

Karl Popper (Jeremy Shearmur and Piers Norris Turner, eds.)

After the Open Society: Selected Social and Political Writings.

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The most beneficial aspect of this book, partially obscured by the editorial introduction and by the organization of the volume, is to draw attention to the fact that Popper has made an important contribution to the theory of social morality so far missed by most critics and students of his work.

The editors of this selection of lesser-known social and political essays by Popper miss a great opportunity to provide a general background to Popper's work in their introduction. Instead, the editors focus on details that to the general reader—as opposed to Popper students and critics—seem at best Popper minutiae, and at worst insider codes baffling to the outsider. I am grateful for what I would guess has been a tremendous, exhaustive, and exhausting effort in collecting and preparing (in some cases transcribing) these virtually lost essays and some of Popper's correspondence, lectures, and interviews that have been hidden in the obscurity of old issues of journals, in Popper's own archives at the Hoover Institute and at Klagenfurt (in Austria), and in some tapes and material in private hands. Also, I wish the editors had organized the essays in terms of problems, or even themes, rather than in terms of geography, chronology, the "Open Society", and era. An organization of the volume in terms of themes and problems would have made transparent Popper's unnoticed long-term effort in developing a social morality that avoids making a false dichotomy between 'socialism' and 'capitalism'.

In this review, I will briefly discuss some of what I take to be the must-read essays in the book. I will discuss the following essays in this order to show how Popper's thought on social ethics can contribute to the problem of the ethics of social control of the powerful in various areas, including politics, the media and medicine: Chapter 7, "Moral Man and Immoral Society" (1940); Chapter 9, "Correspondence with Carnap on Social Philosophy" (1940–1950); Chapter 37, "On Toleration" (1981); Chapter 48, "The Power of Television" (1994); and, Chapter 39, "The Critical Attitude in Medicine, The Need for a New Ethics"(1983).

How we control the powerful in society is still an unresolved problem in liberal-democratic societies and among liberal democratic theorists. What is missing in the current discussion is the ethical basis for social control—a discussion of how it might be moral and where we might locate resources for making moral decisions concerning social control. Popper's essays in this volume fill that gap.

Chapter 7, "Moral Man and Immoral Society" (1940): Popper argues that moral theory often conflates individualism with egoism and collectivism with altruism. He argues for an individualist form of altruism: "our interest in politics or in society is entirely based upon our interest in human individuals, our anxiousness to help them, and our responsibility for them. This is clearly individualism—altruistic individualism... It leads to the demand that the *State is to*

exist for the sake of the individuals...” (66) Furthermore, an altruistic individualist does not “*take one’s own individuality particularly seriously*, or to lay more stress (or even as much) on one’s own interests than on the interests of others.” (65) Popper’s moral philosophy at this point seems both rudimentary and contradictory: individuals are the primary moral deciders; however, individuals cannot morally place their interests above others. Why should the individual morally place other people’s interests above their own interests? The role of the State Popper calls “protectionist”, in that it takes the interests of individuals as primary as opposed to collectivities, especially the collectivity of the State. But again, does the State have a moral duty to “protect” some individuals more than others, such as children? If so, on what grounds? Popper indirectly answers these questions in his correspondence with Carnap when Carnap directly asks Popper whether he is a socialist or a liberal.

Chapter 9, “Correspondence with Carnap on Social Philosophy” (1940–1950): Popper states several theses in answer to Carnap’s question whether Popper is (still) a socialist. The point of Popper’s theses is to open a dialogue between socialists and liberals for how to achieve their common humanitarian goals. Among his theses is the answer to how the State should morally decide to protect some groups of individuals over others—in other words, how the State grounds its decision in choosing among individuals who morally require State “protection”. Popper in particular argues for state ownership of certain industries to better achieve the equalization of income. The moral goal of socialization on an experimental basis is freedom (of the individual). Popper states, “I am convinced that freedom cannot be saved without improving distributive justice, i.e., without increasing economic equality.” (105) Carnap’s response, which basically ends their correspondence as collected in this volume, touches the central point of disagreement between Carnap and Popper in social philosophy: Carnap says that he doesn’t mind great differences in income, but he as a socialist is concerned about “...[un]regulated power concentrated in the hand of a private individual or group.” (107) Carnap assumes that the State having a concentration of power is moral because the State is the moral decider (the moral agent). Popper goes on to argue, in later essays, that the point of democracy is to regulate or control all power concentrations, both private and public (or State). This, according to Popper, is exactly the moral basis for social control (including the socialization of certain industries): to protect all individuals from unregulated concentrations of power whether in the State or in private hands.

Chapter 37, “On Toleration” (1981): Popper argues against unlimited toleration. When we tolerate individuals or groups who not merely use words to argue against democracy but use violence or even advocate the use of violence, “...we may have the *duty* [my italics] to withdraw toleration from those who conspire to destroy it.” (320) However, Popper notices that even though we do not need to tolerate the enemies of democracy, we give excessive power to professionals and professional groups. The professional ethics of these groups are largely intolerant to the individuals they attempt to help. This form of intolerance, in Popper’s eyes, is morally wrong. Popper’s argument is that the point of a professional ethic is to place control on those who have authority: democracies control power, and professional ethics control the power of those in authority. However, current professional ethics are based on the mistaken idea that those in authority are supposed to be error-free in their judgements.

Since it is impossible to avoid error, authorities hide errors and become intolerant

towards those who might challenge them. Popper declares, “I suggest that the first command of our new professional ethic should be: *Learn from mistakes.*” (327)

Chapter 48, “The Power of Television” (1994): Popper’s critique of television occurs in an interview literally during the last few days of his life. Popper argues for a professional ethic to control the professionals involved in the media. Here again Popper emphasizes that the main point of a democracy is to control those who wield power. “This is the main point of a democracy. There should be nobody uncontrolled in a democracy.” (423) Those who work in the media, have the power to influence people. Without a professional ethic similar to at least the professional ethics of doctors, whatever damage is done in the media to individuals in our democratic society goes unchecked and uncontrolled.

Chapter 39, “The Critical Attitude in Medicine, The Need for a New Ethics” (1983): Popper’s realization of the practical problem in current democracies of either a wrong-headed professional ethics or none at all, is further explored in his critique of medical ethics. The question for Popper is not how doctors can exercise proper or legitimate authority as experts; rather, he queries how we can control socially doctors, who exercise great power in our democratic society and who often exercise a power that can result not only in increasing suffering but in the death of individuals. One sentence in his proposals for a medical professional ethics captures the fundamentally new social morality: the sin is not to make mistakes, but rather “...hiding mistakes must be regarded as a deadly sin.” (344) This is the job of all professional ethics, including medical ethics—to open mistakes to public scrutiny so that the harms done to individuals can be lessened if not avoided.

In sum: The editors of this volume have unwittingly revealed an overlooked social morality in Popper’s approach to political and social philosophy. From Popper’s writings in this book, we can learn that we overlook an opportunity to help our troubled democracies when we focus too much on questions of legitimate power and even on the history and sociology of power, rather than on examining and proposing techniques for the control of the uncontrolled in society. Popper teaches that the labels “socialist” and “capitalist” obscure an extremely important social moral problem for liberal democratic societies: how do we control professionals and their organizations that currently have no, little, or misguided professional ethics.

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