**Feyerabend, Pluralism, and Parapsychology**

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Pluralism is all the rage, these days, in the philosophy of science. Sixty years after Thomas Kuhn’s claim, in *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, that periods of science are dominated by a single ‘paradigm’, a more pluralistic climate prevails. Under the influence of careful studies in the history and sociology of science, it’s now recognised that science is irreducibly plural – in its concepts, practices, methods, metaphysical commitments, and social structures. Indeed, talk of ‘science’ in the singular may be suspect, given the sheer heterogeneity of the activities and projects gathered under that elastic label (see Kellert, Longino, and Waters 2006).

Such pluralism, however, always had its champions. Among the most obvious, and the most colourful, was the self-styled ‘epistemological anarchist’, Paul Feyerabend. Close to Kuhn and Karl Popper during the 1950s and 60s, he became best known for his 1975 book, *Against Method*. Preferring the term ‘anarchism’ for its rhetorical force, Feyerabend outlined a doctrine of methodological and theoretical pluralism. Scientific enquiry is plural all the way down, consisting of a *melange* of formal methods, *ad hoc* adjustments, flexible guidelines, and accidents, serendipities, and creative and imaginative exercises. What Feyerabend is ‘against’ is methodological monism, which caricatures scientific practice, and, in the process, distorts and understates the achievements of its practitioners. When he says, dramatically, ‘anything goes’, he’s caricaturing the attitudes of those in the grip of that narrow vision of science (see Shaw 2017).

Feyerabend presented his pluralistic ‘anarchism’ as both a descriptive fact about scientific practice and as a normative thesis. What one sees, in the laboratory or at the workbench, is not the mindless operation of a Popperian falsification machine – feeding in data, churning out hypotheses. If one looks carefully, one finds that scientists are imaginative and creative, adapting existing rules, developing new experimental protocols, guided but not bound by existing methods. The elastic term, ‘Science’, covers an array of practices, projects, and methods, whose complexity and diversity is apt to be disguised by reductive models, such as those of Kuhn and Popper.

Feyerabend argued that such pluralism is obvious to anyone acquainted with the history and practice of science, crediting many of his insights to scientists themselves. There was, however, a charged critique of mid-20th-century Anglophone philosophy of science that alienated many in the discipline. If pluralism is obvious to those informed about science, the implication was obviously that philosophers of science were not among them – lost in their abstract models, as entranced by logic as they were ignorant of history. Moreover, pluralist stances on science threatened to challenge prevailing conceptions of science’s status and authority. If the special cognitive authority of science lies in its having a special method – a singular, formalised, context-invariant, historically-unchanging scientific method – then any denial of that method was a challenge to the authority of science. Critics therefore took Feyerabend to be an enemy of science, perversely deploying his philosophical learning to attack our premiere cognitive authority. Correcting that perception has been a main task for modern scholars of his work (see, e.g., Kidd 2015 and Oberheim 2006).

Such worries about Feyerabend’s motives were amplified by his dramatic, polemical style. The title, *Against Method*, is stark and punchy; the opening pages cite Lenin, Marx, and the radical playwright Bertolt Brecht; and the writing and scholarly style is energetic, informal, and idiosyncratic. Coupled to the potent challenges to received wisdom about science, the effect was to vex many philosophers of science, reflected in their reviews of the book. Unfortunately, Feyerabend responded in kind, firing back with exaggerated rhetoric and a series of even more provocative claims, gathered in a sequel, *Science in a Free Society*. In this book, we hear a call for the separation of science from the state, and a treated to an extreme form of cultural and epistemic relativism.

More strikingly – and the final straw for many philosophers of science – Feyerabend engaged in defences of astrology and (of special interest in the present context) parapsychology. As Marcello Truzzi remarked, it was this book that earned Feyerabend his reputation as the ‘Puck of modern philosophy of science’, while Martin Gardner dismissed it as being ‘of no interest’ (in Richards 2017: 193, 195). (Interestingly, Truzzi consistently chides Gardner for failing to appreciate the salient, insightful points in Feyerabend’s writings and underscoring his ‘heavyweight’ status; see, e.g., Richards 2017: 197, 281.)

Before going into the details of these defences, it’s worth noting the three standard ways they’ve been interpreted by philosophers of science. First, some read them as signs that Feyerabend was committed to the truth or efficacy of astrology or parapsychology. But the textual evidence doesn’t support this; although he might have declared his commitment to, say, telepathy in public talks – under the influence of adrenaline – there’s no written statement to support claims of commitment. Second, some dismiss the defences as mere provocation, as ways of raising the ire of staid philosophers of science. Certainly, there’s an element of that, but such dismissals ignore the fact that people often seek to provoke to some purpose – to raise awareness of an issue, to promote discussion of an issue, or whatever. The principle of charity, if nothing else, invites us to ask what reasons Feyerabend might have for discussing astrology and parapsychology. That brings us to the third response.

Since Feyerabend’s guiding aim was to assert and defend a pluralistic vision of science, some commentators read the defences as part of that project. Often, the argument here is inspired by John Stuart Mill’s defence of the ‘freedom of thought and discussion’, in chapter two of *On Liberty*, an essay beloved by Feyerabend (see Lloyd 1997). For Mill, one of the main dangers we face, as societies, is the inevitable tendency of beliefs to degenerate into ‘dead dogmas’. Since active critical reflection is difficult, we must constantly work hard to resist lapsing into dogmatism, complacency, and easy groupthink. One way to do this is to defend what Elizabeth Lloyd calls ‘unpopular minority views’, while simultaneously challenging widely-accepted views and convictions. By provoking people into actually arguing against views that most are content to merely dismiss, one can force others to up their game.

Read in this way, Feyerabend’s defences of ‘unpopular minority positions’ – like parapsychology – are best understood as efforts to deliberately play certain roles essential to the intellectual health of a community. Provocation, dramatism, and the questioning of received wisdom can keep us, epistemically, on our toes, even if the rewards for doing so are few and the costs many. But though this reading seems right to me, as far as it goes, it leaves out another important dimension of the defences. This concerns the demarcation problem. An important implication of methodological pluralism is that it becomes much more difficult to specify criteria for distinguishing science from pseudoscience, becomes much more difficult. One cannot argue that science conforms to the Scientific Method, because no such thing exists, except in the pages of science textbooks and philosophy of science articles. Instead, there are a set of methods – formal and informal, defined and implicit – which muddy the borders between different disciplines and projects of enquiry. Feyerabend often emphasised the ways that false conceptions of science were used illegitimately to exclude and derogate other projects, disciplines, and traditions.

An emphasis on the pluralistic character of science and the fuzziness of its internal and external boundaries is, of course, entirely compatible with the critical task of appraising theories, methods, and projects of enquiry. That task just becomes much harder and less algorithmic. The core thesis of *Against Method* was, explained Feyerabend (1993:1), that ‘the events, procedures, and results that constitute the sciences have no common structure’. But that does not mean that they are structureless, random, or chaotic. Quite the contrary – careful studies in the history and sociology of science indicates that the sciences have local, complex, changing structures, a sensible point too-often lost amid Feyerabend’s dramatic talk of ‘anarchism’ and ‘the monster, Science’. What really comes out of *Against Method* is a call for a particularist, pluralist analysis of the sciences, one that eschews overly generalised claims that can be sustained only by neglecting the practical and epistemic realities of scientific activity.

Gathering these points together, we can look closer at Feyerabend’s remarks on parapsychology, the most sustained of which appear in *Science in a Free Society*. Most of what he says seems to be taken from Lyall Watson’s book, *Supernature* – as Truzzi says, ‘better studies could have been cited’ (in Richards 2017: 197) – and conforms to Feyerabend’s typical dialectical style (see Feyerabend 1978:91). You start with a derogated subject or topic, such as parapsychology or astrology, noting the scorn or derision it often receives, and declare your intention to try to encourage a more intellectually robust engagement with it. Then you introduce empirical details of the relevant phenomena, coupling this to a sympathetic presentation of existing methods and investigations.

The purpose of all of this is to show, first, that the critics tend not to know anything at all about the object of their derision; then, second, that there is more to understand and argue against then the critics tend to suspect; and, finally, that the methods, data, or phenomena actually find precedent elsewhere in the history of science. The upshot of this dialectical style is usually that the critics are shown to be ignorant and intellectually lazy, relying on assertions rather than arguments, and thereby failing to live up to the high intellectual standards they reserve for themselves (see Kidd 2016).

I suspect Feyerabend’s point is that those who sneer at parapsychology tend to be quite ignorant of it – which doesn’t, of course, require him to regard it as credible or compelling. Judging about the status of parapsychology will be made relative to some conception of science, and Feyerabend’s question is whether that conception is cogent—an intellectual strategy that doesn’t require any prior commitment, *pro* or *contra*, to the status of parapsychology. Reading *Science in a Free Society*’s brief discussion of parapsychology, it seems clear this is what is happening, a judgment confirmed by his other brief remarks on parapsychology. In these cases, he’s really interrogating our operative conceptions of science, rather than defending putative pseudosciences (see Feyerabend 1984).

We see the same thing in a seminar Feyerabend organised at the Eidgnossiche Technische Hochschule in Zurich, on 24 May 1984, on parapsychology. The panellists were Hans Bender, Eberhard Bauer, Piet Hein Hoebens, and Feyerabend, whose talk was tellingly titled, ‘What does it mean to be scientific?’ The guiding question was ‘Which objections might a proponent of strict scientific rigour raise against parapsychology, and how does parapsychology respond?’ Here, we clearly see Feyerabend’s guiding focus on the nature of science, rather than a specific interest in the status of parapsychology. Hoeben – a Dutch journalist and sceptic – appealed to the plurality of science, protesting the vagueness of the concept of ‘strict scientific rigour’, and arguing that attempts to ‘differentiate between research programmes on that criterion [are] running the risk of being overly dogmatic’ (2017:56).

I think that what’s really going on, clearly, isn’t a defence of parapsychology or astrology, but a criticism of scientists who fall short of their own high intellectual standards by offering ignorant dismissals not informed criticisms. Feyerabend’s point is, in a sense, “*Do better—live up to your own high intellectual standards*.” Declaring that it’s *obvious* that parapsychological phenomena are not genuine, or that astrology is ‘bunk’, is far too quick. Moreover, such intellectual behaviour plays into the hands of the enemies of science – to the quacks, charlatans, and others who resist or revile the authority of science.

For Feyerabend, the main lesson to take from methodological pluralism is that science is *messy*. Careful attention to its history, practice, and science shows that it’s too complex to admit of general descriptions, except ones so bland or trite as to be useless. An authentically reflective stance shows its many methods, its many theories, its many varied ways of organising and conducting its activities. Within this pluralist vision, it becomes much harder for us to make neat, clean, rapid judgments; any sharp demarcation between science and pseudoscience has to be abandoned, or at least hugely complicated; the relationships between modern sciences and historical protosciences becomes messier – this is the real meaning of an ‘anarchistic’ vision of science. But there’s no denial, on Feyerabend’s part, of the depth, complexity, and value of science – quite the contrary.

A pluralistic conception of the sciences tells a truer picture of the historical, intellectual, and imaginative richness of the scientific enterprise. If an important part of understanding that richness is exploring the status and relations of parapsychology and other ‘eccentric’ projects and traditions, then so much the better, says Feyerabend. In the end, their status mattered less to him than the primary goal of promoting informed and critically alert engagement with the scientific enterprise. Understanding its pluralism is an important aspect of that, one quite compatible with critical interest in parapsychology, so long as interest is not confused with commitment.

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