Introduction

In this chapter, I attempt to extract an ethics of the self from the philosophy of Karl Popper in the light of the ethics of subjectivity. For clarity, a subjectivist ethics may be viewed as implying that the standards for acting as well as judging actions are those of the individual. This may be taken to be informed by the understanding that while, on the one hand, ethics has to do with the moral evaluation of character and conduct, on the other, by “subjectivity,” reference is made to the condition of the self’s possession of perspectives, experiences, feelings, desires – all of which influence and inform the self’s action as well as judgments about reality. As such, subjectivity presupposes a subject, one that experiences all the phenomena that makes up and produces the self. Given the foregoing understanding, my attempt of a construction Popper’s moral philosophy is built on the foundation of his idea of critical rationalism, which finds expression in his ideas of open society, anti-historicism and falsificationism. To be sure, these ideas also form the basis of his discourse on knowledge.

Suggestive of Popper’s moral disposition is what he referred to as “The Myth of the Framework,” where he argues that the idea that a shared frame of reference is needed for any fruitful dialogue is misconstrued as it also fosters the belief that when there are no such frames of reference, people may resort to violence. In the light of such disposition and the ideas contained in his ideas of open society, anti-historicism and falsification – as well as that knowledge is conjectural – this chapter reads Popper’s moral philosophy as suggestive of an ethics of open standard, open judgment and value revision. This is seen for instance in his perspective of history. Popper regards human history as a single unique
event; and that knowledge of the past does not necessarily help provide knowledge of the future. Indeed, for Popper, “The evolution of life on earth, or of human society, is a unique historical process...Its description, however, is not a law, but only a singular historical statement.”

Thus, though the study of history may reveal trends, there is no guarantee that these trends will continue. In other words, they are not laws; “a statement asserting the existence of a trend at a certain time and place would be a singular historical statement and not a universal law.”

As a result of this, Popper may be seen to have censured the idea that fruitful dialogue is only possible where there are shared assumptions or universal principles.

In this chapter, I begin by examining the basis on which a Popperian theory of ethics can be developed. I then explain what such an ethics will consist of, while pointing out its features of subjectivity. I conclude by highlighting why Popper’s ethics remains true to the basic tenets of (post)modernism.

Motivations for Popper’s moral philosophy

An interesting point to begin with is to state what is here considered the motivations of Popper’s moral philosophy, which include the ideas of: open society, anti-historicism and knowledge as conjectural. To be sure, these ideas could be interpreted to have crystallized into his critical rationalism. That is, they could be said to have precipitated into his critical rationalist attitude regarding the claims we make as well the consequences or implications of such claims. Indeed, critical rationalism is the name Popper gave to a modest and self-critical rationalist attitude in contrast to the rationalist view that only what could be proved by reason and/or experience is acceptable. Popper views the rationalist attitude as inconsistent as it does not explain how “proof” is possible on the same grounds that it views what it takes to be rational. In this vein, Popper noted that the fundamental rationalist attitude results in “an irrational faith in reason.” Popper so described this attitude because he strongly held that neither logical argument nor experience can establish the rationalist attitude. In any case, he shares the rationalists’ belief that reason is the surest human authority; what he does not share with them is the hope that reason can attain to indubitable truth. This is because, for him, truth is beyond the ability of reason to grasp much as it is beyond human authority. Consequently, as a rationalist of some sort, Popper avers that reason is not employed in the attempt to justify claims so as to establish them as indubitable truths; reason should rather be employed to cast a