

AGAINST BIG WORDS

(A letter not originally intended for publication)

Preface. About fourteen years ago I received a letter from a Herr Klaus Grossner, whom I had never previously heard of. He mentioned my friend Hans Albert and asked me for a written interview about the state of (German) philosophy. I agreed with a great deal of his letter, and although I disagreed with some of it, I nevertheless thought it worthy of discussion, and so I answered his questions in spite of some reservations. In a subsequent letter, Herr Grossner asked me for permission to publish the parts of the letter printed here below in a book he was planning. Despite further misgivings I gave him my permission, but only for his book: I retained all my author's rights, and stressed that my contribution to his book must not be reprinted without my express permission. Yet shortly afterwards an excerpt appeared (under the excellent title 'Against Big Words' ['Wider die großen Worte']) in the weekly newspaper Die Zeit, without my permission and with no mention of my rights. (In Germany and Austria copyright is often considerably abused.) Since my letter has already been printed twice in excerpts and has been misquoted on many occasions, I have decided to reprint the previously published section here without any amendments, in spite of its aggressiveness. I wrote:

First, in answer to your four questions (or groups of questions).

1. I started out as a socialist at secondary school, but did not find school very stimulating. I left school at sixteen and only returned to take the university entrance examination (*Reifeprüfung*). At seventeen (1919) I was still a socialist, but I had become an opponent of Marx (as a result of some encounters with Communists). Further experiences (of bureaucrats) led me to the insight, even prior to fascism, that the increasing power of the machine of the state constitutes the utmost danger for personal freedom, and that we must therefore keep on fighting the machine. My social-

ism was not just a theoretical stance: I learnt cabinetmaking (by contrast with my intellectual socialist friends) and took the journeyman's examination; I worked in children's homes; I became a primary school teacher; prior to the completion of my first book ('The Two Fundamental Problems of Epistemology', unpublished [published by Mohr in Tübingen in 1979]) I had no intention of becoming a Professor of Philosophy. (*The Logic of Scientific Discovery* was published in 1934; I accepted an appointment in New Zealand at Christmas-time, 1936.)

I have retained many ideas and ideals from my socialist youth in my old age. In particular:

Every intellectual has a very special responsibility. He has the privilege and the opportunity of studying. In return, he owes it to his fellow men (or 'to society') to represent the results of his study as simply, clearly and modestly as he can. The worst thing that intellectuals can do – the cardinal sin – is to try to set themselves up as great prophets vis-à-vis their fellow men and to impress them with puzzling philosophies. Anyone who cannot speak simply and clearly should say nothing and continue to work until he can do so.

During the Philosophy Congress in Vienna (1968) I was invited to two television discussions between philosophers and was surprised to find Bloch at one of them. We had some insignificant clashes. (I said, quite truthfully, that I am too stupid to understand the way he expresses himself.) At the end of the discussion the chairman, Dr Wolfgang Kraus, said to us: 'Please tell us in one sentence what, in your opinion, is most needed.' I was the only one to give a brief answer. My answer was: 'Rather more intellectual modesty.'

I am an anti-Marxist and a liberal. But I admit that both Marx and Lenin wrote in a simple and direct manner. What would they have said of the pomposity of the neo-Dialecticians? They would have found harsher words than 'pomposity'. (In my opinion, Lenin's book against empirio-criticism is most excellent.)

In answer to your question about the social problems that underlie my works:

All my philosophical works are connected with non-philosophical problems. I wrote about this in 1952 (see *Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 72): 'Genuine philosophical problems are always rooted in urgent problems outside philosophy, and they die if

these roots decay.' And I cited examples of areas in which problems are rooted, politics, social life, religion, cosmology, mathematics, natural science, and history.

A description of these 'roots' of my 'logic of scientific discovery' may be found in chapter 1 (1957), pp. 33–8 of *Conjectures and Refutations*. (*Conjectures and Refutations* has not yet been translated into German, because I cannot find a good enough translator. A copy [for you] is in the post.)

For 'The Poverty of Historicism' please see my dedication in my book of that title (p. v), the end of my preface to the German edition (the last paragraph on p. viii to the end of p. ix).

For the 'Logic of Scientific Discovery' please see also the first page of the introduction to the third German edition (p. xxv).

2. More about this later.

3. At the moment I am working upon my contributions to a volume of the 'Library of Living Philosophers', edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp. (I think that some of these volumes have also appeared in Germany, including the Einstein volume.) The volume that I am working upon is called 'The Philosophy of Karl Popper', and it contains (a) a so-called 'intellectual autobiography', (b) critical contributions by about twenty-five people (including some scientists, as well as philosophers) and (c) my answers.

My current writings are largely dedicated to the struggle against irrationalism and subjectivism in physics and in other sciences, especially in the social sciences. My works are, as always, attempts to formulate intractable problems as precisely as possible and then to solve them. (Even my scientific, logical works – for example, on physics – are attempts to solve problems that are connected with our social and political diseases.)

I also return time and again to problems that I solved many years ago, to tighten up the solution for instance, or to pursue the new problems that arise from my suggested solution – or to follow up new connections.

Here is a list of those problems:

The problem of demarcation. Science/non-science; rationality/irrationality.

The problem of induction in all its guises; including propensities, universals and 'essence'; the problem of definition (the impos-

sibility of the defining postulate and the non-essential nature of all definitions).

The problem of realism (against positivism). Methodology of the natural sciences and of the humanities.

The role of problems and problem situations in the social sciences and in history. The problem of general problem-solving.

Problems of objectivity. Tarski's theory of truth; content, truth content, approximation to the truth. Objectivity in logic (the theory of deduction), mathematics, probability theory. Probability in physics. The problem of time and the direction of time.

The status of Darwin's theory of natural selection. Improvement of the theory of natural selection (selective explanation of developmental trends). Human language and its development. The language of political suggestions.

Indeterminism and selection. Theory of the 'third world' and of logical and non-logical values.

The mind-body problem. A large number of historical problems, especially about the history of theories (from Hesiod and the Presocratics right up to quantum theory).

This is a long list (and will be partly incomprehensible to anyone who does not know my works). Yet I have omitted a great deal, and I am still working upon all these problems and others. See my List of Publications; although a great deal has not been published.

4. I have (I believe) never written a word about Marcuse. In my view, it is pointless to get involved in this diatribe. (See point 2 below. A swamp!) If I remember correctly, I first met Marcuse in 1966 in California (although we were at Harvard at the same time in 1950), but we did not discuss anything. I have the same opinion of Marcuse as does my friend and colleague Cranston.

I have already written about aestheticism in chapter 9 of volume 1 of *The Open Society* (of which the German translation is unfortunately poor). (See the motto by Martin du Gard.) On the whole, Marcuse merely repeats what Mourlan says in du Gard. My criticism can be found in chapter 9 of *The Open Society*. Of course, I wrote this criticism, in chapter 9, long before Marcuse adopted his present stance ('negative philosophy'), and du Gard had already published his book in 1936–40.

In my view, the difference between the 'idealists' among the fascists and Marcuse is almost negligible.

I now turn to your point 2.

2. This group of questions in your letter covers a great deal of ground. I must begin with my epistemological theory.

You say that you have read my works; but please take another look at my *Second Thesis* on p. 103 of the Adorno book on *The Positivist Dispute*. The thesis that we know nothing is meant seriously. It is important never to forget our ignorance. *We should therefore never pretend to know anything, and we should never use big words.*

What I called the cardinal sin above (point 1) – the presumptuousness of the three-quarters educated – is simply talking hot air, professing a wisdom we do not possess. The recipe is: tautologies and trivialities seasoned with paradoxical nonsense. Another recipe is: write down some scarcely comprehensible pomposity and add trivialities from time to time. This will be enjoyed by the reader who is flattered to find thoughts he has already had himself in such a 'deep' book. (Anyone can see these days that the emperor's new clothes are fashionable!)

When a student comes up to university he has no idea what standards he should apply, and so he adopts the standards he finds. Since the intellectual standards in most departments of Philosophy (and particularly of Sociology) permit pomposity and presumed knowledge (all these people seem to know an awful lot), even good heads are completely turned. And those students who are irritated by the false presumptions of the 'ruling' philosophy become opponents of philosophy, and *rightly so*. They then believe, *wrongly*, that these presumptions are those of the 'ruling class', and that a philosophy influenced by Marx would be better. But modern left-wing nonsense is generally even worse than modern right-wing nonsense.

What have the neo-Dialecticians learnt? They have not learnt how hard it is to solve problems and to come nearer to the truth. They have only learnt how to drown their fellow human beings in a sea of words.

Consequently, I do not like squabbling with these people: they have no standards.

It will perhaps interest you to know that, during the entire period of student unrest, we have up to now had only a single revolutionary student in my department (of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method) at the London School of Economics. He

had so much opportunity to put forward his view that he had no reason to complain. My departmental colleagues and I have *never* taught in an authoritarian or dogmatic fashion. Our students were *always* (since I took over the Department in 1946) asked to interrupt the lectures if they either did not understand something or did not agree; and they were never treated condescendingly. We have never set ourselves up as great thinkers. I stress repeatedly that I do not want to convert anybody: I simply set problems and trial solutions before the students. Of course I make it very clear where I stand – what I take to be correct, and what I think is false.

So I do not propound any philosophical doctrine, or any new revelation (unlike *every one* of the people you mention in your letter, with the exception of Hans Albert); rather I put forward problems and trial solutions, and these trial solutions are critically examined.

This throws a little light upon the great difference between myself and the other philosophers you mention. There are only a very few philosophers who solve problems. I hesitate to say it, but I believe that I have solved a whole string of really fundamental philosophical problems – like, for example, the problem of induction. (These trial solutions have – as always – produced new and fertile problems.)

Although I have had so much undeserved success, the fact that I have solved problems is largely ignored. (Hans Albert is the great exception in Germany.) Most philosophers are incapable of recognizing either a problem or a solution, even when they are staring them in the face: these things simply lie outside their field of interest.

I am unwilling to criticize these philosophers. To criticize them would be (as my friend Karl Menger once said) to plunge after them, sword drawn, into the swamp in which they are already sinking, only to sink with them. (Hans Albert risked it, and he has not yet sunk.) Instead of criticizing them, I try to establish new and better standards by discussing the solutions to problems. This may sound arrogant. Nevertheless, I believe that this is the only correct course of action. This explains why I have never published a single word about Marcuse nor about Habermas (until my letter in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 26 March 1970, of which I am sending you a copy).

The basic thesis of Adorno and Habermas in *The Positivist Dispute* is the *claim* (made by Mannheim) that *factual knowledge and*

value judgements in sociology are inextricably linked. I have dealt with this entire topic in my criticism of Mannheim [*Open Society*, vol. II, *The Poverty of Historicism*; also *The Positivist Dispute*, from the final paragraph before the 11th thesis up to the 13th thesis²], in which I attempt to prove not the falsity, but rather the triviality and irrelevance of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. My opponents merely repeat Mannheim's thesis over and over again, in old or new words, instead of providing a serious discussion of the points I have made. Clearly, this does not answer my criticisms.

I now turn to a new point, which is connected with *your philosophical dictionary* (in your article), and in which I criticize this dictionary.

5. I never quarrel over words. But the expressions 'Positivism' and 'Neo-Positivism', which have been brought into this debate by Habermas, have an almost laughable history.

(a) *Positivism*. The expression was introduced by Comte. It originally denoted the following epistemological position. There is positive, that is to say, non-hypothetical, knowledge. This positive knowledge must be retained as a starting point and a foundation.

(b) *Moral and juridical positivism*. Critics of Hegel (including, for example, myself in *The Open Society*) have argued that the Hegelian theory 'Anything that is reasonable is real' is a form of positivism: moral and legal values (for example: justice) are replaced by *positive facts* (the prevailing custom and the prevailing law). (It is precisely this Hegelian conflation of values and facts which still haunts Habermas: it is the remains of this positivism that prevent him from distinguishing the normative from the factual.)

This positivist mixture of values (norms) and facts is a consequence of Hegelian epistemology; moreover, a consistent epistemological positivist must also be a moral and juridical positivist. This means, as I explained in *The Open Society*, that

Right = Might

or that:

Today's might = Right;

a position I resist just as strongly is moral futurism:

Tomorrow's might = Right.

(c) *Ernst Mach's Positivism*. Mach and later Bertrand Russell accepted Berkeley's sensationalism in some of their works:

esse = percipi,

that is, roughly speaking: nothing exists other than sensations. They combined this with Comte's positivism: Knowledge consists of *descriptions of facts* (and not of explanations and hypotheses).

(d) *The 'Logical Positivism'* of the Vienna Circle combined the positivism of Mach and Russell with Russell's 'logistic' philosophy of mathematics. (This was then and is now often called 'New Positivism'.)

(e) Now it is my turn.

I have argued against all forms of positivism both in Vienna, 1930-7, and in England, 1935-6.

In 1934 I published my book *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. This was a criticism of positivism. But Schlick and Frank, the leaders of the Vienna Circle, were so tolerant that they accepted the book for a series they were editing.

One result of this tolerance was that *everyone who just glanced at the book took me for a positivist*.

This resulted in the widely believed myth of Popper the positivist. The myth was perpetrated in countless discourses, in footnotes or in subordinate clauses. Once someone has 'learnt' in this fashion that I am a positivist, and once he has publicly committed himself to this view, he then generally tries to alter the concept of positivism afterwards so that it applies to me. This has already happened from time to time, especially with people who have either not read my books at all, or have read them only very superficially. *This is all relatively unimportant*, since it is only a question of words ('positivism'); and I do not quarrel over words.

Nevertheless, my position could not be more different from positivism. (The only similarity is that I am very interested in physics and biology, whilst the hermeneutists have not the slightest interest in any of the natural sciences.)

In particular I am:

an anti-inductivist;

an anti-sensationalist;

a champion of the primacy of the theoretical and the hypothetical;

a *realist*.

My epistemology implies that the natural sciences do not begin with 'measurements', but with great ideas; and that scientific progress does *not* consist in the accumulation or clarification of facts, but in bold and revolutionary ideas, which are then sharply criticized and examined.

As far as social matters are concerned, I stress a practical approach: the combating of evils, of avoidable suffering and of avoidable lack of freedom (by contrast with promises of a heaven on earth), and in the social sciences I fight against the habit of counterfeiting.

In reality my position is as far removed from positivism as is (for example) that of Gadamer.

You see, I have discovered – and this is the basis for my criticism of positivism – that natural science does *not* proceed in a positivist fashion, but in the main employs a method which works with 'prejudices'. But, wherever possible, it uses new prejudices and prejudices that can be criticized and subjects them to severe criticism. (This can all be found in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 1934 [first published in English 1959].) I have even used the word 'prejudice' in this sense and shown that Bacon, who denounced prejudices, misunderstood the method of natural science; see my little booklet *On the Sources of Knowledge and of Ignorance*, 1960, reprinted in my anthology *Conjectures and Refutations*, especially p. 14.³

Therefore: what separates me from Gadamer is a better understanding of the 'method' of the natural sciences, a logical theory of truth and the *critical* attitude. But my theory is just as anti-positivistic as his, and I have shown that textual interpretation (hermeneutics) employs genuinely scientific methods. Furthermore, my criticism of positivism was astonishingly successful. After many years, it was largely accepted by the surviving members of the Vienna Circle; thus John Passmore, the historian of philosophy, was able to write that: 'Positivism is as dead as a philosophical movement ever can be.'

I do not think much of words and names. But the name ('Neo-)Positivism' is just a symptom of the widespread habit of criticizing before reading. I must make this clear because of your philosophical dictionary. I do not have discussions with those people who discuss things in terms of such catchwords. See Karl Menger's remark, above. This way can lead only into the infinite mire of scholastic quarrels about words. I hope to make better use of my time: in studying more pressing problems.

(The task of reading – and refuting – *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* fell to Herr Wellmer as the other members of the Frankfurt School did not have the time. In his hands, Gadamer's *Truth and Method* becomes the antithesis of epistemology and methodology. But nothing fits together.)

Adorno and Habermas are anything but clear in their criticism of my position. In brief: they believe that, because my epistemology is (they think) positivist, it forces me to defend the social *status quo*. In other words: my (supposed) epistemological positivism forces me to accept a moral and juridical positivism. (That was my criticism of Hegel.) They have unfortunately overlooked the fact that, although I am indeed a (non-revolutionary) liberal, my epistemological theory is a *theory of the growth of knowledge through intellectual and scientific revolutions*. [Through new and great ideas.]

Adorno and Habermas do not know what they are criticizing; and they do not know that their own theory of the analytically indissoluble connection between values and facts is a moral and juridical positivism that derives from Hegel.

Résumé of the book about the so-called 'Positivist Dispute'. This book is sailing under the wrong flag. Besides: my contribution, which was both temporally and logically the *first* and which really gave rise to all the others, was meant to be a basis for discussion. It consisted of twenty-seven clearly and precisely formulated theses, which should and could have been discussed. Yet my theses are hardly ever mentioned in the course of this long book, and my contribution, in the middle of the book, is drowned in a sea of words. No review has mentioned that my theses and arguments are never answered. The method (where arguments are lacking, replace them by a torrent of words) succeeded, and my drowned theses and arguments have been forgotten.

But all this (that is to say, the entire 'Positivist Dispute') is simply walking upon eggshells and is almost grotesque in its insignificance.

Résumé of the whole. Although I almost always work upon sharply defined scientific problems, a common thread runs through all my work: *in favour of critical argument – against empty words and against intellectual immodesty and presumptuousness – against the betrayal of the intellectuals, as Julien Benda called it* (see the 4th and 5th English editions of *The Open Society*, vol. II, p. 393). I am convinced (see *The Open Society*) that we, the intellectuals, are to blame for almost all misery, because we do not

strive hard enough to achieve intellectual honesty. (Consequently, the most pig-headed anti-intellectualism will probably triumph in the end.) In *The Open Society* I say this in a hundred different attacks upon false prophets, and I do not mince my words. For example, I have made a couple of *very harsh* brief remarks about Jaspers and Heidegger (see the Index of Names to *The Open Society*, vol. II, English or German editions).

It seems that you would like to know my reasons for refusing to have any discussions with Professor Habermas.

Here are my reasons. They consist (1) of quotations of Professor Habermas from the beginning of his postscript to the controversy between Popper and Adorno, in the '*Positivist Dispute*' (nota bene, I never published a word about either Adorno or Habermas until 26 March 1970), and (2) of my translations. Many readers will think that I have failed to provide an adequate translation of the original. They may well be right. I am a reasonably experienced translator, but I am perhaps too stupid for this task. Be this as it may, I have done my best:

To the original I feel
I must appeal,
And render faithfully the holy text
In my beloved German next.⁴

It is not the aim of my translation to avoid foreign words, provided that their meaning is clear (co-operation = team work; antagonism = opposition), rather my *sole* concern is to make the – somewhat meagre – informational content of every sentence as clear as possible, even if this should make the translation longer than the original.

Habermas begins with a quotation from Adorno, whom he applauds (page 155).

[Quotations from Habermas's
Essay]⁵

Social totality does not lead
any life of its own over and
above that which it unites and
of which it is, itself,
composed.

[My 'translation']

Society consists of social
connections.

It produces and reproduces
itself through its individual
elements.

It is no more possible to
separate this totality from the
life, the co-operation, and the
antagonism of the individual,

than it is to understand any
element merely in terms of its
functions without an insight
into the whole, the essence of
which inheres in the motion
of the individual entity itself.

System and individual entity
are reciprocal and can only be
understood in their
reciprocity.

(Note: The doctrine of unity given here has been expressed countless times,
and very often better; but the words become more impressive every time.)

Now Professor Habermas himself writes:

Adorno comprehends society
in terms of categories, which
do not deny their descent
from Hegel's logic.

He sees society as a totality in
the strictly dialectical sense,
which forbids the organic
comprehension of the whole
in terms of the statement that
it is more than the sum of its
parts;

These different connections
somehow produce society.

Co-operation and antagonism
may be found between these
connections; and since (as
stated previously) society
consists in these connections,
it cannot be separated from
them;

but the converse is also true:
none of the connections can
be understood without the
others.

(Repetition of the above.)

Adorno uses a terminology
reminiscent of Hegel.

This is why (sic) he does not
say that the whole is more
than the sum of its parts;

nor is the totality a class
whose logical parameters
could be determined by
amalgamating all the elements
within it.

nor is (sic) the whole a class
of elements

And so on. For example, further down the same page we find
the totality of the social interrelations of life . . . we are all
somehow related to each other . . .

or on page 157

Theories are ordering
schemata which we may
construct as we wish within a
syntactically binding
framework.

Theories should not be
formulated ungrammatically;
apart from that, you can say
anything you like.

These theories prove usable in
a particular object domain if
they satisfy its real diversity.

They can be applied to a
specific field, if they are
applicable.

Unfortunately many sociologists, philosophers, *et al.*,
traditionally regard the dreadful game of making the simple
appear complex and the trivial seem difficult as their legitimate
task. That is what they have learnt to do and they teach others
to do the same. There is absolutely nothing that can be done
about it. Even Faust could not change things. Our very ears
have been deformed by now so that they can only hear very
big words.

Men do believe, if they hear words,
There must be thoughts that go with them.⁶

This is why Goethe goes on to say of the great hidden power of
this magical knowledge:

But if you can't think,
Just give me a wink,
And I give it to you for nothing.⁷

As you already know, I am an opponent of Marx; but among the
many of his remarks that I admire is the following: 'Dialectic in
its mysticized form became the German fashion . . .'

It still is.

This is my excuse for not entering this debate, but preferring to
work upon formulating my ideas as simply as possible. This is
often not easy.

NOTE (1984)

The quotation from Marx (at the end of my letter) comes from *Das Kapital*, 2nd edition, 1872, p. 822. Earlier on the same page Marx had written: 'I criticized the mysticizing side of the Hegelian dialectic almost 30 years ago, at a time when it was still fashionable.'

Marx did not suspect that it might remain so, perhaps for ever.

NOTES

- 1 Translator's note: The quotation is given directly from *Conjectures and Refutations*, 5th edn, Routledge, London and New York, 1989, p. 72.
- 2 Translator's note: This paper also appears in the present volume, chapter 5. See pp. 72 f.
- 3 Translator's note: Chapter 3 of this volume is an abbreviated version of this booklet as reprinted in *Conjectures and Refutations*.
- 4 Translator's note: This passage (from Goethe's *Faust*) was translated by the author from the German text below:

Mich drängt's, den Grundtext aufzuschlagen,
Mit redlichem Gefühl einmal
Das heilige Original
In mein geliebtes Deutsch zu übertragen.

- 5 Translator's note: The original German texts of both the Habermas quotations and the author's translations are given in the Appendix (pp. 233-5 below).
- 6 Translator's note: This passage was translated by the author from the German text below.

Gewöhnlich glaubt der Mensch, wenn er nur Worte hört,
Es müsse sich dabei doch auch was denken lassen.

- 7 Translator's note: This passage was translated by the author from the German text below.

Und wer nicht denkt,
Dem wird sie geschenkt,
Er hat sie ohne Sorgen.