Politics between philosophy and polemics : political thinking and thoughtful politics in the writing of Karl Popper, Leo Strauss, and Hannah Arendt

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PART I

THE SPELL OF POPPER:

POLITICS BETWEEN SCIENCE AND POLEMICS

CHAPTER 1

Popper's Proposal for Piecemeal Social Engineering

> *Instead of posing as prophets we must become the makers of our fate.*
> *We must learn to do things as well as we can, and to look out for our mistakes.*
> *And when we have dropped the idea that the history of power will be our judge,*
> *when we have given up worrying whether or not history will justify us,*
> *then one day perhaps we may succeed in getting power under control.*
> *In this way we may even justify history, in our turn.*
> *It badly needs a justification.*[19]
>
> Karl Popper

> *Where ends are agreed, the only questions left are those of means,*
> *and these are not political but technical, that is to say, capable of being settled*
> *by experts or machines, like arguments between engineers or doctors. That is why those*
> *who put their faith in some immense, world-transforming phenomenon, like the final*
> *triumph of reason or the proletarian revolution, must believe that all political and*
> *moral problems can be turned into technological ones.*[20]
>
> Isaiah Berlin

1.1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the "open society" is often invoked in public debate to indicate who "we" are, in terms of both "our" way of life and "our" form of government. Those who use the term often refer to the philosophy of Karl Popper (1902-1994), whose book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, published in 1945, gave the term widespread currency. The book, which can be read as a defense of liberal democracy against totalitarianism (both fascist and communist), played an important role in the dissident movement in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Popper is therefore sometimes classified as a typical "Cold War liberal".[21] This does not mean, however, that his influence declined after 1989. His philosophy formed the inspiration for George Soros's Open Society Institute, founded in 1993. Furthermore, in response to the rise of ethnic violence on the fringes of Europe in the '90s and the challenge of political Islam in the wake of "9/11", his book is being taken off the shelves again, to be used in the struggle against ethnic nationalism and fundamentalist religion, which are depicted as embodiments of the

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[19] OSE2 280.
[20] Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', 168.
[21] Together with Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) and Raymond Aron (1905-1983), see Mueller, 'Fear and Freedom'; Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*, 24. Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992) is sometimes also counted among them.

idea of a "closed society". Apparently, the logic of Popper's argument remains appealing, even though his original enemies have been gone for over twenty years.

In contrast to his presence in public debate, Popper is almost completely ignored in academic political philosophy. Some suggest that this is due to the fact that it is sometimes still believed, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, that nothing of much importance happened in this field in the second half of the twentieth century before the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971.[22] It is certainly due to the fact that within the university, Popper is primarily known as a philosopher of science. His books *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1934) and *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963) are still read, and his falsificationist theory of science is still taught, at least in introductory courses. Moreover, Popper himself has repeatedly claimed that his primary interest lay in the methodology of the natural sciences.[23]

In this light *The Open Society and Its Enemies* might be considered as nothing more than a pamphlet, a polemical intervention in current affairs written by a worried citizen who chose to publish his personal opinion on the political situation of his time. Indeed, Popper himself called his book his "war effort", his contribution to World War II against Hitler and to the Cold War against Stalin.[24] At the same time, though, he intended it to be more than a tract for the times. He describes it as a contribution to "the philosophy of society and politics" (OSE2 259), or, to be more specific, as an examination of "the application of the critical and rational methods of science to the problems of the open society" (OSE1 1). His criticism of the two influential totalitarian political movements of his time is informed by his criticism of "historicism", a faulty methodology of the social sciences which he ascribes especially to Plato, Hegel, and Marx. It seems thus that Popper's approach to politics is embedded in, or even dependent on, a broader set of philosophical, (that is, epistemological) convictions.[25]

Whether his book is considered a "mere" pamphlet or a "mere" application of his philosophy of science, in neither case does it seem to be of serious interest to political philosophers. Some have argued, however, that Popper's philosophy of science should be understood as an application of his philosophy of politics, in which case the latter would deserve to be taken more seriously.[26] However this may be – whether his political philosophy is regarded as an "application" of his philosophy of science or the other way around – insofar as political philosophers are interested in the conditions of their own enterprise, they ought to be interested in Popper's work for a different reason. For, precisely if and insofar as a political philosophy is "influential" – that is, insofar as people write, speak, and hence *act* in

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[22] This is the explanation given by Mueller, 'Fear and Freedom', 46.
[23] See, inter alia, OSE1 2, OSE2 85.
[24] Popper, *Unended Quest*, 131.
[25] Lessnoff, *Political Philosophers of the Twentieth Century*, 176-177: "There is no doubt that Popper's political theory builds on his analysis of the scientific enterprise, of the conditions necessary for the growth of knowledge, and for rational thought in general." See also T.E. Burke, *The Philosophy of Popper*.
[26] See Stokes, *Popper: Philosophy, Politics, and Scientific Method*.

accordance with its assumptions – it may teach us something worthwhile about the conditions of our political understanding. As Raymond Geuss aptly formulates it:

> A political philosophy ... is not really an exclusively theoretical construction, but it must also be seen as an attempt to intervene in the world of politics: the consequences of acting on it ought thus never to be considered matters of complete indifference in evaluating it. ... In the long run ..., when a theory is widely believed and has come to inform the way large groups of people act, deeply hidden structural features of it can suddenly come to have a tremendous political impact.[27]

Insofar as a political philosophy's underlying conceptual assumptions inform our actual political understanding and judgment, then, we are permitted to ask whether its contribution to that understanding and judgment is sound or not.

The force and positive appeal of Popper's idea of the "open society" was felt especially due to the contrasting force of the negative, almost demonic picture he drew of the "closed society" as a backward and primitive society reigned over by irrational belief in magical taboos. Now that the imminent threat of his original contemporary enemies is gone, however, we may seize the opportunity to evaluate his philosophy of the open society on its own terms, according to its inner structure.

As is well-known, Popper's attack on Marxism in the second volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* – entitled *The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* – is preceded by his attempt to break the "spell" of the "alluring philosophy" (OSE1 199) of Plato in the first volume – entitled *The Spell of Plato*. Popper accuses Plato of having laid the basis for the success of later kinds of utopianism by propagating an "Ideal State" that pretends to be wise, just, and happy, and thus by consciously appealing to humanitarian ideas and sentiments, which is reinforced by his use of Socrates as his mouthpiece. Yet, Popper argues, *in fact*, when judged from a *rational* point of view, this state is totalitarian in nature. He points to an "inner conflict" (OSE1 196) within Plato's mind between reason and sentiment, which was decided in favor of the latter, the remedy to which would consist in making political philosophy more "rational".

When, in turn, I attempt to identify what may be called "the spell of Popper", the way I read his work differs from the way he read Plato, if only because, as we shall see, the criterion of "rationality" used by Popper turns out to be too narrow. Moreover, I do not point to any "inner conflict" in Popper's mind, nor do I turn the tables by defending Plato or any other of his "enemies" against him.[28] Instead, I will reconstruct and then deconstruct what may be called respectively the "inner logic" and the "deeply hidden structural features" of Popper's writing, in the first case by critically examining the inner consistency of

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[27] Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 35.
[28] For the latter, see, inter alia, Levinson, *In Defense of Plato*.

what is explicitly *proposed* in it (what is explicitly articulated and accounted for),[29] and in the second case by examining what is actually *enacted* by it (what is performed, even without being explicitly articulated and accounted for).[30]

The current chapter examines the inner logic of Popper's work, that is, the consistency of his work on the level of its *propositions*. He presents his theory as an "application" of the "rational" methods of science to politics, which results in his "proposal" for a politics of "piecemeal social engineering". We examine whether the "rational" and (hence) "responsible" politics he aims to further is in fact supported by his epistemological assumptions. We will argue that, in fact, he requires a wider conception of rationality, for which he can at the same time not account within the epistemological framework he explicitly advocates. As a consequence, his work is vulnerable to the reproach that it lapses into some kind of "decisionism".

The next chapter examines what I have called the deeply hidden structural features of his work, that is, the assumptions *performatively* affirmed by his writing, as well as their consistency with what is *proposed* in it. In the *first* part, I draw attention to the fact that the force of his proposal for a politics of the rational discussion of proposals turns out in the end to rest on the use of the *analogy* between science (or engineering) and politics. Besides being problematic in terms of substance, the crucial because constitutive role of the language of analogy within his work remains unaccounted for within his rationalist picture of language. In the *second* part, I draw attention to the fact that his proposal for a politics of proposing is set in a state of necessity, that is, in a situation in which a collective of "friends" is urged to unite against its "enemies". Hence, the rational (and thus freely discussable) character of Popper's "proposal" is impaired by the conception of politics as *polemics* that is *performatively* affirmed by his writing. Thus, the "open" society harbors in itself a moment of "closure", which leads me to question both the consistency and the adequacy of Popper's rationalist conception of politics.

In the *first two* sections of the present chapter, I give an account both of Popper's notion of "the open society" and of the two alternative approaches to

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[29] Mueller, 'Fear and Freedom', 56: "Of course, personal professions are one thing – the inner logic of political ideas propounded another."

[30] Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 35. See also ibid., 36: "The liberal thinkers like Berlin who gave their penetrating historical and conceptual analysis in the middle of the last century realized that understanding a political philosophy involves taking account of a wide variety of factors that have no parallel in the case of strictly empirical theories. These include hidden structural features of the theory, various assumptions the people who are going to act on the theory make, and the actual institutional, economic, and political reality of the world in which the theory is trying to allow us to intervene (even if that intervention is at the level of a mere normative assessment). Liberalism ought to have applied the theoretical sophistication which it had acquired in its critical struggle against Marxism to the task of understanding itself better in terms of these factors." Holmes, 'Aristippus in and out of Athens', 118, mentions only the third factor: "the normative claims of political philosophy, so I believe, can never be understood from behind a self-imposed veil of ignorance, but rather must always be interpreted in light of historical information about the institutional order within which these claims are to be enforced."

politics that he distinguishes: historicism and social engineering, the former of which he rejects, while embracing the latter on condition that it is not "utopian" but "piecemeal" in nature. He claims that the latter is the only approach that does justice to the open society's demand to assume full responsibility for our political decisions. Since Popper argues that "piecemeal social engineering" is the only approach to politics that deserves the predicate "scientific", in the *third* section I go on to provide an explanation of his distinctive philosophy of science, more specifically of his strict separation of "facts" (or scientific propositions) and "decisions" (or moral and political proposals). In the *fourth* section, I reconstruct in detail both his criticism of the "utopian" form of social engineering and of "totalitarianism", which he ascribes to Plato, and his own "piecemeal", liberal-democratic alternative to it, which he ascribes to Pericles and Socrates. In the *final two* sections, I critically examine the consistency of Popper's position, arguing that the distinction between "piecemeal" and "utopian" social engineering, crucial to his project, is in fact difficult to maintain if it is based on the restricted conception of rationality inherent in the "scientific" attitude of "social engineering". I show that he requires as complement a more comprehensive conception of rationality, that is, a conception that is capable of accounting for the rational validity not only of *technological* propositions (the choice of *means*) but also of *political* proposals (the choice of *ends*). However, this broader conception of rationality can itself not be accounted for on the basis of Popper's restricted epistemological presuppositions, especially due to his strict separation of facts from decisions. As mentioned above, he thereby runs the danger of lapsing into some kind of "irrational" political "decisionism", despite his explicitly professed rejection of this stance.

1.2. POLITICS WITHIN THE OPEN SOCIETY

Before we are able to answer the question of whether Popper's philosophy of science does indeed further the rational and responsible form of politics he advocates, we need to reconstruct Popper's concrete "proposals" as presented especially in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* – by far his most influential political philosophical work.[31] In the preface (written in 1943) to the first edition, he states that what is at stake is nothing less than the survival of our "civilization". The aim of his book is to unite "those on whose defence civilization depends" (OSE1 vii) by breaking with "the habit of deference to great men" who "supported

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[31] In my analysis of Popper's writing I focus primarily on *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, which became his most influential work. I also refer to *The Poverty of Historicism* (published as a book in 1957, being a re-worked and expanded version of a paper originally written in 1936) and to an unpublished paper written between 1944 and 1946. Because I am primarily interested in the illustrative function of Popper's work for our purposes of understanding the practice of political philosophy rather than offering a full exegesis of the idiosyncrasies of the work, I largely leave out of consideration his so-called "later" political philosophy and his theory of three worlds. For a detailed account of these aspects of Popper's work, see especially Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*, chapter 3, entitled 'After *The Open Society*'.

the perennial attack on freedom and reason" (OSE1 vii). The larger part of the book consists of an attack on the authority of three such "intellectual leaders" in particular: Plato, Hegel, and Marx. Still, he claims that the problems treated are "the problems of our own time", and although he states he has tried to state them as simply as he could, the object of his book is "not so much to popularize the questions treated as to solve them" (OSE1 vii).

Hence, Popper's final aim consists in a defense of free and rational political decision-making. As he explains in chapter 10 (which bears the same title as the book as a whole), "civilization" or an "open society" is characterized by the fact that people accept their individual freedom and their responsibility for decisions. In a "closed society", on the other hand, decisions are governed by a belief in magical taboos. As Popper calls his distinction between these types of society a "rationalist" one,[32] we may conclude that the adoption of the distinction itself already presupposes the "method" and perspective of the "open society".

In fact, however, his distinction is more than a purely "rationalist" one, because Popper places its adoption and defense within the context of a grand historical narrative of a continuing struggle, which runs through the history of Western civilization, between the adherents of the open society on the one hand, and those who wish to "return" to the closed society on the other. He states that the open society first came into being in Greece with the "breakdown" of the archaic tribal societies.[33] He regards Socrates, Pericles, and some of the sophists[34] – all of whom he counts among "the Great Generation" – as the first to articulate the principles of the open society, but who were confronted by the conservative reaction of Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle. Later in history, the principles of early Christianity were challenged by orthodox Judaism and the authoritarian medieval Christian Church; early modern and Enlightenment thinking, as embodied especially in the French and American Revolutions, was jeopardized by Romanticism and its nationalist aftermath; and, finally, in the twentieth century, liberal democracy was threatened by totalitarianism. Popper speaks of a "perennial fight" (OSE1 1) for freedom, individualism, egalitarianism, and humanitarianism against collectivism and the division of mankind into superiors and inferiors – a struggle to which he clearly wishes to add his own share.

As Popper explains, one of the issues in an open society which assumes the character of "a problem which can be rationally discussed", is the quest for the "best constitution" (OSE1 173): as soon as political laws are no longer considered magical taboos, they become capable of rational discussion, to be changed

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[32] OSE1 202n. Popper derives the terms "open society" and "closed society" from Henri Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932), but Popper uses them in a different way: "My terms indicate, as it were, a *rationalist distinction*; the closed society is characterized by the belief in magical taboos, while the open society is one in which men have learned to be to some extent critical of taboos, and to base decisions on the authority of their own intelligence (after discussion). Bergson, on the other hand, has a kind of *religious distinction* in mind."

[33] OSE1 176.

[34] Of the sophists, Popper considers Protagoras as one of the most prominent theorists of the open society, while he counts Callicles and Thrasymachus as adherents of the idea of the closed society.

according to the outcome of that discussion. Although Popper does not explicitly *thematize* the question "what is political?", he *uses* a specific conception of "political" that can be distilled from his work. If only in passing, he describes "political life" as "the field of problems concerned with the power of man over man" (OSE2 236). In addition, he claims that "*all* power, and political power at least as much as economic power, is dangerous" (OSE2 129). Throughout his book it becomes clear that for him, the "most fundamental problem of all politics" consists in "the control of the controller, of the dangerous accumulation of power represented in the state" (OSE2 129).[35] He seems to take it for granted that the use of power by some human beings over other human beings is an ineradicable fact of human reality, an empirical datum which he wishes neither to dispute nor challenge. Hence, he is no anarchist.[36] What he wants to challenge, though, is how to deal with this fact, how we *ought* to deal with this "fundamental problem of politics".[37]

To be sure, Popper addresses the problem of political power insofar as the latter is institutionalized in the state. He identifies "political laws" with "the laws of the state" (OSE1 173), and he distinguishes "the realm of legality, i.e. of state-enforced norms" as the sphere of politics from "the realm of morality proper, i.e. norms enforced not by the state, but by our conscience" (OSE1 113). In other words, he conceives of the "political" as a separate sphere within our (open) society or civilization, called "state" or "government". Hence, insofar as he claims to offer a "political philosophy" or a "philosophy of politics" – terms he does not use that often – he is primarily thinking of a philosophy of state or of government.

1.3. TWO APPROACHES TO POLITICS: HISTORICISM VERSUS SOCIAL ENGINEERING

As Popper writes in the introduction, his book examines "the application of the critical and rational methods of science to the problems of the open society" (OSE1 1). Thus, he approaches "the problem of politics" from the perspective of "social philosophy" – a term he uses as shorthand for the (his) methodology of the social sciences. He states that we are ultimately confronted with a choice between *two* alternative approaches to the problem of politics, only one of which is methodologically sound: either we pose as the "prophets" of our fate and thus let "the history of power … be our judge", or we become the "makers" of our fate and then "one day perhaps we may succeed in getting power under control." (OSE2 280 – see epigraph to this chapter). In the first case, we adopt the attitude of

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[35] See also OSE1 120-121.

[36] Cf. Popper, 'Reason and the Open Society', 282: "government is a necessary evil. Total absence of government is an impossibility and – another regrettable truth – the more people, the more government."

[37] OSE1 120. He also speaks of "the problem of politics" (OSE1 120), or of "the political problem" (OSE1 127).

"historicism": in the second, we adopt the attitude of "social engineering", which is then subdivided into a "utopian" and a "piecemeal" variant.

In the secondary literature, Popper's own choice for "piecemeal social engineering" is usually presented as a "middle way" between "historicism" and "utopian social engineering".[38] Accordingly, Jeremy Shearmur depicts the last two as the "Scylla" and "Charybdis" which Popper wishes to avoid.[39] Although this imagery aptly captures the equal *polemical* distance of Popper's proposal from these two alternatives, its use is slightly misleading if we wish to determine the exact *philosophical* relation between the three positions. We therefore adhere to the initial account provided by Popper himself, who presents the distinction between historicism and social engineering as the primary one.[40]

Popper describes historicism as the doctrine which holds that "history is controlled by specific historical or evolutionary laws whose discovery would enable us to prophesy the destiny of man." (OSE1 8). Knowledge of these historical laws enables the historicist to foretell "which political actions are likely to succeed or likely to fail", and thereby to "put politics upon a solid basis" (OSE1 8).[41] Hence, human beings cannot alter the course of history.[42] The appeal of historicism consists specifically in its providing "*certainty* regarding the ultimate outcome of history" (OSE1 9), its promise to relieve us from "the strain of

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[38] Lessnoff, *Political Philosophies of the Twentieth Century*, 188.

[39] Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*, 40-47.

[40] OSE, chapters 1-3.

[41] This conception of historicism should be distinguished from the more common understanding of historicism [*Historismus*], viz. the doctrine which holds that all human thought and knowledge is historically determined. In order to avoid the two being mixed up, Popper calls the latter 'historism' (OSE2 208, 255). In fact, he opposes *both* kinds of historicism, if only because the latter is necessarily part of the former. As the second part of this dissertation shows, Leo Strauss employs the second understanding of *Historismus* only, which he renders in English as "historicism".

[42] According to Popper, "one of the simplest and oldest" forms of historicism is the religious doctrine of the chosen people, for it assumes that God has laid down the law of historical development insofar as it holds that "God has chosen one people to function as the selected instrument of His will, and that this people will inherit the earth" (OSE1 8). Popper indicates that his picture of "theistic" historicism serves to illustrate characteristics that are also shared by "the two most important modern versions of historicism", that is, the "non-theistic" historicism of racialism or fascism on the right and that of Marxism or communism on the left (OSE1 9). The former substitutes the chosen people by the chosen race, the latter substitutes the chosen people by the chosen class.

It should be noted that Popper comes close to formulating the thesis that modern totalitarian movements are "political religions", that is, secularized forms of religion. Although he claims that his attack on "theistic" forms of historicism "should … not be interpreted as an attack upon religion" (OSE1 9), I am inclined to conclude that this claim is difficult to uphold. On the one hand, it seems that he does indeed criticize only *some* forms of religion, while embracing others. For instance, he speaks approvingly of (early) Christianity as a form of protest against "Jewish tribalism" (OSE2 22-23, OSE2 301n56). Sometimes he suggests that a similar distinction can be drawn *within* Judaism (OSE2 23) and *within* Christianity (OSE2 24, 273). On the other hand, to the extent that he reduces "the theistic doctrine of historicism" to a mere *effect* of historical, that is, *human* circumstances (social change, oppression), and insofar as he makes *human conscience* (OSE2 271) instead of *divine law* the touchstone of human conduct, he seems to turn against revealed religion *as such*.

civilization", that is, from the demand inherent in the open society to assume our individual freedom and responsibility, even in times of great social turmoil.[43]

Social engineering, by contrast,[44] implies that "man is the master of his own destiny and that, in accordance with our aims, we can influence or change the history of man just as we have changed the face of the earth" (OSE1 22). Moreover, the social engineer is convinced that a "scientific basis of politics" is to be found in "the factual information necessary for the construction or alteration of social institutions, in accordance with our wishes and aims" (OSE1 22) and not in any knowledge of the future course of history. Whereas the historicist will ask for the "origin" and "end" of certain social institutions or the "true role" played by certain institutions in the development of history, the engineer will ask: "If such and such are our aims, is the institution well designed and organized to serve them?" (OSE1 23). Accordingly, "the engineer or the technologist approaches institutions rationally as means that serve certain ends, and ... he judges them wholly according to their appropriateness, efficiency, simplicity, etc." (OSE1 24).

Next, Popper draws a distinction within the camp of the social engineers between a "utopian" and a "piecemeal" kind.[45] The "utopian" social engineer adopts certain institutional means in order to realize ends that are presumed to be set by history. Popper therefore sometimes characterizes the utopian kind as a *combination* of the attitudes of social engineering (viz. its belief in the possibility of human intervention by institutional means) and of historicism (viz. its determination of the choice of ends).[46] The "piecemeal" social engineer, by contrast, restricts himself to a consideration of the *facts*, that is, of the actual efficiency and effectiveness of certain measures, while the *ends* that these measures are meant to serve are chosen by the *citizen*,[47] who, as we shall see below, is supposed to speak "the *language of political demands or of political proposals*" (OSE1 109).[48]

According to Popper, "piecemeal" social engineering – which he sometimes calls "democratic social reconstruction" – is the only approach that

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[43] Popper notes that historicist ideas seem to surface especially in times of great social change: "They appeared when Greek tribal life broke up, as well as when that of the Jews was shattered by the impact of the Babylonian conquest. (...) In modern Europe, historicist ideas were revived during the industrial revolution, and especially through the impact of the political revolutions in America and France" (OSE1 17). More specifically, he claims that the doctrines of the chosen people, of the chosen race, and of the chosen class originated as reactions to some kind of *oppression*. The doctrine of the chosen people became important during the Babylonian captivity; Gobineau's theory of race was a reaction to the revolutionaries' rise against aristocracy; Marx's prophecy of the victory of the proletariat is a reply to a period of great oppression and exploitation (see OSE1 203n3). In these circumstances especially, "the strain of civilization", that is, the demand for personal responsibility, is harder than ever to bear. See especially OSE1, Introduction, and Chapter 10.

[44] In OSE1 210n9 Popper indicates that the term "social engineering" (in the "piecemeal" sense at least) seems to have been used first by Roscoe Pound in his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Law* (1922).

[45] OSE1 22, 24, 157.

[46] OSE1 24, 157.

[47] OSE1 23-24.

[48] Cf. OSE1 211n11.

offers a truly "scientific" and "rational" basis for politics, being an "application" of the critical and rational methods of science to the problems of the open society. In his view, only this method will lead to free and responsible political action. As his plea for a program of "piecemeal social engineering" is clearly linked with his philosophy of science, we turn to the latter first.

1.4. PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE: DUALISM OF FACTS AND DECISIONS

As indicated above, Popper himself has repeatedly claimed that his primary interest lies in the methodology of the natural sciences. His book *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, originally published in German in 1934, was written in response to the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle. Popper famously argued that the latter's method of verification does not offer a solution to the problem of logical induction. He argued that only the method of *falsification* can offer a criterion by which to "demarcate" scientific from pseudo-scientific propositions. For, whereas verification cannot lead to logical certainty, falsification can. Hence, a theory or proposition deserves the predicate "scientific" only if it is capable of being refuted by experiment. If it is refuted, it is demonstrated to be false by way of logical *deduction*. This method is not only applicable to natural science, but also to technology or engineering (as applied sciences), the latter of which are not so much interested in the explanation of phenomena through the positing of universal laws, but which apply those laws in order to make a specific prognosis in individual cases.[49]

Popper argues that the social sciences, by contrast, presuppose a distinction between factual statements (sociological laws, to be formulated in the language of scientific propositions) and normative statements (social norms and decisions, to be formulated in the language of normative proposals).[50] He claims that norms cannot be reduced to facts: "*it is impossible to derive a sentence stating a norm or a decision, or, say, a proposal for a policy from a sentence stating a fact*; this is only another way of saying that it is impossible to derive norms or decisions *or proposals* from facts" [emphasis in original] (OSE1 64).

Hence, he speaks of "the autonomy of ethics" (OSE1 67). That is to say, whereas the truth (or in any case the falsity) of statements of fact (i.e. of natural or sociological laws) can in principle be proved by scientific experiment, there is no way to deduce the goodness or rightness of normative proposals by having recourse to facts:[51]

> A normative law, whether it is now a legal enactment or a moral
> commandment, can be enforced by men. Also, it is alterable. It may be
> perhaps described as good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or

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[49] OSE2 263.
[50] OSE1, chapter 5.
[51] Cf. OSE2 238: "it is impossible to prove the rightness of any ethical principle, or even to argue in its favour in just the manner in which we argue in favour of a scientific statement. Ethics is not a science."

unacceptable; but only in a metaphorical sense can it be called 'true' or 'false', since it does not describe a fact, but lays down directions for our behavior. (OSE1 58)

For instance, Popper claims that "equality before the law" is "not a fact but a political demand based upon a moral decision; and it is quite independent of the theory – which is probably false – that 'all men are born equal'." (OSE2 234).[52] Social sciences have the task of predicting the "unintended social repercussions of intentional human actions" (OSE2 95) by the formulation of sociological laws, but they cannot establish moral and political norms. Social engineering (as applied social science) implies the same strict distinction between factual and normative statements, the former of which establish the most efficient and effective functioning of social institutions, while the latter formulate the ends the institutions are chosen to serve.

We should note that the *adoption* of the "rationalist" distinction between facts and norms (or decisions) is itself again placed by Popper within the very same grand historical narrative of the progressive development of human civilization mentioned above. He provides a sketch of the history of mankind (still) developing itself from "naïve monism", which does not distinguish between natural and normative laws and which belongs to the tribal, closed society, to "critical dualism", which does distinguish natural laws from man-made norms and which belongs to the individualist, open society.[53]

Popper seems to offer two grounds for the adoption of this distinction, and hence for the autonomy of ethics. His first argument is of a *logical* kind: it is against the rules of logic to infer the validity / invalidity of a normative statement from a factual statement, for the mere *existence* of a decision (or norm) does not yet vouch for its *validity*. However, there appears to be a second, "deeper" reason for the need to maintain this distinction, which "possibly forms the background of the first" (OSE1 73), and which consists in the recognition that:

> … the responsibility for our ethical decisions is entirely ours and cannot be shifted to anybody else; neither to God, nor to nature, nor to society, nor to history. … Whatever authority we accept, it is we who accept it. We only deceive ourselves if we do not realize this simple point. (OSE1 73)

To be sure, Popper displays his awareness of a possibly problematic consequence of this allegedly "simple point". For, if norms are "man-made" or "conventional", they may as well be said to be "arbitrary".[54] In fact, he explains, the attempt to escape from moral "autonomy" into some form of what we may call moral

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[52] Cf. OSE2 278: "Men are not equal; but we can decide to fight for equal rights."; cf. Popper's claim that the decision to oppose slavery "does not depend upon the fact that all men are born free and equal" (OSE1 62).
[53] OSE1 59-61.
[54] OSE1 61, 64-65.

"heteronomy" should precisely be understood as a way of dealing with this danger of "arbitrariness".[55]

Besides historicism, which has already been introduced in the previous section, Popper mentions two other strategies that attempt to deal with this risk of the "arbitrariness" of norms and decisions. The first is "naturalism", which reduces norms to natural laws. A defense of the "natural" inequality of human beings, for example, may be mounted by justifying the "natural" rule of the strong (cf. Callicles' plea in Plato's *Gorgias*),[56] or proclaiming the "natural" prerogatives of the few "noble" or "wise" (as, in Popper's view, Plato has done),[57] but naturalism may just as well be used to defend a humanitarian form of ethics which proclaims the "natural" rights of each human being.[58] The second strategy is "positivism", which reduces norms to actually posited laws, to which "historism" [*Historismus*], which claims that all norms are historically determined, is obviously closely related. Just as in the case of naturalism, some positivists have come to defend a conservative or authoritarian position – "might is right" –[59] while others have taken a progressive or humanitarian position – "if all norms are arbitrary, why not be tolerant?" (OSE1 72).

Popper claims that his *own* position does not imply, however, that moral "decisions" or "demands" (such as the demand for the autonomy of ethics itself) are "arbitrary":

> The statement that norms are man-made (man-made not in the sense that they were consciously designed, but in the sense that men can judge and alter them – that is to say, in the sense that the responsibility for them is entirely ours) has often been misunderstood. Nearly all misunderstandings can be traced back to one fundamental misapprehension, namely, to the belief that 'convention' implies 'arbitrariness'; that if we are free to choose any system of norms we like, then one system is just as good as any other. (OSE 64-65)

We will have to examine, however, whether his claim that his position is more than "merely" a personal opinion is actually vouched for by the assumptions of his philosophy of science,[60] or whether the inner logic of his theory (in terms of its *propositions*) is consistent. Doing so provides part of the answer to the central question of this chapter: do Popper's epistemological assumptions indeed permit rational, responsible political decision-making?

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[55] OSE1 68.

[56] OSE1 70.

[57] OSE1 73.

[58] Popper comments that "this form of naturalism is so wide and so vague that it may be used to defend anything" (OSE1 73).

[59] Popper contends that the first outcome especially is an expression of "ethical nihilism", that is, of "an extreme moral skepticism" or "a distrust of man and of his possibilities" (OSE1 72). See also OSE2, Addendum 11, esp. 381-383, where Popper criticizes Nietzsche's nihilism.

[60] OSE2 259. Cf. OSE1 3, 123, 171.

After having reconstructed the principles of Popper's philosophy of science, I now go on to reconstruct the content of his preferred "solution" to the problems of the open society, his answer to the fundamental question of "the best constitution", which consists in his "proposal" for "piecemeal social engineering".

1.5. TWO POLITICAL PROGRAMS: UTOPIAN VERSUS PIECEMEAL SOCIAL ENGINEERING

As the two epigraphs with which Popper opens the first volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* reveal, he associates piecemeal social engineering, as "method" of the open society, with the name of Pericles, whereas he associates Utopian social engineering, as "method" of the closed society, with the name of Plato:

> *For the Open Society (about 430 B.C.):*
> Although only a few may originate a policy, we are all able to judge it.
> <div align="right">Pericles of Athens</div>
>
> *Against the Open Society (about 80 years later):*
> The greatest principle of all is that nobody, whether male or female, should be without a leader. Nor should the mind of anybody be habituated to letting him do anything at all on his own initiative; neither out of zeal, nor even playfully. But in war and in the midst of peace – to his leader he shall direct his eye and follow him faithfully. And even in the smallest matter he should stand under leadership. For example, he should get up, or move, or wash, or take his meals ... only if he has been told to do so. In a word, he should teach his soul, by long habit, never to dream of acting independently, and to become utterly incapable of it.
> <div align="right">Plato of Athens</div>

These two contrasting passages illustrate that in the final instance,[61] Popper wants to have us realize that we have a choice between independent political judgment and decision-making on the one hand, and blind adherence to authority on the other. He wants to save our individual responsibility by preventing us from handing it over to the compelling laws of History (as in the case of "historicism"), of Nature (as in the case of "naturalism"), of Society (as in the case of "positivism"), or of God (as in the case of authoritarian religion). Hence, Popper's struggle against historicism is in fact part of a greater fight against the escape from personal freedom and responsibility, from what he considers "the strain of civilization" that has accompanied the open society since its birth.[62] I therefore

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[61] OSE1 7. Popper ascribes the first fragment to Pericles, whereas his words (from the Funeral Oration) were written down by Thucydides in his *The Peloponnesian War*, while he chooses to ascribe the second fragment to Plato, who in fact put these words in the mouth of the Athenian Stranger, his main dialogue character in the *Laws*. The exact references are Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* II .40 and Plato, *Laws,* 942abc. The same two passages are quoted by Popper in OSE1 186 and OSE1 103 respectively.
[62] OSE1 4-5, 176.

examine the extent to which his own approach to politics, viz. "piecemeal social engineering", indeed serves his final aim.

As he develops his approach primarily in opposition to the "utopian social engineering" of Plato, we turn to Popper's account of the latter first. Although his most significant contemporary enemy was Marxism – which he regards as "so far the purest, the most developed and the most dangerous form of historicism" (OSE2 81) – in the first (and best known) volume of his book he chose Plato as his main intellectual opponent, because he considers Plato's social and political philosophy to be "the earliest and probably the most influential example" (OSE1 24) of "utopian social engineering", that is, of the combination of technological and historicist elements which he regards as "representative of quite a number of social and political philosophers who produced what have been later described as Utopian systems."[63]

Popper grants that Plato's intentions were benevolent and that he "attempted to answer a very real need" (OSE1 170).[64] For, he states, "we find in the work of Plato … indications that he suffered desperately under the political instability and insecurity of his time" (OSE1 18-19),[65] and that he wished "to win back happiness for the citizens" (OSE1 171) by relieving them from the "strain" that accompanied the birth of the open society. Yet, Popper adds, by employing his excellent writing skills, especially by using Socrates as his mouthpiece, in order to present his Ideal State as being wise, just, happy, etc. and by thus consciously appealing to humanitarian ideas – Popper suggests that in this respect he "knew very well what he was doing" (OSE1 93) – Plato "fully succeeded" (OSE1 92) in casting a "spell" over the friends of the open society which lulled their critical capacities.[66] Hence, they do not realize that his political program is in fact anti-humanitarian and even totalitarian in nature.[67]

Popper claims that Plato's "political program" consists of three demands. *First*, it adopts the historicist law that "*all social change is corruption or decay or degeneration*" (OSE1 19). Popper bases himself here especially upon Plato's *Statesman*, which contains a myth about "the Age of Cronus", a kind of Golden Age in which human beings are ruled by the Gods, which is followed by "the Age of Zeus", our own age, "in which the world is abandoned by the gods and left to its own resources, and which consequently is one of increasing corruption." (OSE1 19).[68] *Secondly*, Popper claims that Plato, despite his historicist stance, nevertheless believed "that it is *possible* for us, by a human, or rather by a superhuman effort, to

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[63] OSE1 24: "All these systems recommend some kind of social engineering, since they demand the adoption of certain institutional means, though not always very realistic ones, for the achievements of their ends. But when we proceed to a consideration of these ends, then we frequently find that they are determined by historicism." See also OSE1 157.

[64] OSE1 293n5.

[65] Popper quotes from Plato's *Seventh Letter*, 325e: "Seeing that everything swayed and shifted aimlessly, I felt giddy and desperate" (translation Popper, OSE1 19).

[66] OSE1 92-93, 99, 169-170, 199-200.

[67] OSE1 34, 87-88, 92, 169-170.

[68] Plato, *Statesman*, 268e-274d..

break through the fatal historical trend, and to put an end to the process of decay" (OSE1 20). In other words, Plato believed in the possibility of social engineering: further corruption in "the political field" can be stopped by "*arresting all political change*" (OSE1 21),[69] by the establishment of "a state which is free from the evils of all other states because it does not degenerate, because it does not change" (OSE1 21). *Thirdly*, Popper claims, Plato found the model or original of this perfect state in a distant past, viz. in the Golden Age of Cronus.[70] He puts forward the naturalist demand to go "*back to nature*", that is, to "the original state of our forefathers, the primitive state founded in accordance with human nature, and therefore stable; back to the tribal patriarchy of the time before the Fall, to the natural class rule of the wise few over the ignorant many" (OSE1 86).

Popper claims that the last two demands, taken together, result in a "totalitarian" political program, laid down especially in Plato's *Republic*, which consists in a strict division of society into two classes and in the identification of the fate of the state with the ruling class, which, in turn, is divided into "herdsmen" and "watch dogs". This class operates as a strong unity; it possesses a monopoly of violence; it does not participate in economic activities; its intellectual activities are censored and controlled by means of propaganda; and the state as a whole is completely self-sufficient and not dependent on trade.[71]

Yet, Popper asks, if this is the case, what then to make of the fact that Plato claims that his Ideal State is perfectly *just*, that it is ruled *wisely*, and that its individual citizens are *happy*? Is his political program not fundamentally different from modern totalitarianism in this respect?[72] It is precisely Popper's intention to unmask this benevolent intention as being part of the "spell" of Plato. We will therefore now turn to Popper's criticism of the "anti-humanitarian" way in which Plato invokes the ideas of justice, wisdom, and especially happiness,[73] as well as to his own alternative, "humanitarian" interpretation of these concepts.

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[69] OSE1 86.
[70] OSE1 25.
[71] OSE1 86-87.
[72] OSE1 87: "Even writers who criticize Plato believe that his political doctrine, in spite of certain similarities, is clearly distinguished from modern totalitarianism by these aims of his, the happiness of the citizens and the rule of justice." One of the authors to whom Popper refers here is Richard Crossman, *Plato Today* (1937).

We may ask, of course, whether it is not the case that modern totalitarian regimes, too, possess an element of idealism insofar as they, too, *claim* to make their individual citizens happy. Popper seems to grant this, for he claims that "the strength of both the old *and the new* totalitarian movements rested on the fact that they attempted to answer a very real need, however badly conceived this attempt may have been. In the light of my new interpretation, it appears to me that Plato's declaration of his wish to make the state and its citizens happy is not merely propaganda. I am ready to grant his fundamental benevolence [emphases added]." (OSE1 171)
[73] Popper's treatment of these three concepts largely coincides with chapters 6, 7, and 10 of OSE1, respectively. Other (Platonic) ideas he discusses are "truth" (chapter 8) and "beauty" (chapter 9).

1.5.1. JUSTICE: STATE INTEREST VERSUS PROTECTIONISM

The central question of Plato's *Republic* is "what is justice [*dikaiosunē*]?", and its Ideal State is presented as being perfectly *just*. Popper argues, however, that Plato employs a concept of justice that is completely opposite to our liberal understanding of justice as "equality of the citizens before the law" (OSE1 89).[74] He claims that for Plato, the predicate "just" refers to "that which is in the interest of the best state" (OSE1 89): it is in the interest of the state that each of its classes attends to what is its own work, assigned by nature, which means in fact that "*the state is just if the ruler rules, if the worker works, and if the slave slaves*." (OSE1 91) By thus using "justice" as a characteristic of the *state* as a whole instead of as category of how *individuals* are to be treated, Popper states, Plato changed the meaning even of the Greek term, which was "isonomy" [*isonomia*] or equality before the law (OSE1 93), the conception of justice to which Pericles adheres in his well-known Funeral Oration.[75]

Popper argues that Plato's conception of justice displays a refusal to use "the *language of political demands or of political proposals*" (OSE1 109). Instead of asking the "historicist" question "How did the state originate, and what is the origin of political obligation?" or the "naturalist" question "What is the state, what is its true nature, its real meaning?", Popper deems it rational to ask "What do we demand from a state?" or "What do we propose to consider as the legitimate aim of state activity?" (OSE1 109). He claims that a rational way to answer this question would be: "I demand that the state must limit the freedom of the citizens as equally as possible, and not beyond what is necessary for achieving an equal limitation of freedom" (OSE1 110). Popper calls this demand "protectionism", for it situates the aim of state activity in the *protection* of the freedom of its citizens, both against each other and against state power. The underlying egalitarianism and individualism find expression, he adds, in the Kantian demand to always recognize that human individuals are ends, and not to use them as mere means to other ends.[76]

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[74] OSE1, chapter 6 is devoted to the Idea of Justice.

[75] OSE1 95, 102. Popper refers to Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, II, 37 ff., more specifically to 37 and 41. In OSE1 95, 255n17, Popper also points to Herodotus, *Histories*, III, 80, 6, which contains a eulogy on "isonomy".

As chapter 5 shows, Hannah Arendt also praises the Greek concept of "isonomy", in both *The Human Condition*, 32n22 and in *On Revolution*, 30. She too derives it from Herodotus.

[76] OSE1 102. See also OSE1 256n20: "I hold, with Kant, that it must be the principle of all morality that no man should consider himself more valuable than any other person." Cf. Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*, 47, who notes that Popper adheres to "a liberal universalism which has a decidedly Kantian flavor, in that all people are treated by Popper as ends in themselves, not to be sacrificed to the general well-being, or to the well-being of the state." Shearmur treats this Popper's "liberal universalism" as one of the two main elements of Popper's political thought, the other being his "negative utilitarianism". He rightly notes that there is a tension between these two elements (ibid., 99-106).

Popper states that the Athenian philosopher Socrates, Plato's teacher, embodied "the true scientific spirit" (OSE1 128), for Socrates' wisdom consisted precisely in "his awareness of what he does not know" (OSE1 129), in his realization that he was *not* wise. Accordingly, he regarded the philosopher as a lover of truth, a *seeker* for it, rather than as a learned professional (a "sophist") or as a proud *possessor* of truth.[77] Popper states that Plato, by contrast, "*gives the term philosopher a new meaning*" (OSE1 145), which follows from the famous statement which Plato put in the mouth of Socrates, the culmination of Plato's *Republic* which Popper calls "the key to the whole work" (OSE1 152):

> … unless, in their cities, philosophers are vested with the might of kings, or those now called kings and oligarchs become genuine and fully qualified philosophers; and unless these two, political might and philosophy, are fused (while the many who nowadays follow their natural inclination for only one of these two are suppressed by force), unless this happens, my dear Glaucon, there can be no rest; and the evil will not cease to be rampant in the cities – nor, I believe, in the race of men. (OSE1 151-152) [78]

Plato presents the philosopher-king as "a lover and seer of the divine world of Forms or Ideas" (OSE1 145),[79] which he is capable of seeing by intellectual intuition and which he longs to realize on earth, as "a painter of constitutions"[80] who is "letting [his] eyes wander to and fro, from the model to the picture, and back from the picture to the model" (OSE1 145).[81] According to Popper, the idea of the philosopher-king implies that the philosopher is a "proud possessor" of truth rather than its "modest seeker" (OSE1 132). He contends, therefore, that the Platonic state is correctly to be described as "the rule of learnedness", or a "*sophocracy*" (OSE1 144).[82] Furthermore, as the philosopher-king knows what is in the best interest of the state, Plato allows him to administer "noble lies" to its

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[77] OSE1 132. Popper also explains Socrates' conviction that knowledge can only be taught by the method of "midwifery" [*maieutikē*]: "Those eager to learn may be helped to free themselves from their prejudice; thus they may learn self-criticism, and that truth is not easily attained. But they may also learn to make up their minds, and to rely, critically, on their decisions, and on their insight." (OSE1 129)

[78] Plato, *Republic*, 473cde, as quoted by Popper.

[79] Cf. OSE1 132.

[80] Plato, *Republic*, 501c (translation Popper). See also OSE1 165-166.

[81] Plato, *Republic*, 501b (translation Popper), cf. 484c. The Idea of Beauty is also at stake here, in the attempt of the philosopher-king to bring about a *radical* change in reality by imitating the beauty of the Ideal State. See OSE1, chapter 8 (second half), chapter 9 (second half), 145, 165-6.

[82] Cf. OSE1 132.

citizens [83] – rendered by Popper as "lordly lies" in order to avoid the positive connotation of the adjective "noble" [*gennaios*].[84]

Popper argues that Plato's plea for the rule of wisdom is rooted in the wrong approach to "the fundamental problem of politics": by asking the question "Who should rule?", "Plato created a lasting confusion in political philosophy." (OSE1 120). For, Popper argues, as soon as this question is asked, it is hard to avoid answers like "the best" or "the wisest", or even "the general will" (Rousseau), "the master race" (racism), "the industrial workers" (Marxism), or "the people" (as in the theory of popular sovereignty).[85] Indeed, he asserts, "far from having solved any fundamental problems, we have merely skipped over them" (OSE1 121), for "even those who share this assumption of Plato's admit that political rulers are not always sufficiently 'good' or 'wise' ... and that it is not at all easy to get a government on whose goodness and wisdom one can implicitly rely" (OSE1 121).

According to Popper, Plato's approach presupposes that political power is essentially sovereign, that is, unchecked. Popper provides three arguments against this "*theory of (unchecked) sovereignty*" (OSE1 121). *First*, he formulates the objection that, in fact, no regime has ever been completely sovereign, and that "as long as men remain human …, there can be no absolute and unrestrained political power. So long as one man cannot accumulate enough physical power in his hands to dominate all others, just so long must he depend upon his helpers" (OSE1 122-123). However, he himself indicates that "these empirical points" do not really count as an "argument" (OSE1 122). *Secondly*, therefore, he issues the claim that "it is reasonable to adopt, in politics, the principle of preparing for the worst, as well as we can, though we should, of course, at the same time try to obtain the best" (OSE1 122). Yet, again, he hastens to add that his argument does not depend on these "more personal opinions" either (OSE1 122). Apparently, he believes that something more compelling is required than *empirical facts* or *personal opinions*. *Thirdly*, therefore, he has recourse to "a kind of logical argument", which serves to lay bare the *inconsistency* of any theory of (unchecked) sovereignty (OSE1 123). One variant of this argument is the so-called "*paradox of freedom*" (OSE1 123), which he claims was in fact first formulated by Plato himself. According to Popper, in Book VIII of the *Republic*, in the context of the story of the degeneration of democracy into tyranny, Plato implicitly raises the question of what to do if it turns out to be the will of the people that not they, but a tyrant should rule: "The free man, Plato suggests, may exercise his absolute freedom, first by defying the laws and ultimately by defying freedom itself and by clamouring for a tyrant" (OSE1 123).[86]

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[83] Popper claims that the Idea of Truth is at stake here. See OSE1, chapter 8 (first half): 138-141, where Popper refers to Plato, *Republic*. 414b-415d.

[84] In OSE1 270-271n9, Popper calls the common choice to translate "noble lie" or "noble falsehood" "one of the typical attempts of idealizing Plato."

[85] OSE1 120.

[86] Popper refers to Plato, *Republic*, 562b-565e, more specifically to 562c, 563de, 564a, and 565cd. Popper claims that the assumption of (unchecked) sovereignty leads to similar paradoxes in the case

Yet, Popper says, what Plato overlooked is the fact that *all* theories of sovereignty are necessarily paradoxical. After all, "the wisest" might select "the best", and "the best" in his goodness might decide that "the majority" should rule. Popper therefore proposes to replace the question "*Who should rule?*" by the question "*How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?*" (OSE1 121), and thus to replace the theory of sovereignty by the "theory of checks and balances" (OSE1 122). The latter proceeds not from "a doctrine of the intrinsic goodness or righteousness of a majority rule," but rather from "the baseness of tyranny; or more precisely, it rests upon the decision, or upon the adoption of the proposal, to avoid and to resist tyranny" (OSE1 124).

Popper claims that this proposal allows us to draw a distinction between two main types of government: "democracy", and "dictatorship" or "tyranny". He adds that these labels are "nominalist", in the sense that they do not define any "essence". That is to say, the term democracy does not signify something like "the rule of the people" – if only because "the people" in itself of course never rules, but only its representatives.[87] Instead, Popper provides the following, by now famous, description of democracies:

> … governments of which we can get rid without bloodshed – for example, by way of general elections; that is to say, the social institutions provide means by which the rulers may be dismissed by the ruled, and the social traditions ensure that these institutions will not easily be destroyed by those who are in power. (OSE1 124)

Tyrannies, on the other hand, are "governments which the ruled cannot get rid of except by way of a successful revolution – that is to say, in most cases, not at all" (OSE1 125). In other words, it is impossible to get rid of a tyranny except by means of a revolution, which is understood by Popper as a bloody, that is, a *violent* replacement of the rulers. Democracy, by contrast, enables the reform of existing institutions and the design of new institutions by the use of *reason* instead of violence. Popper adds that this does not mean that these institutions will be faultless, nor that there is any guarantee that the outcome of democratic policy will be "wise" or "good". His point is rather that the various methods of democratic control, such as general elections and representative government, are safeguards against tyranny, which in themselves remain "open for improvement, and even providing methods for their own improvement." (OSE1 125). In this respect,

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of the principle of *majority rule* – "What if a democratic majority chooses to abolish democracy?" – and in the case of the principle of *toleration* – "What if we are tolerant towards the intolerant?" (OSE1 265n4).

[87] OSE1 125 (in parentheses): "For although 'the people' may influence the actions of their rulers by the threat of dismissal, they never rule themselves in any concrete, practical sense." Cf. Popper, 'Zur Theorie der Demokratie', 207-208: "Denn nirgends herrscht das Volk: Überall herrschen die Regierungen (und leider auch die Bürokratie, das heisst die Beamten, die nur schwer oder gar nicht zur Verantwortung gezogen werden können.)"

Popper may be said to regard democracy as the *political institutionalization* of the Socratic spirit of self-criticism.[88]

1.5.3. HAPPINESS: PROMOTING GOOD VERSUS AVOIDING EVIL

As we have seen, in answer to the question of what the primary purpose of the state is (the *aim* of government), Popper formulates the demand that the freedom of individual citizens should be duly protected, both against other individuals and, especially, against the state itself. In addition, in answer to the question of how to deal with power (the *form* of government), Popper formulates "the principle of a democratic policy" as "the proposal to create, develop, and protect, political institutions for the avoidance of tyranny" (OSE1 125). In both cases, Popper tends to formulate his demands *negatively*. Accordingly, not only our choice of the primary aim of the state and of the way we deal with power, but also the concrete content of public policy is to be determined by one and the same principle: the avoidance of evil rather than the promotion of some good. As he puts it: "Pain, suffering, injustice, and their prevention, these are the eternal problems of public morals, the 'agenda' of public policy .... The 'higher' values should very largely be considered as 'non-agenda', and should be left to the realm of *laissez-faire*." (OSE2 237).[89]

Elsewhere,[90] he provides a more explicit exposition of what is sometimes called his negative utilitarianism.[91] Popper describes his own view as a "complete inversion" of the ethical philosophy defended by theorists (like Plato) who

> … had the idea of an ultimate or highest good (usually made even higher and better by calling it by its Latin name the *summum bonum*) and they believed that all the lesser goods were in some way dependent on, or derivable from this highest good. And they believed that the realization of the highest good was a duty of the greatest urgency, while the realization of the lesser goods was less urgent.[92]

Popper asserts, to the contrary, that it is "the most urgent duty to fight the greatest and most concrete evil" and he adds that "the urgency decreases when we proceed to lesser evils and certainly when we proceed to positive goods."[93]

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[88] Cf. OSE2 238-239.

[89] Cf. OSE1 158.

[90] See Popper, 'Public and Private Values', unpublished paper written between 1944 and 1946.

[91] Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*, 47. Cf. OSE 235n6(2), 284-285n2.

[92] Popper, 'Public and Private Values', 120.

   As is shown in chapter 2, Popper's thesis that the highest good was also considered as the most urgent good is disputed by Leo Strauss in the name of classical political philosophy.

[93] Popper, 'Public and Private Values', 120. He explicitly states that he does not mean to say that "positive values" – "health, wealth, happiness, and so on, or more concretely, the enjoyment of one's life, or of one's work; or more concretely, of music; or perhaps of a discussion" (ibid., 119) – are unimportant: "On the contrary, few things are more important in our lives than our hopes, and dreams, our aesthetic and our religious ideals. My contention is that the world of these values is our private

As Jan-Werner Mueller has noted, insofar as Popper's political philosophy focuses on preventing the worst rather than promoting the best, it fits perfectly within the framework of what Judith Shklar has called "the liberalism of fear".[94] This type of liberalism, which considers cruelty an absolute evil against which every state should protect its citizens, goes back rather to Locke and Kant (who is indeed one of the few philosophers to whom Popper refers in positive terms) than to Hobbes (OSE1 247n4),[95] insofar as the former focus on the claims or *rights* of the individual citizens towards or against the state or government rather than on their *obligations* to state or government *authority*.

To summarize this section, in answer to the "fundamental" question of the best constitution, Popper demands the following. *First*, the question itself is to be phrased and answered in the language of "proposals", for "rational" political philosophy ought to express itself in the language of discussable proposals instead of in historicist or naturalist language. *Secondly*, the content of the "proposals" formulated in answer to this question consists in the demands of negative utilitarianism, that is, the avoidance of human suffering. In this spirit, Popper defines liberalism as the protection of individuals against avoidable suffering caused by other individuals or the state, and democracy is defined as the avoidance of tyranny. *Thirdly*, these "constitutional" proposals regarding the aim and form of government are to be realized by means of what we may choose to call the "normal" politics of "piecemeal social engineering", which is supposed to determine the most efficient and effective means for realizing the ends or aims that we have set for social institutions. For, against the objection that the very principle of freedom is endangered as soon as one demands that freedom should be limited by the state, Popper answers that "[i]t mixes up the *fundamental* question of what we want from the state with certain important *technological* difficulties in the way of its realization of our aims [emphasis added]" (OSE1 110). He calls these "technological" difficulties of determining the *degree* of freedom "the main task of legislation in democracies" (OSE1 110).

When we take a closer look, however, it is not particularly easy to neatly separate the "constitutional" politics of proposing from the "normal" politics of social engineering. If we wish to answer the question whether the notion of "piecemeal social engineering" does indeed further Popper's goal of "rational" and

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world – the world which we may share with our intimate friends; but we deprave and destroy these values if we try to force them upon the public." (ibid., 121).

[94] Mueller, 'Fear and Freedom', 47-48. See Shklar, 'The Liberalism of Fear', 11: "The liberalism of fear … does not … offer a *summum bonum* toward which all political agents should strive, but it certainly does begin with a *summum malum*, which all of us know and would avoid if only we could. That evil is cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself."

[95] In OSE1 247n4 Popper refers to Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 373, where he describes a just constitution as "a constitution that achieves *the greatest possible freedom of human individuals* by framing the laws in such a way that *the freedom of each can co-exist with that of all others*", as well as to Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 'Introduction to the Theory of Right', §B: "Right (or justice) is the sum total of the conditions which are necessary for everybody's free choice to co-exist with that of everybody else, in accordance with a general law of liberty."

"responsible" politics, we need to examine the complexity of this notion more critically.

1.6. TWO CONCEPTIONS OF RATIONALITY: SCIENTIFIC AND MORAL

On the one hand, it seems that Popper suggests that engineering or technology, that is, the method of empirically establishing the most efficient and effective functioning of social institutions, *differs* from the moral or political choice of the right ends of those institutions:

> In his function as a citizen who pursues certain ends in which he believes, [the social engineer or technologist] may demand that these ends, and the appropriate measures, should be adopted. But as a technologist, he would carefully distinguish between the question of the ends and their choice and questions concerning the facts, i.e. the social effects of any measure which might be taken. (OSE1 23-24)

On this account, social engineering in itself is value neutral, while its ends can either be formulated in the language of "proposals", as in the case of "piecemeal" social engineering (presumably by citizens on the basis of common deliberation with an eye to a democratic process of legislation; Popper does not say much about the kind of citizenship he envisions),[96] or in historicist or naturalist language, as in the case of "utopian" social engineering.

On the other hand, Popper may be understood to suggest that the use of the language of "proposals" *intrinsically* belongs to the scientific attitude that is inherent in "social engineering" itself. When he explains that formulating the question of the aim of the state in the language of proposals or demands constitutes a "rational" approach to politics, he adds that it will lead to a demand "which permits the social technologist to approach political problems rationally, i.e. from the point of view of a fairly clear and definite aim" (OSE1 110).[97] He would thus seem to suggest that social technology or engineering can *itself* be considered as "rational" *only* if it employs the "piecemeal" approach, that is, the language of proposals, and that it is hence *by definition* incompatible with the "utopian" approach.

In order to get a clear grasp, therefore, of the apparently complex nature of "piecemeal social engineering" and the conception of rationality implied in it, we need to contrast it more carefully with "utopian social engineering" than we have done so far. For, if we gain a better view of the *difference* between them – that is, between the "utopian" or "wholesale" approach on the one hand and the "piecemeal" / "democratic" approach on the other – we will also gain a clearer

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[96] Cf. OSE1 207n, 234n5(3).

[97] Cf. "It is a question which a technologist must try to answer before he can proceed to the construction or reconstruction of any political institution. For only if he knows what he wants can he decide whether a certain institution is or is not well adapted to its function." (OSE1 109)

view of the *similarity* between them, especially with regard to the specific nature of "social engineering" or the technological means-end-rationality itself.

As is apparent in Popper's critical account of Plato's "canvas-cleaning" especially,[98] the "utopian" engineer aims for a radical reform of society *as a whole* on the basis of a *positive* answer to the question of the best society, viz. the Ideal State, which serves as blueprint and *ultimate* end. He wants to go to the root of the matter and eradicate all evil: "Both Plato and Marx are dreaming of the apocalyptic revolution which will radically transfigure the whole social world." (OSE1 164) The "piecemeal" or "democratic" engineer, by contrast, tries to reform parts of society (viz. specific social institutions) *step by step* on the basis of *moderate* goals, that is, on the basis of a *negative* answer to the question of the best society, that consists in the elimination of avoidable human suffering.

At first sight, what we are dealing with here is a difference in scale or scope, as the terminology of "piecemeal" and "wholesale" suggests. However, in fact the outcome of a specific experiment with reform may lead to the conclusion that a "wholesale" reform *is* in some cases rational – a possibility that is clearly suggested by some of Popper's formulations: "we must reform … institutions little by little, *until* we have more experience [emphasis added]"; "*it is not reasonable to assume that a complete reconstruction of our social world would lead <u>at once</u> to a workable system* [underlining added]" (OSE1 167); "*At present*, the sociological knowledge necessary for large-scale engineering is simply non-existent [emphasis added]" (OSE1 162). These phrasings leave open the possibility that at some future point we *will* have gained the experience that sanctions large-scale planning. If this is the case, Popper's theory is vulnerable to the criticism that the distinction between "piecemeal" and "utopian" is not a *principled* one, but that in fact it is only the *success* of an experiment that *decides for us* whether or not a specific program is desirable, and not so much its planned scale or scope.

Popper seems to be aware of this possibility. In the second volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* he addresses what he calls "the paradox of state planning": "If we plan too much, if we give too much power to the state, then freedom will be lost, and that will be the end of planning" (OSE2 130). Yet, by indicating that the solution to this problem is to be found within the resources of (piecemeal) social engineering itself – "this is again merely a problem of social technology and of social piecemeal engineering. But it is important to tackle it early, for it constitutes a danger to democracy" (OSE2 193-194) – he is begging our question whether social engineering does in and of itself imply a "democratic" approach. In *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), he addresses the same issue more sharply: "It may be questioned, perhaps, whether the piecemeal and holistic approaches here described are fundamentally different, considering that we have

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[98] OSE1, chapter 9, especially 165-166: "They will take as their canvas a city and the characters of men, and they will, first of all, *make their canvas clean* – by no means an easy matter. But this is just the point, you know, where they will differ from all others. They will not start work on a city nor on an individual (nor will they draw up laws) unless they are given a clean canvas, or have cleaned it themselves." (OSE1 166)

put no limits to the scope of a piecemeal approach" (PH 62). Popper now indicates that the distinction between "utopian" and "piecemeal" is to be found elsewhere.

As we have seen, his philosophy of science offers a demarcation criterion on the basis of which science can be distinguished from pseudo-science. Yet his philosophy of the social sciences does not offer such a precise demarcation criterion on the basis of which the two methods can be distinguished from each other. Instead, he speaks of "the rather different *point of view* from which the holist and the piecemeal technologist look upon the task of reforming society [emphasis added]" (PH 62). As he indicates, "while the piecemeal social engineer can attack his problem with an *open mind* as to the scope of the reform, the holist cannot do this; for he has decided *beforehand* that a complete reconstruction is possible and necessary [emphasis added]" (PH 63). [99] Nevertheless, Popper adds that the decision to adopt a piecemeal "point of view" or "attitude" is supported by the *empirical fact* that it is impossible to centralize all the knowledge that would be required for a holistic project,[100] and that it is impossible to place oneself, like Archimedes, outside the social world one wishes to reform.[101]

We may argue, however, that the adoption of a scientific "attitude" or "point of view" already presupposes an affirmation of the *value* of science, an *interest* in acquiring scientific knowledge and in applying that knowledge through technology (in order to solve political problems by the reform of social institutions). As Jürgen Habermas has argued, this "technical cognitive interest" in which the scientific attitude is rooted is itself by no means value-neutral.[102] As Geoffrey Stokes contends, Popper's epistemology may indeed be said to depend on a specific set of moral or political values, rather than vice versa.[103]

However, because Popper asserts that normative judgments (which he demands must be formulated in the language of proposing, demanding, deciding, etc.) are by definition unscientific, it follows that science cannot establish its own normative value (or meaning), nor that of technology (as applied science, with its criteria of efficiency and success). A rational justification of values would require a more encompassing notion of rationality than Popper's strictly scientific one.

Yet, besides the difference between a scientific and an unscientific "point of view", viz. regarding the choice of means, of what will and what will not "work", there is *another* way in which Popper draws the distinction between the "piecemeal" and "utopian" approaches, viz. in terms of their different way of choosing their *ends*. The "utopian" approach presupposes knowledge of some highest good. Yet, Popper retorts, this presupposition can only be saved by "the Platonic belief in one absolute and unchanging ideal" (OSE1 161), together with the assumptions that there are rational methods for determining what this ideal is, and that there are rational methods for determining the best means for its

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[99] Cf. OSE1 163, 167.
[100] See PH 58n10, 82.
[101] See OSE1 167.
[102] Habermas, 'Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision', 264.
[103] Stokes, *Popper: Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method*.

realization. He asserts that "even Plato himself and the most ardent Platonists" (OSE1 161) would admit that there are no rational methods to determine this ultimate goal, but at best some kind of *intuition*. [104] Moreover, as soon as *disagreement* arises, reason would be of no help here, and a resort to violence will be the only option left. The "piecemeal" engineer, by contrast, adopts the method of "fighting for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society" instead of "searching for, and fighting for, its greatest ultimate good" (OSE1 158). What counts in favor of this method, Popper claims, is that:

> a systematic fight against suffering and injustice is more likely to be supported by *the approval and agreement of a great number of people* than the fight for the establishment of some ideal. The existence of social evils, that is to say, of social conditions under which many men are suffering, *can be comparatively well established*, whereas it is infinitely more difficult to judge about an ideal society [emphasis added]. (OSE1 158-159)

Hence, in Popper's view, the fact that a *peaceful agreement* will likely be reached counts as an argument in favor of the piecemeal approach.

However, we may argue that this second way of drawing a line between the two approaches again presupposes a certain conception of rationality that enables us to distinguish justified moral decisions and judgments from unjustified ones; that is, a conception on the basis of which some moral decisions and judgments *can* be considered "justified" (such as "negative utilitarian" ones), and others *cannot* (such as the choice of an "ultimate good").

In other words, it seems that Popper requires a conception of rationality which vouches for the rationality *both* of the choice for the application of the "scientific" attitude as such (to politics) *and* of the choice for certain (moral, political) ends (aims, proposals, decisions) above others (which may be said to include the choice for the scientific attitude itself). [105] Should he turn out *not* to (be able to) deliver a more encompassing conception of rationality which is required for this purpose, he will then run the danger that the "language of proposals" has nothing more to offer than "personal professions" in the sense of subjective, arbitrary preferences – a result which he explicitly denies.

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[104] It should be noted that Plato *does* believe that there are rational methods to determine this goal, but Popper is not capable of taking this claim seriously, due to his more restricted, "scientific", conception of rationality.

[105] In his article 'Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision', Habermas criticizes "positivism" – a system of thought to which he also reckons Karl Popper – for failing to distinguish between two different conceptions of rationality, the one formal or scientific, the other more substantial and comprehensive, comprising enlightenment values such as individual autonomy and emancipation. He argues that Popper's rationalism tacitly requires "the comprehensive rationality of unconstrained dialogue between communicating human beings" which he cannot justify according to his explicit conception of rationality. In other words, he is in need of a form of "committed reason" (ibid., 258, 268, 281), that is, a form of rationality that is not yet divested from its normative elements (ibid., 279).

We now ask, therefore, whether his "critical rationalism" – which presents itself as being broader than scientific rationality – does indeed provide a broader conception of rationality that *is* capable of incorporating value rationality, and hence the value of rationality, within itself.

1.7. THE (IR)RATIONALITY OF RATIONALISM

While the "scientific attitude" restricts itself to logical arguments and *experiments* – with falsification as criterion – Popper defines the "rationalist attitude" in the broader sense (which he sometimes calls the attitude of "reasonableness", OSE2 225) as an attitude that tries to solve problems by having recourse to arguments and *experience* instead of emotions and sentiments.[106] He describes this attitude as follows:

> It is fundamentally an attitude of admitting that '*I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth.*' It is an attitude which does not lightly give up hope that by such means as argument and careful observation, people may reach some kind of agreement on many problems of importance; and that, even where their demands and their interests clash, it is often possible to argue about the various demands and proposals, and to reach – perhaps by arbitration – a compromise which, because of its equity, is acceptable to most, if not to all. (OSE2 225)

In other words, a rationalist attitude in this broader sense implies a readiness to listen to critical arguments and to learn from experience. In fact, Popper continues, we only argue with ourselves because we have learned to argue with others. Furthermore, we have learned that it is the argument that counts, rather than the person arguing. This leads to the view that *each* individual is a potential source of arguments and information, or to what Popper calls "the rational unity of mankind" (OSE2 225). He draws a link between this "inter-personal theory of reason" (OSE2 226) and the rationalism of Socrates, which consists in "the awareness of one's limitations, the intellectual modesty of those who know how often they err, and how much they depend on others even for this knowledge" (OSE2 227). Popper contrasts it with the "intellectual intuitionism" of Plato, which regards reason as "a kind of 'faculty', which may be possessed and developed by different men in vastly different degrees" (OSE2 226).

Popper is intellectually honest enough to acknowledge that the *adoption* of the attitude of "rationalism" *itself* – being an attitude which claims that only arguments and experience may count – cannot be justified ("established") by its own rational means, that is, by arguments and experience, because their use already presupposes an attitude of *readiness* to use them.[107] He therefore draws a distinction between "uncritical" and "critical" rationalism. "Uncritical" rationalism

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[106] OSE2 224-225.
[107] OSE2 230.

would claim that any assumption that cannot be established by argument or experience is invalid. Yet, Popper states, this principle cannot itself be established by argument or experience. Thus, being logically inconsistent, it is defeated by its own means. "Critical" rationalism, on the other hand, acknowledges that the rationalist attitude itself cannot be established by argument or experience, because "only those who are ready to consider argument or experience, and who have therefore *adopted* this attitude already, will be impressed by them [emphasis added]" (OSE2 230), and because "no rational argument will have a rational effect on a man who does not *want* to adopt a rational attitude [emphasis added]" (OSE2 231).

Popper concludes that the choice for rationalism is an "irrational" one, for it cannot be established in terms of the rationalist criteria themselves: "…whoever adopts the rationalist attitude does so because he has adopted, consciously or unconsciously, some proposal, or decision, or belief, or behaviour; an adoption which may be called 'irrational'" (OSE2 231). Hence, Popper speaks of an "act of faith", an "irrational *faith* in reason" (OSE2 231).[108]

He claims that the nineteenth-century conflict between faith and reason has become "superseded": "Since an 'uncritical' rationalism is inconsistent, the problem cannot be the choice between knowledge and faith, but between two kinds of faith" (OSE2 246). In Popper's view, we are confronted with a choice between a "faith in reason" on the one hand and a "faith in the mystical faculties of man" on the other (OSE2 248).[109]

Yet, although this decision cannot be "determined" by argument, Popper adds that arguments may nevertheless be of some help, for we may *imagine* the concrete consequences that are likely to result from the alternative options between which we have to choose – a procedure which will at least prevent us from deciding "blindly".[110] On this basis, he argues that irrationalism is closely related to a division of mankind into "few" and "many", into "friends" and "foes",[111] for the emphasis on emotions, such as fear, but also love (of one's own group), will eventually lead to violence as arbiter. After all, he states, "we cannot feel the same emotions towards everybody. Emotionally, we all divide men into those who are near to us, and those who are far from us. The division of mankind into friend and foe is a most obvious emotional division …." (OSE2 235) Rationalism, by contrast, is "bound up with" the idea that everyone is liable to mistakes, and that, hence, everyone deserves to be heard, which suggests the ideas of impartiality, tolerance, and, finally, responsibility: "we have a duty to respond, to answer, where our

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[108] Cf. OSE1 353n6, where Popper states that the teaching of Duns Scotus and Immanuel Kant could be interpreted as approaching his "critical rationalism", insofar as their doctrines of "the primacy of the will" may be interpreted as the primacy of an irrational decision.

[109] See also OSE2 238, 240.

[110] OSE2 232-233.

[111] See also OSE2 236: "By thus abandoning reason, they split mankind into friends and foes; into the few who share in reason with the gods, and the many who don't (as Plato says); into the few who stand near and the many who stand far; into those who speak the untranslatable language of our own emotions and passions and those whose tongue is not our tongue."

actions affect others" (OSE2 238). In this sense, Popper posits, there is indeed an "ethical basis of science, and of rationalism" (OSE2 238), although he concedes that "the rightness of any ethical principle" (OSE2 238) can still not be *proved*.

Finally, we have to conclude that Popper's broader conception of rationality, or what he calls the "rationalist attitude" or the "attitude of reasonableness" – which, in contradistinction to the strictly "scientific attitude", concerns the determination of the validity of moral and political "proposals" – cannot be justified by its own standards. Elisabeth Ströker has argued that Popper could have resolved this dilemma by explicitly differentiating between his conception of scientific rationality (of falsification), which is in the foreground, and his broader conception of "reasonableness" (of listening to others), which is in the background.[112] According to her, the latter concept "turns out to be much broader and breaks out of the frame of Popper's expressly represented concept of rationality, yet without his having become aware of it."[113] This conception would allow for the possibility that decisions might be "reasonable" instead of completely "arbitrary", were it not for the fact that it does not fit into his explicitly defended conception of scientific rationality.

Habermas concludes that Popper runs the risk of lapsing into some kind of "decisionism", which maintains that political decisions are not accessible to rational consideration at all,[114] as in the political existentialism of Carl Schmitt (1888-1985). However, although in Popper's case a genuine rational "consensus" about moral and political values does indeed seem to be impossible, he still allows for some kind of "arbitration" of our proposals or demands or decisions, in order thus to reach a "compromise".[115] He claims:

> … we can compare the existing normative laws (or social institutions) with some standard norms which we have decided are worthy of being realized. But even these standards are of our making in the sense that our decision in favour of them is our own decision, and that we alone carry the responsibility for adopting them. (OSE1 61)

At one point Popper characterizes our demands or decisions as "*ad hominem* arguments", that is, "appeals made in the hope that you may be induced to think or to feel in certain matters similarly as I do".[116] Again he claims that "rational argument is not entirely impossible", for:

> We can ... investigate our demand from the point of view of its compatibility with certain important and widely accepted moral and

[112] Ströker, 'Does Popper's Conventionalism Contradict His Critical Rationalism?', 275-277.
[113] Ibid., 276.
[114] Habermas, 'Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision', 266; idem, 'The Analytical Theory of Science and Dialectics', 146.
[115] OSE2 225; Popper, 'Public and Private Values', 121. Cf. Habermas, 'Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision', 271.
[116] Popper, 'Public and Private Values', 121.

political creeds. If we can show that it may be acceptable to some of the major creeds, and especially to some creeds which seem to disagree on the issue in question, then we can consider our demand as a little more than a merely personal solution.[117]

However, we may argue, insofar as these "major creeds" are merely accepted because they are "widely accepted", this position comes very close to what Popper himself explicitly rejects as "historism" [*Historismus*], or the doctrine that all human knowledge is historically dependent,[118] which was precisely one of the forms of moral "heteronomy" he wished to avoid in the first place.[119]

1.8. CONCLUSION

Geoffrey Stokes has argued that it is not so much the case that Popper's political philosophy is an application of his philosophy of science – his "social philosophy" in the sense of "methodology of the social sciences" – but that it is in fact the other way around. He claims that "Popper's commitment to certain political values such as freedom and toleration are conceptually prior to any epistemological commitment" and that his moral and political philosophy is "constitutive" of his philosophy of science.[120] He adds the qualification that this conceptual priority is not of any "formal" or "deductive" nature [121] – which leaves open the question of what kind of conceptual relation it is.

   We have seen that, on the one hand, Popper himself indeed acknowledges that "there is an ethical basis of science, and of rationalism" (OSE2 238). Moreover, we have argued that in order for moral proposals to be in some sense rationally justified, he is bound to presuppose some kind of broader rationality. Yet at the same time he is incapable of incorporating this form of rationality within his narrower conception of scientific rationality. Accordingly, Popper maintains that "there is no 'rational scientific basis' of ethics" (OSE2 238). As a consequence, we may conclude, his "ethical basis of science, and of rationality" (OSE2 238) is floating in the air.

   Nevertheless, Popper maintains that his thesis of the "autonomy" of ethics by no means implies that moral decisions are necessarily "arbitrary". On the basis of his own propositions, however, we have to conclude that this remains a mere "personal opinion",[122] because our examination of the inner logic of his theory – the mutual consistency of his propositions – leaves us with no other conclusion than that norms or decisions are by definition "personal" or "*ad hominem*". However, precisely insofar as his "proposals" retain their *ad hominem* character,

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[117] Ibid., 122.
[118] OSE2 208, 255.
[119] Cf. OSE2 267-269.
[120] Stokes, *Popper: Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method*, 5, 6. Cf. OSE2 238, where Popper himself comes closest to affirming this thesis.
[121] Stokes, *Popper: Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method*, 6.
[122] Cf. OSE1 3, 122, OSE2 259.

Popper's polemical rejection of *absolute* heteronomy (that is, of historicism – "posing as prophets" – and of naturalism, but also of "historism"), must indeed lead to a polemical embrace of *absolute* autonomy (that is, of moral statements being created and posited "ex nihilo" – "becoming the makers of our fate" – as in the case of "decisionism").

The following chapter examines whether there are moments in Popper's *writing* in which this binary distinction between and mutual interdependence of strictly objective, scientific rationality on the one hand and irrational, subjective "personal" preference on the other, is left behind. We look for moments in the text of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* about which his propositionally defended, narrower conception of rationality remains silent or for which it cannot account, but which *de facto* form the "ratio" or *raison d'être* of what Popper himself calls his "irrational" faith in reason. We examine what this "irrational" decision *attests to*, what his "act of faith" shows him to be *committed to* and *oriented by* without its being (fully) explicitly articulated by him. Moreover, we examine what the presence of these moments tell us about the conditions and possibility of political philosophy, of "thoughtfully" approaching the political.