwork Orange*.

Who killed Cock Robin? I killed Cock Robin. Popper's modest 'admission of responsibility' for the death of logical positivism (page 88) is very charming, all the more so because logical positivism is still alive and well and living in our philosophical faculties to this day. Popper's sole intention (he tells us) was to point out what seemed to me a number of fundamental mistakes'. Having done that, he ascribes to himself the death of the movement: 'Everybody knows nowadays that logical positivism is dead . . . Who is responsible? . . . I fear that I must admit responsibility'. Unfortunately, just as Popper pointed, in

magisterial volumes, to the 'fundamental mistakes' of Marxism, and still Marxism continues to flourish, so his pointing to the 'fundamental mistakes' of the logical positivists has been largely without effect. The miracle is that he got a hearing at all, in the face of that degree of opposition.

But it may be that he only got a hearing due to his subtle camouflaging. For, even after 're-labelling' logical positivism, he was still very much on the logical-positivist wave-length, and indeed identified with the aim of the Vienna Circle at some deep centre of himself:

But what attracted me perhaps most to the Vienna Circle was the 'scientific attitude' or, as I now prefer to call it, the rational attitude . . . It is in this general attitude, the attitude of the enlightenment, and in this critical view of philosophy . . . that I still feel very much at one with the Vienna Circle, and with its spiritual father, Bertrand Russell.

As if conscious of some discrepancy in his own account, Popper immediately adds (and it is most revealing):

This explains perhaps why I was sometimes thought by members of the Circle, such as Carnap, to be one of them, and to overstress my differences with them.

If, after having shown up the 'fundamental mistakes' of logical positivism, Popper was still (so far as the members of the Circle were concerned) 'one of them', then it is not surprising that Popper survived to fight another day. But it does make his previous assertion, that he (single handed) killed logical positivism, look like a simple misapprehension of his own rôle. Theorists who are courteously argued with in their own terms will allow an opponent to speak on: but if Popper had made himself clearer, he would not have been tolerated any further.

Indeed, this whole question as to whether or not, fundamentally, Popper is (or ever was) a logical positivist himself seems to be some kind of mystery which no-one can crack, not even the

concepts like 'price of this kettle' and 'thirty pence' are usually precise enough for the problem context in which they are used.

With that degree of suspicion of the philosophical claim to be on the heels of 'precise concepts', Popper is fully armed against positivism.

Always remember that it is impossible to speak in such a way that you cannot be misunderstood: there will always be some who misunderstand you. If greater precision is needed, it is needed because the problem to be solved demands it.

This chapter achieves the expository and analytical level of a Collingwood. The book is worth reading for this chapter alone, and the position established in this chapter runs through the rest of the book with an intelligence that never fails to come as a refreshment to the mind willing before the hedge of technical ('precise?') concepts with which Popper usually likes to deal.

And this position leads inevitably to the necessity for what Popper calls World three or the Third World, the world which mediates between the facticity of things and the thinking mind which brings them into being and deploys them in the moral world. World three, which Popper generously attributes to Bolzano, is (I am sure) a concept, a conceptual necessity, which is as old as the act of thought itself. I am sure that Montaigne or Pascal, Kierkegaard or Doestoevsky would not have found Bolzano saying anything terribly original. And Husserl spent out the 'history' of world three in his *Crisis of European Sciences* with all the confidence of a master.

Popper is generous in peopling his world three. Imagination, art, myths and fictions, all are allowed their place there. We ourselves are in that world three, 'our children and our pupils, our traditions and institutions, our ways of life, our purposes and our aims'.

This is a wide, humane, searching, mature view of our *Lebenswelt*, not at all the kind of thing we would get from a logical positivist. Reading fiction, playing the piano or playing chess, we enter the mysterious world peopled by world three objects. Does Popper even make a joke at the expense of the 'atomic protocol sentence'—type positivist? I think that this is

man himself. His heart belongs to Daddy, in a sense, and even when he argues with Daddy he only gets a gentle reprimand. But Popper's distrust of merely verbal quibbling (at which logical positivists are always past masters) argues very strongly that Popper was never the dupe of the ordinary, silly, unexamined verbal claptrap that positivism goes in for. This emerged early on, in a conflict with (significantly) his father.

When he was about fifteen, Popper's father suggested that Karl should read Strindberg, in particular Strindberg's autobiography. Not the sort of stuff that a fifteen year old would be likely to find pellucid, perhaps, and Karl quickly revolted. He protested against what he took to be an 'obscurantist' attitude of Strindberg's. A lengthy dispute with the father ensued. Popper concludes:

I remember how, after this discussion, I tried strongly to impress on myself that I must always remember the principle of never arguing about words and their meanings, because such arguments are specious and insignificant.

This runs through much of the *Autobiography*, the distrust of overmuch reliance upon mere words when matters of substance are at stake. Insofar as Popper always holds to this deep conviction, that philosophical issues are far too important to be discussed merely at the level of words and the meanings of words, he was never a Positivist. It is perhaps that very fact that allowed him such a penetrating insight into the philosophy of science. Distrustful of words, he attempts to come at 'the things themselves' in the mind. This is what makes the long seventh chapter so fascinating for me. For Popper tackles head on the problem of the relation of the words in which an argument is expressed to the truth or falsity of the argument as it is 'in itself'.

The quest for precision, in words or concepts or meanings, is a wild-goose chase. There is simply no such thing as a precise concept (say, in Frege's sense), though

a far more interesting and characteristic state of mind than perception of a round patch of orange colour'.

Able to state this so clearly, and obviously believing: then does Popper still feel himself so closely allied with Vienna Circle, and with its spiritual father, Bertrand Russell? For Popper has obviously gone way beyond both them, and he is a bigger philosopher altogether. He does not really support of Russellian 'red square patch of colour here and all the concomitant drivel about 'sense data'.

But again one is returned to the central dilemma of this: the question of Popper's own sense of identity. A bigger than his mentors, he is yet still in awe of them. Breaks strange seas of thought alone, he is still dependent upon support of the great tradition of philosophy and science, support for his own major original insights from sources frankly inferior to him. A master in his field, he is yet profoundly unsure. Bigger and better than his colleagues, maintains an almost deferential attitude towards them.

It is a puzzle that Bryan Magee tried to solve in his *Modern Masters* on Popper, and one which probably is in better illustration of Popper's own thesis, that the complex descriptions will have to increase to match the complexity problem.

This one is no doubt insoluble. But when all the machinery of the philosophy of science has been moved to the stage, and demonstrated, as it is here in the *Intellectual Autobiography*, it is still Karl Popper the man who is favoured and intriguing, after his work has been discussed, analysed and applauded. There is still the man who acknowledges him the help given to him by his friends, the man who fears and tyranny, the man who is too modest to take credit for his insights, the man who recognises that world three infinitely transcends worlds one and two, who commands our respect and, even, eventually, our real affection. It is not brilliant conjurer who can smilingly depreciate his own achievements on the grounds that our mental tasks so infinitely transcend them.