Karl Raimund Popper was born in Vienna on July 28, 1902. His father was a lawyer of broad intellectual interests who was knighted for his charitable work by the Emperor Franz Josef. The son of the Austrian lawyer knight is now an English knight, and, ironically, the man responsible for this unlikely course of events, Adolf Hitler, was one of those who found shelter in the hostel for the homeless which Dr. Simon Popper helped to build and administer. Popper's parents were Jewish by birth but had converted to Lutheran Christianity before their own children were born. The conversion does not seem to have been the result of any deep religious conviction. Rather, Karl Popper's father, like so many of the Viennese Jewish bourgeoisie at the turn of the century, saw conversion as a natural step in the process of assimilation to the wider population. Popper's own attitude to his origins reflects still the assimilationist attitudes of the circles in which he grew up.

His youth was marked by a number of momentous political events and also by intellectual encounters which were to be no less important for the later development of his thought. The First World War and Austria's defeat shattered the comfortable social environment in which Popper was born and his philosophical and political development, which was astonishingly precocious, took place against a background of economic insecurity and intellectual uncertainty. Although he did not publish a book until 1934 many of Popper's characteristic positions in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of politics were reached, at least in outline, before his twentieth birthday.

In a paper delivered in 1952, Popper argued that, "The degeneration of philosophical schools . . . is the consequence of the mistaken belief that one can philosophize without having been compelled to philosophize by problems which arise outside philosophy—in mathematics, for example, or in cosmology, or in politics, or in religion, or in social life. . . . Genuine philosophical problems are always rooted in urgent problems outside philosophy, and they die if their roots decay." However arguable this is as a general rule, it certainly reflects the nature of Popper's own experience. For his thought in both the philosophy of science and of politics arose in reflection on urgent problems of life in a shattered and defeated country. It is not surprising that much of Popper's later thought in science and politics originated in his reactions to Marxist communism, a movement which was not only enormously influential in postwar Vienna but also claimed to be the unique embodiment of scientific politics.

From his early years Karl Popper had been struck by the poverty rife among the population of Vienna. As a child it seemed to him that nothing could be more im-
portant than to overcome this terrible problem. With this feeling and in the context of disillusion with what he came to feel was an unjust war it was natural that he should have drifted toward socialist circles. The young Popper became a member of the association of socialist students at secondary schools, and in the spring of 1919, in spite of certain lingering doubts, was converted by the propaganda of the communists. He was sixteen years old. Though he was to remain a communist for only two or three months, the incident which led to his abandonment of the cause is of such importance for the later development of his thinking that it is worth quoting what he says of it in his intellectual autobiography. “It happened shortly before my seventeenth birthday. 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. That was the Marxist theory—part of so-called ‘scientific socialism.’ I now asked myself whether such a calculation could ever be supported by ‘science.’ The whole experience, and especially this question, produced in me a life-long revulsion of feeling.”

Revulsion, caused by a feeling of complicity in moral evil, and guilt at having accepted a creed as complex as Marxism relatively uncritically, led to profound questioning in Popper’s mind. The questions which he raised not only led him to abandon Marxist communism and, eventually, socialism in general, but also to reflect on the nature of science and the difference between truly scientific theories and those that merely dress themselves in scientific garb. Developments of his thought in the philosophy of politics and of science proceeded in parallel but it was in the latter field that he published first. This was largely because through most of the inter-war years Popper felt that the danger of rising fascism was so great that he had a duty to refrain from attacking the doctrines of those who were, after all, the enemies of the fascists. It was only when the communists and social democrats had shown their inability to cope with the fascist threat that Popper began to work his criticisms of Marxism into publishable form. The books that resulted, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945) and *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), contain the core of his political philosophy and many of their arguments reflect earlier work in the philosophy of science, particularly his 1934 book *Logik der Forschung.* Apart from its direct attack on what Popper sees as the intellectual foundations of totalitarian politics, *The Open Society and its Enemies* also contains numerous examples of the ways in which the socialists’ mistaken conception of politics and history played into the hands of their enemies throughout the years of the fascist advance. Perhaps these passages of the book, intensely personal in tone, reflect the author’s regret that he did not voice his criticism sooner.

As a result of the publication of *Logik der Forschung* Popper received many invitations to lecture abroad. His long visits to London in 1935 and 1936 were of particular importance to him. There he met many of the major figures in British intellectual life. He heard Bertrand Russell speak at the Aristotelian Society and delivered a first draft of “The Poverty of Historicism” as a paper at F. A. von Hayek’s seminar at the London School of Economics. The contacts made in London were especially significant for the future of Popper’s life and career. The shadow of Nazi Germany was falling ever deeper over his native Austria.
and for a man of his views and background there could be no future under Hitler. Therefore when Popper heard of an opening for teaching philosophy at Canterbury University College in New Zealand he applied for the post. He was appointed, and in March 1937 arrived with his wife to take up his new appointment. Exactly one year later came the news that Hitler had marched into Austria. "There was now," Popper writes, "an urgent need to help Austrians to escape. I also felt that I could no longer hold back whatever knowledge of political problems I had acquired since 1919; I decided to put 'The Poverty of Historicism' in a publishable form. What came out of it were two more or less complementary pieces: The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society and its Enemies (which at first I had intended to call: 'False Prophets: Plato-Hegel-Marx')."4

Popper remained in New Zealand throughout the war, teaching and working on the books he regarded as his war effort in the struggle against totalitarianism. Then, in 1946, he returned to England to take up a post at the London School of Economics where, in 1949, he was appointed Professor of Logic and Scientific Method at London University. Since the war England has been his home, though he has spent fruitful time in the United States as well, and now, retired from formal teaching commitments and knighted, Sir Karl Popper lives at Penn in Buckinghamshire still working on problems that have interested him throughout his life and developing his thought in new and equally thought provoking directions.

Like his friend Hayek, Popper regards himself as a liberal in the sense of a "man who values individual freedom and who is alive to the dangers inherent in all forms of power and authority." His political philosophy is above all a philosophy of freedom, an attempt to discover the conditions under which external constraints upon the individual can be minimized within the security that only the state can provide. It is his overwhelming concern with freedom that has led to his disenchantment with socialism. "If there could be such a thing as socialism combined with individual liberty," he writes, "I would be a socialist still. For nothing could be better than living a modest, simple and free life in an egalitarian society. It took some time before I recognized this as no more than a beautiful dream; that freedom is more important than equality; that the attempt to realize equality endangers freedom; and that, if freedom is lost, there will not even be equality among the unfree."6

Yet Popper has written no equivalent of The Constitution of Liberty and his positive philosophy of freedom has to be extracted from the books in which he has criticized those great thinkers who have, in his view, betrayed the substance of the great ideals they invoke. Of these Plato, Hegel and Marx have been the most influential and they are the major targets of The Open Society and its Enemies. What Popper calls "the open society" is a society in which individuals are confronted continually with significant personal decisions, a social universe of choices free from the pervasive atmosphere of taboos characteristic of archaic as well as totalitarian societies. The open society, Popper argues, was born among the ancient Greeks and arose from that people's unique development of a tradition of critical discussion. This tradition is one among many but it is one uniquely fruitful for the growth of knowledge, not only the knowledge embodied in scientific theories which are corrected or replaced in the give and take of mutual criticism, but the practical knowledge of how to cope with particular political and social problems.

This essay is concerned with Karl Popper's political philosophy rather than his theories concerning the origins of science and philosophy but the functioning of the critical spirit is so central to the operation of an open society that it is important to see what he says of its origins in his paper "Back to the Presocratics." "In all or almost all civilizations we find something like religious or cosmological teaching, and in
many societies we find schools. Now schools, especially primitive schools, all have...a characteristic structure and function. Far from being places of critical discussion they make it their task to impart a definite doctrine, and to preserve it pure and unchanged... New ideas are heresies, and lead to schisms; should a member of the school try to change the doctrine, then he is expelled as a heretic. Among the early Greek thinkers, the Pythagoreans formed such a school but they were the exception. Thales, the first of the Milesian or Ionian thinkers, in contrast, seems to have allowed free discussion of his ideas. Anaximander, his kinsman and pupil, developed his cosmological theories in turn by criticism of his master, and his bold speculations were in turn subjected to the critical mind of Anaximenes. This critical spirit, born among the Ionian Greeks, was brought by Xenophanes to Elea where it flowered in the philosophy of Parmenides, whose ideas developed in opposition to those of his predecessors and of Heraclitus. Popper’s aim in tracing this genealogy of the critical tradition is to show the way in which its existence fostered the discovery of the sort of problems which later philosophy and science attempt to answer. Only the atmosphere of free discussion and mutual criticism permitted the formulation of these problems and allowed for the amazing profusion of suggestive, if speculative solutions which these thinkers provided. In every case the perceived insufficiencies of previous solutions provided the spur to new efforts to reach the truth.

“The Ionian school was the first in which pupils criticized their masters, in one generation after the other. There can be little doubt that the Greek tradition of philosophical criticism had its main source in Ionia. It was a momentous innovation. It meant a break with the dogmatic tradition which permits one school only, and the introduction in its place of a tradition that permits a plurality of doctrines which all try to approach the truth by means of critical discussion. It thus leads, almost by necessity, to the realization that our attempts to see and find the truth are not final, but open to improvement; that our knowledge, our doctrine, is conjectural; that it consists of guesses, of hypotheses, rather than of final and certain truths; and that criticism and critical discussion are our only means of getting nearer the truth. It thus leads to the tradition of bold conjectures and of free criticism, the tradition which created the rational and scientific attitude, and with it our Western civilization, the only civilization which is based upon science (though of course not upon science alone).”

The theme of this vital passage is also present in Popper’s discussion of the later Athenian sophists, men who, in his view, carried the tradition of critical rationalism into discussion of social and political matters. This discussion, in the first volume of The Open Society, forms the background to his hostile treatment of Plato and Aristotle, whom he sees as endeavoring to reverse the process through an unjustifiable distinction between opinion (doxa) and certain knowledge (epistemē). Popper sees Plato, like Aristotle after him and Heraclitus before, as a conservative frightened by contemporary political and social developments and trying, by means of a claim to certain knowledge in philosophy, to put an end to the dangerous reign of free speculation. Plato’s success can be measured by the low reputation which the sophists now enjoy, but it is to the latter and not the former that we owe the core values of Western democracy. And the defense of these constitutes the self-appointed task of Popper’s political writings.

There must be many readers, like myself, who are dissatisfied with this rather extreme dismissal of Plato’s case against the sophists but who will be stimulated by Popper’s picture of Greek civilization. There, for the first time, men argued freely about the truth of the explanatory myths by which their societies made sense of the world. There too was developed the distinction between nature and convention, the
distinction attributed to Protagoras that enables men to differentiate between a man made social world and the preexisting world of nature. However overused this distinction may have become in the modern passion to dismiss the reality of man’s natural limitations, its discovery and clear formulation was a vital step toward the achievement of an awareness of man’s responsibility for his social fate.

But from its beginnings the open society has been menaced by strains which in some ways are inherent in its nature, and origins. Popper believes that we are still suffering from the shock of the birth of a society which, uniquely, allows “the transition from the tribal or ‘closed’ society, with its submission to magical forces, to the ‘open society’ which sets free the critical powers of man.” Anyone can understand and even feel the strains of this birth shock. They are entailed in the realization of our responsibility for our fate, the knowledge that as freedom to criticize permits the growth of knowledge through error elimination, so it allows society to be modified in directions which we choose. The philosophies which Popper attacks attempt to avoid this responsibility, either through an effort to restore the taboo bounded closed society, or, more subtly, through the attempt to overcome the uncertainties and alternatives of change by viewing change itself as a foreordained course which we have only to recognize and accept. Plato’s prescription of a caste society in The Republic is an example of the first, though there are elements of the second course in Plato as well, while Marx is a particularly influential example of the second style of evasion. While there is no room here to enter into the details of Popper’s criticism of Plato and Marx (or of Aristotle and Hegel for that matter), it is important that we look more closely at Popper’s treatment of the second, or “historicist” path. For it is in contrast to historicism and the historicist cult of historical prophecy that Popper expounds his own concept of political theory and action.

In the introduction to The Poverty of

Historicism, Popper describes historicism as “an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principal aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns,’ the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history.” More broadly, historicism is “the doctrine that history is controlled by specific historical or evolutionary laws whose discovery would enable us to prophesy the destiny of man.” There have been almost innumerable varieties of historicism, according to whether this key developmental law is seen as the working through of the will of God, the law of nature, the law of economic development, the law of race etc. In each case the theorist, or prophet, in discovering the law uncovers the destiny of man. Historicism is a response to the fact of change in the world, an attempt to make sense of this fact by seeing each change as a part of an overall purpose or pattern. “It often seems,” writes Popper astutely, that historicists “were trying to comfort themselves for the loss of a stable world by clinging to the view that change is ruled by an unchanging law.”

But there is no such “unchanging law” of change, not least because the direction of change, and hence the course of human history, is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge, and “we cannot anticipate today what we shall only know tomorrow.” Therefore, Popper concludes, “we cannot . . . predict the future course of human history.” Anthony Quinton has criticized this argument against the viability of the historicist enterprise on the grounds that the sort of knowledge that affects the course of history is not the sort of knowledge whose future attainment we cannot predict. The example which he gives is the discovery of a military use for atomic forces, arguing that such knowledge is predictable in the sense that, “We may be able to predict that a certain technological problem will be solved . . . a considerable time before we know how to solve it.” But this point does not really weaken Popper’s argu-

Modern Age 155
ment against the theoretical possibility of accurate historicist prophecy because, at the very least, the unintended consequences or side effects of any solution to a technological problem are themselves unpredictable and it may be these, unforeseen by-product problems of a relatively predictable problem solving process, which most affect the course of history. Indeed, the discovery that there are possible military uses for atomic forces is an example of this, arising as it did in a research program that had no inbuilt expectations of releasing or even uncovering such forces for any purposes whatsoever.

However, Popper's major argument is not directed against the theoretical possibility of historicism so much as the unacceptable consequences of holding historicist views. Historicism is a poor method in the social sciences because it cannot deliver the sort of accurate predictions it promises. But, more significant still, historicist philosophies provide the underlying justification for a false and dangerous conception of the nature and scope of political activity. As early as 1919, Popper had concluded that the core of Marxism consisted in a combination of the typical historicist claim to have uncovered the law governing the course of history with the moral injunction, "Help to bring about the inevitable." This sort of activist historicism is a fairly common formula for political ideologies and movements; it combines a spur to activity with an assurance that everything will turn out right in the end, on the grounds that there really is not any other way things could develop. Believing that he knows the future direction of human history, the activist believer in historicism directs his effort toward facilitating that course. As an example, we may take the Marxist who, believing the collapse of capitalism to be inevitable, devotes his energies to giving history a helping hand rather than working to remedy identifiable and curable ills within the established framework. He justifies his activity by arguing that capitalism is anyway destined to give way to a higher form of social organization and that only after this has happened will it be possible to implement solutions to such social problems as poor housing or inadequate medical care.

Popper calls this the attitude of the "utopian social engineer." It is characterized by the doctrinaire belief that, "we must determine our ultimate political aim, or the Ideal State, before taking any practical action. Only when this ultimate aim is determined, in rough outline at least, only then when we are in possession of something like a blueprint of the society at which we aim, only then can we begin to consider the best ways and means for its realization and to draw up a plan for practical action." The justification for this attitude is provided by the historicist belief that one can know in advance a form of social organization in which present problems will receive definitive solutions. But this is false, not only because no one ever really does possess such knowledge, but because every human action is attended with unforeseen and unintended consequences, and the effect of these will often be to replace present problems with others that are equally grave. In aircraft technology we are familiar with the numerous cases in which an aircraft has been developed that overcomes the particular problems of its precursors only to fail because it embodies graver problems of its own. So it is in politics. Indeed, the unintended consequences of revolutionary upheavals commonly prevent the solution of problems that would have been quite easily soluble before. For example, the recurrent threat of famine due to harvest failure may be overcome by the introduction of improvements in agricultural and storage techniques, but if a revolutionary regime socializes the means of production, distribution and exchange in the belief that this is the necessary precondition for any solution to every problem, the disruption of food production and supply that results may easily nullify even the effects of technical improvements. The
fate of Soviet agriculture under Stalin is a lasting reminder of just this.

In view of the reformist bent of his own politics, Karl Popper has laid stress on the need to distinguish between “admissible plans for social reform and inadmissible Utopian blueprints.” In an address delivered in Brussels in 1947 he sought to provide “a simple formula or recipe for distinguishing” between the two approaches, inadmissible utopianism and his own which he calls that of the “piecemeal social engineer.” What he said there gives as good an insight as any into the spirit of his political outlook. “Work for the elimination of concrete evils rather than for the realization of abstract goods. Do not aim at establishing happiness by political means. Rather aim at the elimination of concrete miseries. Or, in more practical terms: fight for the elimination of poverty by direct means—for example, by making sure that everybody has a minimum income. Or fight against epidemics and disease by erecting hospitals and schools of medicine. Fight illiteracy as you fight criminality. But do all this by direct means. Choose what you consider the most urgent evil of the society in which you live, and try patiently to convince people that we can get rid of it. But do not try to realize these aims indirectly by designing and working for a distant ideal of a society which is wholly good. However deeply you may feel indebted to its inspiring vision, do not think that you are obliged to work for its realization, or that it is your mission to open the eyes of others to its beauty. Do not allow your dreams of a beautiful world to lure you away from the claims of men who suffer here and now. Our fellow men have a claim to our help; no generation must be sacrificed for the sake of future generations, for the sake of an ideal of happiness that may never be realized. In brief, it is my thesis that human misery is the most urgent problem of a rational public policy and that happiness is not such a problem. The attainment of happiness should be left to our private endeavours.”

This passage displays Popper’s characteristically cautious reformism. The consciousness of human fallibility, of the importance of unforeseen consequences and the diversity of human tastes, is at the center of his liberalism and explains the carefully bounded nature of the reforms he proposes. It leads him to a liberal, in the old or Hayekian sense, insistence on the need to minimize the power of the state to the maximum extent consonant with the preservation of the security of all. The most important question in politics, says Popper, is not “Who should rule?” but, “How can we so organise political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?” And the answer he gives is, by developing and preserving institutions that enable us to change our leaders without bloodshed.

It is the existence of institutions that permit the peaceful removal of rulers rather than any especially representative character that gives Popper his touchstone for distinguishing between democratic and non-democratic regimes. He calls a government “democratic” only if it possesses social institutions which allow that “the rulers may be dismissed by the ruled.” His theory of democracy “is not based upon the principle that the majority should rule; rather the various equalitarian methods of democratic control, such as general elections and representative government, are to be considered as no more than well tried and, in the presence of a widespread traditional distrust of tyranny, reasonably effective institutional safeguards against tyranny, always open to improvement, and even providing methods for their own improvement.”

It is one of the misfortunes of political language today that the word democratic has come to be seen as synonymous with good or legitimate government. The problem with this lies in the fact that democratic also means rule by the majority, and what the majority wills may not only fail to correspond with what each of us may consider good but may contradict what that
same majority willed yesterday. Now Popper professes to be uninterested in what he regards as the fruitless pursuit of precise definitions, but in appropriating the label “democratic” for his philosophy he may be giving an unnecessary terminological hostage to his totalitarian opponents. For while his use of “democracy” and “democratic” enable him to state openly and with consistency that there are circumstances in which he would always fight a majority decision, as where a general election result transferred power to a totalitarian movement, the older and more deeply rooted meaning of “democracy” would provide a powerful ideological weapon against any such stand. Sadly, for the proponents of liberal-democracy in the world today, the term “liberal” is changing its meaning under the influence of the state-adoring “liberals” of the United States, while the core significance of the word “democracy” has little or nothing to do with the preservation of individual and group freedoms when the majority or its spokesmen call the tune.20

Nevertheless, we may accept that institutions of the type advocated by Popper do, under most circumstances, give us the best possible chance of living in freedom. What then is the fundamental purpose of the state? In essence the answer that Popper gives is not so very different from that given by Thomas Hobbes. “Why,” he asks, “do we prefer living in a well ordered state to living without a state, i.e. in anarchy?” The answer is that we know that the state is necessary for the protection of our freedom. The state exists to protect “that freedom which does not harm other citizens . . . . [it] must limit the freedom of citizens as equally as possible, and not beyond what is necessary for achieving an equal limitation of freedom.”21 Hobbes answered the question, Why is the state necessary? by arguing that without it there would be the state of nature, the war of all against all, in which man’s life would be poor nasty, brutish and short. Popper’s answer to the same question is a liberal variant of the same theme, which differs from that of Hobbes not so much in the negative or protective function assigned the state, as in the degree to which the two authors disagree on how much the freedom of each must be limited in order that it be equally limited for all.

Popper views the state as being, above all, a society for the prevention of crime, which, in turn, he identifies with aggression. This he applies strictly to both the foreign and domestic aspects of state conduct, insisting on the need to distinguish the aggressive from the defensive use of force between states, as well as the state’s duty to protect one citizen from the aggression of others. State institutions exist for the protection of individual freedom and because all power is dangerous state intervention in social and economic life should be “limited to what is really necessary for the protection of freedom.”22 Now Popper is of course aware that people will differ over what really is necessary and because of his distrust of power in even the most benevolent hands seems to lean throughout his work on a minimalist interpretation of the extent of necessary state intervention.

On the question of the economic intervention of the state, he believes that we must distinguish between two completely different types of intervention one of which is acceptable, indeed necessary, while the other is not. “The first is that of designing a “legal framework” of protective institutions (laws restricting the powers of the owner of an animal, or of a landowner, are an example). The second is that of empowering organs of the state to act—within certain limits—as they consider necessary for achieving the ends laid down by the rulers for the time being.”23 Popper designates the first as “institutional” or “indirect” intervention, and the second as “personal” or “direct” intervention. The rule that democratic governments should follow is to make use of the first wherever possible though, as the case of the annual budget makes clear, the second cannot be entirely ignored.
The advantages of the institutional, indirect method are twofold. In the first place it allows room for adjustment in the light of criticism and experience in a way that the basically discretionary direct or personal method does not. The first method tends to adaptability in the face of circumstances, the second to unpredictability in the face of frustration, and this gives us the clue to the second important advantage of the institutional method. This is that only the indirect method of intervention through the design of a legal framework provides a knowable and predictable background for private activities. "It introduces a factor of certainty and security into social life. When it is altered, allowances can be made, during a transitional period, for those individuals who have laid their plans in the expectation of its constancy. As opposed to this, the method of personal intervention must introduce an evergrowing element of unpredictability into social life, and with it will develop the feeling that social life is irrational and insecure. The use of discretionary powers is likely to grow quickly, once it has become an accepted method, since adjustments will be necessary, and adjustments to discretionary short-term decisions can hardly be carried out by institutional means."24 And so the process continues, increasing irrationality of the system, apparent capriciousness of decisions in the eyes of those to whom they apply, leading to "heresy hunts, national, social, and class hostility."

It is not hard to see that the two different methods of economic intervention which Popper distinguishes, are characteristic respectively of an ordered market economy and of a planned socialized economy; though both types of system may use elements of each, and the economies of the West are now, anyway, more or less unhealthy mixtures of the two ideal types. Popper's own position is plainly opposed to the extension of socialization within these economies, and also leads him to stress the irrationality and inhumanity of the alternative system of Marxist Communism which challenges the West today, though more through its military power and subversive networks than through the offer of an inspiring or even efficient ideal. He has spoken out often against those who whitewash the crimes of communism (or any other form of totalitarianism) in order to criticize the faults of Western societies more forcefully. All Popper's emphasis on the importance of institutions and legal frameworks does not lead him to underestimate the importance of having the right sort of people to fit the posts. "Institutions," he writes, "are like fortresses. They must be well designed and manned."25 And the best manpower, that most willing and able to use free institutions for the furthering of a free society, will be drawn from a society in which the liberal political tradition is strong. So, in turn, Popper's ideal of an open society embracing critical rationalism rests on a soundly positive view of the value of tradition in political life and cultural atmosphere. For the critical spirit, and with it knowledge, only flourish where it is traditionally respected, and when that respect is lost the branch may be a long time in fruiting again.

Among the philosophers of the twentieth century, Karl Popper is among the most important and probably the most original defenders of the liberal democratic tradition. Just as, in his philosophy of science, he has argued strenuously for the objectivity of knowledge in spite of his rejection of the view that knowledge is or can be inductive, so he has worked to develop a theoretical defense of liberal institutions that owes nothing to any false concept of the infallibility of majorities. The two terms, fallibility and freedom, are closely connected in Popper's thought, for freedom is freedom to criticize and freedom from the physical and ideological constraints which may prevent us from showing up the mistakes of others. Whatever our hopes, Popper insists that we must never expect too much from our efforts and must always be ready to improve the institutions that we have evolved.

Above all, we must avoid falling victim
to the illusion of perfectability in men or institutions. For the myth of perfect judgment is the excuse for the suppression of criticism, and the single-minded quest for the perfect society, no matter how benevolent its fond imaginer may be, is the classic justification for crime on a grand historic scale. And that is grand only to the sickest and most self obsessed romantic dreamers.

Popper is an old style liberal in his conception of the nature of a decent society, and one may quarrel with his somewhat negative approach to the admission of the necessity of institutionalized authority. Again, he shares the liberal's usual distaste for discussing what is to be done when liberal institutions seem incapable of dealing with grave problems, perhaps a general strike or large scale terrorism. At least, though, in his remarks on the limitation of tolerance toward those who make intolerance a central part of their program, he shows himself willing to make the sort of hard decision that other liberals have often shirked. For if Popper's conception of the open society is essentially liberal, his attitude toward the society in which he lives is basically conservative. In spite of its admitted imperfections, Western society today is, he maintains, closer to his ideal than any other that has ever been, and against the enemies of the West he will not drop his guard.

When he published The Poverty of Historicism in 1957, Karl Popper dedicated it: “In memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victim to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.” The freedoms cherished by the author of that inscription have been under threat wherever they have appeared among men, and their defense has often been weakened by deep divisions among those who would preserve them. Karl Popper’s work will not overcome those divisions but it may make clearer the shared interest that transcends them, the interest of freedom and Western civilization. Above all, it should make it plain that, excepting some cosmic catastrophe, there is nothing in our destiny that dictates that it must perish, that man is free to see away his only himself to blame.