

SONDERDRUCK

aus

WITTGENSTEIN, THE VIENNA CIRCLE AND CRITICAL RATIONALISM

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 3rd INTERNATIONAL WITTGENSTEIN SYMPOSIUM
13th TO 19th AUGUST 1978 / KIRCHBERG AM WECHSEL (AUSTRIA)

WITTGENSTEIN, DER WIENER KREIS UND DER KRITISCHE RATIONALISMUS

AKTEN DES 3. INTERNATIONALEN WITTGENSTEIN SYMPOSIUMS
13. BIS 19. AUGUST 1978 / KIRCHBERG AM WECHSEL (ÖSTERREICH)

DIALECTICAL ELEMENTS IN POPPER'S CRITICISM OF DIALECTICS

I. M. Fehér
University of Budapest

Popper's objections raised in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* about dialectical historicism's claim to possess an objective knowledge of the future bring home several intricate points. The conceptual framework of his book however, though probably unconsciously, makes good use of that distinctive presupposition of any dialectical epistemology according to which the knower as well as the process of knowing constitute part of the object to be known. The dialectical element of his methodology remains, in the main, a somewhat implicit and latent moment, though thoroughly utilized in certain parts of *The Open Society* as well as in *The Poverty of Historicism*.

Chapter 19 of *The Open Society* is dedicated to the examination of what Popper calls "the ambiguity of violence" and "the ambiguity of power-conquest". In this section of his criticism of marxists, Popper speaks of "the systematic ambiguity of their attitude" which, considering the historical background of the age, led to the admittedly unintended and definitely negative consequences of, first, failing to carry out the socialist revolution at a time when there was an opportunity to do so (end of World War I), and second, of not offering serious resistance to the fascist power-conquest. The ambiguous practical attitude amounted in both cases, in Popper's formulation, to a policy of waiting and doing nothing, thus missing the opportunity at hand in the first case, and contributing, in the second, to the producing of "that anti-democratic reaction of the bourgeoisie" which the theory predicted, but claimed (with ambiguity) to abhor.

The problem Popper singles out is of great historical relevance, and can be given a dialectical formulation in the following way: Popper depicts fairly convincingly, although on a purely empirical level, the process in which a *form of knowledge* (i.e., a theory) turns into a *form of being* (a part of history), and, incapable of catching up with this fact, becomes immediately inadequate. Its becoming false is due to the fact that the very moment when it becomes a form of being, its previous picturing the world, precisely in so far as it was a total picturing embracing all the (historical) world, becomes out of date. The reason accounting for it is that it does not, and cannot by necessity, take notice of the fact that itself has ceased to be *solely* a *form of knowledge*, but has also become a *form of being*. The theory, at the moment of coming into being, may be quite adequate, since in it, by way of a "contraction", the whole world may become reflected, and the theory itself exists *qua* theory at that moment. At a second moment, however, when the theory becomes "Being", or part of the world, "Being" or the world has grown to be *more* than that represented by the theory. As a form of being, the theory—now transformed into "Being"—*will* further contribute to the shaping of the historical world, but this, by necessity, remains concealed before itself.

It should be mentioned that Popper's refutation of historicism (contained in a concise form in the *Preface* to his *The Poverty of Historicism*) puts forward logically similar arguments. However, it is a historical fact that Hegel was aware of the difficulty Popper bases his refutation upon, and his central thesis that history was over (an obviously absurd statement on an empirical level, subsequently often misunderstood and ridiculed by interpreters) was introduced by him exactly for the purpose of securing, methodologically, the possibility of objective historical knowledge. Thus, Popper's refutation of historicism is greatly indebted, although in a negative sense, to Hegel's dialectical philosophy claiming to have arrived at the point of absolute knowledge.

Let me give a very formal and much simplified example which may perhaps illustrate

the above outlined difficulty in a more concrete form. Suppose there is a philosopher (or anybody else) who sets out to describe the world. In doing so, he takes an inventory, as it were, of the objects he finds, then describes the properties and relations of the objects, etc., and finally he presents his investigations in a book. In order to check his observations, we examine whether he has really succeeded in giving us a full picture of the world, whether he has described *all* the objects that exist, with *all* their properties, relations, etc. Let us suppose for easiness' sake that there exist firm criteria to carry out this critical examination, and that at last we find that his description of the world is really complete and adequate. But then, somebody may put forward the following objection: "If I compare the world with your description of it, I find tables, houses, people, etc. in both of them, and so far your picture is quite correct. But suddenly, I behold at least one thing which you have omitted, and which is most definitely part of our world. It is your book. So, your claim to have represented the *whole* world is not fulfilled. Something is left out. There is a part of the world, an object whose place is *empty* in your system." This objection cannot evidently be countered by writing a second book which the first occurs, because then the second would be missing, and we would finally be involved in an infinite regress. The fact that in the theory's picture of the world, the place of itself as well as its further possible interferences with the formation of future (historical) events are lacking, accounts for the otherwise hardly understandable (or understandable only in such terms as "tactical absurdity" or "practical ambiguities") consequence that any further happening, in the eyes of the representatives of the theory, will appear as a thoroughly "objective" development whose coming about they have not more than passively assisted, but not in the least influenced.

The thesis that for consciousness, once it looks upon the world through the prism of previously established theories (since the fact that it always does so is undeniable), the world *will*, by and large, appear as the place of completely objective goings-on which may corroborate or frustrate its expectations, but are, on the whole, independent of its working (whereas, in fact, it does contribute to their coming about), implies furthermore that for consciousness, its own imprinting upon the world remains hidden *at the moment of its activity*, and becomes known only *post festum*. This amounts to what may be called a classical Kantian or Hegelian standpoint. Both these thinkers made an attempt at such a *post festum* reconstruction of consciousness' working; Kant from a transcendental, Hegel from a historical point of view. If, however, we dispense with the *post festum* point of view, and endeavour to get hold of consciousness "at work", then we find, in view of what has been said, that consciousness conceives itself, at the moment of activity, as a purely passive reflection of objects and events, in other words: as nothingness. The theory of consciousness as nothingness has been developed most explicitly in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, a philosophy seemingly very far from the ones discussed so far.

— X —

Does the difficulty, singled out in Popper's criticism of historicism and referred back to several other, apparently very different philosophies, imply that objective knowledge is really unattainable for man? If we return to the example of the "philosopher and the book", a possible solution of the problem may be like this. Since no "quantitative" adjustments, as has been seen, counter the difficulty, a radical "qualitative" re-arrangement, as it were, is required. The book should then be conceived in such a way that each sentence of it should refer to an object of the world and, at one and the same time, to the sentence itself which "*performs*" the describing. But is it not sheer absurdity? I think not. We know that language may be used not only in a descriptive, but also in a performative way; such utterances are performed.

What are the implications of this re-arrangement? Following from the fact that a performative utterance cannot be true or false in the traditional sense, we have to give up our demand

to verify or falsify the theory by way of comparing it with something "in the world". Indeed, there remains nothing "external" to compare it with. Our theory should then be constructed as well as comprehended as a long unique performative utterance.

I think that the theory of performativity can be adopted to the examination of what Popper calls "historical predictions". For, here, the case is far from being such that the theory becomes compared with reality, and is thus corroborated or disproved, but rather, *by virtue of its mere existence*, it contributes to bringing about certain events. Popper writes: a prediction "may, in extreme case even *cause* the happening it predicts . . . A social scientist may . . . predict something, foreseeing that his prediction will cause it to happen. Or he may deny that a certain event is to be expected, thereby preventing it". (*The Poverty of Historicism*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957, p. 15) From this point of view, historical predictions may be considered to stand in between purely "theoretical" (or scientific) theories and performative utterances. When a historical prediction or a prophecy has been uttered, something has definitely been *done with words*. Those assisting the "performance" may act in favour of, or against bringing about it (remaining aloof is also a deed). Nevertheless, since the question of truth may still be applied to them, they cannot be called performative utterances proper.

Thus, in so far as our "perfect" theory begins to assume performative character, it loses in theoretical force. It becomes a kind of Hegelian identical subject-object which, by virtue of its eminent self-reference, can only "show" its meaning, but no more "say" it (Wittgenstein *TLP* 4.1212). Of course, it will *say* a lot of things about "external" objects, but its ultimate meaning will be only pointed towards, as it were, since the theory finally returns to itself. And all this process should be conceived in such a way that, far from being distinct temporal sequences, the two moments (speaking about external things and itself) are wholly intertwined in each part of the theory. Absolute *theoretical* knowledge, or knowledge of the totality (present, past *and* future) is impossible precisely to the extent to which:

Im Dasein steht, solange es ist, je noch etwas aus, was es sein kann und wird . . . muß das Dasein, solange es existiert, seinkönnend je etwas *noch nicht sein*. Seiendes, dessen Essenz die Existenz ausmacht, widersetzt sich wesenhaft der möglichen Erfassung seiner als ganzes Seiendes.¹

ENDNOTE

¹ M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: M. Niemeyer Vlg., 1967, p. 233.