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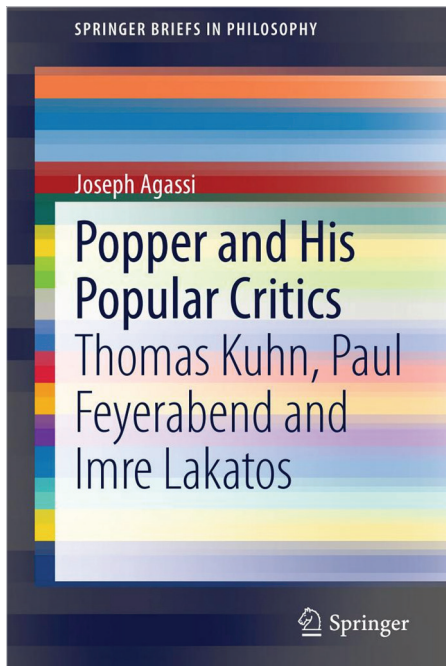
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Joseph Agassi

Popper and His Popular Critics: Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend and Imre Lakatos

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Reviewed by Sheldon Richmond

Why Popper Matters

Karl Popper is a household name in the houses of academia. But does the meaning connoted by the “Popper” name in academia signify the philosophical thought of Popper correctly? Who is the Popper of the academic imagination and does the Popper of the academic imagination approach the Popper we can find upon a sympathetic and close reading of his writings?

I conjecture that if we were to do a survey of academia we would find that “Popper” is identified with “falsifiability” and with “positivism.” Popper after Kuhn is thought to be an outdated positivist. Moreover, his orthodox disciples are thought to be intellectual lackeys dogmatically holding on to the philosophy of a thinker who at best was a fringe member of a small circle of thinkers who had their day, and who in their day not only absorbed the criticisms of Popper, but also realized that the problems they discovered in their own thought through internal criticism was not avoided by Popper’s minor variation on their own themes.

For those who disagree with the majority assessment of Popper, is there a way to correct the assessment in the imaginary of academia? But why care? Is there something in the philosophy of Popper that is still important and valuable today after Kuhn? Does Popper matter today? Or, is it just for the sake of the historical record that we correct the assessment of Popper?

Behind these issues concerning correctly characterizing and assessing the intellectual content and value of Popper is a very troubling and recurring issue concerning the history of philosophy and the over-all intellectual value of philosophy: is philosophy only a matter of fashion without intellectual value? In a sense, logical positivism and its intellectual cousin Anglo-American analytic philosophy aimed to create a philosophical methodology for producing a philosophy that avoided frivolous fashion and had intellectual depth, akin to mathematics and the sciences. Now along came Kuhn and showed that even the sciences are subject to fashion as *paradigm-shifts*. Moreover, Kuhn also revealed along with Quine and Feyerabend,

that paradigms cannot be compared or are *incommensurable* and so there is no way to show that science progresses towards truth, grows in knowledge, or ultimately has intellectual value other than as a puzzle-solving and intellectually complex enterprise. The stakes are high here, not just for philosophy, not just for the sciences, but also for one might say without hyperbole, the value of the human intellect.

All this is background to Agassi's book that attempts indirectly to rehabilitate Popper, to tell why Popper matters today, and directly to set the historical record straight. In a nut-shell Agassi's book argues that the criticisms of Popper made by the positivist and analytic philosophers were not worth taking seriously because they were based on misreadings of Popper. Moreover, the more serious criticisms made by some of the former disciples of Popper who have a correct reading of Popper, namely, Feyerabend, Lakatos, and Kuhn, are easily answerable. Indeed, Agassi encapsulates the criticisms of Feyerabend, Lakatos and Kuhn as follows: Popper thinks that science is identical to empirical criticism. However, Popper overlooks the importance of the fact that all criticism is answerable. Agassi's response to his characterization of the Feyerabend, Lakatos, and Kuhn critique of Popper in brief is this: Popper answered the critique, in principle, before the critique was even made in Popper's very first book, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Agassi characterizes Popper's response very briefly in these terms: we need to distinguish among the answers to criticisms by establishing rules for recognizing which answers are criticism-avoidance, which answers amount to changing the subject or the theory at hand, and which answers implicitly accept the criticisms and propose a new theory.

That basically is the whole of Agassi's book which you can find by reading the first 22 pages at the most. The rest is elaboration, explanation, refinement, and some counter-argument. But if one reads on for about 10 pages more one can find the whole book summarized in two sentences, the first half of the first sentence is the Feyerabend-Lakatos-Kuhn criticism of Popper, and the rest is Popper's answer (in his first book thirty or so more years before Kuhn published anything): "*Every criticism is answerable, but not every criticism is adequately answerable. Inadequate answers are excuses or evasions*" (p. 32. Author's italics.— Ed.).

If this is all there is to the criticism of Popper, and if this criticism is so easily answerable, why has the Feyerabend-Lakatos-Kuhn criticism been taken as the definitive refutation of Popper? I think the answer is that Popper emphasizes **empirical** criticism, and empirical criticism is no longer considered to be crucial for science. Agassi himself has emphasized the role of metaphysical criticism as an important factor in science: "The interaction of a metaphysical theory and a scientific one can go both ways: each may require a revision of the other and revisions may lead to tests. Also, a scientific theory and an observation report can go both ways — especially when facts confirm a hypothesis that conforms to a competing metaphysics" (p. 124). But Agassi takes the trio to task for not merely rejecting Popper's over-emphasis on the empirical dimension but for rejecting all criticism as important for science. (See Chapter 4.) Here is where Agassi can be easily misunderstood as a dogmatic and defensive supporter of Popper in the face of the critique of Popper. Agassi seems to shift the ground from a critique of **empirical** criticism made in the critique of Popper by Popper's critics to a criticism of all criticism that is not apparent in the critique of Popper. Moreover, one can find further apparent confirmation of seeing Agassi's criticisms of the critique of Popper, as defensive, dogmatic and at best subject-changing or ground-shifting when the reader comes to Part III

of Agassi's book. There Agassi critiques each of the trio's individual alternatives to Popper's philosophy of science: Feyerabend's methodological pluralism, Lakatos' theory of regressive-progressive research programmes, and Kuhn's theory of paradigm-shifts and normal science. (See especially Chapters 13, 14 and 15.)

The potential for the misreading of Agassi arises from a common view of criticism that one needs to acknowledge in order to understand not only Agassi's critique of the critique of Popper in this book, but also to understand the importance of Popper today. In other words, to properly understand Agassi's answer to the most crucial background question of the book, of why Popper matters today, we need to take a step into the background or the context.

The gossip about Popper that has appeared in print on Popper, is that Popper was dogmatic and authoritarian: Popper responded to criticism brutally no matter how meritorious the critic, and regardless of the criticism. Agassi could appear in this book to be a chip off the block of which his mentor Popper was made, by his responses to the critique of Popper by his "popular critics" regardless of whether Agassi's responses are witty, severe, matter of fact, and generous or sympathetic, let alone Agassi's short dismissal of the first generation critics alluded to by Agassi in the Preface.

I think what makes Popper to have appeared dogmatic and authoritarian and could make Agassi appear defensive of Popper is their uncommon view of criticism: "Popper declared all attempts at criticism valuable, even ones that rest on misunderstandings. Does this hold for malicious distortions too? Yes, after they are cleansed of their malice" (p. ix). The common view regards criticism even when kind and *constructive* as **judgmental** and negative. *Logically negative* criticism that points out a contradiction or is a *reductio ad absurdum* or involves a *modus tollens* form of argument is also **judgmentally negative**, and *logically negative* criticism is the worse **judgment** a theory and its proponents can face.

My point is simple: when criticism is taken as judgmental, criticism-avoidance is the only way to ensure a positive judgment of both the proponents of a viewpoint and the viewpoint. Hence, when criticism cannot be avoided, and when the only option under the judgmental attitude toward criticism appears to be defence, the defender risks attack as authoritarian and dogmatic.

Here we now come to the importance of Popper, of why Popper matters today even if Popper's view of empirical criticism as the hallmark of science is deemed mistaken: Popper's view of criticism counters the common view. Against the common view of criticism as judgmental personally and abstractly or logically, Popper's view is that criticism is simply a technique for pointing out, when done properly at best, important errors that when corrected take us further along the path of the improvement of knowledge, society, and civilization. Even finding out through criticism of viewpoints that we have taken the wrong path and need to discover a new path is not mere nihilism, but the presentation of a new challenge or "problem-situation." In Agassi's own words: "Popper's critical rationalism comes to replace Bacon's inductivism [...] Popper took the encouragement of criticism as the hallmark of liberalism — in (scientific) research and in (democratic) politics alike [...] Within the philosophy of science [...] Refutations [...] are not always valuable for survival but they are always valuable as intellectual assets: their upsetting important ideas renders them important. (This is the positive power of negative thinking.)" (p. 130). "What is peculiar to Popper is not taking criticism as a lofty activity: this

is rather traditional; what is peculiar to Popper is the view of science as critical, as dialectical. Maimonides had said, human language is not fit to describe the attributes of the divine, yet it behoves humans to try to do so and to acknowledge the limitations of the results of their efforts. Combining the dialectic of the Maimonidean negative theology with the Spinozist replacement of natural theology with natural philosophy amounts to the negative science that Einstein and Popper envisaged" (p. 47).

Why Popper matters today: Popper inherited and carried forward the powerful tradition of criticism or *negative thinking*.