

Return to Ionia

Jan Piotrowski

Introduction

An almost inescapable premise one is likely to accept in this day and age is that ideas, even deeply theoretical ones, have causal power. Another is that people's ideas differ, often to a considerable extent, and in some instances quite diametrically. These two simple postulates entail a simple conclusion, to wit that certain actual events or actions (i.e. those directly or indirectly brought about by particular ideas) shall be approved by some and reproached by others, inadvertently breeding conflict.

This is by no means a phenomenon restricted to our times; for drastic examples it suffices to recall all religious or revolutionary wars fought out in past centuries, though human history abounds in countless less graphic illustrations of the purported thesis. In fact, it is very much a historical truism. What is perhaps less blatant is the evolution in the forms these divergences of opinion assume. The great achievement of the second half of the twentieth century is that in many cases conflicts never left the Popperian world 3¹ – in a manner of speaking, they were never physically consummated. This is perhaps nothing new as regards academic disputes (which constitute a subset of conflicts in the broad sense), which have very much been conducted in a similar fashion for quite some time, yet as far as worldviews and international relations are concerned, such solutions, or specifically their relative frequency, may seem a novelty.

One evident and at the same time very convincing reason for these developments may be that having witnessed the excesses of the two world wars, the global community, at least the part of it that was directly affected by some

¹ In his philosophy Karl Popper distinguishes reality as subsuming three "worlds": "world 1" of physical "things", "world 2" of subjective experiences and "world 3" of contents of statements. Cf. Popper [1972].

form of hecatomb, decided that needless bloodshed is probably not the best way forward. Indubitably, there possibly exist manifold other more subtle and elaborate causes of this state of affairs. However, the present paper does not aim to analyse them in any greater detail, concentrating instead on the consequences of this causally prolific idea.

The Ionian approach: “Let our theories die instead of us”

First, though, some mention should be made of sources of the attitude that underlies this bloodless approach to resolution of worldview controversies. In the seminal *Conjectures and Refutations* Sir Karl Popper argues that “to [his] knowledge the critical or rationalist tradition was invented only once”² – in the early Ionian philosophical school of Thales, who is a likely candidate for the first known teacher to consciously break with the notion that one school shall admit but one doctrine, encouraging acolytes to question his tentative solutions to problems under consideration and propose their own, equally tentative explications. By previously accepted, let us call them *dogmatic*, standards putting the accepted doctrine under such flagrant scrutiny must have seemed dangerously heretical – and would have probably been treated as such, i.e. insubordinate students would have been removed by any means necessary, thus possibly in a forcible manner, in which case the physical consummation of the conflict situation becomes apparent.

The *critical tradition* of the Ionians, on the other hand, rests on one fundamental idea – that man is fallible, that we make mistakes, but also, and perhaps most importantly, that we can learn from these mistakes. This breakthrough concept was discarded with the advent of Aristotelian doctrine of *episteme*, or certain, demonstrable knowledge, only to be revived in the Renaissance, and fully spelled out, elaborated and rehabilitated recently by none other than Popper himself. Sir Karl’s thought can be summarily expressed in a terse statement: *let our theories die instead of us*. In other words, let whatever conflicts may rise between men remain in world 3 and not enter into world 1.

² Popper [2002] p. 204.

United Nations, international order, and the Ionian tradition

The twentieth century can be regarded as a tumultuous history of the fall (with Nazi and Communist systems) and rise (with the overcoming of these totalitarian regimes) of the critical tradition which celebrated what seemed to be its final triumph with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and thus, of the dogmatic attitude. What is perhaps intriguing, though certainly debatable, is that in many respects the Cold War seems a near prototypical example of this critical tradition at work (or maybe half at work – in light of the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction Popper's credo could be rephrased to read *let your theories die instead of you*). The very fact that it never really entered the ultimate "hot" phase, i.e. the phase of what was earlier termed "physical consummation of the conflict" may be seen to corroborate this claim. Evidently, it must be added that this is only so as far as international (that is, in this particular case, East-West) relations are concerned. For the Soviet system was certainly of the dogmatic kind in its treatment of internal dissenters. Interestingly enough, the West also had its dogmatic moments, just to mention the brief³ spell of McCarthyism.

On the international level this aspect of the critical tradition was, and continues to be, institutionalised in the form of the United Nations Organisation – a body founded primarily to watch over serious political conflicts brewing in world 3 and guarantee that they do not materialise in world 1. The UN Security Council has often played the role of a final forum for discussion and resolution of disagreements (between those with the most say in world matters) that risked spilling from the former into the latter. Thus, it can be perceived as the ultimate safeguard of the critical attitude and as such, it seems to have coped with this task with relative success (or at least it cannot be said to be an outright failure) until the last decade of the twentieth century.

This relative success was presumably largely due to the fact that, firstly, all sides to these conflicts preferred some sort of a world 3 resolution to a world 1 campaign, and secondly, the two main camps involved treated each other as equal (read: equal threats), though opposed, which in turn ensured a basic stability of

the fragile dynamic equilibrium that obtained between them. The Security Council remains so structured that its functioning depends on such a subtle balance – a balance that forced the critical tradition upon the opposing parties and one that was gravely disrupted in 1989. For some time after the end of the Cold War there was hope that this institution can nevertheless continue to play a constructive (or anti-destructive) role in international relations since all important political participants now embraced the critical tradition – no longer out of necessity but freely, for want of a stance that would be morally sounder.

This hope was shattered with the advent of neo-conservative philosophy in American foreign policy, an event that constitutes a significant departure from the Ionian tradition. Authorities of the United States thus adopted a different *moral* attitude, a new *ethic*, that they found to be, in fact, more sound and better suited to their nation's needs and aspirations. What ensued was a dramatic rift between on the one hand ardent supporters of the *status quo ante*, most conspicuous being European Union states gathered around France and Germany, and on the other the US administration, largely devoted to the doctrine that could be restated as the assertion that some world 3 problems are best solved in world 1.

The divergence culminated with the outbreak of the Iraqi conflict whereby it became quite evident that hitherto accepted premises underlying international policy and its broadly understood morality no longer held with equal strength for all those concerned. This is tantamount to a remarkable shift in moral outlook, especially on the part of the United States. To exemplify the amplitude of change let us recall that in 1948 Bertrand Russell, an illustrious defender of rationalism, advocated a preventive war against Russia while it was still not in possession of thermonuclear weapons, and thus unable to retaliate⁴. However, at the time it appeared that “an aggressive war, even in these crucial circumstances, and with the then practical certainty of victory, had become a moral impossibility.”⁵ Recent American undertakings in Iraq have evidenced that this last statement no longer

³ Though possibly not quite as short-lived as tends to be believed cf. for example Morgan [2003].

⁴ The rationale for such an approach was presented in an essay later added to Russell [1959].

⁵ Popper [2002] p. 499.

constitutes a valid description of what certainly used to be an almost universally accepted moral principle characterising the vast majority of world policymakers and public opinion.

In itself, a shift in morality is nothing particularly astonishing – human civilisation has many a time witnessed similar developments. Clearly, its not being an astounding irregularity does not entail that it is insignificant. In fact, this attitude change can have far-reaching consequences in multifarious fields of human endeavour, of which perhaps the most immediate is the ensuing necessity for international organisations to accommodate it in one way or another. From what has been said previously, it should be patent that in the case of the United Nations Security Council some such development is requisite, given that the institution was tailored to suit altogether different circumstances.

At this stage it is important to note that from a purely functional perspective the need to overhaul the Security Council does not impose a similar procedure with regard to other United Nations bodies. In 1956 in a lecture delivered at the University of Bristol⁶ Popper lists what he considers nine “greatest evils which have hitherto beset the social life of man”⁷, namely poverty, unemployment and some similar forms of social insecurity, sickness and pain, penal cruelty, slavery and other forms of serfdom, religious and racial discrimination, lack of educational opportunities, rigid class differences, and war. Let us set the final iniquity aside for the moment and devote a few words to the others. Although almost half a century later the list seems practically as exhaustive and relevant as at the time it was first compiled, some progress has undoubtedly been made in many, if not all, of the outlined areas, much of which could be credited to the myriad of United Nations specialised agencies. In this respect at least, people seem in agreement that equally laudable work should be allowed to continue. Whether the intra- and inter-institutional infrastructure of these organs could be improved upon or optimised is unequivocally an issue worthy of

⁶ Later reprinted in Popper [2002] as chapter 19 entitled “The History of our Time: an Optimist’s View”.

⁷ Popper [2002] p. 497.

rumination, but their general purpose and structure are not in dire need of rethinking.

Let us then return to the last item on Popper's list. The UN organ primarily responsible for dealing with potential and actualised instances this unpropitious phenomenon is the Security Council. The following question thus arises: *what (if anything) can be done in order to adapt this body to the new set of moral postulates underpinning contemporary international policymaking?* The obvious and primordial requirement, as set out by article 108, Chapter XVIII of the UN Charter is the consent for any change of all five permanent members. For all intents and purposes this proviso immediately precludes any attempt whatsoever at limiting the latter's power (meaning here both the power of particular states within the Security Council and of the Security Council within the United Nations Organisation as a whole) and with it *any* far-reaching systemic alteration. Incidentally, here partners on both sides of the Atlantic are surprisingly univocal. Admittedly, talk of new members, be they permanent or not, that has for many years now floated torpidly around in the political ether, is all very politically correct, yet it would constitute but a cosmetic change where thoroughgoing structural modifications are required.

Expanding of the Security Council may well aim at making it more representative of the modern geopolitical situation, but if the rationale behind like proposals is so circumscribed, transformation would ultimately amount to converting the body into a club whose membership becomes nothing more than a much sought after status symbol, and as such, fertile breeding ground for increasing dissent between those allowed inside and those left out (which is very much the case as things stand at the moment). In order to counteract these clearly undesirable consequences membership would be in continuous need of expansion, inexorably furthering the inefficiency of the decision making process – for *since when is agreement easier in a bigger group?*⁸ Of course, such enlargement would allow more proposals (some of which will, perhaps, have been

⁸ European Union members' current inability even to *decide which decision making system to adopt* in the Constitutional Treaty serves as ample illustration of this phenomenon.

disadvantageous for the currently only “prospective” members) to be blocked. However, the extent of the present inability to reach constructive accord, especially in matters of greater importance, renders all such change merely nominal, and hence, exceedingly superficial and inconclusive.

Having established both reduction and increase of the membership (as well as dispensing with the entire organ – aside from the United States no permanent member looks even half-willing to give up this prestigious, though effectively illusory, position of power) as severely inadequate measures one is inclined to ask: what action would be pertinent in the circumstances we are faced with? Sadly, no realistic visions emerge. The reason is simple and has already been touched upon – international organisations, therefore *a fortiori* the UN in general, and the Security Council specifically, are institutionalisations of the critical tradition. As such, they aim to disseminate this tradition globally and implement it in specific instances, while concomitantly being entirely dependent on its observance by those concerned. This may seem paradoxical, yet it is easily comprehensible if we view these organisations as aiming chiefly to *consolidate* an attitude that is already at least to some extent either consciously or tacitly accepted.

The same holds true for most European states, which generally advocate the primacy of international law over national legislature and thus accept the pre-eminence of some supranational arbiters. Why this is so is again here a secondary matter, though one that may deserve a brief mention. Perhaps it could be partly attributed to the fact that Europeans have traditionally had to reckon with many neighbours simultaneously. Europe is a small continent littered with nation-states, each with their own particular interests. In order to deal with such geopolitical circumstances they were impelled to develop a panoply of diplomatic tools and stratagems that would allow them to balance these interests against those of their neighbours. The numerous European armed conflicts were also mostly results of some diplomatic negotiations, though ones that would generally have been surreptitious and probably limited to prospective allies. All this meant that whether in peacetime or at war, concessions had to be made. Europe thus acquired *the habit of give and take* – and this approach to foreign policy was as valid for small

countries as it was for great powers, which had to take constant heed of important rivals. When the habit wedded post World War II pacifist attitudes, the modern shape of European foreign policy was finally established, and the stage was set for what could be termed *ethic of peaceful concession*. I need not emphasise that the United States have never experienced similar circumstances.⁹

Conclusion

Modern ethical theory strongly affirms the trivial fact that grave moral conflicts are those where opponents espouse incompatible normative systems. Resolution, as opposed to discarding, of such conflicts is only possible through some reciprocal concessions. It suffices for one side to reject this *ethic of compromise* or *negotiation* for the whole enterprise to fall through. This is exactly what the world is currently witnessing. It is not my aim here to ascertain that adopting the said ethical stance is preferable to its denunciation or *vice versa* – that in itself is a purely moral judgement that ultimately has to be made by each and every one of us. What I do wish to assert is that in rejecting it we automatically reject its institutionalised form and any possibility of true co-operation with its proponents. In claiming otherwise someone is either insincere or risking inconsistency. Consequently, all that international institutions and their supporters can feasibly do is wait for a serendipitous *return to Ionia*, which in the eyes of many still remains a possible option.

⁹ The closest it ever came to this sort of diplomatic dealings was, of course, the Cold War era. That situation, however, differed from the one I outlined in the text in that (a) composition of both camps was predetermined and relatively stable, and (b) the United States' geography gave it autarkical potential, which cannot be said of any single European country (a united Europe could perhaps acquire such potential, but as we can currently witness, this endeavour nonetheless demands considerable diplomatic dexterity). When I talk here of the United States I mean of course the already consolidated federal union. Some diplomatic aptitude would have been necessary in the period when this consolidation was taking place (including the Civil War), yet I am still inclined to argue that the situation was far from being anywhere near as complex as that on the European continent. Two possible reasons could be the common heritage of the vast majority of those involved and the absence in different states of historically rooted national feeling and institutions.

References

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