

Infallible Fallibilism

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I believe that a thoroughgoing fallibilism, which is supposed to apply actually to the statements constitutive of fallibilism themselves, is self-destructive, and consequently absurd. I wish to propose a less radical, but I think perfectly self-consistent, kind of fallibilism, which I shall argue is not self-destructive. A first-order fallibilism – applying to the natural science, history, and hermeneutics – may issue in, and in my opinion ought to issue in, a second-order infallibilism – applying to epistemology and metaphysics. More concretely, fallibilism is in general an infallible way of getting at the truth about the real world; or perhaps rather, fallibilism is an absolutely infallible way of tending towards the truth.

The issue is not merely a technical one within philosophy, but seems to be of some general cultural importance. Fallibilism is in effect¹ an attempt to set out foundations for knowledge, or, what amounts to the same thing, to provide a way of distinguishing between knowledge which is adequately grounded, and so amounts to 'knowledge' properly so-called, and what merely makes some pretensions to be 'knowledge'. As a result of the alleged failure of fallibilism and of other attempts to provide foundations for knowledge, the conviction has got about that knowledge neither has nor needs any such foundations. If this principle is once seriously accepted and consistently applied, the urgent question of how much of what anyone claims to be knowledge actually is so, and how much is not, can only be settled at the level of dogma and prejudice. If it is not, this can only be due to saving inconsistency; since to provide criteria in virtue of which any claimant to the title of knowledge can be rationally vindicated as such is nothing else than to provide foundations for knowledge.

It is important to realise, of course, that Sir Karl Popper, the most renowned living proponent of falsificationism, never claimed that falsifiability was the criterion for distinguishing between sense and nonsense, in the manner of the logical positivists with their verification principle. The trouble with the latter principle, as is by now notorious, is that it is revealed to be nonsense when applied to itself – since there is no course of experience by means of

which one could conceivably verify or falsify the non-analytic proposition that all meaningful non-analytic propositions must be verifiable or falsifiable in principle in some course of experience. For Popper, falsifiability merely provided the demarcation between what was science, and what was not science.² What was *not* science, what might be called 'metaphysics', could be estimable in all kinds of ways; for example, in that it made suggestions about the world which could be refined in such a way as to become testable in empirical terms and so scientific.³ But the question still remains of the status of the principle of falsifiability itself. Is it itself a piece of science? It cannot be, since there is no conjunction of observation statements by which it could conceivably be refuted. But if it is a piece of metaphysics, how is it justifiable as preferable to any other metaphysical statement? No doubt it is an excellent rule of thumb for scientists to follow in their attempts to find out the truth about the world; but how is it to be justified as such?

In *Objective Knowledge*, Popper *sets out* powerfully, and to my mind quite convincingly, the account which he has defended for decades of what it is for science to approach ever nearer to the truth about the world. All our scientific theories, he insists, remain guesses or conjectures. For such theories to be in the running at all, they must be in principle capable of refutation, by conjunctions of true observation statements,⁴ otherwise, they are not to count as scientific. Can we say on what grounds we ought to adopt some scientific theories in preference to others, as 'better' than them? The answer is that, if a new theory is to be preferred to an old one, it must succeed not only where the old one succeeded, but also where it failed, where it was refuted in the manner which has just been described.⁵ It is to be inferred from this that 'no theory has been shown to be true, or can be shown to be true',⁶ the best to which we can aspire is theories which are corroborated as better approximations to the truth than other theories, in that they have passed tests which those others have failed.

So much for the *setting-out* of what it is, on Popper's view, for science to approach closer and closer to knowledge of the real world; this can remain brief, since it is not here in dispute. But it remains to ask how this account can be *justified*; or if 'justification' is not to be regarded as a proper demand,⁷ 'corroborated' as more worthy of assent than rival views on the matter. It may be suggested that it is in accordance with general principles of rational discussion.⁸ But unless these principles are spelt out in a good deal more detail than is implicit in such a mere mention, this is not sufficient; a flat-earther could say as much in defence of his own cosmological theories. What evidence is there that Popper's

own assertions on this matter are any better approximations to the truth than their contradictories? Is the principle of falsifiability somehow itself infallible? If so, why is it so? If it is not infallible, how in principle could one non-arbitrarily decide to stand by it, or for that matter to set it aside?

Popper's own attempts to meet this point do not seem to me very impressive. They amount in effect to the following: –

- (1) Arguments against realism are merely philosophical, and philosophers are by and large a pretty contemptible class of persons.
- (2) It is as misguided, and indeed conceited, to say that the world is a figment of mind, as that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.
- (3) Language as such is committed to realism.
- (4) Men of no less stature than Albert Einstein and Winston Churchill have been supporters of realism.
- (5) It is a fundamental mistake to look for certainty anyway, on this or on any other issue; this is of course of the essence of fallibilism.⁹

As to this last suggestion, it looks as though Popper has adroitly used the application of fallibilism to itself as a pretext for accepting some very inadequate arguments in its defense; fallibilism does at this rate indeed sound very fallible. Popper's comments on the matter are great fun to read – it is hardly possible to doubt that the appearance of trifling and irony are quite deliberate – but it can scarcely be said that they meet the issue head on. With regard to the first point, it is to be insisted that arguments for realism, as opposed to the mere assumption that it is true, are just as 'philosophical' as arguments against it; to say, as Popper does, that the latter are 'philosophical in the worst sense', amounts to nothing more than a thinly-disguised announcement of a prejudice in favour of realism. And it is a curious piece of philosophical bravado to fall back on the claim that judgements of aesthetic value are objective, in order to support the thesis that our knowledge in general is so; the former view is notoriously at least as much in need of defense as the latter. As to the fourth argument, one can only comment that it is hardly *less* convincing than the first, the second, or the fifth.

In fact, I believe that realism can be defended in a manner adumbrated by the third argument. The defense may be summarised as follows. If any sense is to be made of a distinction between the real world on the one hand, and any merely apparent world, world-for-an-individual, or world-for-a-society, on the other, it is presupposed that some 'corrected view'¹⁰ is available, at least in principle, from which such a real world might be apprehended. In the same manner that dreams and illusions, as is so often pointed out in connection with the philosophy of Descartes,¹¹ presuppose by contrast reality and its knowability at least in principle, so do

these merely apparent world or worlds for such-and-such an individual or community which may be distinguished from the real world. Idealism and solipsism, each in its own way, amount to denial that there is a real world to be known by the process of learning which starts from the world apparent to any person or group, and proceeds by the appropriate mental process. But the very statement of idealism and solipsism, which imply that our so-called knowledge *is not* of a real world existing prior to and independently of ourselves and our minds, presupposes the conceivability of such a world, and so the possibility at least in principle of the 'corrected view' from which it might be known. Short of such conceivability and consequent possibility, even the denial implicit in idealism and solipsism is senseless. It is Popper's great merit to have described so forcefully the nature of the mental process by which we may tend increasingly to know the real world, as opposed to being confined to the worlds merely 'of' or 'for' ourselves as individuals or groups. The notions of 'real world' and 'reality' only have a hold in our language and thought as contrasted with what may turn out on investigation to be 'illusory', or 'unreal', or 'mere appearance', or whatever. Popper's principle of falsification amounts to a very ruthless and thoroughgoing recommendation for detecting and progressively eliminating the mistaking of 'mere appearance' for 'reality' in this sense, by constantly subjecting such 'mere appearance' to criticism. But to *bring out* how we tend to get to know the real world by such means is one thing; to *justify* or *corroborate* the thesis that there is such a 'real world', and that we tend to get to know it in such a way, is another.

In effect, I have just summarised an argument to the effect that the proposition that there is such a real world, and that it is to be known in such a way, is itself to be known *a priori*; but it is not an analytic proposition. It is not exactly a *contradiction* to deny either that there *is* a real world, or that it is to be known by stringent attempts to falsify our beliefs and assumptions. There is no strictly *logical* connection between the propositions 'I have carried out investigations on rigorously Popperian principles, which issue in a judgment to the effect that x', and 'The world external to and independent of me is probably^{1 2} characterised by fact x'. But it is not the case either that one can know by *experience*, in any ordinary sense of the word at least,^{1 3} that there *is* a real world, or that one progressively gets to know it through trying to falsify one's beliefs and assumptions in experience. Still, there is, as I have argued, a sense in which this thesis may be corroborated, and its contradictory refuted, through criticism, even though Popper seems to have failed to explain just how this might

be done. The more we consider the question of what we could mean by 'reality' or 'the real world' supposed to be in some sense independent of our inquiring minds and the data upon which they operate, the more we realise that it can be nothing other than what we come increasingly to know by subjecting the data to a thorough process of inquiry. If reality were not in *some* kind of relation to our potential knowledge, at least in principle, we could not even intelligibly declare that it was *beyond* our capacity to know.¹⁴

Popper has written that all objections to his account with which he is acquainted assume that he has tried to solve the traditional problem of induction. But he maintains that from his point of view questions like 'How can induction be justified?' are badly formulated.

'Traditional formulations of the principle of induction . . . all assume not only that our quest for knowledge has been successful, but also that we should be able to explain why it is successful. However, even on the assumption (which I share) that our quest for knowledge has been very successful so far, and that we now know something of our universe, this success becomes miraculously improbable, and therefore inexplicable; for an appeal to an endless series of improbable accidents is not an explanation'.¹⁵

I believe that any plausibility that can well be attributed to the argument of this passage depends on a confusion of two questions, both of which may be understood as expressed by the sentence 'How is knowledge possible?' The first, which is the one attended to by Popper, is a demand for the *causal preconditions* of there evolving creatures in the universe such as were capable of getting to know something about it, and of their founding and maintaining civilisations which would make this knowledge actual. (I would have thought myself that the meeting of such a demand would count as explanation of a kind; however, this is not the main point at issue.) The second question looks for *an overall account of the nature and structure of the world, and of the human mind, which would explain how the latter is capable of gaining knowledge of the former*. In attending to the first question, and claiming that it is unanswerable, Popper has misled himself into neglecting the second.

Let us concede to Popper, for the purposes of the present argument, that Kant's fundamental problem, 'How can synthetic judgments be valid *a priori*?' was an attempt to generalise the problem of induction.¹⁶ If the problem of induction (How can one validly argue from a number of particular premisses of the form 'This S is P', typically arrived at on the basis of observation, to the generalisation 'All Ss are P?') is itself badly formulated, one may well

conclude, as Popper appears to do, that Kant's is a pseudo-problem. But it does seem that Kant's problem, whatever its historical occasion, is one aspect of the question we have just been considering. The principle of falsifiability is not an analytic proposition – it cannot, as we have seen, be corroborated in experience; and the problem of its justification cannot merely be brushed aside. How is the process of framing hypotheses, and 'corroborating' some of these while falsifying others by reference to observation-statements, appropriate for getting to know the truth about a world which exists and existed prior to and independently of such a process? By virtue of what does this process culminate in statements which are *about* what is thus independent of themselves?

Kant is notoriously difficult to interpret; but on one very natural interpretation of what he says his solution is to deny that our knowledge is actually about what is thus independent of itself.¹⁷ Just because knowledge is constituted so largely by these *a priori* elements, he maintains that what comes to be known must be a world-for-us, in effect largely constituted by the process through which we come to know it. I do not think this conclusion is correct; but it is at least an attempt to cope with a real problem. By what right, to take an example which particularly impressed Kant, do we maintain that the world is really characterised by causal relationships, was so prior to man's coming to know about it, and would have been so even if men had never come to know about when the very existence of causal relationships as opposed to the mere conjunction of observable events adverted to by Hume,¹⁸ can only be established through a judgment which is at once synthetic and *a priori*?

As a matter of fact, I believe that fallibilism, or something very like it, can be justified as a series of what amount to *synthetic a priori* judgments. Philosophers do not always sufficiently take into account that some judgments are *self-destructive* without being *self-contradictory*. The verification principle, which is invalidated so far as it is applied to itself, is one example already referred to. Another is the assertion supported by reasons, on the part of Smith, that Smith is a being incapable of making assertions supported by reasons. Of course, it is a good deal rarer to make such judgments, than to make judgments from which they can be validly inferred. For example, a behaviorist might stigmatise all talk about speaking and acting for good reasons as due to the pre-scientific superstition that people actually do act and speak for good reasons. But if no-one acts or speaks for good reasons, then neither does the behaviorist in putting forward behaviorist views, nor could I in accepting them. Therefore, in advocating and commending his views, he is implicitly claiming to do, and inviting me

to do, what as a logical consequence of those views is impossible for both of us.

The following two propositions, if their implications are properly followed through, can be shown, I have argued, to be self-destructive:

(1) that knowledge or true belief is impossible; (2) that it is in general to be arrived at otherwise than by subjecting our judgments to rigorous critical appraisal. It is also in the last resort incoherent, as I have tried to show, to suppose that (3) the real world is other than what is thus to be known. Therefore, the contradictions of these propositions are correspondingly certain. I believe that it is failure to spell out these principles and to work out their consequences which has rendered Popper liable to attack by epistemological conventionalists and anarchists. The consequences of (1) and (2) constitute an epistemology; those of (3) a metaphysics. In epistemological and metaphysical enquiries, as in those of other kinds, to be thoroughly critical is to select (provisionally at least) as true those judgments which are best corroborated by the evidence; but in epistemological and metaphysical inquiries the alternatives are to be rejected as self-destructive, while in other kinds of inquiry they are to be rejected, in Popperian fashion, as falsified by evidence available to observation.

Popper's claim, that the term 'knowledge' is more or less equivocal as between scientific knowledge and that of other kinds, seems to me unfortunate. Any honest man wants to have knowledge rather than ignorance on the matters with which he is concerned, and to apply his knowledge; in doing so, he is liable conscientiously to examine his previous assumptions not just when it suits him to do so, but when the evidence warrants. The mature sciences impress us as they do, it seems to me, as at least on the way to truth about the world, just because they apply these principles in a thoroughgoing manner. And principles at least closely akin to those set out by Popper apply both to our moral lives, and to the business of interpreting the speech and writings of others. Moral badness is quite largely a matter of failure to attend to evidence which might falsify one's assumption that one is a worthy fellow, or that the position of one's group or class within society is in accordance with the principles of justice. Again, in interpreting an obscure ancient author whose opinions and circumstances are little known, I will be the more likely to get at the truth the wider the range of hypotheses I am aware of as to what he might mean, and the more conscientious I am about rejecting those falsified by the evidence in the document before me. It is in accordance both with common sense and with most philosophy to include the pursuit of truth among the constituents of the good or

virtuous life; on the account given in this paragraph, it can readily be seen why this is so.

Popper attacked the empiricists as trying to found knowledge on certainty; Peirce, his fellow-fallibilist, attacked Descartes for the same reason. If my arguments in this paper are sound, the search for certainty by Descartes and the empiricists was in principle correct; at least if *the results so far* of applying a method for getting to know the truth must be constantly open to correction, *the very method of obtaining* these results can hardly be so. Short of certainty at least at the level of method, complete scepticism must inevitably follow.¹⁹ As Popper sees it, 'All theories are hypotheses; all may be overthrown'.²⁰ But what could be the point of such a claim, except on the assumption that it is *by* being prepared to overthrow one's hypotheses when they conflict with the evidence that one may approach ever closer to the truth? And in what sense can I be prepared to overthrow the theory or hypothesis that the overthrowing of theories or hypotheses is the best means of approaching the truth? Only in that I can work out whether its contradictory is self-destructive; a kind of 'falsification' to which Popper does not seem to have adverted. Peirce stigmatised Cartesian doubt as at once impractical and insincere.²¹ Insincere doubt is pointless, to be sure; but this does not imply that we cannot investigate the presuppositions of our inquiries, and attend to the question of on what indubitable principles they are based, and why and in what sense they are indubitable. In rightly stigmatising the former kind of doubt as illegitimate, it seems to me, Peirce was misled into overlooking the importance of doubt of the latter kind.

It has been claimed that 'to take fallibilism seriously is to create problems for the notion of truth'.²² I think this applies only to a fallibilism supposed to operate at the level of epistemology and metaphysics as well as elsewhere. If one acknowledges limits to fallibilism of the kind which I have described, the problems no longer seem to arise. It is *a priori* true, in that the contradictory is self-destructive, that one tends to get at the truth about things by being thoroughly critical in the formation of one's judgments. *A propos* of Hume and Kant, Popper remarks that 'induction is invalid because it leads either to an infinite regress or to apriorism'.²³ I am inclined to retort that any thorough investigation of the nature and conditions of knowledge is bound to lead to aporia, scepticism, conventionalism, anarchism, or some sort of *a priori* account.

The complaint has also been made that 'it is hard . . . to combine objectivism and fallibilism'.²⁴ Here again, it seems that this is only so if fallibilism is not conceived within the limits and with

the qualifications which I have proposed. An inquiry is properly speaking 'objective' if it is comprehensively critical; the type of criticism which is appropriate differing according to whether the inquiry is epistemological or metaphysical on the one hand, or of some other kind on the other. By being 'objective' in this sense, as I have tried to show, it will tend to arrive at propositions which are 'objective' in the sense of being so independently of the 'subjective' feelings, opinions or attitudes of any inquirer.

It has been said that Peirce was driven towards a coherence rather than a correspondence theory of truth, in spite of his inclinations and intentions.²⁵ It seems to me that such a tendency could only be due to a confusion of two distinct ways in which statements may 'correspond' to what is independent of them. A statement may be tested for truth or falsity in relation to evidence available to the senses; but this evidence is certainly by no means always, and is perhaps rather seldom, identical with the state of affairs whose being the case or not being the case is strictly speaking what makes the statement true or false. Thus the statement 'Abraham Lincoln died of gunshot-wounds' is true if and only if the corresponding event happened at some time in the past; it can be tested here and now, however, only on the basis of evidence available in the present. In general, in order to find out what is *true about* the real world *on the basis of* evidence available to the senses, one has to attempt to make one's statements *coherent with one another*. But this is by no means inconsistent with the thesis, which I would argue to be true, that it is *by means of* such coherence within one's statements, and correspondence (in one sense) with data available to one's senses, that one comes increasingly to make statements which correspond (in another sense) with the facts and states of affairs which make up the real world.

It has been suggested that 'we shall never be able to know whether our thoughts agree with reality or not'. Suppose we have criteria by which we purport to validate our methods of investigation; we may still ask, how we can be sure that these reveal 'undistorted reality'. This will involve us in the invocation of more criteria; and the justification of these in yet more again; and so on *ad infinitum*.²⁶ On the contrary, it might be asked, how in the long run could one even make sense of the notion that any conception of reality was distorted, except by implicit reference to some in principle available yardstick which would indicate the distortion to *be* a distortion? In a sense it is true that we can never compare our thoughts with reality; but there is another sense in which it is not. Plainly we cannot *directly* compare the world as it is in itself, with the world as we conceive it to be. But we can advert to the manner in which we correct our successive conceptions of the world, and maintain that our later conceptions of it more closely

represent it as it really is than did our earlier ones. We have, as one might put it, a second-order conception of the real world, or the world as it actually is, as that to which our first-order conceptions approximate more and more closely as we strive to correct them in the light of experience. We do *indirectly* have access to the real world, as that to which our views of the world approximate to the degree that we criticise them rigorously.

According to Stuart Hampshire, 'We cannot now separate the world as we now see it, as a result of the infinitely complicated evolution of our ways of thought and speech as civilised beings, from the world as it really is, somehow divided into its elements by a 'natural' system of classification'.²⁷ But, if what I have argued is on the right lines, there is an important sense in which we *can* do just this. Short of a rough-and-ready ability to judge what is actually so, as opposed to what merely seemed to them as creatures who had evolved in certain ways, our ancestors simply would not have survived – having been poisoned by berries which seemed to be harmless but were really poisonous, or eaten by tigers which seemed gentle but were really ferocious. With the growth of the comprehensively critical attitude which issues in the sciences, the process of disentangling the real from the merely seeming is pushed further; the right classification, which correctly describes things as they are, would be that which, however widely or stringently applied, did not conflict with observation or issue in errors of practice.

Popper will have it that 'the idea of truth is absolutist; but no claim can be made for absolute certainty; we are seekers for the truth but we are not its possessors'.²⁸ But if we are not *absolutely* certain even of *that* much, must we not despair of truth altogether, with the consequence that we fail even to seek it? I believe that the answer is that one can be absolutely certain of some statements about the world and our knowledge of it which are at a very high level of generality, on the grounds that their contradictories are self-destructive. In this way, we can be quite sure that *the world or reality is nothing other than what properly-corroborated judgments tend to be about*. And 'properly-corroborated judgments', at what I have called the first-order level, are those which are susceptible of, and have been subjected to, stringent empirical testing. At that rate, (first-order) fallibilism is infallible (at a second-order level); and must be so, if it is not to be self-destructive and so yield to conventionalism and relativism.

- 1 I believe that this remains so, for all that Popper professes to be hostile to such 'foundations', apparently as redolent of the kind of attempt to 'justify' one's position which is anathema to a conscientious falsificationist.
- 2 Cf. Bryan Magee, *Popper* (London 1973, 43); Popper, *Objective Knowledge* (Oxford, 1972) i2.

- 3 Magee, 45–6. Cf. Popper *Conjectures and Refutations* (London, 1972), 37–8; *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London, 1968), 278.
- 4 *Objective Knowledge*, 12.
- 5 *Objective Knowledge*, 14.
- 6 *Objective Knowledge*, 21.
- 7 Cf. note (1) above.
- 8 This has been suggested to me in conversation by Bryan Magee.
- 9 *Objective Knowledge*, 39–42.
- 10 Cf. P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (London 1966), 250.
- 11 *First Meditation*
- 12 Of course, as Popper rightly points out, this is not ‘probability’ in the sense at issue in the ‘probability calculus’ (*Objective Knowledge*, 40). The same point was made by Bertrand Russell (see A. J. Ayer, *Russell*, London 1972, 96).
- 13 Perhaps the whole business of attending to data, asking questions, coming to conclusions, and reflecting on this process, might at a pinch be said to be a matter of ‘experience’ in a very extended sense; in which case one could be said to come to know such things by experience.
- 14 This is of course the usual, and in my opinion quite justified, objection to Kant’s conception of the *Ding an sich*. For a modern work which repeats this error of Kant’s, see Milton K. Munitz, *The Mystery of Existence* (New York, 1965).
- 15 *Objective Knowledge*, 28.
- 16 *Objective Knowledge*, 27–8.
- 17 Cf. e.g. B xx of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. (*Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London and Basingstoke 1978), 24.
- 18 David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, I, III, xiv; *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section V, Part I.
- 19 Complete scepticism must ensue, if we do not judge it to be certain that whatever method we have determined upon at least *tends* to get at the truth to a degree that rival methods do not. This would not be inconsistent with the truth being arrived at by way of exception through arbitrary means (e.g. the contemplation of tea-leaves or the entrails of birds) where the application of appropriate methods had failed.
- 20 *Objective Knowledge*, 29.
- 21 Cf. S. Haack, ‘Two Fallibilists in Search of the Truth’, I (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume II, 1977), 68.
- 22 K. Kolenda, ‘Two Fallibilists’, II, 85.
- 23 *Objective Knowledge*, 86.
- 24 Haack, ‘Two Fallibilists’, 82.
- 25 Kolenda, ‘Two Fallibilists’, 85. Cf. 92: ‘Percepts are visual data, perceptual judgments are thoughts. The former are ‘absolutely dumb’ (Peirce), ‘lifeless’ (Wittgenstein), the latter are interpreted, understood. To ponder these remarks, by both philosophers, is to be drawn away from the idea of a correspondence of thought to reality’.
- 26 A. Adjukiewics, *Problems and Theories of Philosophy* (Cambridge 1975), 11.
- 27 S. Hampshire, *Thought and Action*, (London, 1965), 39.
- 28 *Objective Knowledge*, 47.