THE METHODOLOGICAL STATUS OF POPPER'S RATIONALITY PRINCIPLE

ABSTRACT. Popper's account of situational explanations is contrasted with the models of Dray and Hempel. Popper's Rationality Principle has the unusual feature of positing causal connections between objective ideas (world 3) and human behaviour (world 1).

Popper's methodological policy concerning the Rationality Principle seems to be in direct conflict with his general theory of scientific method. However, I argue that Popper has underestimated the empirical content and criticizability of the Rationality Principle.

One of the great philosophical parables of our time is Popper's story of his discovery of the Demarcation Principle. Even if one does not agree with Popper's choice of Freudianism and Marxism as paradigm cases of pseudo-science, there is nevertheless something tremendously compelling about his criticism of vague, unfalsifiable systems:

These theories [those of Marx, Freud, Adler] appeared to be able to explain practically everything . . . whatever happened always confirmed [them] . . . It was precisely this fact - that they always fitted, that they were always confirmed - which in the eyes of their admirers constituted the strongest argument in favour of those theories. It began to dawn on me that this apparent strength was in fact their weakness. (1963, p. 35)

Popper then went on to develop a conjectures-and-refutations theory of scientific method centered around the following methodological maxims:

... our methodological rule ... favour[s] theories with the highest possible empirical content (1959, p. 121).

A serious empirical test always consists in the attempt to find a refutation, a counter example . . . we always try to refute first the most risky predictions . . . (1963, p. 240).

... a supreme rule is laid down . . . which says that the other rules of scientific procedure must be designed in such a way that they do not protect any statement in science against falsification (1959, p. 54).

Given this stringent and tough-minded approach to science which is reaffirmed in the recent Schilpp volume (e.g., Vol. I, p. 29), it is surprising to find Popper speaking so strongly in favour of the Rationality Principle as a basis for social

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science. For Popper considers the Rationality Principle to be "almost empty" (1967, p. 144). It is also puzzling to find Popper claiming that it is sound methodological policy never to blame the Rationality Principle for any prediction failures in social science. Rather he says we should always consider falsifications to be criticisms of our auxiliary hypotheses or models of the agent's situation (1967, p. 146).

How are we to resolve these incongruities? Has Popper decided that social science requires a relaxation of the methodological rules which he proposes for physics? If so, it would appear that he must now abandon the grounds of his criticism of Freud and Marx. After all, the Rationality Principle also seems to rule out nearly nothing and its followers also find confirmations everywhere. Or is it simply that Popper has made a mistake in his appraisal of the Rationality Principle?

In this paper I will first focus on the problems of the empirical content and nomicity of the Rationality Principle. I then discuss the problem of whether it is good methodological practice to protect it from refutation.

I. THREE EXPLANATORY MODELS OF HUMAN ACTIONS

To bring out the distinctive features of Popper's explanatory model, it will be useful to contrast his views with those of Hempel and Dray.

According to Hempel, explanations of human actions in terms of motivating reasons fit his covering law model and can be schematized as follows. (Hempel presents a deductive schema merely for convenience and the issues we are dealing with here do not hinge on whether the generalizations involved are universal or statistical. Rather it is their nomicity and content which is in question.)

"A was in a situation of type C.
A was a rational agent.
In a situation of type C, any rational agent will do x.

Therefore, A did x" (1965, p. 471).

For Hempel the last premise is law-like and rational agent is to be construed as a "descriptive-psychological concept" (p. 472) which describes certain "broadly dispositional features" of a person (p. 473). Hempel stresses that the dispositions involved are "higher-order" (p. 433) and are governed by a whole network of theoretical principles. He warns against making the claim