Critical Rationalism and Ethics

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Abstract This paper examines Popper’s views about ethics and metaethics, drawing on a wide variety of sources. It notes the presence of Kantian and utilitarian themes, and discusses some ideas about how they might be interpreted and inter-related. It argues that there are various problems about Popper’s views – notably that his Kantian-influenced ideas about the significance of the individual conscience would appear to conflict with the emphasis on inter-subjectivity in his more general epistemology. The author suggests that it is not likely that a resolution to the issues which he raises will be found in Popper’s own work, and advocates, as a research programme for critical rationalism, the adoption of a strong form of ethical realism, and argues that Popper’s own treatment of reduction suggests the legitimacy of exploration of these matters in a non-reductionistic manner, prior to the attempting of reductions.

Ethics and the Open Society

As Alan Ryan notes in his ‘Popper and Liberalism’ (Ryan 1985), there are two strong but contrasting ethical themes in Popper’s Open Society, of a Kantian and a utilitarian character. More specifically, one might say that on the one side, there is Popper’s ‘protectionism’. This has a strongly Kantian, or as one might say today, ‘republican’ flavour to it. Popper’s protectionism involves the protection of individual liberty in a manner reminiscent of liberalism. However, despite the fact that Popper has sometimes referred to his views in ways that would invite their assimilation to liberalism, I think that we need to note the distinctive character of his views here. Not only does Popper see the protections that he favours as something that has to be created and enforced by the state in response to our moral demands. (That is, there is no hint of a suggestion that they are to be understood in terms of either moral practises – as in Locke – that pre-date the state, or as, after the fashion of J. S. Mill, something that is rooted in utilitarianism.) But it is clear from a comment that Popper

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made in his (unpublished) lectures at Emory University in 1956, that for Popper it is not acceptable that people are not, say, killed because of the good character of others; rather, they need to have rights protected by the power of the state.\(^4\) (Compare also Popper’s discussion of similar themes in his ‘Public Opinion and Legal Principles’.\(^5\)) In addition, Popper stresses that there should be the protection not only of the negative rights favoured by classical liberals, but also that they should not be subject to economic exploitation. Indeed, in the course of *The Open Society* and elsewhere, Popper favoured the idea that people should have an income guaranteed out of taxation; while in a discussion comment at the first meeting of the Mont Pèlerin Society, Popper suggested that this should be at the level of the average wage.\(^6\)

To these ideas, one might also relate Popper’s passionate ethical individualism – something that he emphasised, in a manner that contemporary ‘communitarians’ might well consider, should be distinguished from egoism. What Popper favoured, here, was a concern for each individual, and for the idea that what was desirable was a combination of individualism and altruism.

On the other side, Popper is well-known for commending, as an approach to public policy, what has become known as ‘negative utilitarianism’. Popper here urged that, rather than pursuing the aim of making people happy, government might, instead, be concerned with an agenda of the relief of suffering. It should be noted, at once, that this is not something that Popper was arguing which should be the only concern of public policy. Accordingly, Ninian Smart’s amusing criticism of negative utilitarianism that from such a perspective, we should kill people painlessly; see (Smart 1958) does not hit Popper’s approach; no more than does John Stuart Mill’s earlier development of the same idea, in (Mill 1864).

There is, however, rather more to all this that meets the eye. For while Popper was clearly concerned about the relief of suffering – a response to which is a deep-seated theme in his work\(^7\) – and while Popper seems to me to ignore the problem of what the extent of our responsibilities to others should be, on this score it is not altogether clear that the character of these ideas is quite utilitarian in its spirit. The reason for making this perhaps strange-sounding claim, is that Popper set out, in a paper called ‘Public and Private Values’, which seems to have been written in 1946,\(^8\) an argument which clarifies ideas on this score already to be found in his *Open Society*. The paper is interesting, because in it Popper starts from the problem that people – his concerns seem to have been, especially with humanitarian democrats\(^9\) – may bring to politics attachments to conflicting ideals, points at issue between which cannot be resolved rationally. (The pursuit of any one of which, he criticized as ‘utopian’.) In the face of this, Popper proposed the suggestion that, in the formulation of an agenda for public policy, they should concentrate on what they could agree upon, and suggested, more specifically, that they consider what is unacceptable: concrete evils ‘such as starvation, pain, humiliation, injustice, exploitation’ (Popper 2008, p. 119). This, he was arguing, should furnish an agenda for politics. He further suggested that this might make it possible for those who would be in disagreement about positive ideals – Popper here refers to liberals, socialists, utilitarians and Christians – to discover an agenda that they could agree to.