# 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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# CHAPTER 2

## Analogies with Science and the Staging of Polemics

*Rationality, in the sense of an appeal to a universal and impersonal standard of truth, is of supreme importance .., not only in ages in which it easily prevails, but also, and even more in those less fortunate times in which it is despised and rejected as the vain dream of men who lack the virility to kill where they cannot agree.*[123]
Bertrand Russell

*If we dream of a return to our childhood, if we are tempted to rely on others and so be happy, if we shrink from the task of carrying our cross, the cross of humaneness, of reason, of responsibility, if we lose courage and flinch from the strain, then we must try to fortify ourselves with a clear understanding of the simple decision before us. We can return to the beasts. But if we wish to remain human, then there is only one way, the way into the open society.*[124]
Karl Popper

### 2.1. INTRODUCTION

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the framework of Popper's own "critical rationalism" contains no standards on the basis of which the normative decision in favor of rationalism itself can be rationally justified. In fact, he claims that rationalism coincides with the explicit discussion or justification on the basis of arguments and experience of decisions or "proposals", but the decision to adopt the *attitude* of rationalism in the first place cannot be justified in these terms. Instead, he speaks of "an irrational *faith in reason*" (OSE2 231).

Yet we may say that Popper's distinction between "reason" / the "rational" and "faith" / the "irrational" remains stuck within the traditional "Platonic" binary and hierarchical opposition between knowledge [*epistēmē*] and opinion [*doxa*], between demonstrated and undemonstrated knowledge. Within this framework, Popper can only conceive of ethics (or morality) *either* as being "scientific" *or* as being "arbitrary". As we have seen, however, he explicitly rejects both conceptions, for neither of them serves his primary intention of "saving" our individual responsibility for decisions.

Yet it should be noted that there is one occasion in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* where Popper does not merely speak of a decision in the sense of a

[123] Russell, 'The Ancestry of Fascism', 71, quoted by Karl Popper as epigraph to Chapter 23 of OSE2 212.
[124] OSE1 201.

"proposal", "demand" or "claim", but also in the sense of a "belief" or (some form of) "behavior". This is the passage in which he asserts that "whoever adopts the rationalist attitude does so because he has adopted, consciously or unconsciously, some proposal, decision, or belief, or behaviour; an adoption which may be called 'irrational'" (OSE2 231). It may be said that Popper is gradually turning away here from the notion of a "decision" understood as a "proposal", in the sense of a piece of *knowledge* to be explicitly discussed in rational terms (that is, in what he calls the language of proposals, demands, etc.), towards the notion of a "decision" understood as an *act*. What is brought to light by focusing on this one passage, is the common presupposition that underlies Popper's explicitly articulated conception(s) of rationality, for he conceives both of "propositions" (in the sense of statements of fact, "truth" claims) and "proposals" (in the sense of statements of value, claims of "rightness") as statements that are somehow capable of explicit demonstration or justification. In other words, he thinks of "decisions" in either of the following two ways: (i) as *propositional* attitudes, the truth / falsity or rightness / wrongness of which is rationally and cognitively to be established (which explains his use of the term "belief" here – which may still be understood as a propositional attitude – instead of "*act* of faith"); (ii) as empirical *facts*, the occurrence of which is to be empirically established (which explains his use of the term "behavior" here – a social scientific term – again instead of "*act* of faith").[125] It seems thus that Popper can only conceive of an "act of faith" as a form of immature *knowledge* – knowledge still to be "tested" by rational justification or by empirical proof – instead of as a form of *action* or *practice*.

Indeed, what is hidden by his use of the terms "belief" and "behavior" is the possibility that his "irrational faith in reason" could as well be conceived of as a form of thoughtful *action*, which, precisely because it falls outside of Popper's binary rationality / irrationality distinction, need *not* be characterized as "irrational" merely for the fact that it is not (yet) explicitly formulated in the form of a cognitive and testable "proposition" or "proposal". James Tully has argued that even Jürgen Habermas, while being a critic of Popper, does not sufficiently acknowledge that the form of validation – the form of rational justification inherent in communicative action which demands that an agreement reached communicatively must be based "in the end" on reasons that are capable of being made explicit – must itself be considered as a *practice* of thought, which, in common with all practices, presuppose ways of acting with words that are in themselves not true or false.[126] Accordingly, Tully speaks of a false dichotomy between rational justification and irrational behavior.[127] Similarly, Arnold Burms has argued that the demand for rational justification or a foundation of morals

[125] See OSE1 63-64.
[126] Tully, 'Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy', especially 18, 21, 24, 26.
[127] Ibid., 27: "… once we free ourselves from the convention that we are free and rational only if we can justify the grounds of any uses we follow, we can see that there is a multiplicity of ways of being rationally (and thoughtfully) guided by rules of use, short of self-grounding validation, that is not reducible to the behaviorist's causal compulsion of habit."

falsely assumes that ethics is the same kind of "objectifying" pursuit as science.[128] Instead, he proposes to replace the notion of a "justifying truth" by the alternative notion of an "orientating truth", which he uses to refer to an evocative truth to which my life is attuned, towards which my life is oriented,[129] or by which I am inspired,[130] and which forms an answer to the question *in light of what* should I live.[131]

This chapter examines the *de facto ratio* (or *raison d'être*) of the "decision" which Popper himself characterizes as "irrational" and yet not "arbitrary", in order thus to contribute to tracing the "deeply hidden structural features" of his writing, that is, the elements which shape the *performative* meaning of his work.

In the first part, we explore the main strategy that is employed in Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in order to escape from the possible consequence of his conception of rationality, viz. the verdict that decisions are "arbitrary". Although moral or political "proposals" – including the "proposal" to adopt the attitude of rationalism itself – cannot be justified in the same strict sense as scientific propositions – after all, Popper maintains a strict dualism of facts and values – attention is drawn to the fact that he takes refuge instead in the use of several *analogies* between politics and science. We examine three of such analogies that can be traced within his writing. It is not only their content that is assessed, that is, their correspondence to political *reality* – is politics "really" "like" science? – but, and perhaps more fundamentally, we also take notice of the fact that the *use* of analogies *as such* points to the presence of a language within Popper's writing that *differs* from the "propositional" language that has been discerned so far. In fact, the former turns out to be *constitutive* of the latter, insofar as "faith" in reason (or in "rationalism") is carried by reason's analogy with science. It is argued that science, or rather Popper's idealized picture thereof, serves as an "orientating truth" in our understanding of politics, or as that in light of which Popper *makes sense* of politics and gives it its *meaning*.

The second part explores another moment in Popper's writing that escapes from the "propositional", that is, from the order both of testable scientific rationality and value rationality. Attention is drawn to the conception of politics that is *performed* by his discourse, viz. the polemical politics of appealing to sentiments such as fear and pride in the sole service of achieving victory in the "necessitated" struggle between the "friends" and the "enemies" of the open society, which is precisely the opposite of the conception of politics which is *proposed* in his discourse, viz. the politics of rational (free and impartial) discussion of proposals.

[128] Burms, *Waarheid, evocatie, symbool* [Truth, Evocation, Symbol].
[129] Ibid., 10.
[130] Ibid., 41.
[131] Ibid., 12.

## 2.2. ANALOGIES WITH SCIENCE

Here we assess three different analogies between scientific and political rationality that can be traced throughout Popper's book, all of which fulfill an *orientating* role in the decision to adopt the attitude of rationalism, a decision that he characterizes as "irrational" according to his explicit standards. The analogies surface on several occasions in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, and especially towards the end of its second volume, in chapters 24 and 25, where Popper articulates his "critical rationalism" and his method of historical interpretation.

### 2.2.1. THE ANALOGY BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC EXPERIMENT AND MORAL IMAGINATION

Popper acknowledges that moral and political proposals or decisions differ from scientific propositions to the extent that they cannot be immediately deduced from experience, nor can they be unambiguously "determined" by argument. Nevertheless, as the previous chapter has shown, he argues that they may be "helped" by a kind of argument, which consists in the visualization of the concrete consequences that are likely to result from the alternatives between which we have to choose, a procedure that will at least prevent us from deciding "blindly":[132]

> ... whenever we are faced with a moral decision of a more abstract kind, it is most helpful to analyse carefully the consequences which are likely to result from the alternatives between which we have to choose. For only if we can visualize the consequences in a concrete and practical way, do we really know what our decision is about; otherwise we decide blindly. (OSE2 232)

In this respect, Popper contends, there is "a certain analogy" (OSE2 233) between testing by argument and actual *experiment* on the one hand (as in the case of a scientific method), and testing by our *conscience*, that is, by argument and imagined experience, by foreseeing and assessing the consequences of one's actions, on the other hand (as in the case of moral and political decision-making). In both cases, we employ a kind of decision *procedure* that enables us to "test" the validity of propositions and proposals.[133]

However, we argue that this analogy has several shortcomings. In the *first* place, I would argue that the mere visualization of the (possible) consequences of our moral decisions is not sufficient, for what is still needed is a *substantial* standard or norm in light of which we may assess and decide which consequences are morally permissible and which are not.[134] As the previous chapter has shown,

[132] OSE2 232-233.
[133] OSE2 233: "The rational and imaginative analysis of the consequences of a moral theory has a certain analogy in scientific method."
[134] Cf. OSE1 61: "… we can compare the existing normative laws (or social institutions) with some standard norms which we have decided are worthy to be realized."

when seeking to establish substantial norms, Popper does not seem to go further than claiming that such "standard norms" (OSE1 61) – presumably freedom, individualism, egalitarianism, humanitarianism – are also "of our making" (OSE1 61), which would merely reiterate the problem of the *grounding* of these norms. There are only a few occasions when Popper comes to a more concrete scrutiny of the validity of these standard norms, as in the following passage, for instance:

> We can … investigate our demand from the point of view of its compatibility with certain important and widely accepted moral and 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.[135]

As has already been asserted, Popper does not make it clear why we *ought to* accept these "creeds" for reasons other than that they are "important" insofar as they are *in fact* "widely accepted", and hence he comes very close to adopting a *historicist* (or, in Popper's terms, a "historist") position, which is precisely one of the positions he criticizes.[136]

Apart from this failure to provide a substantial norm, there is a *second* shortcoming of this procedural analogy, which consists in the fact that it does not differentiate between *moral* decisions – i.e. "norms enforced not by the state but … by our conscience" – and *political* decisions – i.e. "state-enforced norms" (OSE1 113) or laws. It is not clear to what extent and exactly how a procedure for the "testing" of moral decisions by individual consciences would work in the case of political decision-making. For, in the *first* place, the additional element that comes into play in the case of political decision-making is the problem of how to attune (the decisions of) different individual consciences to each other. To that end, Popper needs a notion of *citizen*ship or *public* reason, which in this analogy remains underdeveloped.[137] Later, political philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, who wrote at a time when liberal democracy was (once again) more firmly established, did focus on the development of such notions.[138] In the *second* place, another element that comes into play in the case of political decision-making is that *political* proposals are to be turned into *law*, that is, into binding norms (decisions that are somehow collectively enforced) that constitute a duty or an *obligation*, instead of norms that are agreed to by our *conscience* (decisions that are individually upheld) and that constitute a mere demand or *claim*.

Popper seems to acknowledge this crucial difference between a moral (or private) and a political (or public) decision when he states that Socrates, whom he

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[135] Popper, 'Public and Private Values', 122.
[136] Cf. OSE2 267: "… since each generation has its own troubles and problems, and therefore its own interests and its own point of view, it follows that each generation has a right to look upon and re-interpret history in its own way, which is complementary to that of previous generations."
[137] Cf. Habermas, 'Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision', 271, 278, 279.
[138] See Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*; Rawls, *Political Liberalism*.

associates closest with the idea of individual conscience,[139] "was mistaken when he considered himself a politician; he was a teacher" (OSE1 191). Socrates, in caring for the souls or individual selves of his interlocutors, proved to be more interested in the "personal aspect" of the open society than in "institutional reform" (OSE1 191).[140] In his book as a whole, the crucial *difference* – and even *opposition*, as is shown in Plato's *Gorgias* – between Socrates, a philosopher, and Pericles, a politican, is downplayed by Popper in service of his attempt to stage them as *allies* against Plato in what he considers the crucial respect: the *decisive* and even historical struggle of the "friends" of the open society against its "enemies".[141]

### 2.2.2. The Analogy between Eliminating Falsity and Eliminating Suffering

As we have seen, the first analogy Popper uses, which focuses on the *procedural* character of scientific and moral or political decisions, does not offer any *substantial* criterion. The second analogy, to which we now turn, does appear to offer such a substantial standard. According to Popper, there is an *analogy* to be drawn between the elimination of false theories (or falsificationism), which he considers to be the task of science, and the elimination of human suffering (or negative utilitarianism), which he considers to be the task of politics.[142] Jan-Werner Mueller has noted that, by thus taking the fallibility of human knowledge as his basic assumption, Popper seeks a kind of "certainty about uncertainty".[143]

To be sure, Popper's analogy does not draw solely on the common element of "elimination", that is, of *negation*. For the general or universal validity of the attempt to eliminate human suffering is somehow linked to the *urgency* that is inherent in such matters: "human suffering makes a direct moral appeal, namely, the appeal for help, while there is no similar call to increase the happiness of a man who is doing well anyway" (OSE1 284n2).[144] Accordingly, and perhaps more

[139] OSE1 66: "[The historical Socrates] felt compelled, by his conscience as well as by his religious beliefs, to question all authority and … searched for the norms in whose justice he could trust.

[140] Cf. OSE2 276.

[141] As we shall see in the second and third part of this dissertation, both Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt are much more aware of the difference between philosophy and politics, and between individual conscience and the law, which testifies to the extent to which Popper's political philosophy moves within the framework of liberal and democratic political philosophy, according to which both conscience and law rule within their own, pre-established spheres within the already structurally differentiated "open society".

[142] OSE1 285n2: "There is some kind of analogy between this view of ethics [i.e. the negative utilitarian one, WC] and the view of scientific methodology which I have advocated in my *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. It adds to clarity in the field of ethics if we formulate our demands negatively, i.e. if we demand the elimination of suffering rather than the promotion of happiness. Similarly, it is helpful to formulate the task of scientific method as the elimination of false theories (from the various theories tentatively proffered) rather than the attainment of established truths."

[143] Mueller, 'Fear and Freedom', 51.

[144] Cf. OSE1 65, where Popper explains the difference between moral and aesthetic decisions in terms of the greater urgency of the former: "Many moral decisions involve the life and death of other men. Decisions in the field of art are much less urgent and important. It is therefore most misleading to say

precisely, Popper points to an analogy between the *compelling* character of the logic of falsification (which is absent in case of the logic of verification) and the equally *compelling* character of appeal of the need to escape from suffering and pain (which is absent in case of a longing for the realization of so-called positive values).[145]

However, it is questionable whether this analogy solves the problem of "arbitrariness" either, for it should be noted that the professed *universal* validity of the collective effort to eliminate human suffering cannot be understood without and must in the last instance be derived from the experience of a *particular* appeal of a concrete human individual who is in distress. As Arnold Burms has argued, one first needs to understand what it means to respond to the suffering of a concrete individual in order to be able to understand what it would mean to care about the reduction of the totality of human suffering. Because the latter enterprise is embedded in an experience it cannot incorporate, then, our response to the suffering of a concrete individual cannot be understood as a mere additive contribution to the collective enterprise of reducing the totality of human suffering.[146] Moreover, when we focus on the particular experience of a concrete moral appeal, it is clear that as long as someone is in severe pain, the relief of that pain will indeed be the urgent and encompassing goal that takes precedence over all other possible moral goals. As Burms argues, however, it is not thereby implied that the relief of pain is also the central or *highest* goal in life. What deserves priority (or what is compelling) in *some* situations is not thereby the highest goal in *all* situations, in human life as such.[147] This implies that the difficult and potentially *divisive* question "how should we live?" (which *positive* values do we consider worth realizing?) cannot be avoided by having recourse to the professed *compelling* appeal of human suffering – as if it were possible to find a standard in moral and political reasoning that provides the same compelling evidence as do the rules of logic in scientific reasoning.

Perhaps we should say, then, that the final reason why Popper embraces a negative utilitarian view of ethics in answer to those questions is based on the expectation that this is the only answer that will increase the chance that *agreement* will be reached. For, as we have seen in the previous chapter, he seems to praise the value of political *disagreement* at best and exclusively within the limits of technology, that is, precisely when the fundamental, constitutional questions have already been decided,[148] about which he says:

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that a man decides for or against slavery as he may decide for or against certain works of music and literature, or that moral decisions are purely matters of taste. Nor are they merely decisions about how to make the world more beautiful, or about other luxuries of this kind; they are decisions of much greater urgency."

[145] Cf. OSE2 237.

[146] Burms, 'Disagreement, Perspectivism, Consequentialism', 162-163.

[147] Burms, *Waarheid, evocatie, symbool* [Truth, Evocation, Symbol], 96-97.

[148] See OSE1 110-111.

> In favour of his method, the piecemeal engineer can claim that a systematic fight against suffering and injustice and war 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. Those who suffer can judge for themselves, and the others can hardly deny that they would not like to change places. (OSE1 158-159) [149]

We may answer that, even in this case, Popper would still need to provide an answer to the question of what makes "agreement" (or public peace) a greater good than "disagreement" (or public conflict), and in which cases. To conclude, there is no way to avoid the question of the positive (or substantial) good from surfacing in moral and political matters.

On the basis of this analysis, we may argue that Popper, rather than insisting on the "irrationality" of moral and political decisions, could have adopted a different conception of rationality, one that does not seek an objective "decision procedure" or compelling standard (either of a more procedural or a more substantial nature) analogous to (empirical) science. For, as Burms has argued, the search for an objective decision procedure is simply not what we are doing when we are making moral (and political) decisions. Perhaps it would be possible to avoid the danger of the "arbitrariness" of moral and political decisions, then, precisely on the condition that we leave behind the functioning of science or engineering as our "orientating truth" (and look instead for a different "orientating truth").

One of the advantages of this approach would be that it fits much better with Popper's *own* explicit rejection of what he calls a "scientific ethics", that is, an ethics that aims "at telling us what we ought to do, i.e. at constructing a code of norms upon a scientific basis, so that we need only look up the index of the code if we are faced with a difficult moral decision" (OSE1 237n18). He calls this form of ethics "a form of escape, and escape from the realities of moral life, i.e. from our moral responsibilities" (OSE1 237n18). Hence, Popper's rejection of "scientific ethics", which is informed by his assumption of the *logical* separation of facts (or science) and norms (or ethics), stands in direct opposition to his embrace of any *analogical* correspondence between the two. He argues that "scientific" ethics harbors the same danger as would a "historicist", "naturalist", etc. ethics, viz. turn it into something "heteronomous". Apparently, in *this* sense ethics is *far from* analogous to science.

In sum, we may say that Popper wishes to have it both ways: he insists on the strictly *logical distinction* between science and ethics (the dualism of facts and

[149] Cf. Popper, 'Public and Private Values', 122: "It is much easier to agree on a list of urgent social evils to be combated at once and by piecemeal measures than on a vision of a good society, to be realized in some more or less distant future." See also Judith Shklar, 'The Liberalism of Fear', 11: "Because the fear of systematic cruelty is so universal, moral claims based on its prohibition have an immediate appeal and can gain recognition without much argument."

values) – "ethical problems cannot be solved by the rational methods of science" (OSE1 292n11) – but in order to escape from the verdict of "arbitrariness", he simultaneously insists on the *analogical similarity* between them, in the hope of somehow thereby bestowing the aura of "certainty" upon ethics, a characteristic which in fact belongs to science (or his idealized picture thereof).

### 2.2.3. The Analogy between the Social Character of Scientific Rationality and the Social Character of Moral Rationality

We now return to our question of what the *de facto* foundation is for the rationalist attitude (or the attitude of reasonableness). As the previous chapter has shown, Popper asserts that it rests on an "irrational faith", while he also claims that the rationalist attitude is *intrinsically* "linked up with" (OSE2 238) certain ethical principles and the political institutionalization thereof. In order to fortify this latter thesis, he uses another analogy.

This *third* analogy which we can trace in Popper's writing, is drawn between the social or inter-personal character of scientific method on the one hand and the social or inter-personal character of the rationalist attitude on the other.[150] Thus he seems to suggest that the validity of the moral recognition of the other which is linked with the (broader) rationalist attitude, is somehow "similar" to the same recognition that is part of the scientific attitude. Popper explains that scientific method has a *public* character: the scientists needs to allow his theories to be *freely criticized*, and the observations and experiments done need to be of a *public* character: "scientists try to express their theories in such a form that they can be tested, i.e. refuted (or else corroborated) by such experience" (OSE2 218). Analogously, the attitude of rationalism (or of reasonableness) in general requires one to listen to the others' arguments, and to refer to arguments and experiences (rather than emotions and passions), which can be publicly scrutinized.[151] In the first place, the attitude of rationalism implies – is "bound up with" or "linked up with" (OSE2 238) – the moral recognition of the other as other, just as in the case of science. In the second place, the attitude of rationalism requires some kind of political institutionalization of that moral recognition, again analogous to scientific practice.[152]

It is clear that, just as in the case of the previous analogies, this one does not serve as a *justification* for the decision to adopt a rationalist attitude (or an attitude of reasonableness), because, from the perspective of Popper's conception of rationalism at least, the validity of the scientific attitude in light of which it is interpreted – or which provides its orientation – would also require justification: what justifies the decision to adopt the method of science in the first place? What Popper needs instead is a theoretical account of what it *means* to adopt an

[150] OSE2 225, 217-218.
[151] OSE2 224-225.
[152] OSE2 227, 236, 238-239.

"attitude" or to participate in a "practice", and of the extent to which *analogical* thinking may serve as *ratio* for that adoption.

In the second place, we may ask how the *political* institutionalization of the moral principles that are embodied within the attitude of reasonableness takes shape.[153] For there is an important difference between the "social institution" of science on the one hand, and the "social institution" of politics or of the state on the other. In the case of science, the recognition of the other only regards people who are somehow willing to contribute to the search for knowledge and the methods for gaining knowledge (for example, by speaking the language of science). What is at stake in science (that is to say, in Popper's idealized form thereof), is the search for theoretical, propositional truth, or, in the case of the applied sciences such as engineering, the successful application of that knowledge. In the field of politics, on the other hand, what is at stake is "the power of man over man" (OSE2 236), as Popper himself acknowledges in passing. In this case, the *binding* – in the sense of *obligating* – power of the institution in question is at least to a certain extent bound up with the implicitly presupposed and potentially violent use of force that is exercised by the *state* or *government*, sanctioned by the *law*. As we have seen, the presence of state power is always presupposed by Popper, although he does not provide a full theoretical articulation of it. Moreover, nor does he articulate the founding or institution of the state as such, that is, the *obligating* rather than *claiming* decision with which it is bound up. We may therefore characterize Popper's explicit conception of politics as an anti-revolutionary (anti-violent) one: because politics coincides with *democratic* politics, the *decisive* moment (the choice *in favor of* democracy) is removed from sight and is not *recognized* as itself also *political*.

This omission may well be connected to the fact that Popper chooses from the outset to treat his political philosophy within the framework of "social philosophy". That is to say, he applies the methodology of the social sciences and social engineering / technology as applied social science to the sphere of "*the state*", that is, the realm of "the political" insofar as it can be distinguished as a separate sphere within "the open society" (or "civilization"), while (the legitimacy of) the institution or founding of the latter is always already presupposed, without being called into question. As a result, Popper does not arrive at the formulation of a political philosophy in the more encompassing sense of an explicit and theoretical articulation of the *raison d'être* of "the political" in a broader sense, that is, "the political" as it is implied in the decision in favor of the "open society" as a *particular* type of society, a decision which precedes and constitutes the institution of "the political" in the narrower sense of the realm of the state or of legality, understood as a sub-sphere within that "open society".

So far, this section has shown that Popper attempts to remedy the danger of the "arbitrariness" of his "faith" in reason – which is in itself caused by his strict separation of (scientific) facts and (moral) decisions – by *drawing on several*

[153] Cf. OSE2 238.

*analogies* between scientific reasoning on the one side and moral (and political) reasoning on the other. As such, the aura of certainty – or of certainty about uncertainty, as Jan-Werner Mueller puts it [154] – which belongs to science (or to Popper's idealized picture thereof) is "carried over" to morality and politics. We have traced and examined three such analogies: (i) the analogy between testing by scientific experiment and testing by the imaginative power of our conscience; (ii) the analogy between the elimination of false theories and the elimination of human suffering; (iii) the analogy between the social (or inter-personal) character of the science and the social (or inter-personal) character of moral (and political) reasoning.

All three of these analogies have been found wanting for several reasons. In the *first* place, they are wanting in their *substance*. By invoking and attesting to the self-evidence of "science" and "engineering" as models or ideal types for politics, several aspects of the latter are removed from sight. Insofar as Popper (and his readers) is (are) led by this picture of politics, that is, insofar as this picture of politics is *constitutive* of his discourse, insofar as it provides the *orientation* for his discourse instead of merely being the *subject* of his discourse (which it also is), we can locate part of what I would call "the spell of Popper" – the effect of a language he *uses* that falls outside the "scientific" or "rationalist" language he *advocates* – precisely in the force and meaning of these analogies. These analogies are enforced by Popper's use of the expression "social engineering", which is a frozen metaphor for the analogy between mechanical engineering and political reform, and which determines from the outset the perspective from which he invites us to picture the phenomenon of politics.[155] Whereas the use of metaphorical language seems to be excluded from Popper's conception of rational language on the propositional level – remember his claim that a normative statement, in contradistinction to a factual one, can "*only* in a metaphorical sense [emphasis added]" be called "true" or "false" (OSE1 58) – at crucial moments his writing turns out to be *resting* precisely on such language.

In the *second* place, and more fundamentally, Popper fails to account for this crucial, because *orientating* (rather than *justifying*) role of analogies which is present within and which underlies his own discourse. That is to say, he does not make it clear whether the use of analogies can be considered as part of the "rationalist attitude" or not; that is, of the attitude in which only logical argument and actual experience may count.[156]

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[154] Mueller, 'Fear and Freedom', 51.

[155] See especially OSE1 24, 67-68, 163.

[156] In his 'Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition', 180-182, Popper draws a distinction between the "expressive" and "stimulating" functions of language on the one hand, and the "descriptive" and "argumentative" functions on the other. He claims that human beings share the first two functions of language with the animals, while he considers the latter two specifically human. Although he admits that language, in so far as language *qua* language has all four functions, may be ambivalent, Popper strongly defends a critical tradition which works against this ambivalence, in favor of the descriptive and argumentative uses of language only.

Popper might reply that the role performed by analogy within the rationalist attitude belonging to moral and political reasoning is similar to that of the role of the "searchlight" in the empirical sciences (OSE2 260-261, 268).[157] He claims that the role performed by a hypothesis in the empirical science "is analogous to" that of a "point of view" or an "interest" in historiography or the interpretative sciences. However, when it comes to explaining what such a "point of view" or "interest" in the case of the latter sciences consists of, Popper claims that it is determined by a certain "pressing need', while he does not mention the constitutive role of analogies in shaping such a "point of view" or "interest". As he characterizes the use of such a "point of view" within the interpretative sciences as "analogous" to the role fulfilled by the "searchlight" in the empirical sciences,[158] we have in fact traced another, *fourth* analogy with the (empirical) sciences. Thereby our initial point is merely reinforced, for once again Popper employs the use of analogy without showing any "theoretical consciousness" (Geuss) of that use.

Meanwhile, our attention to the unarticulated *use* of analogies has put us on the track of an aspect of philosophical writing that differs from its propositional (or justificatory) aspect, for Popper's multiple appeal to forceful "analogies" within the heart of his argumentation shows that there are moments within his writing when he uses a language that not only falls outside the "scientific" language of "propositions", but is also not explicitly included by him within the category of the "rational" language of "proposals".

### 2.3. THE STAGING OF POLEMICS

The second part of this chapter considers the assumption that thought – including political thought – is a *practice* and not merely a body of knowledge, the validity of which is to be tested as our starting point. Accordingly, we ask whether the politics *enacted* by Popper – that is, the political attitude to which his writing attests – is in fact in agreement with the politics he explicitly *proposes*, that is, with piecemeal social engineering as "rational" method of politics. In other words: with regard to the *decision* in favor of the politics of proposing, does Popper *act* in accordance with his own *proposal* to conceive of politics in terms of a free and rational discussion about proposals?

Let us first return to the primary goal of Popper's project as reconstructed in the previous chapter. He aims to save a politics of rationality and responsibility, which is closely linked to the moral recognition of "the rational unity of mankind". However, we have found that this kind of politics is jeopardized by the merely scientific or technological conception of rationality he defends on the level of his propositions. In fact, it turned out that the decision in favor of a rational politics of proposing cannot be justified on the basis of its own assumptions, that is, on the basis of logical argument and experience. As Popper explains, all argumentation

[157] OSE2 261-262, 268.
[158] OSE2 261, 268.

rests on certain assumptions, and these cannot all be based on argumentation themselves. He could have chosen to *broaden* his conception of rationality (in order to *include* assumptions which are themselves not argued for), but he chose to retain his narrower, falsificationist, conception of rationality. As a consequence, his position seemed to lead to some form of "decisionism", in which case (moral and political) arguments would be merely *ad hominem*.

We now shift our attention from the *propositional* level of his text to the level of its *performance*. It is argued that his writing attests precisely to a "polemical" conception of politics in the emphatic sense of the word, viz. as a life-and-death struggle between friends and enemies, a conception of politics that is in fact very similar to that of Carl Schmitt,[159] which is completely at odds with the rational form of politics defended by Popper on the propositional level. As we have seen, Popper stages his *act* of proposing within the larger framework of a necessary and historical struggle, of the invocation of a "state of necessity" in which the very survival of "our civilization", of *our* "open society", is at stake.

Examining Popper's discourse more closely, its structure turns out to be very polemical indeed. He divides mankind into two camps, a camp of the "friends" of the open society and a camp of its "enemies", who are involved in a struggle within which there are only two options: *victory* or *defeat*.[160] As we have seen in the previous chapter, Popper speaks of the need to overcome the "fatal division" among "those on whose defence civilization depends" (OSE1 vii). There is no time for discussion – i.e. for the attitude of "*I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth*" (OSE2 225) – but only for a *fight*, in which it is actually permissible to use other means than (mere) rational argument, such as emotions and sentiments.

Popper employs several means. In the *first* place, the choice in favor of the open society is staged within a *progressive* historical narrative within which the allies of the "closed society" are pictured as "primitive" and backward. In other words, historically, the decision in favor of the open society has already been taken, whereas on the propositional level Popper has claimed that historical "progress" rests with us and hence is never secure.[161] In the *second* place, the *decision* in favor of the open society is equated with *being human* as such, which becomes clear from the penultimate sentences of the first volume of the book:

> If we dream of a return to our childhood, if we are tempted to rely on others and so be happy, if we shrink from the task of carrying our cross, the cross of humaneness, of reason, of responsibility, if we lose courage and flinch from the strain, then we must try to fortify ourselves with a clear understanding of the simple decision before us. We can return to the beasts. But if we wish to remain human, then there is only one way, the way into the open society. (OSE1 201)

[159] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*.
[160] OSE1 vii.
[161] OSE2 279-280.

In other words, whoever does not make the "simple decision" in favor of the open society is not merely an enemy of the open society or of "civilization", but places himself outside *humanity* as such.[162] Thus, Popper acts as if there is "only one way", as if there is really *one* option, by which he excludes or at least starkly reduces the possibility of free choice he wishes to save in the first place.

In addition, the sentiments that are actually *invoked* by Popper here, such as fear (of being primitive and even inhuman), and love (for) and pride (in) (being progressive and human) are precisely the sentiments which he declares on the propositional level are to be *rejected* because of their divisive and possible violent effect. Indeed, we have seen him praising faith in and hope for the open society and its concomitant rational attitude over the fear and despair which would lead to an escape from the autonomy and responsibility belonging to "the strain of civilization" into the heteronomy of the "historicist" attitude belonging to the closed society.[163]

In sum, the *polemical* politics which Popper *performs* by his manner of writing appeals to the necessity of *struggle*, that is, to a "decision" in the sense of a specific course of *action* to be taken instead of in the sense of a "proposal" to be discussed in *theory*. This conception of the political includes the following elements. First, invoking a space for reasonable discussion in *freedom* is replaced by invoking a state of *necessity*. Secondly, *logical argumentation* is replaced by an appeal to *emotions or sentiments*. Thirdly, invoking the rational *unity of mankind* is replaced by a *division of mankind* into a camp of "friends" and a camp of "enemies" (the latter of which are at some point even pushed out of humanity).

Popper might defend himself by asserting that the politics which he *performs* here – invoking a state of necessity – is nothing more than invoking a state of *exception*, which is permissible *exclusively* in name of a defense of the state of *normal* politics, the status quo, which is, as we have seen, identified by him as that of the politics of piecemeal social engineering. In his treatment of Marx, Popper explicitly – that is, on the level of his propositions – discusses the possibility of the necessity to defend democracy.[164] He posits that the use of violence is permitted or considered to be legitimate *only* if the use of reason falls short in defending democracy: "… the use of violence is justified only under a tyranny which makes reforms without violence impossible, and it should have only one aim, that is, to bring about a state of affairs which makes reforms without

[162] In Schmittian terms, Popper's *moral* decision (to belong or not to belong to "humanity") may be said to hide what is in fact a *political* decision (to belong or not to belong to a specific friend-enemy grouping). See Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 54: "When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponent. At the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim these as one's own and to deny the same to the enemy."

[163] OSE2 279: "… historicism is born of our despair in the rationality and responsibility of our actions. It is a debased hope and a debased faith, an attempt o replace the hope and the faith that springs from our moral enthusiasm and the contempt for success by a certainty that springs from a pseudo-science; a pseudo-science of the stars, or of 'human nature', or of historical destiny."

[164] OSE2 151-152, 160-162.

violence possible" (OSE2 151). We could say that "revolutionary" (violent) politics is *only* permitted in defense of "democratic" politics. It may not be a coincidence that this is the only occasion when Popper does not speak of a battle *against* tyranny (which is his usual, negative utilitarian formulation), but of a battle *for* democracy (as if he knows that the formulation of a negative goal would not be enough to win the battle):

> Democracy provides an invaluable battle-ground for any reasonable reform, since it permits reform without violence. But if the preservation of democracy is not made the first consideration in any particular battle fought out on this battle-ground, then the latent anti-democratic tendencies which are always present (and which appeal to those who suffer under the strain of civilization …) may bring about a breakdown of democracy. If an understanding of these principles is not yet developed, its development must be fought for. (OSE2 161)

We might say, then, that *The Open Society and Its Enemies* is to be read as the product of a state of *exception*, in which the first consideration is the *preservation* of democracy.

Yet, in a certain sense this is beside the point, for what I am arguing is that Popper lacks the "theoretical self-consciousness" (Raymond Geuss) to *connect* in any meaningful way what he *is claiming* on the *propositional* level – that is, his conception of knowledge and rationality – to what he *is doing* on the *performative* level. To be more precise: he fails to relate his propositional *articulation* of the possibility and legitimacy of the state of exception in certain circumstances to what he himself, as writer and thus as actor, is *enacting*, viz. furthering a polemical conception of politics.

In the *first* place, he fails to ask what the effective consequences are (both in the sense of the performative meaning and the actual historical impact) of the conception of polemical politics he *practices* in his writing, that is, the "deed" he performs, for the actual realization of the rational and responsible politics he explicitly argues for, that is, of the "first word" he asserts. In other words, he fails in the task of giving a theoretical account of the *practice* of his thinking.

In the *second* place, Popper does not offer an explicit theoretical articulation of what the fact that he himself, on the performative level, *cannot avoid* invoking the polemical conception of politics which he rejected on the propositional level, would imply for the question of how "realistic" and how consistent his explicitly articulated conception of politics (as the politics of proposing) actually is. In other words, he fails in the task of offering a conception of the political that is sufficiently comprehensive and consistent.

### 2.4. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES: MODERN AND ANCIENT

The analysis in the previous two sections has established that the positive, substantial *question* of the good society and the best form of government cannot be

avoided; that is, the question of the right political order or "best constitution" cannot be reduced to or substituted by an (allegedly) "objective" "method", "decision procedure", or "language". Moreover, every *decisive* and obligating answer to this fundamental question inevitably implies a form of "closure", in the sense of the exclusion of other answers. Therewith, a form of "closure" (i.e. something by which it is constituted but which it cannot incorporate) is present within the heart of the "open" society. We have argued that, in Popper's case, this place or moment is occupied by the following two elements: (i) the *orientation* towards the practice of science or engineering as a true or self-evident, presupposed ideal to which the practice of politics is pictured as being "analogous" and in favor of which ideal Popper has in fact always already *decided* (as was demonstrated in the first section of this chapter); (ii) the *staging* of a polemical politics which is rejected (or at best presented as an "exception") on the propositional level, but which is in fact always already decided in favor of on the performative level (as was demonstrated in the second section of this chapter).

In order to find an alternative account of politics, philosophy (or thinking), and their interrelatedness, we need to open up a critical perspective on Popper's political philosophy. We may find such a perspective by drawing attention to an apparent contradiction in his work. Throughout his book, Popper claims that the problems of the open society are coeval with civilization *as such* (which he claims was "born" in ancient Greece) and have (since then) in a certain sense been "perennial", that is, belonging to the human condition as such. Yet, in the preface to the *second* edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1950), Popper suggests that the problems that are coeval with the open society – especially the risk of social engineering becoming "utopian" – are closely connected to the specifically *modern* belief in the possibility of relieving human suffering by *human* means only:[165]

> I see now more clearly than ever before that even our greatest troubles spring from something that is as admirable and sound as it is dangerous – from our impatience to better the lot of our fellows. For these troubles are the by-products of what is perhaps the greatest of all moral and spiritual revolutions of history, a movement which began three centuries ago. It is the longing of uncounted unknown men to free themselves and their minds from the tutelage of authority and prejudice. It is their attempt to build up an open society which rejects the absolute authority of the merely established and the merely traditional while trying to preserve, to develop, and to establish traditions, old or new, that measure up to their standards of freedom, of humaneness, and of rational criticism. It is their unwillingness to sit back and leave the entire responsibility for ruling the world to human or superhuman authority, and their readiness to share the burden of responsibility for avoidable suffering, and to work for its avoidance. This revolution has created powers of appalling destructiveness; but they may be conquered. (OSE1 ix)

[165] This contradiction is also noted by Holmes, 'Aristippus in and out of Athens'.

What is suggested here is that the problems belonging to the open society originate in a "moral and spiritual revolution" that started "three centuries ago", that is, from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, when Hobbes and Spinoza wrote their influential works.[166] We may say, then, that the problems that coincide with the use of science and technology as a means to relieve "the strain of civilization" are not the result of a *perennial* condition, but of a historical *decision*, led by the appeal of modern science and born in a polemic against pre-modern forms of authority and prejudice. As soon as this historical horizon is opened up, that is, as soon as the *institution* of "the open society" and of its "method" of "piecemeal social engineering" have become opened once again to question, two alternative directions become visible.

In the first place, the principles of modernity (especially technical rationality) can be criticized in the name of the principles of modernity itself. This is the road that has been taken by Critical Theory, in response to what Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer have called the dialectics of Enlightenment.[167] In its most sophisticated form, this is developed by Habermas in his theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy as the political institutionalization thereof.[168] There is indeed a clear similarity between his ideas and Popper's plea for an "attitude of reasonableness" as the embodiment of moral ideals such as impartiality, tolerance, and responsibility, based on his "inter-personal theory of reason". The drawback of this approach, however, would be that it still tends to hold on to an idealized picture of politics as a form of rational discussion, which it presents as a privileged use of language.

Secondly, the principles of modernity can be criticized in the name of those of pre-modernity, or, to be more precise, of ancient political philosophy. In a way this is the more radical road. As the next two chapters will show, it is connected with the name of Leo Strauss (1899-1973), whose restoration of the pre-modern horizon re-establishes the difference between philosophy and politics and the concomitant ranking of contemplation (theory) *above* action (practice). "Utopian" thinking in the original (pre-modern, classical) sense of the word is never "activist", but raises the *theoretical* question of the best regime, apart from the *practical* question of its actual realization.[169]

Against the background of the classical position, then, it becomes clear that Popper's notions of "utopian" and "piecemeal" social engineering in fact share one and the same presupposition: political philosophy is *active*, that is, it culminates in laying down a "political program" or "political demand", which is to be realized in practice.[170] Accordingly, Popper reads Plato from the outset as if he presents a "political program", rather than as a philosopher who wishes to come to a *theoretical* understanding of the *problem* of politics, that is, of the problematic

[166] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), Benedictus de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670).
[167] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* .
[168] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*; idem, *Between Facts and Norms*. Cf. OSE2 238.
[169] See also Shklar, 'The Political Theory of Utopia', 164-165.
[170] See Lane, 'Plato, Popper, Strauss, and Utopianism: Open Secrets?', 119-142.

character of the question of the best constitution, in which the relation between the philosopher and the political should always be taken into account. Moreover, Popper considers Plato's dialogues merely as monologues or treatises in disguise, instead of written performances of a specific conceptualization of the relation between philosophy and politics. There is, however, *one* passage in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in which Popper appears to be aware of the possibility that Plato's dialogues can be read in the latter way, which also happens to be one of the very few passages in which he speaks favorably about Plato:

> It may be remarked that Plato, even though his theory is authoritarian, and demands the strict control of the growth of human reason in his guardians …, pays tribute, *by his manner of writing*, to our inter-personal theory of reason; for most of his earlier dialogues describe arguments conducted in a very reasonable spirit. (OSE2 227)

## 2.5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, our reading of the work of Karl Popper has led us to argue that insofar as a political philosophy wishes to realize some form of "rational politics" – or, more broadly, of "thoughtful politics" – it should acknowledge its own specific character as a *practice*. Hence, its conception of the political can be traced not only by taking notice of the "rational" character of its own cognitive claims *about* politics, but by also taking into account its own performative character; of thought being a *practice* in itself, especially insofar as it is spoken or written. In Chapter 1 it was argued that, precisely as a result of the epistemological assumptions of his "critical rationalism", Popper is insufficiently able to do justice to his final aim of realizing a rational and responsible politics (that is, his way of conceiving what I call "thoughtful politics"). Chapter 2 demonstrated that his "last word" appears to consist of his use of the *analogy* of politics with "science" or "engineering" on the one hand, and of his *performance* of politics as polemics on the other.

In order to remedy this lack of "theoretical self-consciousness", this failure to think through the conditions of "political philosophy" and of "thoughtful politics", the following three demands should be met. *First*, one would need a more comprehensive conception of both politics and philosophy. On the one hand, the political should be understood in a broader sense than as the rational justification of proposals and as encompassing more than that which belongs in the sphere of the "state" or of "government" as an already limited sub-sphere within an already established specific kind of society called "open society". On the other hand, philosophy (or thinking) should be understood in a broader sense than as a methodology of the social sciences, with its strict separation of facts and values, its concomitant denial of the rationality of value statements, let alone of other linguistic usages. *Secondly*, it needs to be acknowledged that moral and political "decisions" are not only capable of being studied under the aspect of either their propositional validity or their status as empirically falsifiable behavior, but also under the aspect of the *performative* meaning of their *practice*. *Thirdly*, it needs to

be acknowledged that some form of rationality for moral and political decisions (such as the question of the best constitution) is possible, that is, a form of "thoughtful politics" which escapes from the binary opposition between the claim that all decisions are "arbitrary" on the one hand and the demand for an "objective", quasi-scientific decision procedure on the other. The next two chapters will examine whether and to what extent the work of Leo Strauss lives up to these three demands.