Commitment and Objectivity

1. Competing Worldviews

We all have attitudes towards the world, or perspectives on it, which we bring to our experience of things and people, and in the light of which we interpret them. Such attitudes, if spelled out as claims about the world, may or may not be true or even coherent. Aspects of them may be innate (although this does not mean that they are correct). Others, we have picked up from our childhood, or our language, and our education formal or informal. As Thomas Kuhn argued powerfully in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,[1] inculcation into such things (which in that book he called 'paradigms') is also part of a modern scientific education. People studying science are taught by means of problem-solving exercises, which lead them to see the world in a certain way, and to expect that problems can be solved in particular terms. I can still vividly recall the way in which, when I visited a friend of mine who was studying economics at the University of Chicago in the 1970s, he told me that graduate training involved students doing numerous such exercises, to the point where they could offer the proper 'Chicago' treatment of any problem in economics, almost in their sleep.

The problem, however, is that – as we typically become aware, during our teens, in respect of our parents' ideas! – such ordinary assumptions may well be wrong, or certainly problematic. While an important feature of Kuhn's work was his stress on the way in which the ideas (and habits) which have played the role of paradigms in science in the past, have changed, not least in 'scientific revolutions'. If anyone interested in ideas thinks about their own views, they are likely to discover that they, also, make assumptions of this kind. This is something that we typically discover when we mix with other people from different backgrounds. But we are likely to find that we face a problem. It is that there are indeed various different such views, and that the content of them will often conflict. Further, if we explore matters, they will find that others hold their – different – views with just the same conviction as we hold our own.

This poses a problem. We might, on reflection, realise that while we have various tastes and ideas, it might not matter very much to us that we had some of them. It would not be upsetting to say that, if we had grown up in a different country, our tastes might well be different. Had I grown up in Australia, I might like 'Vegamite', a to me ghastly yeast-extract based paste that people spread on toast. Or had I grown up in in Denmark, I might enjoy eating herring, rather than thinking that it would be best left in the sea. But there would be no reason to be concerned about such things, and thus the discovery of the utter contingency of some of our tastes and attitudes. Other things we may think matter. And indeed, they may affect not just how we approach our understanding of the world, but also how we react to other people's views, to matters of practical problem-solving, and to how, say, we think that animals and other people should be treated. We can accept that, in the past, slavery was simply accepted as a human institution, and that we would ourselves have been likely to have accepted it had we grown up in other times and places. But we now typically think that it is wrong, and may even find it difficult to understand how it was that people ever thought

[1] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

that it was acceptable. We also face the problem that there is a gap between our attachment to our beliefs about the world and our moral ideals and what we can actually *show* to be correct. This is all most obvious in the case of religious or political commitments, but it can also hold good concerning, say, the 'paradigm' (to use Kuhn's term) or approach that people might take to purely scholarly matters. It may be that, as in the case of the beliefs with which we grew up, or acquired in the process of education in, say, a particular approach in science, we are initially not explicitly aware of holding a distinctive view, and that when we become aware of alternatives, we can't put our finger on just what it was that led us to have the specific views that we did. We might, alternatively, be able to point to a particular process of formal instruction, or to the impact of a particular book, or a particular experience, which was responsible for our taking the view that we do. There may, indeed, be a body of apologetic literature (which we know about, even if we have not fully explored), that we may believe settles these matters in favour of the ideas which we hold dear. But it is also the case – as we will discover if we explore these matters with friends who have different views – that what we had found convincing often leaves them cold. At best, they might say, while the material to which we point offers a case for the plausibility of our view, it does not show it to be correct. They may, further, say that other material or experiences lead them to think that a different view – the one that they hold - is *more* plausible.

It is important to take seriously the fact that, had we grown up in a different setting, our beliefs would be likely to have been different.[2] This would include some of the things that we care about most passionately. In addition, in the past, had 'we' held very different views, if someone had challenged them, we would have typically been willing to defend them – indeed, in much the same way as we might, today, be inclined to defend our current beliefs. The ideas that we hold now are different from those that 'we' held then (and this is also likely to be the case if we reflect about the ideas that we have held over the course of our own lives). This, it seems to me, suggests that we stand in need of a cogent theory about how such changes make sense; of what makes them rational. It is also important that we take seriously the idea that our current ideas may not be correct, and to give thought to how we might be able to discover this, and to improve upon them, should this be the case – and, indeed, of how we could rationally improve on our ideas about what makes a theory rational, too!

2. What might be done?

I personally think that the best approach available to us here, is one offered in the work of Karl Popper, and of some of those who have been influenced by his work. I will explain it briefly – not least so that it can itself then be opened up to criticism.

Popper, influenced by his own critical reaction to the work of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, and by work that he had undertaken in psychology,[3] thought it useful to understand us as approaching the world with all kinds of a priori expectations. (A priori here means things we bring to our

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[2] Indeed, this was a familiar concern of the sceptically-minded in the Enlightenment, in respect of religion.

[3] A useful introduction to this is provided by Malachi Hacohen's 'The Young Popper, 1902-1937: History, Politics and Philosophy in Interwar Vienna', in *The Cambridge Companion to Popper*, ed. J. Shearmur and G. Stokes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 30-68, and his *Karl Popper: The Formative Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

experience of the world, rather than derive from it.) These expectations are in part biological, but also social. While these are a priori in the sense of being things that we bring to experience, there is no reason to suppose that they are a priori true. That is to say, they may be false, and we need, in the face of this, to open our ideas to criticism. A key role can be played here both by other people,[4] and by observations inspired by theories which compete with the ones which we favour. Popper also emphasised the importance of looking not for confirmations of our views, but at things which might show that they are wrong. It is striking the degree to which, in the history of science, ideas which were taken simply to be reports on what was, factually, the case, were revised when people advanced theories which competed with the hitherto accepted ones. Discussion about the merits of the rival theories prompted people to correct their understanding of what the facts had previously been understood to be. What is open to criticism here, are not just the theories that we advance, and our understanding of what the relevant facts are, but also our ideas about how discussion should proceed, what the rules should be for the publication of scientific papers, and more generally our social arrangements which affect the conduct of science and the constitution of knowledge of even a common-sense kind.[5]

The ideas set out in the previous paragraph are connected to Popper's theme that we should abandon the idea of knowledge as what can be shown to be true, and, instead, shift to the idea that our knowledge, in the sense of what are currently our best and best-scrutinized theories, is fallible, and open in principle to critical appraisal. This, emphatically, does not mean that we should drop the idea that what we claim to be knowledge should be true; simply that we can never be sure that we have reached truth (and that our strong feelings of subjective certainty, don't show that what we are 'certain' of is, in fact, true). A writer strongly influenced by Popper, William Bartley, wrote an interesting book about these matters, in which he also took issue with what he called the *Retreat to Commitment*,[6] on the part of some Protestant theologians – of the shifting, under the impact of criticism, not to the revision of the content of what they believed, but to holding their views in a form which rendered them impervious to critical appraisal.

I have just discussed empirical beliefs about the world – the kinds of things which we might expect to be able to confirm or to disconfirm, if we were to put them to the test. But the problem from which we started was much wider in its scope. For that related also to much more general ideas about the world – including metaphysical beliefs. These, I think, can be addressed by making use of another idea found in Popper's work.

This is the idea that we might understand, and evaluate, our more general views about the world, in line with Popper's discussion of what he called 'metaphysical research programmes'.[7] These are broad ideas about what the world is like, the terms in which we should seek to explain things, and so on. One could look at these as an explicated (and in this sense more objective) version of Kuhn's

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[4] Indeed, Popper stressed that our ideas were best understood as something that was evaluated against an open inter-subjective agreement as to what is the case.
[5] See Sir Peter Medawar, 'Is the scientific paper a fraud?'; see http://www.weizmann.ac.il/mcb/UriAlon/sites/mcb.UriAlon/files/uploads/medawar.pdf. See also my 'Popper, Objectification and the Problem of the Public Sphere', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, July 2016, 46, pp. 392-411.
[6] W. W. Bartley III, *Retreat to Commitment*, second edition (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1990).
[7] Popper's developed his ideas about these from the 1950s. See the accounts in his *Unended Quest* (London: Fontana, 1976), and in his 'Metaphysical Epilogue', in *Quantum Physics and the Schism in Physics*, ed. W. W. Bartley III (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982. See also, for a more general discussion, his 'The Problem of the Irrefutability of Philosophical Theories', chapter 8, part 2 of his *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge, 1963).

'paradigms'; and indeed, one of Popper's key ideas was that we should spell out our substantive ideas,[8] so that they could then be opened up more easily to criticism. Popper argued that the history of science was characterized by competition between such ideas, and that they could be assessed if one spelled out what problems they were supposed to solve, and then appraised them in relation to these. Karl Popper, in an interesting brief article, has discussed the way in which Descartes' idea that we should see everything in the physical world as a complex mechanism, while attractive, was shown to be fatally flawed by the philosopher Leibniz, who demonstrated that a purely mechanical Cartesian physics could not give an adequate account of how it was that one object bounces off another.[9]

It will, typically, be the case that if such ideas are spelled out, then at any point there will be outstanding problems facing any such view. Much of philosophy has consisted, historically, of people spelling out a picture of the world, which, while attractive in some ways because it seemed to resolve problems which faced us about understanding the world and our place in it, also looked in other ways problematic – especially to people who favour other such views! Indeed, if people endeavoured to do so, one could typically get a good measure of agreement between people who favour different, competing, approaches to things, as to just what the attractions, and what the problems, are in respect of any particular view. These may be the things that people try to evaluate in discussions within philosophy. But because of the relationship between such theories and our scientific picture of what the world is like, they may also be looked at, and evaluated, in terms of the degree to which, so far, scientific work inspired by one or other such theory has been successful.[10] (One may, further, generalise this to our experience and understanding of the world as a whole, and of human life within it.) The product of this will be simply an evaluation of how things stand so far, and it is always possible that those who favour a particular view and who face daunting philosophical problems, or a lack of success in terms of explaining things in detail in terms compatible with their approach, may in the future overcome these difficulties. What, I would have thought, we can reasonably ask of people, if one adopts this 'Popperian' perspective, is to face clearly the difficulties that their approach involves,[11] and that they should not think that just because their approach seems to them to be attractive, this shows that it will, in fact, be successful. One might say, however, that their attraction to the view that they favour may fortify them in the faith that, with more work, they will overcome the problems that currently face them.

3. What does this mean in practise?

The ideas that I have talked about so far can be applied, fairly easily, to arguments between distinctive positions in the history of philosophy, and also to ideas which have been influential on the history of science. I also think that they could be applied usefully to arguments about religious

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[8] This, however, could not be done all at once; we would engage in such explication when our assumptions were questioned, but always against a background of other ideas that were, for the time being, taken for granted.

[9] See on this Karl Popper, 'Philosophy and Physics', in *The Myth of the Framework* ed. M. Notturno (London: Routledge, 1994).

[10] One could see such an approach as explored in the work of Imre Lakatos, for example in his earlier writings in his *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programme*s, ed. J. Worrall and G. Currie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), although he developed his views in ways which, it seems to me, needlessly developed differences from Popper's ideas.

[11] I have written a criticism, from this perspective, of the 'Intelligent Design' movement of critics of Darwinism, in the U.S: 'Why the "Hopeless War": Approaching Intelligent Design', *Sophia*, 49, Issue 4 (2010), pp. 475ff.

belief.[12] If they are accepted, they would lead us to take a rather different approach in argument from the usual kinds of religious apologetics. For rather than trying to justify the truth of a view which we favour, or to show that it is correct by means of philosophical analysis, we would, instead adopt the following procedure. First, we would set out what the problems are that we are trying to address. Our statements about this should be opened to critical appraisal. For other people might be able to draw our attention to ways in which our *understanding of what the problems* are may itself be contentious or question-begging in ways that we had not expected. This might well lead us to reformulate the ideas from which we had initially started. We would, then, explain how our ideas offered a response to those problems – how, if they are correct, they offer ways of resolving the problems, and in forms that are not simply question-begging. This is a task in which others are likely to be able to assist us. For they may point out lacunae in our ideas, or may show how, rather than resolving a problem which we thought that we had solved, we had simply managed to shift the problem to another place in our ideas.

A key feature of all this, is that once we set our ideas out in this way, we are likely to find problems about them. There may be contradictions between our different views. They may also clash with other ideas which we would wish also to be able to hold. It is also the case that we may find that, if they are correct, then they suggest that it should be possible to understand the world in a particular way – either in principle, at a theoretical level, or that that we should, as a matter of fact, be able to explain the world in scientific terms, in ways that cohere with our approach. We will, however, typically find that issues arise which we cannot resolve immediately. It will then mean that a programme of research opens up in front of us, to try to show that the theoretical problems about our views can be solved, or that as a matter of fact the world can actually be understood from our perspective – however unlikely other people may initially think that this will be.

It should immediately be stressed that *all* approaches will find themselves in the same boat. *Every* view is likely to find that it faces such problems and difficulties which those who favour it cannot immediately resolve. What does this mean concretely? Well, before you present your ideas, start by setting out what you think our situation is, what problems face us, and find out if they agree. Then, explain your favoured view, and why you think it is a plausible approach. But at the same time, explain the problems that you see it as facing. That is to say, explain what look to you its strong points, but also the most telling objections, and things that it has yet to explain. Also explain how your approach intends to tackle these problems – what its strategy will be. All this, it seems to me, can be set out in such a way that you invite – and learn from – other people's appraisal of it. One can then ask others to do the same in respect of their views. Just because everyone is, here, in the same boat, it means that one can expect to engage in friendly-hostile collaboration with people who take contrasting views. They will be keen to help us discover the problems about our views, and the respects in which what we had hoped were ways of resolving problems successfully, are, in fact, no such thing. While we will be only too happy to look critically at their efforts, and to point out difficulties for them. There would seem to be no reason – once we all come to accept that we can't 'prove' the correctness of our favoured view – that we can't come to a good measure of agreement about the state of the discussion of the different views, at any one time. We may also come to appreciate how, with the development of such discussion, we can at any time come to a fair

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[12] I have discussed this in a paper 'What Karl Popper Should have said about the Philosophy of Religion', which I hope to publish before too long.

measure of agreement about things which will be of practical significance for us: about what the world is like, about how problems are best tackled, and so on.[13]

What is crucial in all this, is that people respond honestly to problems, rather than surreptitiously reducing the content of what they are asserting, while pretending to do no such thing. It is fine to accept that there is a problem with one's views, and to seek to overcome it. What is problematic, is to pretend that there is nothing wrong, while dropping quietly what one was initially saying, and pretending that one's views remained as they always were. It is interesting the way in which, for example, religious (and political) sects often try to keep the history of their movements secret, and to conceal what they initially claimed, because they are aware that if the full story of what they had said in the past was available, it would call their current views into question. All this also serves to bring out that it is not necessarily a virtue that a view seems able to withstand criticism. For this may be the product of people not, in fact, exposing their ideas to criticism, or evasiveness and bluster when pertinent criticism is offered, or not distinguishing between ideas about how, in principle, criticisms of one's view might be met with actually having produced a concrete response to the criticism

4. And so to Politics

In what I have said so far, I have largely discussed people's views about the world, and what their approach might be to scientific or practical issues. But this approach would seem to me also to apply to people's political views.

This will be most obvious in cases where people are strongly attached to programmatic ideas. If, say, you speak with a Marxist, they will typically take the view that Marx's works gave us key insights into how the world works, and ideas about a distinctive form of political action in which we should be involved. But while there may have been key writings or experiences which led them to take these views, they will not be able to demonstrate that they are correct. Further, a bit of discussion will disclose all kinds of outstanding issues which they need to address. Similar problems can be raised for those who favour free markets, and for those who wish to take just a pragmatic approach to politics. The same is true for conservatives and for those who are 'woke' and think that their progressive views are obviously correct, and that everyone else is simply immoral.

What I wish again to stress, is that we are all in the same boat: while we may have strong attachments to our particular views, other people's positions are, in that respect, symmetrical with ours. There is, in each case, a gap between what we think is true, or represents the best approach, and what we have telling arguments for. This does not mean, however, that all views are on a par. For we can ask people about the problems to which their views are directed and judge the cogency of their account. We can then evaluate the degree of success that their views have had in addressing those problems – and also look at the problems that can be raised for their views, by people who take different orientations to politics. For these objections to be telling, they need to be developed as problems *for* the different views in question. That is to say, the criticisms have to be

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[13] This has an interesting connection to Karl Popper's suggestion in his *Open Society* (London: Routledge, 1945 etc) and in his 'Public and Private Values', in his *After the Open Society* ed. J. Shearmur & P. Turner (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

made in ways that do not presuppose the correctness of some other view. But it is just here that some of the issues that have been raised by Marxists, on the one side, and people who place emphasis on markets, on the other, may be particularly important. Marxists have, for example, said important things about the way in which 'relations of production' form a structure which, at any one time, limits the choices that are available to us as occupations. While, as I argued in an earlier piece, Hayek has in my view said important things about the way in which our use of market mechanisms limits the way in which we might be able to realise ideals about 'social justice'.

The approach which I suggest we may draw from Popper's work suggests how we may bring rational critical appraisal back to areas of activity in which it is now not often found. It also suggests how we may recognise competitive diversity, while at the same time being able to learn from one another. And it even suggests that, across our different views, we may seek to recognise what, currently, we can agree about as policy which it makes sense to pursue in the face of the various practical problems which concern us today.