

# Back to Kant's '*Sapere aude!*'

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Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large portion of men, even when nature has long emancipated them from alien guidance (naturaliter maiorennnes), nevertheless gladly remain immature for life. For the same reasons, it is all too easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so convenient to be immature! If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have a conscience for me, a doctor to judge a diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all. I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will soon enough take the tiresome job for me. (Immanuel Kant, 1784)

Steve Fuller's new challenging essay, dense of hints and suggestions as his works usually are, invites the reader to a critical examination of the wide-ranging sociological and cultural implications of ideas, with particular emphasis on their consequences in time and on the role of their authors and supporters throughout history. In the present remarks I shall confine myself to a few comments on the epistemological roots of Fuller's arguments.

Once again, after his *Thomas Kuhn: a Philosophical History of Our Times* (2000) and *Kuhn vs Popper: The Struggle for the Soul of Science* (2003a), as well as a number of articles and short essays, Fuller calls our attention to the sharp difference between two radically different approaches to science and philosophy, namely, Karl Popper's and Thomas Kuhn's. Most interestingly, in the present work Fuller highlights an aspect that underlies their respective views about the politics of ideas – a facet that, in Kuhn's case, is never explicitly stated nor confronted, but whose shadow hangs over most of his epistemological works. Furthermore, by putting the issue of the responsibility of intellectuals within a broader context, Fuller helps us to better understand its scope and critically approach it.

In Popper's case the critique of intellectuals springs from the fact that ideas always have unintended and unforeseeable consequences: 'If ideas can be vehicles for launching us into a glorious future, they can equally serve to propel us to a disastrous fate' (Fuller, 2003b: 21). Therefore, Fuller continues, 'A responsible intellectual is mindful of just this Janus-faced potential of ideas. It implies both a cognitive and an ethical burden' (*ibid.*). On the other hand, Kuhn's concern with the puzzle-solving activity that characterizes paradigm-driven periods of normal science betrays a justificationist conception of rationality that prevents the very possibility of freedom of thought, decision and responsibility that informs the nature of Popper's philosophy. Whereas Popper clearly separated justification and criticism, in Kuhn (as well as in Wittgenstein, from whom Kuhn draws many of his philosophical tenets) justification and criticism remain fused. That is why their followers do not have the option of using criticism as an alternative to justification and turn to description of frameworks and standards. Criticism becomes an alternative to justification only after the two notions are clearly separated. Once this separation is achieved, instead of positing authorities to guarantee and criticize actions and opinions, the aim becomes that of constructing a philosophical programme to foster the growth of knowledge and to counteract intellectual error.

The idea that paradigms (or lexicons, in Kuhn's later terminology) are not and cannot be true or false *per se* is but a variant of logical positivists' justificationism: it is the idea that truth is grounded in the solidarity of beliefs within a given scientific community, an immediate consequence of Kuhn's highlighting of the communitarian character of science. According to this view the truth of a scientific theory reflects or is a projection of the consensus within the scientific community. A theory is false when it is rejected by that community. What is true is what experts agree to be true; what is open is that on which leaders do not care or dare to have an opinion. Positivists as well placed particular emphasis on community: they regarded communal collaboration as important for the production and justification of scientific knowledge, which they in turn regarded as important for the unity of science. It is this very emphasis that fuels Kuhn's conception of science as a social institution and his attempt to define scientific knowledge, if not truth itself, in terms of the consensus of belief that is forged among its members.

However, advance in knowledge has nothing to do with membership in communities (Wittgenstein notwithstanding). The strength of a community and the solidarity of belief offer ease and disengagement: for sure, they offer intellectuals the possibility to entrench themselves more firmly and better enforce their ideas on others, whatever the effects on the real development of science and on the community. But it is a two-edged sword, for when we add to Kuhn's ideas that scientists must commit themselves uncritically to a

paradigm and that it is appropriate for the profession to ostracize those who disagree, then it becomes difficult to see how science can uphold and encourage freedom of thought.

Furthermore, what Kuhn himself portrayed as a realistic description of the way science actually works takes on a strongly normative function. Feyerabend spotted this aspect immediately after reading the typescript of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*: 'What you are writing', he wrote in a 1960 letter to Kuhn, 'is not just history':

It is *ideology covered up as history* . . . you use a kind of double-talk where every assertion may be read in two ways, as the report of a historical fact, and as a methodological rule. You thereby take your readers in. You present your material in such a manner that . . . history seems to satisfy the principle that ALLES WIRKLICHE IST VERNÜNFTIG so that evaluations can then be directly derived from historical study. (Feyerabend, 1995: 355)

With a different terminology, Kuhn is nothing but employing and stretching Wittgenstein's ideas. For, according to the Austrian philosopher, each discipline, 'language game' or 'form of life' has its own standards, principles or 'logic', which need not be compared or be reducible to any other standards or (external) principle and which it is the special task of the philosopher to describe and clarify – not the least to judge, defend or criticize. There is no arguing or judging among disciplines: criticism, evaluation and explanation would no longer be proper philosophical aims. Knowledge is essentially divided, and description is all that remains to the philosopher. All he can do is to describe the logics, grammars or first principles of the various kinds of discourse, and the many sorts of language games and forms of life in which they are embedded. Philosophical critique is no longer of content, but of criteria application. Paul Feyerabend highlighted this very clearly in his 1970 rejoinder to Kuhn, plainly declaring that all that is left would be 'consolations for the specialists'.

Kuhn's philosophy is more interested in the acceptance, not in the content, of ideas, confining itself to their present – rather than potential – power. It legitimates existing structures and neglects the aims of those operating within them, above all the growth of knowledge and the advancement of learning. At the heart of his views lies a dangerous form of imperialism, according to which disciplines and their practitioners must conform: they must not judge one another, and they must not try to describe a common world in collaboration with other disciplines, since each one has its own. Kuhn's philosophy, regardless of its author's intentions, tries to convince us that no fundamental decision or responsibility on our part is required, that we really should not waste our time on criticism or on trying to understand, and that everything will and must go well if we only fall into step behind the institutionalized

scientific dogma of the day and its experts. The risk is to replace philosophical and scientific values of truth, rationality, and the freedom of thought with political power, solidarity and (blind, dogmatic) commitment to belief (see Gattei, 2004: chs 5–6).

Kuhn's relativism gives rise to a sort of conservative defence of whatever belief system is construed as rational according to the established scientific community. Despite revolutionary science is being acknowledged, critical attitude is systematically discouraged: instead, normal science is regarded as the essence of the scientific enterprise, and dogmatic commitment to a paradigm (or a lexicon) is upheld as a necessary prerequisite for rational knowledge and social harmony. And the desperate search for 'harmony', rather than critical engagement, often characterizes Kuhn's contributions to public debates and reflects in his writings. Indeed, while Kuhn's history of science does not conceal controversy and error, his philosophy of science consistently plays them down. Rorty, as Fuller rightly notices, moves along the same line: 'intellectuals are often generously credited for positive developments traceable in their ideas, however unintended, while blame is withheld from them for the negative developments, however intended' (Fuller, 2003b: 31). Controversy is a vital and regular factor in the scientific tradition: by saying that for most of the time leading scientists rightly shield from criticism the ruling scientific idea of the day Kuhn and Rorty utterly disregard its relevance for the growth of knowledge and the development of human beings (on these issues, see Agassi, 1997 and 2002).

Intellectuals, and particularly their leaders, academic professors, advocate a commonwealth of learning governed by a free market of ideas. Kuhn's philosophy and sociology of knowledge are incompatible with a free market of ideas – and yet they are extremely popular and widely recommended. It is not too difficult to see why. As Joseph Agassi has argued, the immense popularity of Kuhn's stereotypical image of the scientific enterprise is part and parcel of the betrayal of the intellectuals of the second half of the 20th century. Kuhnian ideas do serve a function in contemporary academic life: they legitimate the existing structures of powerful academic institutions – they legitimate the very system in which Kuhn was intellectually born and trained, and from which he benefited so much. Kuhn legitimates, in other words, the scientific establishment and offers a theoretical defence of intellectual cartels. Popper's philosophy, by contrast, aims at undermining them, casting doubt on all expertise and making the challenges to establishments part and parcel of the scientific enterprise. That is the reason why academic leaders prefer to embrace Kuhn's views and hold Popper at a distance. Intellectual leaders need Kuhnian ideology to legitimate what they do, for undoubtedly Kuhn is largely right on the descriptive level: in practice, many intellectuals tend to work against the free market of ideas. They attempt to control the intellectual landscape and what they call intellectual freedom is,

in fact, protection from intellectual competition. The continuing popularity of Kuhn's ideas among academics, four decades after they were first published, is strong evidence that the market-place of ideas is severely regulated and that intellectuals are often regimented in the steps of their alleged leaders. As in the case of Wittgenstein, Kuhn told professionals what they wanted to hear.

Whereas most professional philosophers, following Wittgenstein and Kuhn, compartmentalize knowledge and take the view that the scope of rationality is severely limited, Popper does neither and offers instead a universal theory of unlimited rational criticism. Both Kuhn and Wittgenstein have created philosophies that justify and rationalize entrenchment and reduce competition. Popper advanced an evolutionary epistemology according to which ideas are subjected to sharp competition, science is a revolutionary activity dedicated to pursuing truth by overthrowing error, and unsuccessful ideas are weeded out by confronting them with contrary evidence or arguments. By contrast, in Kuhn's eyes most of science is bound by tradition and commitment to reigning paradigms that are guarded and licensed by scientific elites. Intellectual revolution is a rarity, likely to be more disruptive than enlightening: the history of science is not the story of the struggle for truth among competing theoretical frameworks – rather, it is the story of successive ideological hegemonies that work to perpetuate the profession, not to advance knowledge.

As William Bartley put it in his extraordinary last book (1990), our knowledge is unfathomable: when we affirm a theory, we at the same time propose its logical implications – that is, we affirm all those statements that follow from it, as well as those implications that stem from combining it with other theories that we also propose or assume. As a consequence, the informative content of any theory includes (non-trivial) statements that cannot be known in advance. This means that intellectuals cannot afford to set themselves above the debate. Each of us is needed to help objectify and to probe our ideas, so as to better understand what we are saying. In particular, we need to be able both to give and to receive criticism. If we want to learn from a debate, our aim should be to lose and not to win, for the more all participants lose, the more we all win – that is, learn. Such a critical conversation, conducted in the service of truth, is also a token of our respect for one another, grounded in our mutual recognition of the fallibility of the human condition.

This is no easy task: our choice in favour of reason does not guarantee that we will be successful in our search for the truth, nor in the discovery of our errors. It does not even necessarily lead to the avoidance of violence. Of course, it may lead to these things – but it also may not, and faith in reason may become important precisely when it does not. However, we must go through all this if we want not only to preach reason, but to put it into action

– and do so with people whose views and life-styles are different from, and hence more of a challenge to, our own. Reasoning is engaging in communication with others: it requires non-epistemic values of social conduct. Central among these is the moral imperative to take others and their arguments seriously – i.e. to respect them, that is, to be ready not only to allow differences to exist (*tolerance*), but also to try to learn from them (*respect*). Popper accepted this challenge and invited fellow intellectuals to engage in dialogue with the full awareness of its difficulty and of the responsibility involved in our ideas, decisions and actions. His invitation calls us all back to Kant's words:

*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. The immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding! (Kant, 1784: 54)*

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