

Karl poppers idea of  
democracy  
philosophy essay



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In order to analyze Poppers idea of democracy we shall sets out key tenets of his social and political thought, as well as a few of problems with them. The paper will try to underline Poppers conception of human nature and show how this provides a framework for his theory of history, his critique of historicism and his conception of the ' open society' and democracy. After considering Poppers central political values of freedom and reason, we'll go through the related epistemic and political programmes of democracy and piecemeal social engineering.

### Historical and Intellectual Background

Even if Popper rejected Marxism in 1919, he claimed to be a socialist till 1932; it was the socialistic ethic and its idea of justice to which he retained adherence, not its political strategies. Awareness of the growth of authoritarianism in the Soviet Union and what he saw as deficiencies in the Marxist theory and practice of Austrian social democracy pressed him to revise further his political views. Both the idea and the experience of violence were catalytic. Social democracy, by holding to their threat of achieving their objectives by violent means, were implicitly provoking state authorities to a ruthless response, Popper then adopted a more traditional, liberal political stance: deciding that freedom was more important than equality he reaffirmed his rejection of violence.

The central core of Popper's social and political theory resides in *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, regarded by the author as his ' war effort': they were intended as a defense of freedom against the obvious impulse towards totalitarianism and authoritarianism.

Popper's further espousal of the values of reason, toleration, peaceful discussion and respect for the individual all find their predecessors in Kant's moral and political philosophy. The Austrian thinker extends Kant's ethical precept of criticism and self-criticism providing a foundation for his philosophy of critical rationalism and joins Kant's optimistic idea and hope in the possibility of obtaining social reform and peaceful relations within and between nations.

### Human Nature

To explain human behaviour and history Popper refuses the utility of a general theory of human nature; his conception of human nature may be found in his knowledge of biology and psychology since he considers human beings similar to any organism, in that they have inborn needs or expectations. According to the author, people tend to hold on to the uniformities they discover, become afraid of change and even wish to dominate others; so if this occurs, the failure of a regularity provokes social disorder and also encourages people to create traditions and taboos. Even though the attachment to regularities is a source of dogmatism and intolerance (attitudes which are anathema to him), Popper advocates social regularities, like social traditions, more favourably than would many other liberals. He suggests that the maintenance of traditions (by which he seems to mean culture or settled ways of thinking and acting) brings order and predictability into our lives and even provides the foundation of social structures: the important political task is to discriminate between valuable and harmful traditions.

This conception of human nature has direct implications for the sort of society he wants to promote

and the principles by which it is to be guided. He suggests a slow, gradual reform because this kind of change will not suddenly remove the traditions to which people have become accustomed and thereby create anxiety, terror and violence. There are many contradictions between Popper's advocacy of boldness, novelty and revolution in intellectual but not in social life: I think they might be explained more with reference to his theory of human nature than to his epistemology, even if he justifies the distinction in epistemological terms, it becomes clear that objective knowledge is preferable because of the constraints it exercises over subjective fears and impulses. This account of Popper's conception of human nature demonstrates his concern for the practical impact of ideas upon the social life of human beings, here we may notice a conservative tone in his political thought.

### Epistemology and History

Popper's social and political thought includes a more general, speculative philosophy of history which indicates the character of historical progress. For the author, ideas are the main influences upon whether or not human progress is maintained: all social changes and conflicts, wars and revolutions can be seen as the result of conflict between opposing ideas and ideologies. Even with these conclusions, he shares with the historicists, whom he so vehemently attacks, a belief that there exists a direction to human history given by the growth of knowledge. He claims that ' the growth of knowledge,

and thus the history of science, is the heart of all history'. The social dilemmas produced by the most crucial episodes in the evolutionary history still remain; for the author these are best exemplified in the evolution of the different social arrangements that have arisen from the exercise of different human facilities. So the 'open' and the 'close' societies represent 'ideal types' of two different stages of social and cultural evolution. According to the author where the lower biological needs are dominant, the social structure has the character of a closed society in which all social life is guided by myths and rigid taboos. A kind of 'magical attitude' prevails, in the closed society there is no scope for self doubt and personal moral responsibility; changes in these kind of societies come about more by the introduction of new magical taboos than by ration attempts to improve social conditions. Popper affirms that the breakdown of the closed society began in Greece around 600 B. C., when new intellectual values, methods and ideas of acquiring knowledge arose together with an original style of politics. The Ionian School inaugurated a new tradition of critical thought: its innovation was to question and discuss dogmas and traditions instead of merely accepting them. Within this historical and philosophical transition, according to Popper, we can trace the emergence of a scientific method. The ideas of criticism and democratic practice allowed human beings to commence their entrance into the 'open society' where they could become aware of the importance of personal decisions and individual moral responsibility. Where biological and physical bonds became weaker more abstract relations, like exchange and cooperation, linked together people and groups.

Democracy and the Open Society

One of Popper's most striking contributions to contemporary political thought maybe found in his conception of democracy and of what he defines as ' open society'. The idea of the open society operates both as a minimalist ideal to be sought after and as a celebration of the achievement of modern rationality and liberal democracy. Much of its appeals lies in its apparent capacity to limit the impact of our inevitable errors and to contain potentially harmful social tendencies.

The open society, which is basically identified by the author as his idea of democracy, aims to promote criticism and diversity without succumbing either to violence or irreconcilable social division. This ' adventure' in a creative and critical thought produces conflict, but such problems are resolved by peaceful means; the values of freedom of thought and speech, toleration and individualism operate as both a motivation for, and a constraint upon, individual behavior. Those more substantial differences are to be channelled into the democratic process whereby governments can be replaced by free and regular elections.

Popper recognizes the presence of certain dangers in the historical evolution of the open society: he suggests that it could become an ' abstract society' in which social relations might become too rational but, although Popper acknowledges that modern industrial societies exhibit many such features, he denies that the process of abstraction or rationalization will actually complete itself. According to the philosopher there will always be emotional needs which human beings can not satisfy in an abstract society; in this view we see the distinction made between the private and the public sphere. The familiar function of the private sphere provides emotional and biological

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regeneration for authentic life in the public sphere; though Popper's neglect of the problems of unequal power and authority within family and personal life places him clearly in the mainstream of patriarchal political thought.

Even though he knows, and admits, that such democracies fall short of his ideal, he is quite optimistic about their potential. Anyway we must recognize that the transition to the open society remains incomplete and its achievements are always and constantly under threat. On the one hand, biological needs, old traditions but especially the difficulties of living with rationality and personal responsibility all combine to challenge the new society; the passions of our lower nature are always liable to rise up and overthrow the controls instituted by self critical scientific rationality. On the other hand the open society may be inherently self-destructive because critical thought continually erodes those older 'closed' traditions that sustain social institutions.

Democracy performs a vital function for both politics and epistemology. It provides a peaceful means for reform and change of government, while ensuring the freedom of thought and speech necessary for intellectual progress. This process encourages a pluralism of ideas and groups, it is the necessary precondition for the 'working out of political meaning and aims', and is vital for the processes of critical thought and the goal of emancipation through knowledge.

Popper's theory of democracy typically grows out of his criticism of other approaches to government, initially Plato's than Marx's. Our philosopher denies that the guiding principles of politics should be determined by

answers given to the question ' Who should rule?', instead we should ask ' How can we so organize political institutions that bad and incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?' which is followed by another essential question ' How can we get rid of those rulers without bloodshed and violence?'.

In responses, Popper argues that democracy should be founded upon a ' theory of check and balances': basically we are assuming that even the best rulers might fail, so this theory relies on institutional means for curbing their power. The major check is provided by periodic elections that enable people to ' oust their government without using violent means': this shows the difference between democracy and its opposite, tyranny which ' consists of governments which the ruled can not get rid of except by way of a successful revolution'.