

Fallibility of Knowledge and the Attitude of Reasonableness: A Study of Popper's Conception of Tolerant Society and its limitations

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Abstract

For peace and harmony in a society it is necessary to resolve conflicts and disagreements regarding social issues. Karl Popper is of the view that if disagreements are resolved with the authoritarian attitude that our arguments are conclusive then this attitude imposes its opinion and hence it may lead to violence. Karl Popper rejects authoritarian attitude on the basis of his critique of absolute knowledge. He believes in fallibility of knowledge. He thinks that if disagreements are resolved with an attitude of reasonableness that our arguments are rational but are not conclusive then this attitude is ready to be convinced by other. Hence it leads to reasonable compromise and promotes tolerance rather than intolerance. Problem that arises here is that if all knowledge is fallible then it will ultimately lead someone to conclude that his position regarding a dispute cannot be falsified conclusively. Then compromises will not be made on the result of soundness of argument but will be made for the sake of greater interest of a group of individuals. It will promote confrontation between interest groups. Thus we will not be able to hope for a tolerant society. The aim of this paper is to look into the matter of possibility of a tolerant society by study of Popper's method and by working out its limitations. This study will help in understanding of the theoretical issues regarding the construction of a tolerant society.

Keywords: Fallibility of Knowledge, Falsificationism, Attitude of Reasonableness, Holism

Introduction

Difference of opinions and interests of individuals lead a society to conflicts or social strain. If they are not resolved in rational manner, they may lead the society to violence. Karl Popper, who is one of the most influential philosopher of twentieth century and supporter of reason, is of the view that if disputes or conflicts are resolved with the attitude that our arguments are conclusive so must be admitted then this attitude is not

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ready to be convinced by the other but only hopes to impose its opinion. Eventually it can lead to violence. On the contrary, if disputes are resolved with an attitude that our arguments are right and based on our analysis of the problem but are not conclusive then this attitude is ready to be convinced by the other. Consequently, this attitude may be the basis of a reasonable compromise between conflicting parties.

For Popper, the attitude of reasonableness can only be prevailed if we give up authoritarian attitude towards knowledge and believe in fallibility of reason. In other words Popper thinks that to believe in absolute reason is the main hindrance in avoidance of violence. He makes clear that to believe in absolute reason is not a realistic way. There is no rational ground on the basis of which we can claim that our arguments are conclusive. In this connection, he criticizes absolutism of traditional epistemology and develops his critique of absolute knowledge. Problem of observation and induction lead Popper to conclude that knowledge is conjectural and the growth of knowledge lies in falsification of theories. He dismisses the possibility of absolute knowledge.

Problem that arises here is that this methodology trusts in fallibility of knowledge. The idea of fallibility of knowledge ultimately leads us to concluding that someone's point of view regarding the particular disputes cannot be falsified conclusively. However it can be falsified for a particular situation and circumstances. One may easily disagree with the situation on the basis of his perception of the situation. Here it seems to be correct that compromises are not made on the result of soundness of argument but they are made for the sake of greater interest of a particular group of individuals. It will promote confrontation between interest groups. Thus question of prevention of conflicts will remain problematic and we will not be able to hope for a tolerant society. His denial of absolute knowledge and belief in falsificationism lead him to conclude that man is antecedent individual. He overlooks the possibility to see man in collectivity. Because of this, his sociology is reduced to protection of self interest. Consequently, possibility of conflicts remains there. [These conflicts may move a step forward or a step backward but they remain lingering on nonetheless]

In order to probe this problem I have divided this paper into three sections. In first section I discuss Popper's views regarding rejection of absolute knowledge. Here I inquire that for what reasons Popper goes to claim that all knowledge is fallible. In second section I discuss the main feature of Popper's methodology of falsificationism and his claim of tolerant society. Here I examine Popper's argument that critical attitude towards problem of society can lead us to reasonable compromises. In third section I critically examine Popper's methodology

and his conception of tolerant society by working out the implications regarding his method.

Popper's Critique of Absolute knowledge

Absolutism is highly influenced by the idea of certainty and holism of traditional epistemology. Certainty presumes secure sources of knowledge. Holism presumes that parts of a whole are guided by absolute theories or laws, which belong to essence of the whole. In other words holism believes that a whole is not merely an aggregate of parts. It has an essence that is more than the parts. The question that arises here is, can the presumptions of certainty and holism be justifiable? The possibility of certain knowledge is closely related to the possibility of secure source of knowledge while the justification of holism is closely related to the possibility of existence of essence. In order to examine absolutism these possibilities must be examined.

Traditionally it is thought that immediate experience is the secure source of knowledge that provides pure elementary information concerning the world. Moreover, it is said that these information are certain and can constitute a higher-level knowledge by the association of elements of information. Elements of information are associated if they occur together. Association is strengthened by repetition and provides ground for a theory or law that is presumed to be objective and reliable.

Karl Popper regards this traditional approach towards knowledge as a commonsense theory of knowledge. His main argument is based upon that the claim that commonsense theory of knowledge is not justifiable for two reasons: one, immediate experience is not rationally justifiable; second, it takes induction for granted and overlooks the problem of induction. Let's see how Popper formulates his argument

Commonsense Theory of Knowledge and its Limitation: Popper's Critique

According to Popper, commonsense theory assumes that knowledge of the world is gained through senses. We use our eyes to see or observe things around us, ears to hear, nose to smell, tongue to taste and our body to touch. In this way we get direct information about any aspect of the world through senses. Direct experience does not involve any background knowledge. It is supposed to be the foundation of knowledge. The fundamental thesis here is that all knowledge consists of information received through senses. This information is immediate, certain and free from all error. Errors arise due to subjective admixture to this immediate knowledge. The following citation from Popper fully portrays this conception of knowledge:

There is immediate or direct knowledge; that is, the pure unadulterated elements of information which have got into us and are still undigested. No knowledge could be more elementary and certain than this...

Knowledge which goes beyond the pure reception of the given elements is therefore always less certain than the given or elementary knowledge, which indeed constitutes the standard of certainty. If I doubt any, I have just to open my eyes again and observe with candid eye, excluding all prejudice: I have to purify my mind from sources of error.¹

In order to critically evaluate this theory, Popper works out that the major presumptions of common sense theory of knowledge are:

Our contact with the world through the sense organs provides us sense data. Knowledge gained with the help of sense data may be called elementary or immediate knowledge. Immediate knowledge does not involve background knowledge. Sense data provide secure foundation of knowledge, (They are passively received by the senses.) Elementary knowledge is regarded as certain knowledge.

- Problem of Immediate Experience

Popper notes that this theory of knowledge hinges upon the idea of immediate or direct experience. According to him, there is no way to prove that sense data are the objects of immediate or direct experience. He maintains that since there is always a background knowledge or disposition behind every experience, therefore, the so-called direct experience, which is supposed to be the foundation of knowledge, does not exist at all.²

He argues that if we accept that sense data exist then we commit ourselves to the view that they are passively received by our senses. Now sense data are thought to be ultimate, independent and objective entities. Therefore, whatever the senses passively receive i.e. elementary knowledge must be objective. Our maturity, background knowledge and preferences would play no role in receiving them. But this is not the case. It is true that different persons have different perceptions. Moreover, an individual can perceive the same thing differently on different occasions. This shows that there are no such things like sense data that are objective entities and are passively received by the senses.

Popper says that learning by experience is a very complicated phenomenon. It cannot be grasped by the so-called immediate observation of the common sense theorists. He says:

As children we learn to decode the chaotic messages which meet us from our environment. We learn to sift them, to ignore the majority of them, and to single out those, which are of biological importance for us either at once, or in future for which

we are being prepared by a process of maturation... Learning to decode the messages which reach us is extremely complicated.³

Popper agrees that sense organs receive messages from environment. These messages, however, do not constitute knowledge. They are incoherent and chaotic. We organize these chaotic messages against some background knowledge or disposition. Therefore, it can be safely said that these messages are always decoded by us to form knowledge. Popper maintains that our observations are not simple. We cannot take away our dispositions, background knowledge and biases from our observations. Without the background knowledge, no observation can be made. The difference between the observations of professionals and non-professionals about an event is a glaring example in this regard. This is due to the difference in their background knowledge.

The outcome of this discussion is that there cannot be context free direct experience. Due to problem of background knowledge our decoding the incoherent and chaotic messages always remain fallible.

There is another reason due to which Popper relies on fallibility of knowledge. Owing to the fallibility of sense organs, according to him, it becomes difficult to guarantee that our sense organs work perfectly. The reason is that sense perception involves a biological system and there is no logical way to prove that this system always works perfectly. In other words, efficiency of sense organs is a biological matter and can be explained by biological theories. These theories, however, do not guarantee that our sense organs are infallible. Therefore, it cannot be inferred that our perceptions are true. Popper says:

Almost all of us are good observers and good perceivers. But this is a problem to be explained by biological theories, and not to be taken as the basis for any dogmatism of direct or immediate or intuitive knowledge. And after all, we do all fail sometimes: we must never forget our fallibility.⁴

It can be concluded here that our perception and sense organs are fallible. Therefore, immediacy of experience cannot be justified. The role of background knowledge dismisses the basic presupposition of commonsense theory of knowledge.

Beside the problem of immediate experience there is another problem with commonsense approach towards knowledge. That is problem of induction. It strongly believes that by the observations, which are made in the past we can expect with certainty that future will be like the past. In other

words commonsense theory of knowledge takes induction for granted. Without any problem being raised it accepts that our belief in regularity or in laws of nature is justified by repeated observations.

- Problem of induction
There are serious problems here, which are ignored by the common sense theorists. David Hume brought up these problems in the 17th century. Popper presents Hume's criticism in the following way:
 - (i) Are we justified in reasoning from [repeated instances of which we have experience to other instances [conclusion] of which we have no experience? In other words, premises of inductive arguments are experienced but their conclusion is not experienced. There is no way to justify inductive leap which is central to all inductive reasoning. Popper calls it Hume's logical problem of induction.⁵
 - (ii) Why, nevertheless, do all reasonable people expect, and believe, that the instances of which they have no experience will conform to those of which they have experience? It is said that our expectations are due to repeated observations. Is it the case? Popper calls it Hume's psychological problem of induction.⁶ We can summarize above point in following questions.
 - (a) Can inductive leap be justified? This highlights the logical problem of induction.
 - (b) Why do we trust on induction? This highlights the psychological issues related to induction.

Hume's answer to the first question is in negative. He has made it very clear that inductive leap cannot be justified. Popper is in complete agreement with Hume that we cannot justify induction on rational ground. As far as the second question is concerned, Hume says that we trust induction due to our habit-It is due to repetition. Popper does not agree with this solution for the reason that repetition presupposes similarity and similarity presupposes a standpoint. This is not possible without a theory or a background. He explicates that belief in regularity or in natural laws does not simply depend on repetition. Someone is mistaken if he believes in certainty of laws of nature. What implies from

this discussion is that the notion of certainty of commonsense theory of knowledge is baseless. Problem of immediate experience and problem of induction lead us to conclude that certainty is impossible task. [It is just a matter of 'animal faith'. In fact even animals (like humans) do draw inductive inferences]

Like commonsense theory of knowledge there has been another influence upon history of theory of knowledge. That is influence of holism. It is embedded, according to Popper, in the intellect of our ancestors.

Holism and its Limitation: Popper's Critique

It holds that whole must not be regarded as mere aggregates of parts. They have their control over parts by means of some absolute laws. These laws can only be understood if essence of whole can properly be known. Popper rejects this holism on the basis of following reasons:

- (a) It is impossible to justify that there is unchanging essence of whole.
- (b) It is an impossible method.

According to Popper the word whole as used by holists is ambiguous. In one sense it is taken as a totality of all the properties or aspects of a thing, and especially of all the relations held between its constituent parts. This cannot be studied scientifically. In another sense it denotes certain special properties or an aspect of thing that makes it appear as an organized structure rather than a mere heap. Scientific study of such wholes is possible.⁷

Popper holds that whenever we describe whole we must be selective. We can only see some aspects of a whole rather than all its relations. Popper further says that not even a single example of a scientific description of a whole is ever cited which covers all aspects of a thing since in every case it would always be easy to point out aspects that have been neglected.⁸ Popper also argues that all knowledge, intuitive or discursive, comprises of abstract notions. We can never grasp the concrete structure of social reality in itself.

There is another reason due to which Popper dismisses holism. He says that holists not only plan to study the whole society by an impossible method but also plan to control and reconstruct it as a whole. For Popper, it is an impossible task. He writes:

The term society embraces, of course all social relations, including personal ones..., it is for many reasons quite impossible to control all, or nearly all, these relationships; if only because with every new control of social relation we create a host of new social relations to be controlled, in short, the impossibility is a logical impossibility.

[Because] The attempt leads to an infinite regress; the position is similar to the case of an attempt to study the whole of society-which would have to include this study [in sense of totality with all relations].⁹

Thus Popper concludes that there can be no doubt that the holist plans to control or reconstruct society by controlling relations is utopian plan. It is impossible to see social groups or object of sociology in totalities. Social essence cannot be grasped. Therefore, epistemological ground for absolute solution remains problematic.

By the analysis of problem of notion of certainty and holism Popper concludes that absolute reason does not exist at all. He has strong reservation against the influence of absolutism upon sociological and political theories. He thinks that this influence eventually promotes search for a perfect blue print of the society, in accordance with which state ought to be ruled. He holds that the search for perfect ideals in epistemology presumes that there are ultimate sources of knowledge. In the same vein, the existence of perfect models of state presumes that there are perfect ways of ruling. There is also a possibility of having perfect rulers. Traditional political theories have been interested in the question that 'who should be a perfect ruler'.¹⁰ The question "who should be the perfect ruler" cannot be answered properly. It is an impossible task because we do not have any perfect source of knowledge. Therefore, according to Popper, such a view easily ends up in authoritarianism. This attitude cannot solve political conflicts. Rather, it adds to political problems and hence encourages violence. That is why Popper emphasizes on such an epistemology that does not involve consequence mentioned above.

Popper's Epistemology of Critical Rationalism and the Possibility of Tolerant Society

Popper takes knowledge to be conjectural and fallible. Insecurity of observations and inconclusiveness of inductive conclusion make our knowledge conjectural and fallible. The possibility of growth of knowledge, argues he, lies in falsification of theories. Owing to the problem of induction we cannot verify a theory logically. However, if a theory does not survive our critical test it can be falsified logically. If we see, for instance, several black crows we cannot establish truth of the statement that all crows are black. But it can easily be established that all crows are black is false if only one non black crow is seen. In this way Popper, by accepting logical problem of induction, finds the room for empirical reason. This logical point leads Popper to say that we can improve our knowledge by the falsification.

He thinks that the attitude of falsification encourages us to examine our argument or conjectures critically. If in the result of

criticism, a theory is falsified then we can hope another theory for a better solution of the problem. Thus by trial and error we can step forward to a better solution. Popper calls this method the critical method, in his own words, "it is method of trial and error elimination of proposing theories and submitting them to severest test we can design."¹¹

Since this methodology dismisses the absolutism and believes in fallibility of knowledge, therefore it has no room for perfect solution of problem of society. The methodology of trial and error is basically a piecemeal approach towards the solution of social conflicts of society. It can be understood by a comparison of it with another approach that aims at the reconstruction of society at larger scale by applying absolutistic theories. The idea of reconstruction of society at larger scale is rejected by Popper on the ground that social planning on large scales cannot be carried out. We have no sufficient factual knowledge for that kind of planning. The idea of social change on large scale is utopia. He writes:

*It (Utopia social engineering) claims to plan rationally for whole of the society, although we do not possess any thing like the factual knowledge which would be necessary to make good such an ambitious claim.*¹²

According to Popper, knowledge of facts of society must be based on experience. If one has a plan for reconstructing the whole society then one must have sufficient factual knowledge of society but due to limitation of experience, it is impossible. So the idea of social engineering on large scale is not correct.

As far as factual knowledge of society is concerned, according to Popper, it consists of existing problems; therefore, planning should be limited to these. Popper calls it piecemeal social engineering. He thinks that it is more useful for solution of problems of society than any totalitarian programs due to the following reasons:

- The piecemeal engineering is comparatively simple.
- It is less risky.
- There may be a possibility of reaching a reasonable compromise which can help in avoiding violence.

A utopian engineer needs an ultimate aim and a complete blue print of society. Popper maintains that there is no scientific methodology that guarantees this. He says:

*"There is no rational method for determining the ultimate aim, but, if any thing, only some kind of intuition. Any difference of opinion between utopian engineers must therefore lead, in the absence of rational methods, to use of power instead of reason, either to violence."*¹³

In his piece-meal social engineering, Popper puts emphasis on trial and error. He is a strong supporter of the view that we learn from our mistakes. We learn by looking at the consequences of our action in the light of systematic criticism. This is an ongoing process by virtue of which we progress. In this methodology there is no need for a complete blue print of society. We can start with a conjecture. A systematic criticism excavates our mistakes and thereby we can put forward a better conjecture. Popper argues that this methodology is comparatively simple and more practical than the utopian one. Piecemeal engineer sets modest tasks in which particular problems in concrete situations are looked into. According to Popper, if it [piecemeal social engineering] goes wrong, the damage would not be very great and re-adjustment would not be very difficult.¹⁴ Therefore piecemeal engineering is less risky and rationally sound.

Utopian approach believes in absolutism. As said earlier, it is not open to criticism. It does not promote public examination and is advocated by authoritarian rulers. There is no possibility of reasonable agreement regarding the problems of society. That may lead it to violence. As piecemeal approach focuses on existing evils or problems and it is open to criticism, Individuals may be able to examine and propose solutions of problems. In the light of criticism, some compromises or agreements can be made. Individuals, having this attitude, will realize that the argument in favour of their interest are not conclusive and so they will have to tolerate others opinion and will be ready to reject their argument if they are falsified. This is his conception of attitude of reasonableness.¹⁵ Popper hopes that it will construct a tolerant society where conflicts, which arise due to difference of interest, will be resolved rationally and hence society will be free from violence and aggression

Limitations of Popper's Concept of Tolerance

Fallibility of reasons ensures the inconclusiveness of argument while inconclusiveness of argument demands that our opinions must be rejected if they are falsified. The problem here is that if no observation is secure (knowledge is fallible), how someone can be satisfied that his assertion has been falsified. In other words because of fallibility of knowledge no falsification can be conclusive whereby someone can be persistent regarding his own position. Obviously this situation would not be compelling for reasonable compromises and tolerant society will be problematic.

We can better understand this by Feyerabend's analysis of refutability of theories focusing the question how falsification involves

complexities.¹⁶ Feyerabend argues that in assertion: all crows are black; we believe that they are intrinsically black. That is why if a white painted crow or a crow that has been fallen into bag of flour is seen, it would be hardly inferred that all crows are black is falsified. In other words all crows are black can only be falsified if whiteness can be proved as intrinsic quality. Feyerabend raises the problem that holding whiteness and blackness as intrinsic quality involves such a series of arguments or theories which is based on circumstances and so it involves complexities.

It means that due to these complexities, refutation or falsification of a theory can not be conclusive. One can say that all crows are black is not falsified because a white crow, which is seen, is not intrinsically white. In a similar fashion, an individual can insist that he is not ready to reject his interest or argument because criticism against his assertion or argument is not conclusive. In this connection whenever a compromise arises it would not be on the basis of reliable reason but would be on the basis of political tactic. In other words society will merely be a form of contract, a mean for achieving goal for certain group of individuals. Obviously such a conception of society will lack a possibility of more strengthen harmony among individuals. Thus possibility of violence will remain there.

A strongly harmonized society can only be possible if it is built on the basis of mutual interest. Mutual interest can only be understood in perspective of some shared values. In order to understand shared values of a society one must see individuals in their collectivity. Problem with Popper's method is that due to denial of absolutism and holism it overlooks the collectivity of men as subject matter of social science. Popper's method assumes that the driving force of society is our hopes, aims and expectations, which are individualistic in nature. Consequently it leads him to say that man is antecedent individual. Anthony O'Hear points out this problem. He says,

It has to be insisted yet again that many of aims, hopes and thought of individual are in turn due logically to existence of collective phenomenon, by which it is not meant merely that social traditions influence the mind of individual, but that very existence of motives like patriotism or treachery, one way or the other, depend for their sense on the individual existence is a collective. Holism to this extent is unavoidable.¹⁷

O'Hear points out that it is not necessary that all our hopes, aims and expectations are individualistic. They can have their moorings in collectives. Many of our attitudes can only be understood by seeing ourselves as members of a collectivity and not as an antecedent individual. In some places, Popper himself appears to recognize this. He acknowledges that sometimes a whole can exert some control over its

parts.¹⁸ Here Popper seems to accept that attitude of individuals can be determined by some sort of collectives or social wholes. But, since his epistemological endeavor is critical thinking, which is based upon perception and abstract reasoning, therefore he limits himself to individualistic concept of man. Having an individualistic concept of man he ignores the psychological and sociological relationship between inhabitants of a society. Consequently, a ground for collective values is not found in Popper's system and possibility of more strengthened harmony in the society remains problematic.

Popper's conception of fallibility of knowledge and his conception of man do not provide substantive ground for collective value. Popper puts the foundation of society on antecedent individual. His individualism seems to be unsuccessful for a tolerant society.

Conclusion

Popper's idea of attitude of reasonableness for construction of a tolerant society is based on the idea of inconclusiveness of argument or fallibility of reason. His denial of absolute knowledge and his epistemology of falsificationism reject the possibility of considering man in his collectives. It reduces man to individualistic concept of self. He overlooks the possibility that the idea of fallibility of reason can lead an individual to the opinion that he is not ready to reject his interest because criticism against his assertions is not conclusive. In this case problem or conflict would not be resolved rationally and so violence will prevail in the society. Therefore, for prevention of violence and for constructing a tolerant society we need to tackle the main problem of violence, which is our inclination towards self-interest.

Notes & References

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- ³ *ibid.*, 63
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- ⁵ *ibid.*, 4
- ⁶ *ibid.*, 4
- ⁷ Karl Popper, *Poverty of Historicism*. (London, Routledge, 2002), 70
- ⁸ *ibid.*, 72-3
- ⁹ *ibid.*, 73
- ¹⁰ Karl Popper, *In Search of a Better World* (London, Routledge, 1996), 46
- ¹¹ Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986), 16
- ¹² Karl Popper, *Open Society and its Enemies*, part one (London, Routledge, 1952), 161
- ¹³ *ibid.*, 161
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, 159
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- ¹⁷ O' Hear, *Karl Popper* (Routledge & Keagon Paul, 1992), 169
- ¹⁸ Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986), 209