

## KARL POPPER ON TWO KINDS OF RATIONALISM

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### ABSTRACT

*'Rational' and 'Irrational' are two words in the philosophical diction which have been very confounding and controversial. For many philosophers, the philosophy of Plato is not only a great example of Idealism but also of rational thought. But for many philosophers it is not according to rational standards or even to standards of common sense. Kierkegaard is supposed to be the father and founder of Existentialism and his dissatisfaction towards reason, rationality and logic is quite obvious. Many great philosophers and thinkers like Schopenhauer, Bergeson, Nietzsche and Freud (the founder of Psycho Analysis) raised many serious questions about the validity of rational arguments and the importance of reason in the complete personality of a human being. The views of Karl R. Popper in this regard are very interesting. He is the strong upholder of Rationalism in Philosophy and Science but he does admit the limitations of a rational thought. This article is an attempt to understand the concept of a valid rational argument according to Karl R. Popper.*

**Key Words:** Rational, Irrational, A rational, Critical Rationalism, Uncritical or Comprehensive Rationalism.

### INTRODUCTION

The discussion and the controversy between Rational and Irrational Philosophy is long standing. In Greek Philosophy we find the philosophies of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle which are supposed to be the great examples of Rational Philosophy. It is Socrates, who revolted against the philosophy of Sophists (Flew, 1989) according to which, the ultimate source of knowledge is sense perception (individual's sense perception). In Modern Philosophy in the case of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz (Continental Rationalism) we find three great philosophers who believe reason as an ultimate source of knowledge (Stace, 2010). In case of Locke, Berkeley and Hume (British Empiricism) we notice a different style of philosophizing in which the ultimate source of knowledge is sense perception and not reason (Thilly, 1982). The greatness of Kant as a philosopher lies in the successful synthetization of Rationalism and Empiricism. Hegel is supposed to be the great champion of rationalism. According to Hegel "*The rational is real and real is rational*" (Russell, 2003). After Hegel there have been four major philosophical movements and the similarity among all of them is Anti-Hegelian in nature. The philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (the influence of Schopenhauer on Freudian thought is quite obvious) on one hand and the philosophy of Bergeson on the other described the role of other faculties in human personalities like will, instinct, or intuition. These thinkers also explained the over exaggerated role and importance of Pure Reason in human personality.

Karl R. Popper as an original philosopher neither agrees with Continental Rationalism nor with British Empiricism. He is of the opinion that both of the schools are authority oriented and have been struggling to reach at a flawless and ultimate source of knowledge (Popper, 1960). According to Popper, this should not be a genuine question of Philosophical Epistemology. The proper question of epistemology, according to Popper, should be how to scrutinize the data given by any source of knowledge? (Popper 1960). Now the question arises how to analyze the data given by any source of knowledge properly? In the philosophy of Karl Popper, the observation and experience (sensuous) play the role of a negative argument like reason. They are to falsify the scientific statement and not to verify it (Popper, 1972). According to Karl Popper, knowledge starts with conjectures or assumptions etc and the conjecture of Science and Philosophy should be criticizable (Popper, 1972). That is why the philosophy of Karl Popper is supposed to be a philosophy of Critical Rationalism.

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### **The discussion**

Popper in one of his research articles explains the two kinds of Rationalism. (Popper, 1945)

- i. Uncritical or Comprehensive Rationalism.
- ii. Critical Rationalism.

By Comprehensive Rationalism, Popper means that kind of rationalism that does not accept any statement which is not rational proper. We can explain this kind of rationalism with an example. If a person says "I will not accept any statement which is not rational proper." Now the question arises, can we consider the above-mentioned statement as rational proper itself? This statement seems to be a kind of wish, demand or temperament and nothing else. The same was the case of the Criterion of Verifiability of Logical Positivism (Churchland, 1975). According to Popper it is unattainable and contradictory in nature.

So far as the Critical Rationalism is concerned, it is that kind of rationalism which admits its limitations and boundaries. This kind of Rationalism accepts the priority of Irrationalism over Rationalism (Popper, 1945). Now again concentrate on the philosophy of Popper according to which every form of knowledge starts with conjectures and assumptions. The conjectures, assumptions, bold guesses, hypothesis, imagination and intuition cannot be termed as 'Rational Proper.' In other words, in the case of the Epistemology of Popper and in the case of the above mentioned two kinds of Rationalism, we find that kind of Rationalism which knows its boundaries and limitations and seems to me more sober and mature.

### **Research Questions**

The following are the research questions originating from this article

- i. What does one mean by a Rational statement?
- ii. What does one mean exactly by Irrational statement of any kind?
- iii. Is there any fixed meaning of Rational and Irrational?

### **Research Objectives**

The fundamental objective of this article is to be clear about the words Rational and Irrational because these are the words of great importance not only in the field of Philosophy and Psychology, but all forms of learning.

### **Greek Philosophy in the view of Karl Popper**

World Philosophy in general and European Philosophy in particular have great connections with Greek Philosophy. In this centuries old Philosophy, one can notice all the fundamental different point of views about philosophizing. In this Philosophy we have the fundamental discussions of Materialism, Idealism, Dualism, Individualism, Collectivism, Skepticism and Pluralism etc. Generally, and internationally, the time period of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle is supposed to be the most productive and the most fruitful period of Greek Thought. Interestingly Karl Popper has a different view. He identifies himself as a philosopher with Ionics (the first three philosophers of the ancient world) (Popper, 1958). He agrees with Socrates that knowledge is limited and human ignorance is boundless but he severally criticizes Plato and Aristotle due to the following reasons:

- i. He does not agree with Plato's Objective Idealism considering the Metaphysics of Plato as Irrational and contradictory to common sense (Popper, 1962). Remember Karl Popper is also regarded as a common-sense philosopher. Unlike Plato, he gave the concepts of Three Worlds in which 'World 1' is the world of material objects. 'World 2' is the world of human conception, perception and a disposition to act or react etc. 'World 3' according to Popper, is the world of all possible human creations (Popper, 1992). Unlike Objective Idealism of Plato, this world of Popper is Manmade and can be achieved by the interaction of the previous two worlds.
- ii. Popper criticizes Aristotle because of his insistence on definitions of things.
- iii. Popper is of the view that the free thinking and the free spirits of Philosopher can only be seen in Thales, Anaximander and Anaxemnes and with the rise of Pythagoras and his followers the free thinking and the making of new creative conjectures died down gradually.
- iv. Popper not only rejects Cynics, Stoics, Epicureans and Neo-Platonists etc but also Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle for not being rational proper.
- v. Interestingly, Popper does not accept the philosophies of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz as Rational. He considers them intellectuals of some sort (Popper, 1992).

### **Critical Rationalism of Karl Popper**

Keeping in view the above-mentioned objections of Popper on the great philosophers of Europe, it is but necessary to understand his thoughts (first) about Rational and Irrational thoughts and after the proper understanding and conception, one can move forward.

According to Popper, the Comprehensive Rationalism is not possible (as mentioned above). Because knowledge starts (according to Popper) with conjectures and assumptions etc. Knowledge can be obtained through imagination, intuition or vision etc. It is quite obvious that these faculties of human personality cannot be considered as rational proper. So, the position of Karl R. Popper as a critical rationalist seems very interesting and unique. Popper is that kind of rationalist who admits its boundaries (as mentioned above). At this point one cannot forget the famous distinction made by Karl Popper between Science and Pseudo Science. The traditional approach about scientific statement was that it is derived from observation and experience. Popper rejects this view and says categorically that no knowledge can be produced or developed by mere observation and experience (Popper, 1972). In order to get a new knowledge, one has to have a theoretical background in the form of conjectures or hypothesis. The observation and experience in this regard plays a role of a negative argument along with Critical Rationalism. In other words, the role of observation and experience is to check the validity of any scientific statement. In the language of Popper, the role of observation, experience and Critical Rationalism is to falsify the Scientific statement and not to verify it (Popper, 1992). For the proper understanding of the philosophy of Karl Popper in general and his views about Rationalism in particular, it would be helpful to break it down in the following points

- i. According to Karl Popper, Uncritical or Comprehensive Rationalism is not possible because human knowledge starts with conjectures and not with rational proper statements.
- ii. Since knowledge starts with conjecture, then in other words it starts with Irrational elements.
- iii. Popper openly admits that being rational is a choice, a demand and a temperament (Popper, 1945, 33).
- iv. Since nothing can be produced from mere observation and experience than the priority of theory over practice is obvious.
- v. One important point which Popper raised is that in the discussion of rational and irrational one should be balanced mentally and emotionally because according to the observations of Popper the upholder of Comprehensive Rationalism can soon become disappointed completely from Rationalism and become complete skeptics. For Popper this is uncalled for (Popper, 1945).

In the same article in which Popper presented the above mentioned two kinds of Rationalism he elaborated his position as Rationalist.

- i. According to Popper, Rational approach leads towards humanity and the equality of all human beings. While emotional or irrational approach leads to nowhere (Popper, 1945).
- ii. According to Popper, rational approach leads to the second important ideal and that is equal before the Law.
- iii. Procedural Justice cannot be achieved without Critical Rational approach.
- iv. According to him every conjecture is and should be criticizable and it should thoroughly be criticized (Popper, 1960).
- v. In the process of creativity Popper values imagination too much. But he identifies imagination with rationalism and not with emotionalism (for example creative thoughts in Science and Philosophy) (Popper, 1992).

### **Rational, Irrational and A rational**

Karl Popper is justified in his statement that rational and irrational are two concepts in Philosophy which have a long history behind. But my humble opinion in this regard is different. According to my personal opinion in the discussion of rational and irrational, the third important concept (A rational) must be included. Popper considers emotions as irrational. But in my opinion emotions, sentiments, moods and feelings should be regarded as A rational elements and not irrational ones. Same is the case with intuition,

imagination and vision. Instinct can also be considered as A rational. The problem with the article of Karl Popper is that it has only two categories as everything has to be divided into these two. Many views of Karl Popper in this regard can be challenged or criticized also.

- i. According to Popper, Rationalism identifies itself with the equality of all human beings and Emotionalism lead to nowhere. In my humble opinion this is quite arbitrary. Pure rational approach makes a man outsider and not engaged and involved into the affairs of day-to-day life. Interest in humanity and equal approach to all human beings have also some strong connections with the universal good emotions of human beings.
- ii. Equality before the Law is a graceful ideal which humanity has achieved over the years, but it is very difficult to give the whole credit to the rationality of human beings. Pure reason cannot produce this sort of ideals without the good emotions behind.
- iii. Sartre in his famous essay explains at length the fact that pure reason leads a man to be an outsider (Sartre, 1985). (Outsider is a name of a great novel by Albert Camus also) and through emotions one connects himself or herself with the world.
- iv. In the novel of Albert Camus as mentioned above the same theme appears, that without emotions (good) one can only be an outsider and not someone who can be considered as a natural and sympathetic human being. (Camus, 1946).

### **Karl Popper on Plato**

Karl Popper severely criticized Plato in his book *The Open Society and its Enemies* and considered his Objective Idealism as Irrational and not in accordance with common sense. I dare to differ with Popper considering Plato's Objective Idealism as not irrational but A rational; considering it as a Metaphysics beyond common sense and not contradictory to it. Karl Popper did not approve the rationalism of the Continental Philosophy considering it some sort of intellectualism (as mentioned above) but again this is not an appropriate opinion in my view. Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz are those great philosophers who believe in the existence of innate ideas. According to them the human knowledge is not acquired but innate. According to them Man can discover knowledge and not invent it. They are called rationalist according to this criterion. Popper rejected the whole philosophical epistemology of Continental Philosophy considering it subjective and irrelevant to the growth of Philosophy and Science (Popper, 1972). It seems quite clear that the rationalism of Popper is quite different from the rationalism of Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz etc.

### **Popper's Pluralistic Cosmology**

Popper is a philosopher who accepts common sense and the rationality which revolves around this common-sense view of the world. Let us explain it further.

According to Karl Popper there are three worlds. 'World 1' is the world of material objects. By accepting the existence of the external world around without having any Metaphysics behind, the position of Popper as a philosopher seems unusual. Unlike Idealists, he does not consider material world as a copy or shadow or illusion etc. But at the same time unlike materialists, he is not saying that only material things exist and the abstract things are nothing but a function of them. His 'World 2' is the world of human perception and conception etc and apparently this abstract world does not seem to be derived from the first world. The 'World 3' (as mentioned above) is the world of all possible human creations. In one of his articles, Popper considers Plato as the first discoverer of 'World 3' (Popper, 1967). At this point it is but necessary to understand the difference between the Objective Idealism of Plato and the 'World 3' of Popper. According to Plato, there are two worlds that is, the Material World and the World of Ideas and as a thorough going Metaphysician and Idealist, he considers the material world as nothing but the copy of the Ideal world (Perdue, 2014). The position of Popper as a philosopher is quite unusual. He believes in the material world and he believes in the internal, abstract world of human beings without considering himself as Idealist or Materialist. He gave the world a pluralistic cosmology. Considering human knowledge Manmade and considering it completely objective and self-autonomous as Plato thinks about his Objective Idealism, Popper seems less consistent than Plato (Popper, 1960). For Plato, ideas are self-existent, objective, self-autonomous, independent of any Mind or minds. By considering the Rationalism of Plato as irrational and contradictory to common sense Popper wants to assert the common-sense point of view of reality,

considering human knowledge as Manmade but insisting on the complete autonomy and objectivity of Human knowledge. To my mind this is the biggest mistake of Karl Popper as a cosmological philosopher.

By considering feelings and emotions as irrational, he even denies the common-sense point of view. Feelings and emotions should be considered A rational and not irrational. The philosophies of Plato and Hegel should also be considered A rational and not irrational ones. Now take the example of the Philosophy of Hegel. For Hegel Objective Spirit and Absolute Spirit are responsible for the original and creative ideas in Philosophy, Science, Art and History (Miller, 1979). Again, in the philosophy of Hegel knowledge is not Manmade. Knowledge is not an invention of Man. The problem with Karl Popper is that he has only two categories in mind. He considers emotions, feelings, instinct, imagination, intuition, vision etc as irrational elements of human personality. He forcefully asserts that no knowledge can be produced or developed from mere observation and experience. He also knows very well that in deduction nothing new about the world can be produced. Now the question arises from where does the creative conjecture come from? Popper has no answer and he wrongly consider it irrational. In my opinion, like the Objective Idealism of Plato or the Objective Spirit of Hegel the creative conjectures come from some A rational realm and a realm beyond common sense. In short, the biggest problem in Popper's Philosophy is not to include the A rational aspects of this world and not to include the great realm which is beyond rationality and common-sense.

## **CONCLUSION**

Karl R. Popper is supposed to be the great philosopher of 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He wrote immensely in his books and articles upon the different problems and issues of philosophy that is Epistemology, Cosmology, Metaphysics, Philosophical History and Philosophy of Science etc. In my personal opinion his most original contributions are in the field of Philosophy of Science and Political Philosophy. He made an original and valuable distinction between Critical Rationalism and Uncritical or Comprehensive Rationalism. His own philosophy is sometimes, called Critical Rationalism. Popper is the upholder of that kind of Rationalism which knows its boundaries and limitations. He identifies himself with the rationality and free thinking of Ionics and severely criticizes not only Pythagoras but also Plato and Aristotle. He rejects all Modern Philosophical Epistemology, considering it subjective and irrelevant to the growth of Science and Philosophy. This article is an attempt to reconsider the distinction made by Popper about Rationalism in which a suggestion was made that, in the discussion of Rational and Irrational the word and (the concept) A rational must be included. In the humble opinion of the writer this inclusion will help solve many confusions found in our day-to-day life (in case of feelings and emotions) and also in the proper understanding of the great philosophies of Pythagoras, Plato and Hegel. In the personal opinion of the writer Popper has been quite unfair to these great philosophers.

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