

# Respect as the Ethic of the Open Society

STEFANO GATTEI

*University of Pisa, Italy*

*ABSTRACT* Karl Popper's description of the open society in terms of respect, rather than mere tolerance, appears to be highly relevant today. Although he never explicitly addressed the issues of multiculturalism and value-pluralism in contemporary societies, Popper's idea of respect provides an effective way to approach them. For, on the one hand, it may help to reframe current debates about multiculturalism in clearer terms. On the other, it provides a critical assessment of the widespread relativism that presents itself as a sort of panacea of all theoretical and practical problems posed by the cohabitation of groups sharing different values and worldviews. On closer scrutiny, political relativism – just as its epistemological counterpart – is not only entirely inadequate but also dangerous for the very existence of the open society. A serious look at the present situation suggests, rather, the adoption of a principle of reciprocity that is consistent with Popper's critical pluralism and might prove to be effective in addressing the problems faced by a multicultural society.

Two Greeks are talking: Socrates, perhaps, and Parmenides.

We'd better never know their names; the story, thus, will be more mysterious and calm.

The subject of the dialogue is abstract. They sometimes allude to myths, which they both disbelieve.

The reasons they advance may abound in fallacies and have no aim.

They do not quarrel. They do not want to persuade nor to be persuaded, they do not think of winning or losing.

They agree on one single thing: they know that discussion is the not impossible path to reach a truth.

Free from myth and metaphor, they think or try to think.

We shall never know their names.

This conversation of two strangers somewhere in Greece is the capital fact of History.

They have forgotten prayer and magic.

Jorge L. Borges  
'The principle', in *Atlas*

## INTRODUCTION

‘The main philosophical malady of our time is an intellectual and moral relativism, the latter being at least in part based upon the former’. These words open an important addendum to the fourth edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and clearly describe the target of Karl Popper’s philosophical reflection in the second half of the 20th century, namely, ‘the theory that the choice between competing theories is arbitrary’ (Popper, 1962[1945b], p. 369), ‘a philosophy that amounts to the thesis that *all* theses are intellectually more or less equally defensible’ (Popper, 1994a, p. 191). The view Popper was determined to attack had deep epistemological roots but, most significantly, he decided to append his criticism to his most important work of political philosophy. This decision is particularly relevant today, for relativism has wide political implications that are germane to current debates on multiculturalism, and an effective criticism of it may help to oppose them and enhance discussion.<sup>1</sup>

## THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ROOTS OF RELATIVISM

In the early 1950s, one of the most widely discussed and influential philosophical works of our time appeared in print: Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. In this posthumously published book Wittgenstein set forth the idea that the meaning of a term is equal to its usage within a language, and that each ‘linguistic universe’ – such as that of a culture or a civilization – has its own rules of construction, signification and decision. According to Wittgenstein, contents cannot be separated from the criteria by which they are judged: criteria are never inter-cultural but, rather, always sub-cultural, dependent on context. Each discipline, field, ‘language game’ or ‘form of life’ is alleged to have its own standards, principles or ‘logic’, which need not conform to or be reducible to any other standards or (external) principle, and which it is the special task of the philosopher to describe and clarify – not in the least to judge, defend or criticize.<sup>2</sup> There is no arguing or judging among disciplines: criticism, evaluation and explanation would no longer be proper philosophical aims. Knowledge is essentially fragmented and description is all that remains to the philosopher. All he can do is describe the logics, grammars or first principles of the various kinds of discourse, and the many sorts of language games and forms of life in which they are embedded. Philosophical critique is no longer of content but of criteria application: as Paul Feyerabend put it, all that is left are ‘consolations for the specialists’ (Feyerabend, 1970).

In the footprints of Wittgenstein, Thomas Kuhn’s attempt to define scientific knowledge, if not truth itself, in terms of the consensus of belief forged among its members,<sup>3</sup> actually involves a relativism that allows for a conservative defence of whatever belief system is construed as rational according to the established scientific dogma of the day. Although

revolutionary science is acknowledged, critical attitude is systematically discouraged:<sup>4</sup> instead, normal science is regarded as the essence of the scientific enterprise, and dogmatic commitment to a paradigm is upheld as a necessary prerequisite for rational knowledge and social harmony (see Notturmo, 2000, chapter 10). In so doing, Kuhn's philosophy allows for and even invites the parochial policies of making outsiders of those who criticize the insiders too sharply, and of rejecting alternative theories as meaningless instead of critically engaging with them.<sup>5</sup> All of this fits very well with the policy of never admitting that you are wrong and your opponents are right. As a consequence, in Kuhn's (as well as in the logical positivists') view, community, politics and power all become far more important than truth.<sup>6</sup>

Kuhn's philosophy is more interested in the acceptance, rather than in the content, of ideas, confining itself to their present – rather than potential – power. It legitimates existing structures and neglects the aims of those operating within them, above all the growth of knowledge and the advancement of learning.<sup>7</sup> At the heart of this view lies a dangerous form of imperialism, according to which disciplines and their practitioners must conform: they must not judge one another, and they must not try to describe a common world in collaboration with other disciplines, since each one has its own. The risk is to replace philosophical and scientific values of truth, rationality, and the freedom of thought with power, solidarity and (blind, dogmatic) commitment to belief.<sup>8</sup>

Facing the 20th century's crisis of foundationalism,<sup>9</sup> some philosophers have concluded that scientific knowledge is unjustified, hence irrational. Others – indeed, the majority – have opted to retain the idea that scientific knowledge is justified, but to weaken either the idea that truth is correspondence with reality or the idea that justification shows that a statement is true. Wittgenstein's idea that science is grounded in a form of life; Carnap's idea that it is grounded in the external questions of a linguistic framework; Kuhn's (similar) idea that it is grounded in the acceptance of a scientific paradigm; Rorty's idea that it is grounded in the solidarity of community – each of these responses retains a foundationalist theory of rationality, according to which it is irrational to accept a belief that has not been justified, and obligatory to accept one that has.

But the crisis of foundationalism has no implication whatsoever for truth. It does not show that truth does not exist, it does not belittle it and it does not reduce it to solidarity and consensus. It only shows that, as Socrates beautifully said, we are living in the twilight zone between knowledge and ignorance, where the views that we hold may be true, but where we are unable to know that they are (Plato, *Symposium*, 202a). The failure of foundationalism as a concept and as a research programme does not involve the failure of epistemology: however difficult to reach, the twilight zone between knowledge and ignorance is an ideal well worth holding on to (see Agassi, 1988, pp. 499-500).

Popper took Socrates' point very seriously, closely linking his critical rationalism with the search for truth. As human beings, we should be aware of our fallibility and critical of our theories – but we can move from the awareness of our fallibility to the criticism of our theories only if we deliberately aim at the truth. For Popper, rationality is not so much a property of knowledge, as a task for humans: it is not the content of a theory, or a belief, that is true, but rather the way we hold it (that is, the way we defend or attack it). Reason is the negative faculty of relentless criticism, as Joseph Agassi put it, and by appealing to it we do nothing but make a choice. Our decisions depend on what goal we are determined to achieve, or have set ourselves to achieve. That is why for Popper – as opposed as to Wittgenstein and Kuhn – truth plays the role of the regulative idea of scientific research and rational discussion (see also Notturmo, 2000, chapters 7-8, 10).

#### DIALOGUE AS AN ETHICAL VALUE

Rationality requires no foundation, only critical dialogue: it is the core of Popper's revolutionary philosophy (see Gattei, 2007). Dialogue was a value for him: his methodological proposals reflect both the hope that rational debate will lead to improvement and the conviction that criticism entails responsibility. Indeed, logical reasoning occupies a central position in Popper's epistemology, but his critical attitude involves something more and different. His logical reasoning is a consequence of his ethical experiences,<sup>10</sup> and its meaning is a part of a wider problem involving the ethical responsibility of human beings in general. Epistemology may set norms for the rational appraisal of theories, but these are embedded in a wider set of values guiding social interaction and communication. In fact, epistemology comprises – and indeed requires – certain non-epistemic ethical norms, such as honesty and respect, without which the epistemic norms would be unworkable.

In other words, rationalism requires a complementary notion of reasonableness, that is, 'an attitude of readiness to listen to critical arguments and to learn from experience' (Popper, 1945b, p. 225).<sup>11</sup> It is the ethical nature of Popper's fallibilism: having realized how little we know, we are required to doubt our knowledge and learn from our mistakes.<sup>12</sup> The process of doubting must be a conscious attitude of openness to criticism, that has an individual and a social aspect. For, on the one hand, each participant in the game of critical discussion is required to be prepared to listen to criticism, to be able to accept criticism, to practice self-criticism and to engage in mutual criticism with others. On the other, once a subjective attitude or ethical stance has been adopted by the individuals, reasoning must be conceived as a social process of intersubjective confrontation.

Popper saw the rational attitude as a moral obligation and as a clear option against violence, deeming both dogmatism and voluntarist

irrationalism to be irresponsible. Rationality is openness and readiness to engage in dialogue, accepted with a full awareness of the difficulty of such a task:

The choice before us is not simply an intellectual affair, or a matter of taste. It is a moral decision [...]. For the question whether we adopt some more or less radical form of irrationalism, or whether we adopt that minimum concession to irrationalism which I have termed 'critical rationalism', will deeply affect our whole attitude towards other men, and towards the problems of social life.

(Popper, 1945b, p. 232)

We are confronted with a decision that will affect our whole approach to philosophy and life in general. And since the situation cannot be resolved by any proof but only on the basis of our demands and preferences, we have to give up the desire of certainty, the wish to escape our responsibilities.

#### TOLERANCE AND RESPECT

Reasoning is engaging in communication with others. It requires non-epistemic values of social conduct. Central among these is the moral imperative to take others and their arguments seriously – that is, to respect them, to be ready not only to allow differences to exist (tolerance) but also to try to learn from them (respect). The difference is first made explicit in a paper Popper originally delivered in 1963: an open society is 'a society based on the idea of not merely tolerating dissenting opinions but respecting them' (Popper, 1994b, p. 110).

Tolerance and respect are often confused and, what is worse, they are used without realizing their meaning, that is, their consequences. Of course, tolerance is important and in fact essential for anyone who does not already have it. Also, it should be our priority, so long as there are intolerant people who discriminate and persecute others for whatever reasons. However, for a society that aims to be an open society, it is merely a minimum condition – necessary, but not sufficient. Rather than a point of arrival, as it is often presented, it is a starting point. The aim in an open society is not to put up with ideas with which we disagree: in order to be open, a society needs something more and different.<sup>13</sup> As well as tolerating each other, members of an open society should respect one another, that is, take others seriously, allowing that their reasons, culture and way of living may have an effect on their own way of reasoning, their own culture and their own way of living.

More than ever, contemporary societies are constituted by an ever-growing mixture of people from all over the world, each with their values, beliefs and worldviews. Such a plurality often involves reciprocal misunderstandings and gives rise to serious problems of cohabitation. Upholders of relativism start from this basic and undeniable fact to conclude

that there is no way to rationally assess different cultures: each one is, by itself, all-pervasive and does not allow for a view 'from outside', that is, for a way to critically compare it with others. By contrast, Popper advocates critical pluralism:

Whilst relativism, arising from a lax form of toleration, leads to the rule of violence, critical pluralism can contribute to the taming of violence.

In order to distinguish relativism from critical pluralism, the idea of *truth* is of crucial importance.

Relativism is the position that everything can be asserted, or practically everything, and therefore nothing. Everything is true, or nothing. Truth is therefore a meaningless concept.

Critical pluralism is the position that *in the interest of the search for truth*, all theories – the more, the better – should be allowed to compete with all other theories. This competition consists in the rational discussion of theories and in their critical elimination.

(Popper, 1994a, p. 191)

By laying stress on the role of truth as a regulative idea, Popper highlights the different attitudes involved in tolerance and respect. For his advocacy of critical pluralism of values does not boil down to tolerance: if we want to learn from others we have to consider them as endowed with positive values. This requires respect for other people, for their freedom and autonomy as rational agents:

Respect [...] means that we take the dissenting opinions of other seriously, and that we regard them as possibly true. It means, in fact, that we treat them as potentially our own – since we want to discover the truth and since we recognize that we may be in error [...]

(Notturmo, 2000, p. 33)

By considering dissenting positions as possibly true, we will try to criticize them in the best possible way – or, to put it differently, we will see them as possibilities of learning, as important contributions to our own cultural and human growth.<sup>14</sup>

Tolerance, as an ideal, has nothing whatsoever to do with the recognition of our own fallibility or with the desire to learn from others: we tolerate dissenting views merely because we do not want to restrict the freedom of people who hold them. As a passive virtue, tolerance requires the patient forbearance of something we dislike and even think to be unacceptable and blameworthy. As a negative attitude, it asks that we leave others to live their own lives: we put up with things we do not like and endure situations we cannot stand, without suppressing or persecuting people who live their lives in

ways we do not accept. By contrast, respect is both an active virtue and a positive attitude: it asks for mutual understanding and, when appropriate, for correction of our respective habits. It invites us to appreciate positions different from or own, to value and perhaps even make them our own. In Popper's own words: 'if I hope to learn from you, and if I want to learn in the interest of truth, then I have not only to tolerate you but also to recognize you as a potential equal' (Popper, 1994a, p. 199).<sup>15</sup>

Tolerance and respect inform two very different kinds of society, the relativist one and the open one, both of which might be democratic, at least at first sight. The difference between a tolerant, relativist society and a respectful, open society is, in a nutshell, the difference between leaving people alone and trying to co-operate with them to grow together, both from the human and the intellectual point of view.

### CONSTRAINTS OF THE OPEN SOCIETY

Dialogue is critical, not dogmatic, and it rests on the practice of mutual understanding: 'After a dialogue, interlocutors may or may not change their mind, but in any case they become enriched, more thoughtful, more open, more inclined to appreciate views different from their own' (Pera, 2005, p. 17). Most importantly, dialogue does not aim at unanimity, consensus or conversion of interlocutors. If we want to learn from a debate, our aim should be not to win it, or to convince other participants that we are right. Instead, we should prefer to lose, for the more all participants lose, the more we all win – that is, learn.<sup>16</sup>

The society that regards this conception of dialogue as its vital lymph is an open society. For sure, it is a well-developed form of society, one that has overcome the basic idea of tolerance and realized that the civil cohabitation of different worldviews requires much more than that. But it is a very demanding place to live, since it requires its citizens constantly to engage with each other and take responsibility for their choices. Just as 'the game of science', as described by Popper in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, is in principle without end and he who decides one day no longer to abide by its rules retires from the game (Popper, 1935, p. 53), so in an open society he who refuses to respect others and engage critically with their views simply calls himself out. Sometimes, hold-outs may turn out to be a threat for the open society. Then, in order to protect itself, society must impose constraints and control all fanatical and fundamentalist individuals or groups that threaten the principle upon which the freedom of the other citizens rests.

Aggressive people not only fail to appreciate respect, they also ignore tolerance, thus putting the minimum condition of civil coexistence at risk. Society should not tolerate them, for 'Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance' (Popper, 1945a, p. 265). We cannot afford to tolerate those who are intolerant towards us. It is Popper's solution to 'the

paradox of tolerance', a paradox Popper himself illustrated by telling the story of a tribe of Indians which was so tolerant that it extended its tolerance also to a den of man-eating tigers living near its village. In so doing, the tribe slowly disappeared – and, with it, the principle of indiscriminate tolerance. Unlimited tolerance ends up by promoting intolerance, and leads to the disappearance of tolerance itself.

The open society is not a relativist society in which all positions are equally accepted and tolerated, nor can democracy be founded on tolerant relativism, for it would soon take to tyranny and absolutism. The open society is a society in which all positions are critically discussed and selected on the basis of rational discussion. It is a society in which each position is taken seriously and severely criticized in the constant effort to learn from it, even if this means to learn how and where it goes wrong. The aim is not condemnation, but understanding and growth. Those who refuse to abide by these rules cannot have all the rights of free citizens – to maintain the survival of the open society and of the people living in it.

#### THE DANGERS OF RELATIVISM

Modern science is an invention of the western world, so to speak, and has an intrinsic value. Liberalism, the separation between state and church, the state of law, the welfare state, democracy and the various conventions or declarations of rights – that are precisely called universal – are all instances of the typical outcomes of the so-called 'western world', mostly of Western Europe: they were all born at some point in its history, and they were developed, improved and possibly adopted in other parts of the world. And they all claim universal validity.

There have been several attempts to explain such outcomes. But whereas successive explanations advanced new causal elements while always retaining Max Weber's question – 'to what combination of circumstance the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization and Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value[?]' (Weber, 1992, p. 13) – today, a century after Weber's work, this starting point is being questioned and eventually rejected. For the current widespread idea is that none of these outcomes of the western world can claim universal value. The alleged universality of western institutions is nothing but an illusion, and upholding them reflects nothing but intellectual arrogance. In his book on the clash of civilizations, Samuel Huntington summarized this position as follows: 'In the emerging world of ethnic conflict and civilization clash, Western belief in the universality of Western culture suffers three problems: it is false; it is immoral; and it is dangerous' (Huntington, 1997, p. 310).

According to the jargon of political correctness – a sort of new language employed to hint at things without saying anything explicitly, a fashionable



way to try to please everybody that ends up with avoiding concrete issues – anything can be compared within the western culture, and much can be compared with regard to the peculiarities of western culture and other cultures. But when we come to cultures themselves, or to higher entities such as the civilizations referred to by Weber and Huntington, an appeal is made to self-censorship. Whenever we face a culture that does not have or rejects our institutions, we are not allowed to ask which culture is better or preferable. All we are allowed to say, if we wish to be polite, is that the two cultures are different.

‘Reason also is choice’, wrote John Milton (Milton, 1667, III, p. 108).<sup>17</sup> There is a variety of possible choices: some refer to everyday life, such as the choice of a profession or those within a profession; others to our passions, the problems we wish to investigate and try to solve; others to our own myths. There may be the choice of a faith, or of no faith. And there is a very particular kind of choice: the choice of choosing – that is, philosophy. It is a choice that does not confine itself to the option for one thing or another, indicating one reason or another, but concerns the conditions of each possible choice. From this springs its strength, but also its danger and risk, for philosophies are not luxuries for a few initiates cultivated in universities. Philosophies are instruments of penetration and the diffusion of powerful ideas, vehicles of influential opinions. That is why we cannot deem relativism innocent, and maybe think it is the best starting point for political tolerance and correctness, philosophical analysis, or the implementation of democracy. On the contrary, the opposite is true: the relativism that preaches the equipollence of all values and the equivalence of all cultures tends towards suppleness rather than tolerance.

The relativism that relativists hold to be the indispensable basis for a laic state betrays itself to be nothing but a new religion, one that does not accept the educational burden of effective integration and prefers to build separate schools instead. Relativists’ talk about different forms of life, paradigms and linguistic frameworks involves the simultaneous denial of the possibility of understanding them. And by preventing understanding, relativists exhibit their inability to respect the views of others. For this reason, ‘Relativism is one of the many crimes committed by intellectuals. It is a betrayal of reason and of humanity’ (Popper, 1994a, p. 5).

#### RECIPROCITY AS A NECESSITY

By allowing intolerants among tolerant people, relativism leads to the rule of violence and it endangers the freedom that allows relativists to uphold their credo (see Popper, 1994a, p. 191). For the same reason, the utopia of a tolerant, relativist democracy is nothing but an illusion that risks turning into a nightmare. This is unacceptable, both from the political and intellectual point of view. Moreover, such relativism has weakened our defences and

made us prone to surrender, for whereas intolerants do not allow the reciprocity of our principles and values, we consent to the relativist deconstruction (*à la* Derrida) of those principles and values, and theorize dialogue even when it bears very poor results: dialogue is useless if some of those who take part in it declare, in advance, that any position equals any other.

By contrast, Popper's critical pluralism provides a promising philosophical framework within which we can organize our policies in a multicultural society. Believing in reason is not sufficient; we must put it into action and practice it – particularly with people whose views and lifestyles are different from, and therefore more of a challenge to, our own. This is the first way in which we have to respect others, that is, to allow them to make a difference to us, to have an impact on our own lives.

In order to make the open society live and prosper, all of this must and needs to be reciprocal: tolerance and respect would otherwise die with their practitioners. That is why we can only afford to tolerate and respect those who, in turn, tolerate and respect us. Not out of a sort of law of retaliation – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – but for theoretical reasons. It is the minimum requirement not simply for the survival of a group of people but, what is more important (from the point of view of humanity as a whole, at least), of the principle of tolerance: 'If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them' (Popper, 1945a, p. 265). Unreciprocated tolerance and respect would lead not only to the death of their advocates, but to the death of the very idea of tolerance and respect – that is, to the renunciation of some of the most important achievements of reason and civilization.

The principle of reciprocity has wide political implications for the current debates on immigration, integration and multiculturalism. Such problems, posed with increasing urgency because of the dynamics of world population and the recent developments in international politics, cannot be solved in terms of tolerance and the protection of public order alone. Their complexity demands sharper tools and a more determinate approach.

Optimism is a must, but it is very cheap, and we have reached a situation where the price to pay is too high: recent terrorist attacks expose the error and naïvety of Europe's solutions to the problems of cohabitation and integration. The policy thus far adopted, based on the passivity of tolerance, needs to be replaced by the active principle of reciprocity, which is fuelled by criticism and whose *organon* is respect. Within an open society, cultures and traditions are encouraged to engage with each other and try to assess their reciprocal merits. Values and beliefs should be defended with rational arguments and reciprocity should be adopted to control intolerant fundamentalists and prevent them from establishing their absolutism. In case of sharp conflict, choice is the only option.<sup>18</sup> For commitment to dialogue implies that, when compared with

others, some traditions and cultures may be revealed to be weaker, or prove to be less attractive or, indeed, meet with difficult and insurmountable problems when faced with objections. In such cases, the ethics of dialogue and its being exercised with intellectual honesty require a sort of Darwinian selection at the cultural level, for no groups or traditions can claim a right to survive that is independent from the freedom of individuals to live within them. The duty of an open society is not to defend individual traditions and lifestyles that exist within its boundaries, but to preserve and foster a structure in which individuals belonging to different traditions with different lifestyles may respectfully live together. As William Bartley noted, your freedom to supply is abridged by my right to refuse what you wish to supply to me. It is the price of our freedom: ‘Freedom to supply and to receive, and the mutual limitations they impose on one another, are indispensable for liberty. The mutual limitations are crucial’ (Bartley, 1990, p. 23).

#### CORRESPONDENCE

Dr Stefano Gattei, Dipartimento di Filosofia, Università degli Studi di Pisa, piazza E. Torricelli, 3/a, 56126 Pisa, Italy. Email: stefano.gattei@fls.unipi.it

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#### NOTES

- 1 The stimulus to write this article came to me while attending Marcello Pera’s *Popper Memorial Lecture*, held at the London School of Economics and Political Science on 10 February 2004, the revised version of which later appeared as Pera (2005). Together with a few other recent writings of his that appeared in Italian, this article plainly states the terms of a heated and widely debated problem – multiculturalism, or the integration of different cultures within an open society – that is central in current political debates, both in Italy and abroad. From a different epistemological perspective, but along similar lines, I wish to highlight the general philosophical ideas involved in the debate, in the hope of providing a clearer and more comprehensive picture of what is at issue.
- 2 See, for instance, Wittgenstein (1953, I, §109: ‘we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place’. See also *ibid.*, §89, and Wittgenstein (1921, 4.112: ‘Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. [...] A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. Philosophy does not result in “philosophical propositions”, but rather in the clarification of propositions. Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries’), and Wittgenstein (1969, §189).

- 3 See, for instance, Kuhn (1962, p. 94): ‘As in political revolutions, so in paradigm choice – there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community’.
- 4 ‘The clash between Popper and Kuhn is not about a mere technical point in epistemology. It concerns our central intellectual values, and has implications not only for theoretical physics but also for the underdeveloped social sciences and even for moral and political philosophy. If even in science there is no other way of judging a theory but by assessing the number, faith and vocal energy of its supporters, then this must be even more so in the social sciences: truth lies in power.’ (Lakatos, 1970, p. 93)
- 5 If not actually meaningless, theories cannot be rationally discussed due to the incommensurability that allegedly separates them. More than ever, incommensurability betrays its real nature: however, usually referred to as a problem, it rather proves to be a solution, that is, an easy way out of problems, for it invites critical disengagement. Instead of confronting problems, scientists may always appeal to incommensurability to avoid them.
- 6 In the first edition of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn hardly refers to the concept of truth: he has no need of it, not even in order to characterize and explain progress: ‘The developmental process described in this essay has been a process of evolution *from* primitive beginnings – a process whose successive stages are characterized by an increasingly detailed and refined understanding of nature. But nothing that has been or will be said makes it a process of evolution *toward* anything’ (Kuhn, 1962, pp. 170-1). In the 1969 ‘Postscript’ to the second edition of the book (Kuhn, 1970) he introduces two arguments against the notion of truth implicit in the traditional view of progress as increasing verisimilitude (see Kuhn, 1962, pp. 205-7). His later writings focus on this very issue: the basic idea of traditional epistemology, a correspondence theory of truth that assesses beliefs on the grounds of their ability to reflect the world, independently of the mind, cannot account for the change of those very beliefs. Therefore, according to Kuhn, it must be rejected and replaced with a weaker conception, internal to the lexicon itself. For if a statement can be properly said to be true or false within the context of a given lexicon (Kuhn’s later term for paradigm, emphasizing its linguistic nature), the system of categories embedded in the lexicon cannot be *per se* true or false: ‘lexicons are not [...] the sorts of things that can be true or false’ (Kuhn, 1993, p. 330; see also Wittgenstein, 1969, §§ 205, 477 and 559). Their logical status is that of words’ meaning in general, that is, of a convention we can justify only in a pragmatic way. Truth is internal to lexicon and truth claims in one lexicon are not relevant for those made in another, nor can truth be applied to a lexicon itself (Putnam’s ‘internal realism’ closely resembles this stance). Lexicons embody linguistic conventions that mark the distance between the reality described by a theory and the theory describing it in different ways.
- 7 Also according to Wittgenstein we must once and for all take leave of Plato’s image of knowledge as the outcome of a relentlessly critical attitude, of a reason that does not accept anything without doubting or questioning it. Accordingly, we should replace dialogue and its reciprocal and symmetrical structure with the asymmetric notion of teaching, that presupposes the learner’s disposition to

follow docilely, with the docility encapsulated already in the root of the Latin verb *doceo* (to teach). The learner must be docile because this attitude is part and parcel of the process of learning – he must not question the foundation that renders the act of learning possible (see Wittgenstein, 1953, I, §§ 143, 160, 449 and 457-8). As opposed to Popper (see, for example, his 1976), for Wittgenstein questions about foundations must be banned because they cast doubt on the possibility of agreement and thereby severely limit the potential for rational discussion. The keystone of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is the reasons that make us think of rules as institutions, as codified and repeatable customs. Along the same lines, Kuhn portrays science as an institution and draws a picture of knowledge, if not of truth itself, as founded on the consensus and solidarity of belief established among the members of the scientific community.

- 8 See Bartley (1990, chapter 14, especially pp. 224-5); see also Notturmo (2000, chapter 10). Since it is impossible to justify our beliefs, only a critical quest for truth can prevent the scientific community from degenerating into a closed society that allows room for research only if it conforms to its parameters and abides by its rules, and that ostracizes those critically minded individuals who strike too deep. For, as Feyerabend (1970) argued, it is not the plurality of beliefs that constitutes the major threat to science, but their institutionalization and regimentation into pre-established frames. Progress is made by devising new, interesting ideas and testing them critically, not incorporating them into the standard scientific dogma of the day.
- 9 By foundationalism I here refer to the view according to which reliable knowledge is justified knowledge, and we are rational to the extent to which we rely on knowledge that is shown to be founded in one way or another. The attempt to define scientific knowledge, if not truth itself, in terms of some sort of consensus of belief forged among its members, actually involves a relativism that allows for a conservative defence of whatever belief system is construed as rational according to the established scientific dogma of the day. What is worse, although a revolutionary attitude is acknowledged, criticism is systematically discouraged and commitment is upheld as a necessary prerequisite for rational knowledge and social harmony.
- 10 A radical choice is the origin of the whole of Popper's philosophy – a decision best exemplified in an early encounter with a Nazi youth, who refused to argue and said to Popper: 'What, you want to argue? I don't argue: I shoot!' (see Popper, 1994b, XIII). He was confronted with an alternative and built the entire edifice of his philosophy on the decision to choose dialogue, to fight with words instead of swords, to let our theories die in our stead. Of course, there is a difference between the rules obtaining in the ideal scientific and political communities: philosophers and scientists can (and actually must) experiment with ideas, whereas politics should not likewise experiment with human lives. Still, Popper sees the rational attitude as a moral obligation against scientific dogmatism and relativism, and as a clear option against violence. Rationality is inscribed within the framework of a more basic and general rationality, the rationality of the world and of the human person.

- 11 It is an attitude that makes rationality depend on its natural soil, that is, the strength of arguments: indeed, being rational means nothing but following the best argument in a critical debate.
- 12 Popper always insisted on the need to revise our attitude towards mistakes. It is the starting point of his ethical reform of rationality. Whereas the attitude of the old ethics would be to cover up mistakes, keep them secret and forget about them as soon as possible, for Popper 'To cover up mistakes is [...] the greatest intellectual sin' (Popper, 1994a, p. 201). Practically all rational philosophers have stressed the value of criticism, yet they almost all viewed criticism – that is, the elimination of error – as a preliminary to the positive advancement of our understanding of the world and our place in it.
- 13 Not only do tolerance and respect not equate, but the latter is not even a consequence of the former. We do not start to respect dissenting opinions by tolerating them more and more. The shift from one to the other is a qualitative, not merely a quantitative, one: we do not respect ideas that we tolerate, nor do we need to tolerate ideas that we respect (see Notturmo, 2000, pp. 34-5).
- 14 As William Bartley put it in his last book, our knowledge is unfathomable: when we affirm a theory, we at the same time propose its logical implications – that is, we affirm all those statements that follow from it, as well as those implications that stem from combining it with other theories that we also propose or assume. As a consequence, the informative content of any theory includes (non-trivial) statements that cannot be known in advance. This means that nobody can afford to set himself above the debate. Each of us is needed to help objectify and to probe our ideas, so as to better understand what we are saying. It is no easy task: our choice in favour of reason does not guarantee that we will be successful in our search for the truth, nor in the discovery of our errors. It does not even necessarily lead to the avoidance of violence. Of course, it may lead to these things – but it also may not, and faith in reason may become important precisely when it does not. However, we must go through all this if we want not only to preach reason, but also to put it into action – and do so with people whose views and lifestyles are different from, and hence more of a challenge to, our own. See Bartley (1990).
- 15 Recognizing others as equal is the consequence of evolving from childhood to maturity. Children do not respect other children – rather, they often try to impose their views and exert their power. A developed society (that is, an open society) is a society that has evolved from his childhood state (or 'tribal condition', to use Popper's phrase): it is a society whose members have given up imposing their views or exerting the power they have on other members. This, of course, may be seen as a loss, as a constraint – and it is, indeed: it is part of what Popper called 'the strain of civilization'. But the gain is much bigger and much more important.
- 16 It is Popper's solution to the problem of induction: how do we learn from experience? In his classic *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* Popper replied that learning from experience is the act of overthrowing a theory with the help of that experience: we learn from experience by repeatedly positing explanatory hypotheses and refuting them experimentally, thus approximating the truth by

stages (see Agassi, 1961, pp. 40-1). As Agassi put it, 'refutation opens the road to innovation. Nothing is a more potent heuristic than refutation. Nothing is more conducive to progress than criticism of the current situation, nothing is more likely to herald the new than discontent with the old. Criticism is liberation. The positive power of negative thinking' (Agassi, 1988, pp. 497-8).

- 17 Of course, not deciding is already a decision, but of the worst kind.
- 18 When violence replaces peaceful debate, as in the case of terrorist attacks, reason must give in and we have to fight to establish the minimal conditions for critical exchange. As Popper said in his later years, 'We should not shrink from waging war for peace' (Popper, 1999, p. 119). We do not have to try to make people critically minded. We have no right to force them to offer or accept criticism, nor to learn to participate effectively in a critical discussion: it is their right to refuse to do so. All we can (and have to) do is try to help them become critically minded if and when they request that.

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