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Preface

To borrow a phrase from Tolkien, this tale grew in the telling. It started life back in 2013 as a public lecture involving material that eventually found its way into Part II, and was released as a podcast entitled "The Open Society as an Enemy" on the now-defunct iTunes U.[1] At the time, the plan was to concentrate primarily on issues concerning social media, the transparent nature of modern life, and the erosion of privacy in the age of the internet. As is often the case, life got in the way of making further progress after the public lecture was delivered, and the project was shelved with the intention of getting back to it one day.

Days turned into years, but the ideas kept percolating in the background. It was only during a research sabbatical in 2017–18 that I was able to brush off my notes and revive the project. By then, its scope had expanded to include other areas, motivated by concerns over populist swings in Western governments that led to the election of Donald Trump in the 2016 US Presidential election and the UK's vote to leave the European Union, but with a belief that those movements were manifestations of a deeper phenomenon. In the meantime, more had happened, which meant that much of what had been written needed to be rewritten. All of this led to more scribble, scribble, scribble towards another damned thick, square book. A little more than half of the book was written during that sabbatical, but life intervened again, and the project returned to the shelf as I took on an administrative role in the fall of 2018. I had hoped to make some progress on the project while in that post, but then COVID-19 appeared, and the world turned on its ear yet again. The first full draft was finally completed in October 2022.

One problem with writing a book about the *zeitgeist* is that if you take too much *zeit*, the *geist* changes. One constant worry during the writing of this book was that the phenomenon with which I was concerned would self-correct, and I would wind up with little more than an extended note about what one person was worried about during the first quarter of the 21st century. The only good thing I can say about the extended period of social upheaval of the past few years is that the main argument and analysis of the book remains, I believe, as salient and relevant as ever.

I was trained as an analytic philosopher, but this is not a work of analytic philosophy. Its scope is too broad and its intertwined themes are too varied to conform to the normal conventions of that tradition. In my more cynical moments, I say that analytic philosophy is where important problems go to crawl inside their own navel and die.[2] When faced with a problem, all too

often, the first instinct of an analytic philosopher is to take out their conceptual cleaver and chop, chop, chop the problem down to its clearest, most precise, and least interesting formulation. However, real life is messy and tangled and complicated, and frequently the analysis of a messy, tangled philosophical problem stripped of all complexity offers little guidance on what to say about the original.

If this is not a work of analytic philosophy, then what is it? It is, most assuredly, not an attempt to build a grand philosophical theory in the spirit of 19th-century system builders. It is not an attempt to provide the definitive answer to a single problem or even a set of problems. It is, one might say, an attempt to provide a philosophically sensitive, empirically informed analysis of a social problem that spans multiple disciplines and affects people from all walks of life, casting a general malaise upon contemporary society. It is an attempt to weave a tapestry from a great many threads, providing a picture, from one perspective, of what has come to pass and why. It is, to adopt a phrase, a work of *synthetic* philosophy. It offers analysis and aims at rigour, but its primary ambition is to articulate a problem where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and cannot be solved if we only concentrate on solving each part in isolation.

There are many shortcomings in the analysis provided. The most obvious is that each of the four main parts addresses themes that could easily be the subject of a self-contained book.[3] Trying to draw attention to the many *interconnections* between these themes and how they mutually shape our present understanding of the Open Society requires, of necessity, not only brevity but omission. A second shortcoming is that this book largely concentrates on trends that have played out in the US and the UK. This is because the book draws upon my own experience as an American expatriate who has lived in the UK for the past twenty-plus years. And perhaps a third shortcoming is that, with a topic such as this, additional examples that illustrate the phenomenon I am concerned with appear more rapidly than it is possible to address. The Tristram Shandy paradox has never felt so real as when writing this book.

No book will persuade every reader of every point. I hope that most readers will agree with some of what I say, and that some readers will agree with most of what I say. This book has been written over such a long period of time that I am no longer sure that *I* still agree with everything that I say. But maybe that's how it should be. To adapt a phrase from Groove Armada, "If everybody thought the same, we'd get tired of talking with each other." That holds for our past and future selves as well.

Introduction

It is difficult to recall the optimism that existed in the West at the end of the 1980s. Although the Tiananmen Square protests ended on 4 June 1989, with the Chinese military brutally crushing the popular uprising, that event was followed by the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November and, only a few years later, by the collapse of the Soviet Union on 26 December 1991. For those alive at the time, it was not just a profound change in the global order but the decisive end to the ideological conflict underlying the Cold War. To some, it seemed we were experiencing the "end of history", even if it took several more years for Francis Fukuyama's book of that name to appear. The optimism even found its way into the electronic music of the time. The Jesus Jones song, "Right Here, Right Now", released shortly after the Wall fell, captured the *zeitgeist* perfectly:

> Right here, right now
> there is no other place I want to be
> Right here, right now
> watching the world wake up from history

That this optimism no longer exists is clear. This book offers an analysis of why that is, and attempts to correct a broad conceptual shift that may have been partly responsible.

Each generation experiences an event X that burns itself into the collective consciousness. That event provides a focal point in future conversations, enabling people to ask *where were you when X happened?* For my generation, the aptly named Generation X, our X was the fall of the Berlin Wall. For my parents, members of the Baby Boomer generation, their X was the assassination of John F. Kennedy. For the Millennials, X was the terror attacks of 9/11 and the collapse of the Twin Towers. For Generation Z, which came of age during the early 2000s, I suspect their X is less of a singular event than the overwhelming awareness of climate change, political intransigence, and the need for urgent action. Maybe, for them, X will refer to the answer to the question, *when did you realise something had to be done?*

For all these values of X, the fall of the Berlin Wall is unique. In what way? The fall of the Wall and the opening up of East Berlin were positive events, one that inspired hope and symbolised transformative change on an international scale not previously thought possible. It is a curious coincidence that the Berlin Wall fell during the formative years of a generation that would be known for being cynical and disinterested – the first generation predicted to earn less than

their parents – and the generation to whom the term "slacker" was liberally applied. Nevertheless, when news channels showed footage of ordinary people taking sledgehammers to the Wall, the one thought on everyone's mind was that, whatever happened before, the future was going to be very different.

There is a Yiddish proverb that says, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans". History's unfolding has a way of confounding expectations. Liberal democracy is under threat from the rise of populists and authoritarians. The popular movements collectively known as the "Arab Spring" did not result in greater freedoms and the blossoming of democracy in the countries where they happened, with the possible exception of Tunisia. The tragedy of the Syrian civil war continues. War is on the verge of breaking out in the Middle East. Public debate in America has become coarse and toxic. Racism and xenophobia have become more prevalent. Many people have grave doubts about the value of international institutions such as the United Nations or free-trade economic agreements. The United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union in part due to concerns over immigration and a rejection of the four freedoms of the European Union. Russia has engaged in shadowy exercises of power, challenging the values and credibility of Western institutions. It also invaded Ukraine. And China's emergence as the pre-eminent superpower is nearly complete as it prepares to take centre stage as the largest national economy on the planet.[1] Taken together, the post-World War II order is unravelling before our eyes.

Some suggest that this collapse is due to the fact that people have had quite enough of the economic upheaval caused by globalisation. In the US, concerns over the economy have been interwoven with concerns about illegal immigration. Trump's pledge to build a wall along the southern US border tapped into people's fears about Hispanic migrants flooding their communities and taking their jobs. In the UK, the concern was with *legal* immigration, for membership in the European Union required that the UK respect the free movement of people. And, while the UK did benefit from free movement, people were understandably worried about the need to protect, as Gordon Brown put it, "British jobs for British workers". In both the US and the UK, fears over immigration or demographic change led a number of people to believe that their way of life was being threatened by the resulting societal shifts.[2] In Hillary Clinton's book, *What Happened*, she quoted a Republican voter who said Democrats "wanted to take away his guns and make him attend a gay wedding". In the UK's referendum on whether to leave the EU, the division of votes into pro-Brexit and pro-Remain was complicated by the fact that two million British expatriates living abroad were excluded (BBC News 2016), and that the vote was divided sharply along generational lines. But there is more at play here than just people's concerns over economics, immigration, or political disagreement between demographic groups.

To see that those issues are only part of the story, it is important to note that a number of recent political upheavals were facilitated by effective (dis)information campaigns on social media. We are still learning the full effect of Cambridge Analytica, the secretive political consulting firm that closed in 2018 after the news broke about its influence over elections around the world, but we know one thing for certain: political campaign managers from the past could only have dreamed of creating the kind of targeted advertisements that are now possible. Such advertising has an insidious side to it – social media, not subject to traditional regulations covering election advertising, effectively weaponises people's personal information, allowing them to be manipulated by advertisements tailored to their psychological profiles.

Coexisting with all of the above is the increased polarisation of society, which is both a cause and effect of some of the phenomena mentioned above. Our group identities have become increasingly dominant, often with unfortunate consequences. Online, group identity can override a person's qualifications, with arguments discredited on the grounds of who the author is rather than what they say. Knowledge is increasingly politicised, and increasingly moralised. More remarkably, it has been shown that communication across group boundaries can actually *increase* polarisation. When a person's group membership is seen as core to their identity, information undermining beliefs relevant to that identity can prompt the person to double down and, paradoxically, raise their degree of belief.

All of these factors, at all levels of society, help fuel popular resentment, transforming our current age into what Pankaj Mishra has called an "age of anger". People from all walks of life feel as if they are facing existential threats. What do people do during times of existential threats? They try to protect themselves. How do they protect themselves? By rejecting what they see as the source of the threat and turning towards leaders who acknowledge their fears and offer solutions that are typically easily articulated with clear scapegoats. Perhaps it is not surprising that so many voted for Trump in 2016; after all, he declared "I am your voice. I alone can fix it. I will restore law and order". Similarly, perhaps it is not surprising that so many in the UK voted for Brexit; after years of grinding austerity, who wouldn't want to give the system a good kick? When faced with complex problems admitting no easy solution, simple political slogans promising to "take back control" or "make America great again" provide comfort.

The Open Society and Its Enemies

What, if anything, does all the above have to do with the Open Society, the topic of this book? I believe the above events reveal an important conceptual shift, and a revaluation of values, related to the core principles of Western democracy. It is for this reason that I began by contrasting the sense of optimism unleashed by the collapse of the Wall with the current climate of anxiety

and fear and the rise of populism, pivoting towards authoritarianism. In order to appreciate the exact nature of this conceptual shift and revaluation of values, we first need to step back in time to 1945, when the philosopher Karl Popper published his influential critique of totalitarianism, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

Karl Popper was an unusual figure to have written a sweeping historical critique on the intellectual origins of totalitarianism. At the time, Popper was known as a philosopher of science, not a political philosopher, and best known for his theory of *falsificationism*, a view about what distinguishes scientific theories from other, nonscientific, systems of belief. Essentially, falsificationism states that the distinguishing feature of scientific theories is that they entail specific claims which can be tested empirically. If the claim is found to hold, the theory is *corroborated* since the empirical finding is consistent with it. We cannot conclude, though, that the theory is true because we have only checked one claim out of the infinitely many the theory entails. But what we can conclude, if the claim is found not to hold, is that we have *falsified* the theory. We have found a prediction that is incorrect.[3] Theories that have this property are said to be *falsifiable*, and falsifiability, according to Popper, is the distinguishing feature of scientific theories. Falsifiability suggested a principled way to distinguish astronomy from astrology and evolution from intelligent design. This idea of what distinguishes scientific theories from other types of belief has become embedded in popular culture and is known to people who have never otherwise heard of Karl Popper.

Popper's move into social and political philosophy was facilitated by three things. First, he was a polymath with a wide range of scientific, philosophical, and political interests – in addition to an unwavering confidence in his own abilities.[4] Second, in his youth, Popper's political interests led him to study the writings of Marx, eventually joining an organisation he describes in his autobiography (Popper 1992, p. 32) as "the association of socialist pupils of secondary schools". However, Popper became disenchanted with Marxism after a number of his associates were shot by the police on 15 June 1919 in a street protest in Vienna.[5] He also had growing reservations about Marx's theory of historical materialism, ultimately concluding that the view was unscientific. (Popper discusses this at length in his book, *The Poverty of Historicism*.) Third, the rise of Nazism in Germany and the looming threat of the annexation of Popper's native Austria made him fear for his safety; all of Popper's grandparents were Jewish. Popper emigrated to New Zealand in 1937, taking a job as a lecturer at Canterbury University College in Christchurch. It was there that Popper wrote *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, which he later described as his "war effort".

What, exactly, is meant by the expression "the Open Society"? For Popper, the Open Society was a society in which individuals had the freedom to choose the kind of life they wanted to live and how they wanted to live it. The Open Society was *open* in the sense that the future possibilities for a person were not ruled out simply by virtue of their social position and social practices

that kept each person in their place. In writing about the Open Society, Popper frequently contrasts it with the "organic or biological theory of the state". According to that theory, "a closed society resembles a herd or a tribe in being a semi-organic unity whose members are held together by semi-biological ties – kinship, living together, sharing common efforts, common dangers, common joys and common distresses" (Popper 1945a, p. 186). How does a closed society resemble an *organic* unity? For Popper, the core idea was that an organic unity has an overarching commonality of purpose for each of the component parts (namely, keeping the organism alive) combined with the fixed, static nature of each part's role in achieving that purpose.

A closed society is one where each person has their assigned place. Medieval societies, with clear class differences between the serfs, nobility, and royalty, where this order was decreed by God in the divine right of kings, provide one example. In a closed society, people are denied both the opportunities and freedom to develop and shape their lives according to their values and desires. In contrast, an Open Society is one "in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions" (Popper 1945a, p. 186) – decisions that involve substantive choices about one's life trajectory and the kind of person one wants to be. That openness, freedom, and *indeterminacy* of the future, which allows people to write their life stories, is at the heart of Popper's conception of the Open Society.

Popper thought that a primary threat to the Open Society, perhaps even the greatest threat, derived from faulty epistemology. In particular, Popper believed that closed societies relied upon people's failure to embrace an attitude he called "critical rationalism". In a critical rationalist mindset, people interrogate their beliefs and the reasons why they hold them, always challenging their beliefs and asking if they have good reasons for what they believe. A natural parallel with Popper's theory of falsificationism can be seen: if we find that we don't have good reasons for what we believe, we should either suspend judgement or revise our beliefs. This isn't quite the same thing as falsificationism, for not all of our beliefs can be empirically tested in the same way as scientific theories. Moral theories, for example, don't make descriptive claims about the world that can be empirically tested. Instead, moral theories make normative claims about how one should act or how one should evaluate outcomes. Nevertheless, critical rationalism still applies to moral theories, for we can ask why we hold the moral beliefs we do. This is one way moral progress is made.

According to Popper, knowledge became politicised in closed societies. For instance, Nazi Germany's theories of racial superiority had no basis in fact, but reams of pseudo-scientific material were produced to support those views for political reasons. In the Soviet Union, Trofim Lysenko advocated a number of utterly misguided agricultural theories that were amenable to Soviet ideology; these theories rejected Mendelian genetics and the theory of evolution by natural selection as Western propaganda. ("Survival of the fittest" was seen

by some communists as free market economics written into biology.) Biologists who dissented from Lysenko's views were sent to prison camps or executed. As a result of Lysenko's influence, agricultural yields actually declined in the Soviet Union until Lysenkoism was abolished after the death of Stalin.[6] China not only suffered from Lysenko's influence, having imported his theories as part of good communist ideology, but created its own disaster in the Great Leap Forward where Mao's ideologically influenced economic theories destroyed the economy and led to the death of over 30 million Chinese people due to famine.[7]

It's been a long time since the reign of Lysenkoism in the Soviet Union, but Popper's concern about the dangers of politicised knowledge is as relevant as ever. Today, the politicisation of knowledge occurs more subtly. Instead of being couched in explicitly ideological terms, it is often masked by spurious evidential concerns and the cultivation of fear, uncertainty, and doubt.[8] We see this in both the US and the UK. The denial of climate change, despite its well-established status within the scientific community, is one egregious illustration of the politicisation of knowledge. In the US, alongside climate change denial, we find efforts to overturn Obamacare, despite it being a reasonable attempt to patch the dysfunctional US healthcare sector given the socioeconomic and political constraints that impede reform.

In the UK, the politicisation of knowledge is illustrated by the following anecdote. During the run-up to the EU referendum, Michael Gove dismissed predictions about the economic damage that leaving the EU would cause by saying, "people in this country have had enough of experts" (see Mance 2016). Experts don't always get it right, and so the frustration expressed by Gove is understandable. The vast majority of economists around the world received a great deal of criticism for failing to predict the financial crisis of 2008. Yet, if you are not going to consider expert advice, what will you base your judgement on instead? When it comes to complex issues with potentially harmful long-term consequences, Michael Gove's remarks are nothing less than shocking. Given his attitude towards experts, perhaps we should not be surprised that as Secretary of State for Education he approved opening three schools advocating creationism (Vasagar 2012).

Concerns about the politicisation of knowledge continue to be well-founded, and there is reason to believe critical rationalism has come under attack throughout the West, just as when Popper was writing. The main difference between Popper's time and our own is that, whereas Popper was concerned with the subversion of knowledge by totalitarian governments, in the contemporary period we are now seeing the subversion of knowledge by populist governments of all ideological stripes. But there is, I believe, more at play here than just the politicisation of knowledge. The Open Society, in a variety of senses different from those that concerned Popper, has come under attack in recent years, for reasons other than the politicisation of knowledge. To see this, we need to reflect on the concept of the Open Society and the multiple

senses that it possesses. And this requires understanding the peculiar kind of concept it is.

Rorschach concepts

Popper's conception of the Open Society centred around personal freedom and the absence of rigid class structures. This sense of the Open Society was key to how the West framed the conflict between the competing political ideologies that lay at the heart of the Cold War. Yet there are a number of other ideas suggested by the term "Open Society" that goes beyond Popper's conception, although they are certainly related to it. Take freedom of movement, or informational transparency, or the value of diverse societies, for example. How can a single concept play such an important coordinating role in society while remaining so nebulous?

I suggest that the concept of the Open Society serves as a coordinating device for social and political discussions. In a highly influential paper, Taylor (1971) identified two different kinds of meaning something can have, and examined how those different kinds of meaning influence people's behaviour. The first type of meaning was *intersubjective* meaning, which just referred to a meaning shared across society. Typical examples of intersubjective meanings are those attached to words in ordinary language, such as "table" and "chair", "to run", "to laugh", and so on. However, intersubjective meanings also go beyond linguistic meaning. Holding up your hand with the palm facing outwards is nearly universally understood to mean *stop*; a beckoning gesture means *come here*. Other behaviours display more cultural variation: nodding one's head means *yes* in most Western countries but *no* in Bulgaria. The intersubjective meanings of society make communication possible and facilitate collective action. Intersubjective meanings are necessary for *individuals* to operate as a *group*.

However, intersubjective meanings, on their own, are not enough to transform a *group* into a *community*. Creating a community requires something above and beyond that which enables people to coordinate, because people can coordinate their activities without there being anything that binds them together. This is the function of Taylor's second kind of meaning, which he called *common* meaning. The phrase *common meaning* might suggest something prosaic or done frequently, but Taylor drew on the sense of *common* as something *belonging to the whole community*. Common meanings are special in that they provide the foundation of our social existence. Taylor explains the idea as:

> Common meanings are the basis of community. Intersubjective meaning gives a people a common language to talk about social reality and a common understanding of certain norms, but only with common meanings does this common reference world contain significant common actions, celebrations and feelings. These

> are objects in the world that everybody shares. This is what makes community. (Taylor 1971, p. 30)

It is natural to think that common meanings, because they are the basis of a community and are shared by the community, are those things that the community has reached a consensus on. However, this isn't quite right.

Taylor immediately challenges that understanding with the following clarificatory remarks (emphasis added):

> We cannot really understand this phenomenon [of how common meanings create community] through the usual definition of consensus as convergence of opinion and value. For what is meant here is something more than convergence. Convergence is what happens when our values are shared. But what is required for common meanings is that this shared value be part of the common world, that this sharing be shared. But we could also say that common meanings are quite other than consensus, *for they can subsist with a high degree of cleavage*; this is what happens when a common meaning comes to be lived and understood differently by different groups in a society. (Taylor 1971, pp. 30–31)

The fact that Taylor says that common meanings can subsist "with a high degree of cleavage" is no accident. The verb *to cleave* is, curiously, one of those words that is its own antonym. If you consult the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the first sense of *cleave*, meaning "to part or divide by a cutting blow; to split", derives from the Old English *cléofan*. As an example, the OED cites a usage from the King James Bible in 1611: "Abraham […] claue the word for the burnt offering" (Genesis 22:3). The second sense, meaning "to stick fast or adhere" derives from the Old English *clífan*. Here, the OED provides an example from the Coverdale Bible of 1535: "their tonges cleued to the rofe of their mouthes" (Job, 29:10). These two different words in Old English converged over time in their pronunciation and spelling to the single word we now have, with two utterly opposing senses.

To say that common meanings provide a basis for community while being able to subsist with a high degree of cleavage is to say that common meanings have the ability to unify and divide *at the same time*. This is a well-known phenomenon. Fierce debates can erupt between individuals who appear otherwise to be in broad agreement. The ambiguities of common meanings, and their role in creating a shared perception of a community can be leveraged by masterful politicians to suggest agreement where little, in fact, exists.

To illustrate this, recall Donald Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again". Many commentators were struck by the fact that he was running for president with a slogan acknowledging American decline. Trump's gloomy call sharply contrasted with that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt who, in the

midst of the Great Depression, ran on "Happy Days Are Here Again" (1932), "Remember Hoover!" (1936), and "Better a Third Termer than a Third Rater" (1940). A less-noted feature is that the slogan "Make America Great Again" is largely devoid of content. Make America great, in what way, and how? The genius of Trump's slogan is that each individual who endorsed "Make America Great Again" could cheer in support, yet have a different understanding from everybody else as to what exactly it meant.

However, one might also argue that the slogan was not entirely devoid of content because American history provided some common ideals on which to build, such as the preservation of individual liberty. But note that appealing to these ideals doesn't solve the problem so much as push it back a stage, for the notions of *individual liberty* and *personal freedom* are also common meanings with the power to cleave. "Make America Great Again" could mean any of the following, in any rank ordering: from rolling back the forces of globalisation, to restoring coal mining, to bringing back manufacturing, to providing greater environmental protections (think of the residents of Flint who couldn't drink the municipal water), to reducing the influence of special interests in Washington, to achieving greater economic growth, to reducing illegal immigration, to reducing crime, to fixing crumbling American infrastructure, to increasing individual incomes, to creating more jobs, to reducing taxes, to reducing American debt, to increasing the strength of the armed forces, to reducing or eliminating multiculturalism, to working to eliminate racism, to protecting social security, to restoring traditional family values, to restoring white nationalism, and so on. A crowd could, in principle, endorse the *statement* "Make America Great Again" without there being a single unambiguous *policy* or *plan* or *goal* commanding a majority.

Something very similar happened in Britain with the referendum on leaving the EU. Consider the following passages from Theresa May's Brexit speech on 17 January 2017 (emphasis added):

> *The result of the referendum* was not a decision to turn inward and retreat from the world.[…]
>
> Business isn't calling to reverse *the result*, but planning to make a success of it. The House of Commons has voted overwhelmingly for us *to get on with it*. And the overwhelming majority of people – however they voted – *want us to get on with it too*.

What was it about the referendum outcome that enabled Theresa May to speak with confidence about *the result of the referendum*? What was the "it" that Theresa May claimed people wanted the government to *"get on with it"* in such a hurry?

For completeness, here is the complete text that was put before the British people in the referendum: "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?"

That's it. As Green (2017) noted in his article in the *Financial Times*:

> The proposition is that the UK remains or leaves the EU. There is nothing on when this should happen, or how it should happen, whether by Article 50 or other means (such as a new treaty). There is nothing, at least explicitly, on whether Britain should remain part of the EU single market or customs union (both are possible without being members of the EU) […] And there is nothing on what type of relationship, if any, the EU and UK should have after Brexit.

This matters, because what Green has pointed out is that the question put before the voters was *fundamentally ambiguous*. The referendum asked an abstract question about whether an outcome, capable of being realised in multiple ways, *should* be realised, leaving the actual specifics of the implementation open to each voter's interpretation. This makes any talk of *the result of the referendum*, which the government needed to *get on with it*, a bit suspect.

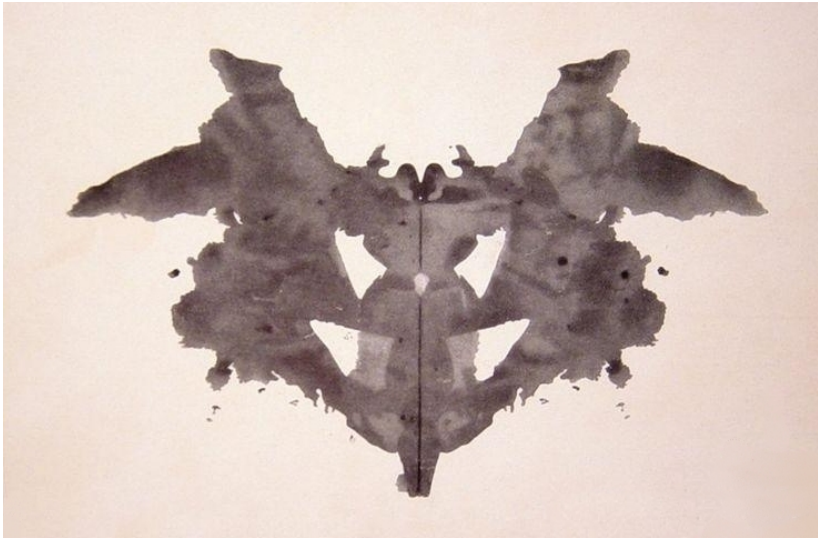
Let me introduce a term of art for those concepts whose common meaning in a society is heavily dependent on the subjective understanding of the individual. Let us call them *Rorschach* concepts. This name is derived from the famous psychological test designed by Hermann Rorschach in his 1921 book, *Psychodiagnostik*. The test consists of presenting ten inkblots, following a certain procedure, to a subject, who is invited to comment on what they see in each image. (Figure 1 reproduces the first inkblot from Rorschach's inkblot test.) An important part of the diagnosis lies in observing *how* the subject examines and responds to the inkblots, in addition to what they say. Given the abstract nature of the blots, it is clear that much of the response elicited lies in the mind of the subject and is projected onto the blot.

There's an old joke about the Rorschach test. It goes as follows:

> A patient goes to see a psychologist, complaining of an inability to concentrate. The psychologist shows the patient the first inkblot.
> "That's two people having sex," the patient says.
> The psychologist reveals the second inkblot.
> "That's two people having sex in a park."
> The psychologist then shows the third inkblot.
> "That's two people having sex on a beach."
> "You seem rather obsessed with sex," the psychologist remarks.
> "What, me?" The patient says. "You're the one with all the dirty pictures!"

The reason this joke works is that there is no fact of the matter about what the Rorschach inkblots mean. What a person *sees* is just what the person *projects*. Each person's projection is constrained only by the shape of the

Figure 1: The first inkblot from Rorschach's test



Source: Hermann Rorschach (1921), public domain.

inkblot, which is the same for everyone. Rorschach concepts are similar. In speaking of *making America great again*, that concept was nothing more than an empty vessel waiting to be filled by the hopes and dreams of the listeners. Yet each person's understanding was not completely unconstrained, for the concept of American greatness appears in many of the common meanings forming the foundation of American society. A similar phenomenon happened in the Brexit campaign. "Leave the EU" provided a nearly blank slate on which voters could project their favoured vision for a post-EU Britain. The idea of what it meant to "take back control" had few constraints on its interpretation.

Rorschach concepts, despite their ambiguity and subjectivity, often feature in the common meanings Taylor talked about. One mechanism by which common meanings cleave society is through individuals projecting onto concepts their own subjective understandings, where imperfect overlap can yield solidarity or sow discord, depending on which aspects are made salient. With Rorschach concepts, the danger is not only that people can talk past each other, but that illusions of agreement can be cultivated while masking deep divisions.

The Open Society as a Rorschach concept

Understanding the Open Society is philosophically challenging because the Open Society is a Rorschach concept. Given this, our task is two-fold. The first task is analytic: we must make clear what we talk about when we talk about

the Open Society. In what follows, I make no claim to provide an exhaustive analysis as the concept of the Open Society is far too rich. What I will do is look at a number of aspects of the Open Society, grouped into four families of interrelated ideas. Each family can be thought of as one way to project meaning onto the Rorschach concept of the Open Society. Each of these four senses of the Open Society will first be examined in isolation and interrogated, as critical rationalism requires. Once that is done, the second task is synthetic: to consider how the four senses of the Open Society are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The synthetic task requires understanding how trying to advance or curtail one sense of the Open Society can have, at the same time, the concomitant effect of curtailing or advancing a different sense.

What are these four senses of the Open Society that will occupy our attention? In Part I, I consider a *cosmopolitan* conception of the Open Society centred around states, citizenship, and the free movement of people. It is a question with which we must engage because the global order, predicated on nation-states having exclusive sovereignty over its territory – an idea derived from the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Year's War – is predicated on a fundamental natural injustice. This natural injustice, that a *birthright lottery* bestows on each person citizenship of a state not of their choosing, creates a world rife with structural inequality. It creates an environment ripe for conflict between the *haves* and the *have-nots*, especially when the roles could so easily have been reversed if people had simply been born to different parents.

In Part II, I consider the *transparent* conception of the Open Society, centred around the availability of information and the diminished privacy of the modern world. Here, I argue that the Open Society is Janus-faced. Transparency of process and freedom of information are important virtues for public institutions and are necessary conditions for democracies to flourish. But what about informational transparency concerning individuals? We are in the middle of a vast, unsupervised worldwide experiment regarding the collection and analysis of information about persons. Companies harvest individual data at a level inconceivable only a few decades ago. Is radical transparency, an instrumental good for controlling the potential excesses and abuses of power by powerful institutions, equally good when applied to individuals? I argue that perhaps the greatest shortcoming of the dystopian novel, *1984*, is that Orwell was insufficiently paranoid.

In Part III, I consider the *Enlightenment* conception of the Open Society, centred around the free exchange of ideas. In this sense, an Open Society is one in which its citizens entertain and critically discuss ideas. It is not necessarily liberal; it is about embracing a general intellectual attitude of curiosity and the cultivation of tolerance. A liberal can be dogmatic and intolerant, and a conservative can be *laissez-faire* regarding the beliefs and behaviours of others. A conservative society, in the sense defended by Edmund Burke, could certainly open to the free exchange of ideas: it would just adopt a sceptical attitude towards social reform, requiring that change be evidence-based and

grounded in experience.[9] But what are we to make of claims by some that the free exchange of ideas can not only constitute *harm*, but harms from which people should be protected? Issues of trigger warnings, safe spaces, and no-platforming of speakers have played a heated role in Western culture wars. I argue for a nuanced understanding of the issues at play and try to dial down the temperature of this heated debate.

In Part IV, I examine the *communitarian* conception of the Open Society, centred around polarisation, tribalism, and intergroup conflict. This sense of the Open Society is loosely related to the original conception of the Open Society introduced by the French philosopher Henri Bergson 13 years prior to Popper's book. In his book, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson characterises a closed society as one "whose members hold together, caring nothing for the rest of humanity, on the alert for attack or defence, bound, in fact, to a perpetual readiness for battle" (Bergson 1935, p. 229). An Open Society rejects this mentality and embraces a broad, diverse community. This matters because our social identities infuse each of our lives, yet when social identities are made salient, conflicts readily emerge from psychological dispositions such as ingroup biases and the fundamental attribution error.[10] How do we resolve this core tension between valuing our social identities and their ability to generate conflict?

These four different senses of the Open Society – cosmopolitan, transparent, Enlightenment, and communitarian – form the analytic core of the book. They are not the only way to theorise the Open Society, but they are mine. Some senses overlap with Popper's Open Society, some overlap with Bergson's Open Society, and others are very different. Consequently, the vision of an Open Society I offer expands on that articulated by both Popper and Bergson.

One may well ask why am I modifying the concept of the Open Society in the way proposed? In particular, one might ask why not stick with the Popperian concept, since that is the one with the greatest historical legacy? Or, for those not too concerned with history, why not engage with the concept of Open Society as developed by Gaus (2021)? The latter question is easy: my concerns and aims are very different from Gaus's. Although it is true that societies are complex systems, they are not always best understood via complex systems theory. As for the former question, there are two reasons.

The first reason is that Popper's concept of the Open Society is more narrow than mine. His primary concern was to defend democratic societies against attack from several fronts. One front involved authoritarian or totalitarian worldviews (hence his concern with Plato and Marx) that sought to replace democracies from the *outside*. Another front involved various personal attitudes, such as intolerance, that undermine the viability of democracies from the *inside*. The solution to both, for Popper, involves cultivating a critical rationalist attitude; in so doing, we will recognise our fallible nature (thereby undermining a willingness to endorse Plato's authoritarian regime with the wise

philosopher-kings at the apex) and see the errors of historicism (thereby neutralising threats from Nazism or Marxism). But my concept of the Open Society defends *value pluralism*, and does not accord pride of place to democracy, necessarily.

The second reason is that Popper's defence, as noted above, places critical rationalism and scientific method at its core. In Volume 2 of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, he describes critical rationalism as the attitude based on "argument and experience" and the view that "I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort we may get nearer to the truth". This attitude is "closely akin to the scientific attitude". While I believe in the importance and power of science, Popper's claim that "we may get nearer to the truth" gives me pause. Truth about the *natural* world, or logic and mathematics, I can get behind; but truth about the *social* world is trickier. In a diverse world with competing value systems, moral codes, religious doctrines, and conceptions of rational action, *whose* truth is Popper referring to?

In contrast, my concept of the Open Society has an existentialist foundation. It is grounded in respect for individual freedom, the right to self-determination, freedom of association, and a consistency principle. I will argue in Part I that from this minimal core we can derive a concept of the Open Society compatible with value pluralism and, as John Stuart Mill put it, a diverse range of "experiments in living". The attitude of critical rationalism will presumably feature in some of those experiments, but not necessarily all. If people freely choose, on an informed basis, to reject a life based on a scientific attitude, who am I to judge?

The Open Society as an enemy

When we reflect on the four different senses of the Open Society I've described, we discover that a curious *inversion of values* has occurred. In many parts of the Western world, a movement has emerged that perceives each aspect of the Open Society as a threat rather than something to be celebrated. The free movement of people is rejected, the free exchange of ideas is seen as disturbing, and the value of diverse communities is called into question as polarisation divides us. Informational transparency, rather than serving to hold the powerful to account, instead opens up the lives of ordinary citizens for monitoring and manipulating, and transforms our identities into commodities to be sold. This inversion of values explains the title of the book. It also explains the titles of each of the four main parts, for those titles express the sentiment rejecting that aspect of the Open Society. The title of Part I, "Don't come around here no more", expresses the rejection of the cosmopolitan conception of the Open Society. Part II's title, "The panopticon of the soul", refers to a world in which social media has made the inner lives of each person knowable to all, subverting the transparent conception of the Open Society. The title of Part III, "Safe spaces", describes how some try to shield themselves from ideas challenging their core beliefs, rejecting the Enlightenment conception of the Open

Society. Part IV's title, "Modern tribes", characterises how increased polarisation partitions diverse communities into groups according to certain defining characteristics, retreating from the communitarian conception of the Open Society.

The value-inversion of the Open Society is a profoundly important change, and one that has occurred largely without us being aware it was happening. During the Cold War, the values underlying the Open Society were core values of the West, and promoting the Open Society with all of its associated liberties was a key difference between Western democracies and those countries under authoritarian control. Today, the Open Society is seen by many as no longer an all-things-considered good. Some doubt its value altogether. This is unfortunate because, if Popper was right and the Open Society gave people the freedom to choose the kind of life they want to live and the chance to live it, think about the consequences of critiquing the Open Society. Critics of the Open Society, under the guise of populism, portray it as an enemy, and in so doing serve the interests of authoritarians and powerful organisations. If, as Baudelaire wrote in 1869 that "the devil's finest trick is to persuade you that he does not exist", an equally impressive trick is to invert the meaning of the Open Society such that populist leaders, acting with a democratic mandate, can enact policies restricting individual freedoms and opportunities.

Although I believe that the Open Society is, at present, seen as an enemy by some, I also believe this is a grave mistake. A central aim of this book is to rehabilitate the concept of the Open Society. What I hope to achieve, at least partly, is to establish how many of those aspects of the Open Society that are seen as a threat are overblown. This defence of the Open Society is sometimes challenging, because the perceived threats of, for example, the free movement of people has a firm grip on some people's worldview. But, I argue, when we step back and take into account moral and economic considerations, the free movement of people deserves to be endorsed, although admittedly with important qualifiers. (Anyone who claims I am arguing for open borders has not read the book.) In other cases, the defence of the Open Society is easier because the perceived threats result from an incorrect realisation of the ideal. This is the case, I argue, for the transparent conception of the Open Society, where the current state of society has made the lives of ordinary people transparent instead of increasing the transparency of organisations and institutions. These are just a fraction of the issues that are discussed in the course of this book.

There are two further reasons to revisit the defence of the Open Society. The first is that I believe one focal point of Popper's critique of authoritarianism and totalitarianism is no longer relevant. At the time Popper was writing, authoritarianism and totalitarianism were frequently underpinned by historicist beliefs: that history unfolds according to general laws. While Marxists, Leninists, Maoists, and Nazis frequently did perceive the world in this way, contemporary authoritarians and totalitarians often do not bother to justify themselves with historicist narratives. Instead, we find that they pursue power through other means that do not need general laws of history. People appeal

to ideas of restoring national glory, the rectification of historical injustices, or raw economic self-interest, but those narratives do not need historical laws. This is explored in Part I.

The second reason is that Popper's focus on the *politicisation* of knowledge, while important, is incomplete. Today we also find the Open Society under threat from the *moralisation* of knowledge. The free exchange of ideas is threatened, in some quarters, by those who wish to suppress debate and enquiry out of concern that what we might call "ideational harm" will be done. Certain ideas are not even entertained as possibilities by some groups simply because they conflict with their social identity, leading to those ideas being rejected prior to the consideration of evidence or other reasons for belief. This is explored in Parts III and IV.

And that is why the concept of the Open Society needs to be revisited again – Popper's defence, despite its brilliance and influence, needs a reboot. We need to engage with contemporary objections to the Open Society, showing why they are misguided, on moral, political or pragmatic grounds, in ways relevant for our time. Only someone with Popper's knowledge of and respect for the history of philosophy could think that, in order to show what was wrong with Nazi totalitarianism, it was necessary to begin with Heraclitus.

The final point I argue is that undoing the value-inversion of the Open Society requires another break with Popper's thought. Given his rejection of historicism, it is no surprise that Popper rejected grand attempts to solve social problems. His preferred method was "piecemeal social engineering" (Popper 1945a, p. 18) that concentrated on isolated, local problems. However, rehabilitating the Open Society requires more than piecemeal social engineering, as this is no mere local problem. The rehabilitation requires a philosophical enquiry into the very kind of society we want to create. It requires answering questions such as: what freedoms do we wish to protect, and what freedoms are we willing to give up in order to make other forms of social organisation possible? These questions cannot be solved in a piecemeal fashion, for they involve global comparisons and trade-offs along dimensions not obviously comparable. Yet decisions must be made because a policy choice in one area has implications for others, and it is by no means obvious that we can achieve the maximal good for all senses of the Open Society at the same time. I elaborate on this topic in the final chapter, though these questions remain in the background throughout the book, particularly in Part II.

Rejecting piecemeal social engineering means adopting a broader perspective on society, reflecting carefully on the kind of world we want to create. Part of the reason the Open Society has become an enemy, I believe, is that we have trusted local solutions proposed by piecemeal social engineering without thinking about what negative externalities might be generated when those solutions, each individually having good reasons behind them, are combined. As a result, we now stand at a tipping point in human history where we are confronted with the existential dangers of moving forward without paying sufficient attention to where we are going.

In some ways, I argue the Open Society can be an enemy, but often not for the reasons we might initially imagine. Once we have rehabilitated our understanding of the Open Society, we can begin to see which aspects are worth preserving and which need to be curtailed in order to support human freedoms, preserve personal autonomy, and create lives worth living in societies worth living in. Given the scale of that task, it goes without saying that this book does not, and could not, provide the last word on any of its subjects. What it does provide is a view, a theory, and a warning.

Notes

Preface

[1] If you know it exists and go searching for it by name, you can find a recording buried in the archives of the LSE's Public Event Podcasts. It's not quite the digital analogue of being on display in a cellar, in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying "Beware of the Leopard", but it's close.

[2] The original draft of this work featured a more crude (and accurate) expression, here, but a trusted editor persuaded me to substitute a more family-friendly expression in its place.

[3] For Part I, see Blau and Mackie (2017); Borjas (2016); Kondoh (2017); Nowrasteh and Powell (2021) and Watson and Thompson (2021). For Part II, see Brin (1998) and Solove (2008, 2011). For Part III, see Baer (2019), Ben-Porath (2017), Lukianoff and Haidt (2018), Downs (2005). For Part IV, see Haidt (2012). This list is not exhaustive, of course.

Introduction

[1] Although some are beginning to question whether this will, in fact, happen. The upcoming demographic decline in China, caused by decades of its one-child policy, may prevent it from surpassing the US (see Cox 2022; Sharma 2022).

[2] In the US, for example, various census projections predict that the white portion of the population will become a numerical minority around 2045. Since ethnic minorities tend to vote Democrat rather than Republican, some Republicans view this as an existential threat.

[3] Falsificationism relies on the inference rule known as *modus tollens*: from (i) if T, then P, and (ii) not-P, it follows that not-T. Here, let T be a theory, and P some particular proposition implied by the theory T, which we will interpret as a *prediction*. If we conduct an experiment to see whether the prediction P is true, and we find it isn't, then – following the scheme of *modus tollens* – from not-P, it follows that not-T. That is, we have shown the theory T is false. However, trying to turn this kernel of an idea into a workable scientific methodology proves to be extremely complicated. For example, theory T will normally be composed of a number of logically independent propositions T_1, T_2,…,T_n, where T is really the *conjunction* of all of these propositions. That is, T is logically equivalent to T_1 *and* T_2 *and* … *and* T_n. Therefore, when we find that T is false, we have only established that at *least one* of the T_i is false. How do we know which one? And how do we know that what sounds like a grand discovery — *we have shown that* T *is false!* — isn't just a really minor failing ("we have found that T_1 is wrong because we put a decimal point in the wrong place"), and adjusting that fixes the problem. At the end of the day, no

one has shown how to turn the kernel of the idea behind falsificationism into a viable scientific methodology. Nonetheless, as noted, it retains its grip on the popular understanding of how science works.

[4] One of my favourite examples is the following anecdote from a former colleague of mine at the LSE. Apparently, Noam Chomsky was invited to give a seminar at the LSE on the topic of the evolution of language not long after his book *Syntactic Structures* had established him as a highly influential and revolutionary thinker in linguistics and the philosophy of language. Chomsky began his lecture and had only been speaking for a few minutes when Popper interrupted him, taking the rest of the hour to lecture Chomsky about his (Popper's) theory about the evolution of language, much to Chomsky's astonishment.

[5] The precise details of this event are obscure, as Popper only vaguely alludes to them in his autobiography. He writes:

> In Vienna, shooting broke out during a demonstration by unarmed young socialists who, instigated by the communists, tried to help some communists to escape who were under arrest in the central police station in Vienna. Several young socialist and communist workers were killed. I was horrified and shocked by the brutality of the police, but also by myself. For I felt that as a Marxist I bore part of the responsibility for the tragedy — at least in principle. Marxist theory demands that the class struggle be intensified, in order to speed up the coming of socialism. Its thesis is that although the revolution may claim some victims, capitalism is claiming more victims than the whole socialist revolution.
>
> (Popper 1992, pp. 32–33)

It is clear that the event profoundly unsettled Popper. The best reconstruction of the events that I know of is provided by Artigas (1998, pp. 204–05), and it is this version that I reference here.

[6] See Lewontin and Levins (1976) for a detailed discussion of the ideological roots of Lysenkoism and its consequences.

[7] Dikötter (2010) provides an excellent account of this tragic period of Chinese history.

[8] In their excellent book, *Merchants of Doubt*, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway chronicle the way this was done in the tobacco and the fossil fuel industries. There is growing concern that something similar is being done by the food industry regarding the role of sugar.

[9] As Burke wrote, on the nature of political reform:

> I must see with my own eyes […] touch with my own hands not only the fixed but the momentary circumstances, before I could venture to suggest any political project whatsoever […] I must see the means of correcting the plan […] I must see the things; I must see the men. (Burke 1996, p. 326).

[10] The fundamental attribution error is a cognitive bias, first identified by Ross (1977). It states that people, when characterising the behaviour of others, underemphasise environmental factors and overemphasise dispositional or character-based factors. For example, when someone describes another person's behaviour of which they disapprove, they are much more likely to describe it as resulting from character flaws than being situationally influenced.

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