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Appeal to the court of experience

Ray Scott Percival

Review of: *Popper: Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method*. By Geoffrey Stokes.

Geoffrey Stokes's introduction to Karl Popper's work portrays it as an evolving system of ideas and aims to explore the little-understood intricate logical relationships between Popper's work on scientific method and his philosophy of politics. It is one of the few books to cover the debate between Popper and the Frankfurt School.

The dogma of justificationism, that one should accept all and only those positions that can be justified, is an ideological juggernaut that will require decades of argument just to show that it is debatable. In contrast, Popper argued that knowledge can grow only through conjecture and refutation. This means justification is not only a waste of time but also impossible. Many commentators present it as simply a variant of the orthodoxy or ignore it in the hope it will go away. Stokes is one of the former.

Stokes skips over what Popper regarded as William Bartley's important generalisation of his method, comprehensively critical rationalism (CCR). All positions are in principle potentially criticisable, without fear of circularity, infinite regress or dogmatism. Because he sees CCR through the spectacles of justificationism, Stokes deploys an argument against CCR that actually applies only to justificationism.

Stokes places Popper's work and that of the Vienna Circle far too close together. True, both thought experience was an important court of appeal and science an astounding example of its use. But apart from agreeing on the value of the territory, they wanted to carve it up in incompatible ways. For Stokes, the Native Americans and European whites must have had very similar projects! For the Vienna Circle, a statement was scientific if and only if it was verifiable; otherwise, it was either a tautology or meaningless. For Popper a statement was scientific if it was refutable. While the circle banned metaphysics from science as strictly meaningless, Popper acknowledged metaphysics as deeply inspirational and integral to science.

Characteristic of many of Stokes's "criticisms" is that they are presented as Popper "admitting" or "granting" them - as if Popper was not the one who originally raised and dealt with them in the systematic elaboration of his philosophy. A refreshing exception is that Stokes acknowledges (but only in a footnote) that the idea that Popper was originally a "dogmatic falsificationist" is merely a Lakatosian myth.

Popper: Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method. First Edition

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