

FROM OPEN SOCIETY TO OPEN UNIVERSE

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Abstract. There is a characteristic clarity and distinctness with which we can uphold the methodological and ontological heritage of Rene Descartes as a great milestone in epistemological ontology which holds a key to progress in our understanding of the natural and the human worlds respectively. Epistemological ontology* is the discipline which is primarily interested in knowledge as a form of existence in its own right and in its possible interactions with other forms of existence. With Descartes, we are as much enriched by the revolutionary character of his method of doubt as we are puzzled by the mind-body dualism or by the harmony of the contingent union of the mind and the body on the one hand and by the supposed existence of clear and distinct ideas in the mind on the other. As a question of appraisal after 400 years of Cartesianism, what kind of improvement, if any, has been possible for us all to make over Descartes? Was not Descartes himself the first to teach us how to argue from one form of existence – in his case, the clear and distinct ideas in the mind as a form of knowledge – to other forms of existence such as God and the physical universe? For an answer, I turn to Karl Popper's open universe argument. I begin by focusing on Popper's preoccupation, until his death, with optimism as a duty of every intellectually responsible person, which reminds us of his own contribution to the philosophy of politics during the world war II – his work on *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism*. I then discuss a possible common intellectual bond between Bertrand Russell and I Carl Popper – what I would like to call their shared optimism of rationally connecting the conditions of human knowledge to the conditions of human freedom. This is followed by a discussion of Popper's theory of the growth of knowledge and his logical argument for an open universe, making a room for complexity, novelty, individual creativeness, individual freedom, and a search for a bet-

ter world to live in. The concluding part of my paper discusses briefly Popper's open universe argument in those aspects which suggest a fundamental improvement over Descartes's innovative epistemological-ontological framework.

Addressing himself in his „Replies” to Princess Elizabeth, Descartes wrote: „After we have thus recognized the goodness of God, the immortality of our souls and the greatness of the universe, there is a further truth that it seems to me very useful to know: namely, that although each of us is a separate person and, consequently, has interests different in some measure from other people's, nevertheless each has to remember that he could not exist by himself; each is, in fact, part of the universe, or more particularly part of the Earth; each is part of this state, this society, this family – bound to it by his residence, his oath, his birth. And each must always put the interests of the whole of which he is part before his particular personal interests; within limits, of course, and with discretion; it would be wrong to expose oneself to a great evil to procure only a small good for one's relatives or one's country; and if a man is worth more, just in himself, than all the rest of his city, he would not do well to be willing to be lost in order to save it.”¹ By their common concern with a form of life lived in dignity and freedom, what did Rene Descartes, Karl Popper and Bertrand Russell contribute to our understanding of an open society and an open universe? The first decisive step towards recognizing such a form of life in our *self-consciousness*, which consists not just in our thinking, doubting or knowing but in our thinking about them all, was taken by Descartes when he stated that while it was *possible* to doubt everything including the existence of God, or of the external world or even of our own bodies, it was not *possible* to doubt one's own existence while thinking or doubting. Descartes even designated it as the First Principle of Philosophy: 'Cogito, ergo sum'. Sartre called it „the absolute truth of consciousness as it attains to itself”: For Descartes, 'Cogito, ergo sum' is no argument to show selfconsciousness as an object (of our knowledge). It is a demonstration of philosophy as a form of life. Do not human freedom and creativity characterize the very foundations of philosophy conceived as a form of life, or as a project, of selfconsciousness itself? If we say, with Sartre, that „the man who discovers himself directly in the *Cogito* also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence”², it is a clear recognition of the project of selfconsciousness as individual freedom and as a form of life at the same time. Individual freedom is itself impossible without a community of free yet morally responsible selfconscious beings, without a whole world of intersubjectivity. In other words, my freedom is bound by the necessity of my *being-in-the-world*.

II

Realising the far-reaching consequences of his theory of knowledge, of his theory of scientific method and scientific change, for our understanding of the human-states-of-affairs politically and historically, Popper (1945/1957) formulated his devastating criticism of the

utopian models of society based upon the historicist and essentialist approaches of Plato, Hegel and Marx. Popper warned us of the dangerous consequences of the totalitarian/utopian models, which have been responsible, at least partly, for the rise of communism and national socialism. On the positive side, he formulated his theory of democracy, his theory of open society, which depends on the use of piecemeal engineering as a method of bringing about improvement in the conduct of life (*Lebensführung*) and significant social change. Sixty years after his first book *Logik der Forschung* appeared in 1934, Karl Popper published his latest work titled *Alles Leben ist Problemlosen*³ just about the same time when he died in London on 17th September 1994. In the new book, Popper explains his view about science, incompleteness of science, epistemology and the problem of freedom, evolutionary or Darwinian epistemology, history and politics, the collapse of communism, and intellectual responsibility; above all, he goes into the question of *how to* understand the past and *how to* shape and influence the future which is open. Optimism, he reminds us all, is a duty. Thus he describes his optimism as follows: "We live in a wonderful world; in the Western world we have achieved the best possible social system that we have ever known. And we constantly attempt to improve and reform our world. Many of these attempts have landed us in trouble. For the consequences of our social and political actions are often quite different from what we could intend or foresee. Even then we have achieved more than what most of us have hoped for."⁴ Popper goes on to argue that „we must judge the facts of the past historically and morally so that we can learn about that which is possible and morally right. We should not at all try to find directions and tendencies in the past for purpose of making predictions about the future. For the future is open... ”⁵ On the other hand, in his book *Die Offene Gesellschaft und ihre Feinde* which appeared in 1945, Popper proposed a radical transformation of Plato's problem: "Who should rule?" by turning it into the question: How can we change or shape the constitution of the State, so that the government can be changed or replaced without spilling blood? Popper's whole emphasis here was not on the method of forming of a government but on the possibility of its dissolution. Publication of Popper's book *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), which appeared first in *Economica* in 1944 and 1945, was another significant step in this very context. Thus Popper argued to the effect that our knowledge shapes our interactions with the universe. It shapes our human interests in changing the world we live in. But our knowledge is fallible and yet it can grow according to a rational, though unpredictable, pattern. From all this, together

Notes

- * Pandit, G. L. (1991): *Methodological Variance: Essays in Epistemological Ontology und the Methodology of Science*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 131. Dordrecht : Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- ¹ Descartes, René, „Letters/Answers to Objections”, *Descartes: Philosophical Writings, A Selection*. Transl. and edited by Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach (With an Introduction by Alexandre Koyre). The Bobbs-Merril Company, INC, Indianapolis.1971, pp. 283-284.
- ² Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Existentialisme and Humanism*. London,1948, p.45
- ³ Popper, Karl. R., *Alles Leben ist Problemlosen*. Piper: Munchen/Zurich,1994
- ⁴ Reference 3, p.274.
- ⁵ Reference 3, p.275.