

# KYIV-MOHYLA HUMANITIES JOURNAL

Gaspings for Perspective

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*Source:* Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal 1 (2014): 243–249

*Published by:* National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy

<http://kmhj.ukma.edu.ua>

# Gasping for Perspective

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This is a personal report of my effort to keep a sense of perspective in the light of my experience with the philosophy of Sir Karl Popper. My experience impressed me greatly, and as usual in such cases, it was important for me to compare my experiences with those of others. The variance was, and still is, disconcerting.

The need for comparing notes was mentioned a few times by Popper himself, and so my failure in this respect got worse. Later on I found out that the variance between one's experience and the reports of others regarding the same experience can be shocking. This is shown in so-called Ash-type experiments, in which people simply cannot take the variance and fear that they are going mad. This did not happen to me. I found Popper wonderful – I still do – and most of my peers did not report the same experience.

I do not know to what extent I share Popper's philosophy. I do not even know what exactly his philosophy is, though I have some ideas about it that may be near enough to the truth. At least, I hope that I do not distort his ideas too much. But as I think that some of his ardent disciples do distort his ideas, I cannot take an oath that I do not. Let me remind you, at least, that no two people share exactly the same philosophy. Not even Marx and Engels.

What impressed me so much about Popper was not that I did or did not agree with him. It was that he spoke in a way that helped me enormously with the problems I had on my mind. I always tried to criticize him. The question is, whether my criticism of Popper is valid? But this matters here less than the fact that I found them enlightening. It is very

much like what one hears from one's elders in one's youth: young people are rebellious, at least today, but they have to learn to appreciate the fact that they appreciate some of the instruction that they receive, even if they replace it with newer ideas. It is the valuable instruction that deserves critical efforts most. Alas! We cannot tell our students that, since our education is counter-critical, teachers try to show their charges that they are always right.

So much for my impression about what I learned from Popper. The public response to his ideas is a matter too wide to discuss here, but I am reporting my impression of it more than the complex facts. My impression is that in the American philosophy of science, Gerald Holton, Adolf Grünbaum, Hilary Putnam and Jaakko Hintikka direct the situation and reflect it. Watkins has studied Grünbaum's critique of Popper with the admirable patience that I lack and do not aspire to achieve. For me it suffices that he calls Popper a mythmaker, as does Putnam. How are we to judge such matters? Who is going to be the authority on this?

There is much truth in the postmodern theory about assertions: they have no intrinsic quality, says the postmodern, only the authority of the individuals who endorse them. If so, then it does not matter whether what Grünbaum or Putnam say makes good sense or not; what matters is that some philosophers of science command great authority. And it must be conceded that much less intellectual competence is required to decide who is a great authority than to judge that what a great authority is saying is unintelligent even when it is. It is hard to decide even why Grünbaum or Putnam say that Popper's ideas are silly. Is it because they think so or is it their effort to maintain power? So it is much easier to be postmodern and swim with the current and agree with the high and mighty than to follow Popper and try to cope with real problems.

A philosopher deals with issues that traditionally count as philosophical. Now the people just mentioned are definitely no philosophers in the traditional sense: they do not even try to present a comprehensive view, a worldview or a *Weltanschauung*. Not only do they not offer general views of the universe; they offer no intellectual frameworks for research.

This is true of the leading thinkers of the twentieth century, like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger: they have offered no comprehensive views. This is not as clear as it should be, as this is confused with system-building. Bertrand Russell never tried to develop a philosophical system in the traditional sense of the word *system*. He did have a worldview that he repeatedly expressed, though, often more as a concerned citizen than as a philosopher, much to the disapproval of Wittgenstein. The difference between a worldview and a system is that the latter is presented with a pretext that it is axiomatic. After the development of modern logic, this pretext cannot be sustained except by individuals who display utter disregard for logic.

The example that comes easiest to mind is Ernst Mach. A positivist, he opposed all systems. But he felt a need to have a comprehensive worldview. He said, his worldview comprises the sum total of all extant scientific theories. This is particularly obvious when, in accordance with Karl Popper's suggestion, his ideas are taken in conjunction with those of Josef Popper, since they were partners and read each other's manuscripts. Perhaps the same holds for Willard van Quine, who, without the boost of positivism, said he trusted science to tell him what there is. This is lovely, though unfortunately it does not work, as science is not made of one cloth and is full of unsettled controversies.

It is not easy to offer a worldview, and so one should not demand it. Wittgenstein and Heidegger, however, refrained from trying to offer worldviews, and they took credit for not trying. The hoards of their followers delve into interpretations of details of their *oeuvres* without examining their broad outlines and their import. They then tend to ascribe to their masters their own ideas and perhaps even see all philosophy in our era as one complex worldview. This is even worse than trying to see contemporary scientific ideas as one, as mixing competing views is inconsistent. Now in science it is hard to advocate unconventional views: significant dissent from a received scientific theory is a major breakthrough; yet dissent from a philosophy need not be significant; rather dissenters have to be influential. So philosophy allows dissent more easily than science.

The positions of Grünbaum or of Putnam are not that poor: they do suggest that their assertions are important, but not merely because they are influential. This is why Popper took them and their likes to be adherents of rationalism and so he tried to argue with them. In my view he was in error on this, yet this view of mine is dangerously near to autism, I know.

Popper was very thoughtful and he offered many ideas on the matter aired here, but he did not have time to bring them into a coherent view. He followed the idea of the Enlightenment movement of the independent mind. When Galileo deemed his critique of Aristotle as expressed in his first *Dialogue* sufficiently convincing, he made the Aristotelian express amazement at this fact and ask, if we cannot trust Aristotle, whom Dante had called the prince of philosophers, whom can we trust? Trust your own reason, says Galileo's spokesman in response. Popper did share this idea, and even held on to it in a manner more consistent than Galileo: one has to trust one's own reason, not other people's proofs. True, one has to listen to others' arguments, but these are never conclusive: there is always a need for a decision. This is why many commentators called Popper a conventionalist. I will return to this.

Watkins challenged Popper on this, and Popper acknowledged the challenge and answered it in a most interesting essay. Watkins said, we do rely on authorities, the *London Times*, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, any other authority. Yes, said Popper, and these authorities are not acceptable in classical rationalist philosophy, since none of them is proven above error. This view of fallible authority is the kernel of Popper's revolution.

A word about revolutions. Thomas Kuhn's book on scientific revolutions is hardly more than a patchwork of some Hegelian buzzwords stuck loosely on solid ideas that he borrowed freely from Michael Polanyi. Yet he had a point. When an intellectual revolution happens, it opens new vistas and suggests a myriad of changes in the details of our views of the world. He called "normal science" the task of harmonizing established detailed knowledge with new general ideas. On this he was right. So much so, that before the cleaning up of the debris from one revolution

is finished, a new one is on its way, so that we live in a constant mess, in a mix of remnants of old defunct ideas. This is particularly true of the revolution that Popper has started: it will take a long time before his ideas will be properly squared with much common knowledge.

Popper taught at the London School of Economics from 1946 to the end of his career in 1969. His Chair was personal, but his position was one instituted by Sydney and Beatrice Webb, who accepted as a matter of course the authority of theories inductively founded on solid facts. In accordance with the ideas of Sir Francis Bacon as John Stuart Mill updated them, they repeatedly organized their data in different methods and came out with new ideas. Their ideas did not survive, but their view of science as the surviving ideas did: they instituted a position for teaching the service course on logic and scientific method that Popper filled after the War.

In his first lecture he always welcomed the new overseas students, expressing his view of the siblinghood of humanity and coupling it with his view of the superiority of western culture and science. It was the ancient Greeks, he said, who developed the idea of universalism. This, to cut things short, is the Greek idea that there is truth by nature and truth by convention, that the former is universal and binding and the latter is neither. Truth by nature, they said, rests on proof. What is proof they did not know. The first theories of proof that we have are products of the twentieth century, twenty-five centuries too late.

Bacon suggested that the reason scholars disagree is that they are prejudiced. If we only agree to give up prejudices and not to defend them casuistically, he said, the truth will prevail. Popper agreed with Russell and with Bernard Shaw. He said, we cannot give up all of our prejudices, as we do not know what they are. Beware of those who say they have no prejudices, said Popper, for they surely have lots and lots of them, since they see no reason to doubt that they are right.

And so Popper gave up the idea that the truth by convention can be given up in favour of the truth by nature by sheer conversion to the scientific worldview. Rather, we have to improve our ideas piecemeal.

We can thus accept authorities, but remember that they are fallible, that the truths they recommend are still truths by convention, even if they are the best, the nearest to the truth by nature as far as we know. This is Popper's fallibilism (his view of everything human that in principle it cannot be assured of being error-free), and it is very revolutionary, as it is a new view of the autonomy of the individual, of the rationality of science, and of the best political ideas we can have with the help of science, and more.

The idea that there is only truth by nature and truth by convention leads to the conclusion that Popper's philosophy is conventionalist. The great conventionalist philosophers, Pierre Duhem and Henri Poincaré, sought proofs, and when they gave up the proof of the truth by nature they did settle down for the truth by convention. Not so Popper: he rejected the ancient Greek dichotomy between the two, and so he is understandably misunderstood. This is true of many revolutionaries.

The revolution opens up many avenues, and so it is exciting. So it is sad that just then it was declared that philosophy is dead. This forces us to ignore the majority of philosophers and do our own thing without their help. This is dangerous. From time to time, revolutionaries felt that they were misunderstood and they tended to keep to themselves and keep the doctrine pure. Popper has warned us against this in his marvelous discussion of the role of schools as preserving dogmas or as allowing doctrinal changes to occur only surreptitiously.

To do so, perhaps we should go further: we should admit that controversies are the soul of intellectual progress and examine Popper's ideas for their consistency with this idea. We should see criticism then as valuable because it keeps controversy going. We will have, then, for example, authorities compete rather, than merely to see the *London Times* and the *Britannica*. We will be pluralists. Popper was a pluralist, but he said he was always a pluralist, and this is a mistake. Pluralism requires a reexamination of Popper's views in many ways. Consequently, we would all compare notes regularly on diverse problems and proposed solutions, only some of which are still alive; and we would want to know

where we all stand, and we will know that for that we will have to keep comparing notes. Will this be boring or exciting? That will depend on us, of course.



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