

Towards a Critical Rationalist Ethics*

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Abstract: This paper explores the integration of Karl Popper's Critical Rationalism (CR) into ethical theory as a *research programme* by examining the implications of non-justificationism, theory-ladenness, and Popper's realist approach to ethics. It highlights the *intentional* component and indispensability of moral laws, the role of *values* within Popper's theory of three worlds, and the emergence of the *moral agent* in an evolutionary context. The paper concludes by addressing objectivity and *intersubjective criticizability* in ethics.

1 Introduction

Popper frequently emphasises the moral importance of various ways of thinking and, in some instances, connects his epistemological approach to ethics. The fundamental values that Popper often highlights are individual *freedom* and *autonomy*, understood in the Kantian sense. These values align with the Kantian project of self-emancipation through knowledge. Consequently, the epistemology of Critical Rationalism (CR) inherently acquires moral significance (Popper, 1994; Koertge, 2009; Shearmur, 2009; Shearmur, 2021).

Despite his significant contributions to the philosophy of science, epistemology, and political philosophy, Popper does not provide a systematic discussion of his moral philosophy. As the founder of CR, his treatment of ethics within this framework remains notably ambiguous (Shearmur, 2009; Shearmur, 2019; Popper, 1946; Shearmur & Turner, 2008). This lack of clarity has spurred efforts to develop a philosophical research program for ethics within the context of CR (Shearmur, 2009).

This paper aims to suggest preliminary conjectures aimed at contributing to the philosophical foundation for ethics in CR. It primarily follows Jeremy Shearmur's suggested framework, though it may diverge in some areas. Rather than engaging in traditional debates within the philosophy of ethics, this paper seeks to define the overarching characteristics of a philosophical research program for ethics within the CR framework, drawing inspiration from CR doctrines in epistemology and metaphysics.

The structure of the paper is as follows:

Section two examines the consequences of CR's *fallibilist and non-justificationist* approach to ethics.

* Paper delivered at *Popper and Ethics*, Zoom-based Workshop, organised by Jeremy Shearmur, 3 Aug. 2024.

Section three argues for the indispensability of *general moral principles* in moral judgments, drawing on the theory-ladenness thesis emphasised in CR.

Section Four outlines the implications of Popper's realist approach for the ontology of ethics, arguing that the ontology of ethics includes an *intentional* component. This section also examines the consequences of this intentional component.

Section five addresses the place of *values* within Popper's *theory of three worlds*.

Section six utilises Popper's *theory of the self* to explain how the *moral agent* emerges in an evolutionary context.

Section seven discusses *objectivity* and *intersubjective criticizability*, key components of CR, and identifies various areas for criticism in ethics.

Section eight provides the conclusion.

2. An unjustifiable fallible ethics

Fallibilism and non-justificationism are central doctrines of CR. Fallibility posits that human knowledge is inherently fallible, acknowledging the potential for errors in our ideas. No theory can ever be justified, as there is always the possibility of error. Building on this philosophical foundation, Popper argues that instead of seeking justification or certainty, we should focus on criticising ideas and proposing better conjectures (Miller 1994; Miller 2006; Bartley 1964; Popper 1963; Popper 1983).

The immediate consequence of fallibilism and non-justificationism in ethics is that moral principles and judgments are also fallible and should be subject to criticism and potential revision. Popper, influenced by Bartley's criticisms, recognised that to preserve the integrity of CR, he must adopt a critical attitude towards decisions, standards, and values (Popper 1945/2013; Popper 1934/2002, ff. 5*, p. 15; Bartley, 1964). This perspective promotes a critical attitude in ethics, where moral judgments are not seen as absolute or infallible but are open to criticism. Consequently, moral principles and judgments are conjectural and tentative, subject to improvement through criticism and modification, leading to progressive ethics.

Similar to the scientific domain, where induction does not provide justification and does not seek to *justify particular statements*, ethical statements are also not justified. In ethics, as in science, the process of making moral judgments begins with *general conjectures* subject to criticism in each situation. This approach paves the way for continuous criticism of ethical standards and judgments.

Another important consideration is that questioning whether Kantian or utilitarian theories are suitable for CR may lead to an incorrect formulation of the problem. Traditional versions of these theories are embedded within the framework of justificationism, seeking criteria to *justify* moral decisions. In contrast, within CR, the criteria proposed by Kantian or utilitarian views for justifying moral decisions are merely tools for *criticism*. They are employed to criticise decisions, intentions, standards, and judgments, aiming to establish a moral world. This moral world, as a regulative idea, is one where individuals act in accordance with moral values in their behaviour and interactions with others and their environment.

The tools of criticism should not be confined to the criteria of a particular approach. For instance, if our theory of “duty” is grounded in mystical theories, fulfilling these duties may not be sensitive to human suffering. Conversely, in public policy, the establishment of laws may yield collective benefits, yet their application may not be moral from an individual’s perspective. Therefore, neither reference to *duty* guided by *categorical imperative* nor *consequences* necessarily justify decisions as moral in all circumstances. However, they can highlight concerns about the immorality of certain decisions and actions.

Moreover, it is important to recognise that these criteria are also criticizable and may be replaced by other criteria. Given these considerations, we should not expect Popper’s approach to be restricted to a specific set of criteria associated with a particular philosophical approach, such as Kantian or utilitarian. Instead, CR should employ all these criteria as tools for criticism, while also criticising them and striving to develop new tools for emerging ethical situations.

3. Theory-ladenness and indispensability of moral laws

In ethics, generalists argue that moral judgments should be guided by general moral principles, whereas particularists maintain that moral judgments should be based on the specific details of each situation, without relying on general principles. The literature on this topic includes numerous arguments for and against both positions (Dancy, 2017). However, rather than delving into these debates, we argue that the epistemology of CR, particularly its emphasis on *theory-ladenness*, tips the balance towards the generalist perspective.

The doctrine of theory-ladenness in CR, particularly in Popper’s philosophy, suggests that observations and the way we formulate problems are influenced by our theoretical frameworks. Popper in his arguments against induction asserts that science does not derive from induction on *particular observations*. Instead, it begins with general conjectures, as particular observations are interpreted through the lens of these general theories. These general conjectures are then subject to criticism and modification in light of particular observational statements. In the scientific research process, *theories* are involved at every stage, from recognising and formulating the problem to interpreting concepts, experiments, and observations. Theories determine what is relevant or irrelevant to our problem situation, guiding our research path (Hanson, 1958; Popper 1972, Appendix). Thus, *general statements* are inevitable at various stages of scientific activity, from problem formulation to their application in particular situations and the prediction and interpretation of observational results.

Popper’s emphasis on the importance of theory extends to the biological and genetic levels. According to Popper, as scientific activity begins with a “problem,” living organisms interact with their environment to solve problems. The discovery and formulation of the problem are influenced by a prior knowledge, which Popper interprets as genetic a priori knowledge or *expectations* in living organisms. He draws an analogy to Kant’s a priori knowledge, noting that it consists of general conjectures or laws (Popper 1999, 71-2).

Theory-ladenness and the theory dependency of moral concepts

Moral judgments are made when encountering moral problems in particular situations. Similar to how scientific problems are formulated within the framework of existing theories, moral problems can be understood and articulated within the framework of general moral principles. Concepts such as ‘duty’ and

‘justice’ are also theory-dependent, finding different interpretations across various philosophical frameworks and cultural and social systems. For instance, the deontological perspective interprets ‘duty’ differently from the utilitarian perspective. This theoretical nature means that our moral judgments vary according to our presuppositions about obligation, duty, and moral responsibility. Consequently, general statements are implicitly or explicitly presupposed in the process of making moral judgments.

For example, consider a moral problem where one must decide whether to tell the truth or lie to protect someone’s feelings. A deontologist might argue that one has a duty to tell the truth regardless of the consequences, while a utilitarian might consider the potential harm caused by the truth and opt for a lie to minimise suffering. This illustrates how different theoretical frameworks influence moral judgments.

Therefore, Popper’s argument about the relationship between particular and general statements within the framework of scientific theories can also be applied to the moral debate between generalists and particularists.

The role of laws in modelling of moral situation

As previously mentioned, science does not commence with induction on observational statements. Instead, science begins with *general conjectures*. It is also important to note that theories are typically abstract entities, and we do not apply them directly; instead, we build theoretical models for the problem and the data in the problem situations. These models are the entities to which theories apply. Therefore, how we model the problem situation is crucial and depends on theories.

Similarly, moral judgments do not originate from particular moral statements. Limiting moral judgments to particular feelings results in *psychologism*. Moral judgments inherently involve the application of general principles to particular situations. This process is analogous to scientific practice, where a situation is modelled using a set of general rules and moral principles to arrive at a moral decision. During this modelling process, relevant and irrelevant factors are identified by *theories*.

For example, consider a scenario where one must decide whether to report a colleague’s unethical behaviour. A deontologist might apply the general principle of duty to report wrongdoing, regardless of the consequences. In contrast, a utilitarian might weigh the potential outcomes, such as the impact on the colleague’s career and the overall benefit to the organisation. This illustrates how theoretical and moral perspectives guide the modelling of a moral situation, leading to a moral judgment for that particular situation.

The role of general laws in recognising similar situations

Furthermore, one might question how moral judgments can be made without general knowledge about possible actions in particular situations. For instance, how can an action in situation A be identified as “discriminatory” without a general understanding of what *constitutes* a “discriminatory” action? Without such general knowledge, it is impossible to draw analogical inferences from familiar situations to new ones that differ in some respects from previous encounters. A moral agent can relate different experiences across various situations only by applying a general principle. Without theories expressed in general statements,

experiences remain disconnected, and the agent cannot clarify decisions in different contexts. Thus, general rules are essential for making coherent and consistent moral judgments.

Coherency

General principles serve as a compass, guiding moral reasoning and aiding in navigating complex moral situations to make coherent decisions. Underlying specific judgments are broader theoretical commitments that can be articulated as principles and general laws. These general principles of ethics provide a framework for consistency and guidance across different situations, ensuring that similar cases are approached with similar methods. In ethics, general principles offer binding coherence, ensuring that moral judgments are not arbitrary but align with an overarching moral system. Like general statements in science, these principles are essential to ensure that our moral judgments are not isolated decisions but part of a coherent and rational moral system. Indeed, these principles and the resulting coherence contribute to the integrity of the self.

Argument of moral obligation

Moral rules are fundamental to the concept of moral *obligations*. In their absence, elucidating moral obligations becomes significantly challenging. Indeed, moral rules establish a framework that delineates what is obligatory, thereby guiding individuals in their moral decision-making processes.

Comparatively, consider the laws of nature, which express a form of necessity. These natural laws are viewed as conjectures that describe necessary relationships in the natural world. Similarly, though conjectural, moral rules establish necessary guidelines for moral behaviour. They serve as a basis for determining what actions are morally required, permissible, or forbidden.

Moral obligations would lack a clear foundation without such rules, leading to arbitrary and inconsistent moral judgments. Just as the laws of nature provide a structured understanding of natural phenomena, moral rules offer a structured understanding of moral obligations, ensuring coherence and consistency in ethical reasoning. Thus, moral rules are indispensable for articulating and upholding moral obligations within a coherent ethical framework.

4. Popper's realist approach and the metaphysics of moral laws

The critical discussion surrounding the metaphysics of ethics is extensive. This section does not aim to delve into classical controversies or evaluate their arguments. Instead, we seek to identify the issues that will be prioritised in the metaphysics of ethics research program by adopting the doctrines of CR and determining the direction this program will take.

According to CR, a suitable research program for the metaphysics of ethics should address existing problems and show its superiority in its explanations compared to competing theories. It should also be compatible with other philosophical and metaphysical assumptions. Importantly, it should avoid reductionism and not adopt an inflated ontology (Popper & Eccles 1985; Shearmur 2021; 2024; Popper 1963).

This section outlines the implications of Popper’s realist approach to the ontology of ethics and then argues that ethics, like technology, has an intentional component in its ontology. In this section, the consequences of this intentional component are also examined: it is argued that this intentional component, on the one hand, causes moral judgments to depend on the context. On the other hand, it institutionalise ethics through collective intentionality. In the discussion of the institutionalisation of ethics, it is claimed that applying the doctrine of institutional individualism in CR is a way to consider both the influence of institutions on individuals and to preserve individual autonomy for the moral responsibility of individuals.

Popper is a realist in both epistemology and ethics. However, he did not provide a comprehensive theory regarding the components of moral realism. In the appendix of *The Open Society*, he outlined general epistemological guidelines for evaluating decisions and criteria. Popper considered “truth” as a regulative idea and proposed “rightness” as a regulative idea for decisions, which is more ambiguous than *truth*.

One outcome of Popper’s realist approach is the distinction between science and technology. Science aims to understand the world and offer realistic explanations. This approach has led CR to establish clear boundaries with instrumentalism and relativism. Conversely, the aim of technology is to intervene in or change reality to meet needs. Consequently, scientific theories are assessed based on their truth-likeness, while technologies are evaluated based on their efficiency in meeting their intended needs.

In this sense, decisions are akin to technologies. The correctness of a decision depends on the intended consequences of it. Accepting the science/technology distinction suggests that moral laws, which aim to apply moral principles to regulate human behaviour and decisions, function as a *social technology*. A moral decision intends to create a *moral world*. Therefore, the aspect of ethics that proposes norms and standards for “right” actions, behaviours, and decisions, as part of reality, is similar to technology in that it offers solutions to practical problems that satisfy needs (Paya 2008; Niemann 2020; Marquardt 2021, 5, ff73).

Intentionality and the ontological status of moral laws

Ontologically, technologies possess an intentional ontological component. In addition to their physical components and design, technological artifacts also have an intentional aspect, which can be considered as belonging to World 2 in Popperian terms. Thus, technology has a mind-dependent nature, which does not contradict realism. Similarly, intentionality is an ontological component of moral rules. Moral laws or principles are hypothetical rules that prescribe actions according to moral values, intending to constitute a moral world. Therefore, the ontology of moral laws includes components in both World 2 and World 3. The elements in World 2 relate to the intentional aspect, while those in World 3 pertain to the intended consequences¹ (in this context, the creation of a moral world) and the linguistic formulation of moral laws. These values and laws establish criteria and standards, serving as tools for distinguishing between good and bad morals. These criteria are not justifiable and can be criticised and evaluated independently.

Intentionality, situational logic, and context dependency

¹ *Intentions* are classified as *mental attitudes* and thus belong to World 2. However, the objects of intentions in ethics pertain to World 3. In his discussion of ethics, Popper distinguishes between two types of intention. One type is intention in the sense of the third world, which refers to the *intended results* in an objective, rather than subjective sense (Shearmur, 2024). Therefore, the *intended results* are the objects of intentions.

In the previous section, we emphasised the necessity of general moral rules in moral judgments, which led us in a quasi-Kantian direction. However, the ontological dependence of moral laws on intention and the connection of ethics to complex human interactions indicate that even with general laws, decisions and moral judgments are situation-dependent.

Particularists are right in highlighting the importance of particular situations in moral judgment. However, acknowledging this does not require us to deny the existence of general moral principles. Just as in science, where we do not directly apply theoretical principles to a particular situation but instead model situations using general principles and theoretical assumptions, we do the same in moral contexts. Depending on the conditions, context, and preferences influenced by our views and assumptions, we may develop different models and consequently make different decisions. This is especially true in moral matters, where human factors and intentions significantly complicate the situation.

Popper introduces situational logic by highlighting that human behaviour and choices are significantly influenced by the context in which they occur. Choices or actions may lead to unintended consequences. Due to the intentional component and the complexity of real situations, we cannot directly apply general rules to a real situation. Instead, we model a real situation using situational logic. Since modelling relies on preferences and assumptions, decisions and judgments become dependent on our situation, context, and preferences. Therefore, although we have general moral principles, judgments become sensitive to the context and situation, as particularists emphasise (Paya 2008).

The importance of practice

The similarity between ethics and technology and the dependency of ethical judgments on context and situation underscores the importance of *practice* in ethical judgments and decisions. In technology, a technician becomes more adept at diagnosing and solving problems through *practice*. Similarly, ethical skills are refined through continuous practice in modelling various situations. Individuals can improve their moral judgment by regularly engaging in ethical situations, recognising the similarities and differences between models, and practising continuously. This ongoing interaction and reflection in real-world situations lead to a deeper understanding of moral principles and their more effective application in complex scenarios.

Ethics as Institution

Autonomy is one of the basic values accepted by Popper following Kant. This section posits that when a community embraces the intentional component of ethics, ethics assumes an *institutional* nature. However, institutionalised ethics may conflict with autonomy. It is argued that applying the doctrine of *institutional individualism* within CR provides a framework to acknowledge the impact of institutions on individuals while preserving individual autonomy, thereby ensuring moral responsibility. To elucidate this issue, we draw on Searle's *theory for institutions* and a variant of *methodological individualism* termed *institutional individualism*, as proposed by Agassi (Agassi, 1975; Searle, 2005; Amir, 2023).

According to Searle's theory, institutions are established through *collective intentionality*, where shared ideas and intentions create *social facts* (Searle 1995; 2005). Institutions confer *prescriptive powers*, such as rights and duties, that regulate behaviour. Searle argues that collective intentionality is essential for the

existence of institutions. This collective acceptance creates and sustains institutional facts. Institutions also have functions, known as *status functions*, assigned to them by collective agreement. Through this collective intentionality, objects or actions acquire roles that extend beyond their physical characteristics.

This perspective can be extended to view ethics as an *institutional fact*. Society collectively agrees on what constitutes moral or immoral actions, thereby granting moral principles a form of prescriptive power. Social acceptance of certain ethical standards helps create a common moral framework that legitimises these principles and ensures their adherence within society. This aligns with Searle's broader view of the emergence of *social reality*, where the power of language and collective consensus can create realities that, while intangible, significantly impact human behaviour and social frameworks. Consequently, moral principles attain an ontological position as part of the fabric of social reality, constructed and sustained through human interaction and consensus.

Considering ethics as a social institution, it serves as a framework for social behaviour and decision-making. It provides a codified set of norms and principles that guide actions, shape expectations, and regulate social interactions. Prescriptive concepts such as "right" and "obligation," which may appear straightforward, depend on collective intentionality, making their reality context-dependent. Therefore, in this approach, ethics cannot be simply reduced to a set of general principles. Instead, it is an integral part of the social fabric, influencing and being influenced by human interaction and shared beliefs. Alongside other institutions, ethics functions as a technology for shaping the world.

Several important aspects emerge from this analysis. First, there is a *causal effect* wherein morality intervenes in the social realm, directing human behaviour and social norms toward *intended* outcomes in World 3. Second, the causal effect of morality, similar to that of institutions and laws, influences human behaviour and other realms of reality through *World 2*. Third, the importance of *collective acceptance* in institutional realities is highlighted; moral norms also possess the power to influence through collective recognition. Fourth, the *prescriptive power* of institutions, which leads to the creation of rights and obligations, is also present in the case of moral norms. Therefore, these explanations suggest that the ontological status of moral laws is analogous to that of legal institutions and laws.

Kantian autonomy vs. institutional ethics

Popper frequently cites individual *freedom* and *autonomy*, in the Kantian sense, as fundamental values. According to Kant, people's obedience to moral law is not driven by external compulsion but by free will or self-legislation. This distinction between moral and legal obligations is crucial (Kant, 1785/2007). Popper's acceptance of Kantian autonomy underscores the central role of individuals' free will and intentions in accepting moral laws. Moral actions should be guided by individuals' intentions and rational decision-making, based on the categorical imperative. For Kant, genuine moral actions arise from adherence to moral laws determined by rationality, autonomy, and self-legislation rather than external influences. However, institutional ethics, which relies on collective acceptance, appears to conflict with Kantian autonomy. This is why Kant differentiates between moral laws and religious or legal rules.

This leads to the conclusion that, although many moral laws have likely been discovered, formulated, and acknowledged by society, the moral agent's decision must be based on free will, not societal compliance or institutional pressure. Individuals should be their own lawgivers. While societal acknowledgement can

give ethics an *institutional* nature, this institution, like others, can only guide actions and behaviour externally. Unless an individual self-legislates these laws through free will, the term “moral” is applied loosely; moral actions should not be motivated by fear of public opinion or the prospect of punishment and reward.²

Institutional individualism and moral responsibility

An important point to consider is that moral responsibility is tied to our control over actions, encapsulated in the principle that “ought” implies “can.” This means we are only morally responsible for actions within our control. Therefore, when dealing with individuals with genetic defects, we must consider these defects when allocating moral responsibility (Bartley 1971, 14-15). If institutions create situations where moral decisions and actions are risky, this context should be included in evaluating the moral behavior of individuals in such situations. To extend Searle’s perspective on laws and institutions to ethics in a manner compatible with Kantian individual autonomy, we must present an interpretation of autonomy and moral responsibility that includes the pressure exerted by social institutions on individuals.

Moral principles can emerge from individual’s *rationality* and *self-legislation* and become institutionalised through collective intentionality. Initially, individuals may create moral principles through self-legislation, but these principles gain wider recognition and authority when accepted by the community. Thus, moral principles have dual nature, encompassing both individual and institutional dimensions. They begin with individual, self-legislation intentions, but collective acknowledgement transforms them into institutional facts within social reality.

For example, consider the principle of honesty. Through personal rational reflection, an individual may accept the moral law that honesty is a duty. This personal recognition and commitment to honesty stem from independent decision-making. When society collectively agrees that honesty is a fundamental moral principle, this collective acceptance reinforces the principle and creates social expectations and norms around honesty. As more individuals recognise and adhere to this principle, it becomes embedded in the collective intentionality, constituting an institutional reality. The principle of honesty gains *prescriptive power* from both individual decisions and collective recognition, ensuring its effectiveness in regulating behaviour within society.

The doctrine of *institutional individualism*, as an interpretation of *methodological individualism*, considers the influence of institutions in social situations. Institutional individualism posits that institutions influence people’s decisions and behaviours. Therefore, to evaluate moral choices, this influential force must be considered. Sometimes, this influence may limit the abilities of moral agents, and since moral prescriptions assume that individuals have the ability to act, the restrictions imposed by institutions may affect the evaluation of moral behaviour. As presented by Agassi, institutional individualism emphasises the role of institutions in shaping individual behaviour while maintaining that only individuals have aims and responsibilities, as intentionality ultimately belongs to individuals, not institutions (Agassi, 1975; Amir, 2023). This approach offers an understanding of moral responsibility that acknowledges the role of

² See also Marquardt (2021, 2) on Popper’s distinction between individual and institutional ethics.

institutions in shaping behaviour while supporting the individual's ability to act rationally and maintain moral autonomy.

By recognising the dual role of individual and collective intentionality, Searle's theory of institutions can be consistent with Kantian ethics. Moral principles begin with individual autonomy and self-legislation but gain wider social relevance and power through *collective acceptance*. This dual nature of moral laws explains both individual autonomy and the formation of institutional ethics.

5. Popper's realist approach and the metaphysics values

One of the challenges that CR faces in the metaphysical research program for ethics is the ontological status of moral values. What place do they hold in Popper's theory of three worlds? Let's consider them merely as mental constructions. CR must explain how it avoids moral relativism and arbitrariness, and what theory it proposes for the reality of values and their relationship with moral laws and standards.

Just as theoretical entities in scientific theories located in World 3 refer to a reality in World 1 if the theories are true, the moral laws in World 3 must also refer to something real. These realities are values. For CR to maintain a realist approach to moral laws, it must regard values as real. Values give meaning to human behaviours and experiences (Paya 2019). They provide purpose and direction for human experiences, thereby imbuing them with meaning.

Some values are personal and subjective, while others are objective. Some values may also be culturally oriented and, therefore, while accessible and meaningful to a specific group sharing that culture, are not universal. Values also possess normative force, though this force varies: some values have greater normative force than others (Paya 2019). We expect moral values to be objective and universal, providing moral meaning to human experiences and behaviors. The claim that such values are universal is based on the assumption that human beings share the same moral nature. This view should be compatible with Popper's theory of the self and can also be examined from an evolutionary perspective (Barrett 2017; Popper & Eccles 1985).

6. Popper's theory of the self and moral agency

The moral agent possesses *dispositional* properties that have evolved in humans through an evolutionary process. These properties are dispositional in the sense that they predispose individuals to make moral decisions when confronted with moral situations. Thus, moral agents have inherent dispositions or inclinations that influence their behaviour. Additionally, these properties can be viewed as emergent, arising from the complex interactions between individuals and their environment, particularly other humans [5]. These features manifest in the human world. In the metaphysical research program of CR, it is essential to develop a theory that explains how the moral agent emerges and under what conditions it can discover moral values and laws. In this section, we aim to explain the emergence of the moral agent using Popper's theory of the self.

The concept of the self has been a prominent topic in philosophy and psychology for centuries, and its emergence in the evolutionary process has been a subject of debate among researchers. A notable example of a scientific and philosophical approach to this multifaceted problem is *The Self and Its Brain*, a jointly

written book by Karl Popper and John Eccles. The book tackles questions on the nature of the self and consciousness. In Chapter 4, titled ‘Some Remarks About the Self,’ Popper discusses his view on the nature of the self.

Popper believes that selves exist, unlike many philosophers since Hume, who have doubted or denied their existence. He thinks Hume himself was not consistent in his scepticism about the self, because he often used the notion of ‘character’ to explain human actions, and ‘character’ is just another name for the self, and that we do not need to assume anything more than that to talk about the self (Popper & Eccles 1985, 103; Hume 1888, 251, 403, 411).

Popper suggests that the self is a product of the brain and cannot be separated from it. He does not accept the idea of a “*substantial*” self, but instead considers it as a process that emerges from the interaction of neurons in the brain, and *evolves* through interaction with the environment. Popper’s view of the self implies that we are dynamic and evolving beings who learn to be selves through language and social experience. In other words, we do not have a *fixed* or *innate* self but learn to become selves through our interactions with the world, especially other people. This learning process is one in which we learn about World 1, World 2, and especially about World 3; it involves both inborn dispositions and social experience, as well as language and reason. Therefore, humans owe their status *as selves* to language and to others, who help them create World 3.

Popper maintains that we can learn about ourselves not by self-observation, nor by looking at ourselves in the mirror or thinking about our feelings, but by becoming *selves*, and by developing *theories* about ourselves, by doing things and making conjectures about who we are. He means that we become selves by having experiences, making choices, and finding out what we like and don’t like. We also develop *theories* about ourselves by trying to explain why we do what we do and what we want to achieve. These theories can change as we grow and learn more. Popper thinks this is how we get to know ourselves better, and it helps us understand and change our beliefs and actions (Popper & Eccles 1985, p. 110).

Popper’s *theory of the self* as a research program raises the question of how, in an evolutionary process, the *self* becomes a *moral agent*. In *The Self and Its Brain*, Popper briefly suggests that moral agency results from the influence of World 3. Under the influence of World 3, the self transcends instinctive desires and becomes a moral agent. According to this theory, moral agents are selves who possess the cognitive ability to think of themselves and others as persons and selves, and to respect everyone. Popper argues that World 3, the realm of objective knowledge and culture, endows humans with a unique capacity to act as moral agents. However, he does not explain how the self acquires this capacity. Specifically, how does the self transcend emotional and instinctive motivations, discover moral values, formulate moral laws, and make moral judgments? This issue is central to various evolutionary scenarios that attempt to explain how moral agency emerges and evolves in human history based on biological, psychological, and social factors.

Evolutionary explanations of morality acknowledge a fundamental distinction between the prosocial emotional feelings that occasionally drive chimpanzee behavior and the moral motivations in humans, which are often guided by moral norms and rules. While these explanations concur on this fundamental difference, they diverge in their accounts of the origin and nature of these norms and laws, and their relationship to the cognitive capacities of humans and other animals.

John Barresi (2016) offers an evolutionary explanation of moral behaviour and its relationship with *personhood*, which can be integrated into a critical rationalist research program. Barresi posits that moral behavior is contingent upon personhood as a cognitive capacity that emerged during human evolution. Personhood, according to Barresi, is the ability to understand oneself and others as persons and to respect all persons equally in accordance with moral norms. This capacity enables individuals to adhere to normative rules appropriate to different roles and situations rather than being guided by personal or emotional preferences. Thus, ‘personhood’ is a pivotal concept linking the self to moral agency.

The essence of personhood lies in recognising oneself and others as *persons*. A crucial condition for understanding a moral norm as equally applicable to individuals in similar situations is not only recognising the normative demands in that situation but also conceiving of both oneself and others as members of a class of agents obligated to accept these demands. To achieve this, a concept of agency is required to bridge the gap between the self and other. For humans, this concept is personhood. It serves as the bridge that facilitates normative guidance applicable to individuals based on their roles in various situations rather than their personal emotional preferences. Personhood necessitates a cognitive capacity to recognise oneself and others as persons, acknowledging them as individuals and selves, and respecting all people equally in accordance with moral norms. This capacity also allows individuals to follow normative rules appropriate for different roles and situations, rather than being guided by personal or emotional preferences.

Incorporating Barresi’s theory of personhood into Popper’s theory of the self allows us to elucidate how the moral agent emerges from the self and influences human life within the framework of critical rationalism. Following Barresi, we propose that moral agency arises from the development of the self through a stage termed ‘personhood’. This stage represents a cognitive capacity that provides a third-person perspective on situations. This perspective enables individuals to compare the pain of others with their own and to apply moral norms equally to all individuals (Mansouri, 2024).

7. Objectivity and intersubjective criticizability

Criticizability is a fundamental component of CR. Popper equates the *objectivity* of knowledge with *intersubjective criticizability* (Popper, 1945/2013; Paya, 2011). Given the central importance of criticizability, this section will explore its different dimensions within the context of ethics.

In the context of descriptive theories, criticism is directed towards the *regulative idea* of absolute *truthfulness*. Conversely, in the realm of decisions, criticism targets the regulative idea of absolute *rightness* (Popper, 1945/2013). In science, we lack a definitive criterion for recognising truth, just as we lack a criterion for rightness in ethics. However, science provides criteria for refuting false theories. Logical inconsistency or empirical inadequacy can refute a theory. Similarly, in ethics, criteria can be established to identify wrong decisions and actions. The criteria articulated by Kant for the *categorical imperative* do *not justify* the rightness of a moral decision but can indicate that something goes wrong with a decision. Likewise, the utilitarian criterion does *not justify* a moral decision but can potentially reveal that a decision or action is wrong. This distinction is crucial because CR should not be confined to deontic or utilitarian approaches. The criteria proposed in these approaches serve merely as *tools for criticising* decisions within CR. There is no necessity to limit CR to any single approach. Instead, all these tools can be employed to criticise decisions and to seek out new tools for this purpose.

The problem of criticizability of moral conscience

Popper has referred to moral *conscience* as “the ultimate court of appeal” on several occasions. His views on the appeal to conscience appear quasi-Kantian. However, since consciences are personal and subjective, there is a concern that they may undermine the criticisability and objectivity of moral judgments (Shearmur, 2009; 2019; 2021; 2024). To address this issue, it is essential to interpret these references within the context of Popper’s entire body of work and provide a plausible interpretation of the role of conscience in moral judgments.

Firstly, Popper’s references to both *conscience* and *decisionism* primarily emphasise preserving autonomy in moral decisions, as opposed to relying on religion and society. Therefore, his emphasis on conscience should not be interpreted to mean that our conscience is infallible or that we should not criticise decisions or theories that result from conscientious decisions. Rather, it signifies that, as autonomous beings, humans must make decisions based on their own conscience, rather than on religious or societal dictates.

Secondly, the concept of *conscience* is inherently vague. Critical rationalists should not interpret conscience as a criterion that *justifies* moral decisions and judgments. Conscience functions similarly to intuition in science. Scientific intuition does *not justify* theories but serves as a source of *inspiration* for theoretical conjectures or for correctly applying laws in particular situations. Similarly, conscience does *not justify* moral laws or decisions; it merely inspires the conjecture of moral rules or their adequate application in particular situations. Conscience is akin to the scientist’s *good sense*, as explained by Duhem in the context of scientific activity. Scientific intuition or good sense can be trained and improved with training and practice, but it is not justified or does not justify anything.

In the same way, conscience does *not justify* moral judgments but inspires them. Therefore, just as scientific intuition is not a valid criterion for recognising the truth of scientific statements and judgments and may lead us astray, conscience is not a criterion for the correctness of moral judgments. Like scientific intuition, moral conscience requires training through continuous criticism and interaction with others.

Furthermore, conscience has another function that distinguishes it from scientific intuition: the internal criticism of intention, which will be explained in the section related to the criticism of decisions.

The role of science in criticising decisions

As previously discussed, moral principles are not directly applicable in moral situations. After recognising and modelling the situation, we apply moral principles considering the specific conditions to reach an ethical decision. Science aids in understanding these situations, enabling us to propose more accurate models. Additionally, science plays a crucial role in rationalising ethics by delineating the limits of agents’ abilities (Bartely, 1971; Niemann, 2020; Marquardt, 2021, p.6 ff. 88).

Decisions are made based on the conditions and situations at hand. Therefore, the criticism of decisions should be conducted according to the conditions and logic of the situation. Popper’s concept of *situational logic* involves descriptive and explanatory knowledge, which is the domain of science. This underscores the importance of science in criticising moral decisions.

Institutional individualism highlights the influence of institutions on individuals. Although individuals are ultimately morally responsible, if institutional influence restricts their freedom of action and shapes their behaviour, these restrictions must be identified and considered in the moral evaluation of decisions. Understanding the institutions and the limitations they impose on individuals is the responsibility of science, particularly the humanities. This aligns with Miller's perspective on the role of science in criticising technologies, illustrating the important role of science in bringing technology into the realm of rationality (Miller 2006; Miller 2023).

Criticism of theories

Just as in science, where induction is not a justification and scientific inquiry begins with general conjectures criticised in light of particular observations, moral judgments also commence with general conjectures subject to criticism based on criteria in specific situations. These criteria themselves are not definitive or justified, allowing for continuous criticism of ethical standards and judgments. In this approach, the criteria for morality serve not as justifications but as tools for criticism, and both the criteria and standards can be revised. A significant portion of criticisms is directed at the theories we have accepted regarding concepts such as duty, justice, or other moral values. Even moral conscience relies on moral views and theories that may be commonsensical, necessitating criticism and the proposal of more adequate theories under new conditions. Generally, the criticism of moral decisions may lead to the critique of the underlying theories that give meaning to moral concepts. For instance, the concept of "justice" as fairness is interpreted differently in Rawlsian theory compared to utilitarianism. Similarly, the understanding of social justice varies between a tribal society and a modern society (Hayek 1978, 57-68). Thus, a critical approach to our interpretation of "justice" may involve engaging with and criticising the broader theories that underpin that interpretation.

Criticizability of the intentional element in decisions

Popper considered the regulative idea of *rightness* in decision-making. Consequently, the criticism of decisions, including moral decisions, is directed towards rightness. However, the rightness of a decision depends on the intention behind it. Therefore, the element of intention is crucial in evaluating moral decisions and can be criticised in two ways.

The first aspect aligns with Kant's idea that intention should be pure and based on the act from duty. Evaluating this aspect of intention is only possible through internal criticism or reference to conscience, as it is a subjective matter related to World 2. Conscience, being personal to the moral agent, determines whether a decision was made solely to respect moral law or if personal or external benefits were involved. Since the answer to this question pertains to personal motives, it remains inaccessible to others unless the agent discloses it. This is one reason to differentiate between judging others and judging their decisions.

The second aspect of intention pertains to the *intended results* of decisions and actions. The intention of moral action is generally to create a moral world where behaviours align with moral values. Popper considers this second sense of intention more important than the first (Shearmur, 2024). The reason is twofold: firstly, the intention in the first sense is not intersubjectively criticisable unless declared by the moral subject. Secondly, the harm caused by impure intention affects only the individual.

In contrast, the intention of the second type may harm others, and it is objective. This objective intention can also control the first sense of intention. An intention may be pure and based on duty, but it relies on a mystical theory of duty that is insensitive to harmful results for people. Therefore, Popper is attentive to both the inner intention and the outcomes of intentions in decisions (Shearmur, 2024). The greater the consequences and social impact of decisions, particularly in public policies, the more critical it is to evaluate the results and the harm they cause to those involved.

However, Popper's emphasis on intended results does not imply adopting a utilitarian approach. According to Popper, we are not aware of all the outcomes of our actions beforehand. We are responsible only for the intended results (Shearmur 2024). Although adopting an utilitarian approach can enhance the objectivity of moral judgments, it is impractical for moral agents to predict all outcomes in human and social contexts. Therefore, they cannot be held accountable for all results; they can only be held responsible for the intended ones. Moreover, the intrinsic and pure intention, resonating with Kantian autonomy, is significant because of its connection with Kantian autonomy. However, its criticism is subjective and personal, based solely on internal judgment and conscience. It is morally important whether a decision is made solely based on social, religious, or cultural pressure or profit, or with the intention of choosing the pure good.

Thus, in Popper's view, it is not feasible to adopt a purely Kantian approach where moral decisions are made regardless of their outcomes and solely based on intention and the formal criterion of the categorical imperative or pure good intention. Attempting to place Popper's view within either Kantian duty or utilitarianism is misguided and incompatible with the doctrines of CR. This is because such an approach presupposes that these frameworks provide a criterion for justifying the morality of decisions or actions. Instead, if we accept these criteria as tools among others for criticising decisions ethically, we avoid this problem. We should seek to discover new tools for moral criticism of decisions that are effective in various situations.

8. Conclusion

By employing the doctrines of CR, this paper has delineated the direction of the research program in moral philosophy within CR. By examining the implications of Popper's doctrines, we have outlined a framework for a philosophical research program in ethics within CR. Based on fallibilism and non-justificationism, we have argued that moral principles, judgments, and ethical standards in CR are inherently fallible and not justifiable.

Furthermore, the debate over whether CR should adopt a Kantian or utilitarian approach to obtaining moral standards is grounded in a justificationist presupposition, which may misguide the proposal of a research program for ethics in CR. The criteria presented in these theories serve as tools for evaluating laws and moral judgments. These tools for criticism are utilised to evaluate actions, claims, intentions, methods, and decisions to constitute a moral world as a regulative idea. A moral world is one where individuals act in accordance with moral values in their personal behaviour and interactions with others and their environment.

Popper's realist approach to science and morality suggests that moral laws, like legal laws, have an intentional component, making moral judgments context-dependent and sensitive to situational factors.

One consequence of theory-ladenness is the indispensability of moral laws, which are explicitly or implicitly embedded in moral reasoning. However, to apply these laws, we must first model the moral situation. In this modeling, the specific conditions of the moral situation significantly influence moral judgments and make them context-dependent.

The intentional component of ethics, when acknowledged by the community and rendered through collective intentionality, leads ethics to become an institutional fact. Institutional individualism in CR supports individual autonomy while recognising the impact of institutions on moral decisions (Agassi, 1975; Amir, 2023). Popper's theory of the self suggests that individuals transcend to moral agents through their evolutionarily acquired capacity for moral reasoning, allowing humans to discover values and imbue their behavior with moral significance.

Objectivity in CR is achieved through intersubjective criticisability. Various tools and mechanisms are available for criticising the rules and standards of ethics, all aimed at creating a moral world. The role of science in criticising ethics requires further study.

By integrating these elements, we may develop a coherent and rational ethical framework within the context of CR, fostering a progressive and adaptable approach to moral philosophy. Future research should explore and develop new critical tools for emerging ethical situations. Additionally, further examination of the relationship between individual autonomy and institutional ethics is necessary.

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