

Review

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Critical Notice

PAUL FEYERABEND, *Farewell to Reason*. London: Verso 1987. Pp. 327.

While Paul Feyerabend doubtless deserves his reputation as a philosophical gadfly against practically everything on offer, he is also a man with a mission. For over twenty years he has steadfastly defended the right of individuals to resist the demands and blandishments of the powers that be. Not for him the easy assumption that intellectual issues can be separated from humanitarian ones and considered in a neutral, nonpartisan fashion. The advancement of knowledge and civilization is not the unmixed blessing it is generally supposed to be and it is unwise and irresponsible to regard Western ways of living as superior to non-Western, nonacademic ways. Like it or not we must not let the experts do our thinking for us, still less allow them decide how we should act. They are not more reliable, only more pretentious and pushy.

In *Farewell to Reason* Feyerabend restates and broadens his argument with a scathing attack on scientifically inspired world views and the role of authority in modern society.¹ Dismissing 'the belief that "humanity" ... can be saved by groups of people shooting the breeze in well heated offices,' he would have us refrain from 'ratiocinating about the lives of people [we have] never seen' (17). However enlightened such ratiocina-

1 In what follows I concentrate on the long first essay of *Farewell to Reason*, 'Notes on Relativism.' The volume itself covers a wide range of topics including Xenophanes' arguments against the Homeric gods, progress in philosophy, Popperian critical rationalism, the relationship of Mach's views to Einstein's, Aristotle's ideas concerning the continuum, Putnam's criticism of the idea of incommensurability and the Church's failure to deal effectively with Galileo's challenge. Like the 'Notes on Relativism' the essays devoted to these issues are alternately insightful, challenging and infuriating (and sometimes all three at once). I do not consider them because I wish to focus on what I take to be the centrepiece of Feyerabend's philosophy, namely his argument for relativism.

tion may seem to be, it is as dogmatic and authoritarian as the allegedly unenlightened thinking it is supposed to supercede. 'The quality of the lives of individuals ... must be known by personal experience before any suggestions for change can be made,' and those who wish to help others should proceed as 'ignoramus[es] in need of instruction' rather than 'as heaven's greatest gift[s].' In fact, the only reasonable option that is now open — at least to citizens of Western democracies — is to 'say farewell to reason' (319) and to 'return to life' (83).

Feyerabend's fundamental conviction is that 'diversity is beneficial while uniformity reduces our joys and our (intellectual, emotional, material) resources' (1). In his view it is a mistake to grant this or that way of living special 'opportunities' and 'rights' and even more so to treat science as something other than 'one tradition among many' (40, 39). The 'science-ridden democracies of today' in which experts are thought to have all the answers are not superior to communities in which 'learning is not separated from living' and the people themselves decide 'what is true or false, useful or useless' (58, 59). What makes a society agreeable and successful has nothing to do with its intrinsic excellence; societies that lack variety are invariably less progressive and many-sided in their development than societies with diverse characters and cultures.²

In defence of these large claims Feyerabend argues that traditional conceptions of reason and objectivity have outlived whatever usefulness they may once have had. Words like 'reason' and 'rationality' many have a good ring but they are practically useless as they 'can be connected with almost any idea or procedure [to] surround it with a halo of excellence' (10). It is, says Feyerabend, untrue that 'the progress of Reason is... inevitable' (12) and that 'any change in the direction of Western civilization and especially of Western science is bound to be an improvement' (26). On the contrary, the ideas of Reason and Objectivity have all too often been 'used to make Western expansion intellectually respectable' (5) and all that rationalism now does is 'lend class to the general drive towards monotony' (13).

2 Compare Feyerabend's discussion of John Stuart Mill's argument in his 'immortal essay *On Liberty*' (33-4). According to Feyerabend, this argument prefigures his own but one may be forgiven for wondering whether Mill would have agreed that differences of opinion should be vigorously promoted and traditions accorded equal opportunities and rights. The idea that 'a variety of views ... is needed for the production of "well-developed human beings" [and] for the improvement of civilization' (33) is a far cry from the radical pluralism that Feyerabend advocates.

Indeed, to Feyerabend's way of thinking, the objectivity of reason is a myth and it is essential that we face up to the fact. In his view there is no single right way to behave, no single right way to think, only ways that are right for some of us, wrong for others (85). Man is, as Protagoras maintained, the measure of all things; 'the truth lies with us, with our "opinion" and "experiences"' (50; see also 44). Even in the physical sciences 'universal truth' is unavailable and unnecessary, there being only 'different points of view, valid in different areas' (61). Whatever the rationalist may say, the content of our opinions 'depends on, or is "relative to," the constituting principles of the tradition to which they belong' (73). 'Opinions not tied to traditions are outside human existence.'

There are two sets of claims here. On the one hand there are Feyerabend's nonphilosophical observations about society and science, most of which seem sound enough. Without doubt scientism, the overrationalization of human behaviour and the adulation of experts should be strongly condemned, as should the arrogant assumption that nonWestern and nonscientific cultures have nothing to offer. On the other hand there are Feyerabend's general philosophical views about the relativity of truth, rightness, and reality, which are much more difficult to swallow. Even those who fully agree with his critique of society and science are likely to wonder whether he helps his cause by dismissing reason and objectivity as peremptorily and as uncompromisingly as he does.

Certainly it is difficult to go along with Feyerabend's views concerning the role of experts and the value of a plurality of theories. The fact that the experts' advice has occasionally led to disaster is surely no reason to conclude that 'citizens [rather than] special groups [should] have the last word' (59), cases in which disaster could have been avoided had their advice been sought being just as common. Nor can the existence of arguments showing conflicting theories to be 'at least as good' as those now accepted be established simply by noting that such alternatives have on occasion been developed by those outside the mainstream of opinion (76). While citizen power and cultural diversity may well be desirable in certain areas, even generally beneficial, the experts often know best and there is rarely anything to be gained by preserving inadequate views on the off-chance that they will prove useful later on.³

3 Also, how clear is it that 'the history of science is full of theories which were

More to the point, Feyerabend's argument for the relativity of truth leaves much to be desired. It is one thing to argue that the 'criteria of success and acceptance change ... in accordance with the values of those interested in a particular area of knowledge,' quite another to conclude that the relevant values are personal rather than cognitive, social rather than epistemic (29; see also 30). We are not obliged to suppose that the truth of our beliefs are conditioned by the frameworks within which they are formulated if only because the practice of making objective claims is — as Feyerabend himself concedes — 'part of a special tradition' (72). Indeed, we have every reason to think of truth and objectivity in the ordinary unrelativized way, it being a central requirement of the tradition with which these ideas are associated that personal and social considerations be rigorously excluded.

And to cap things off there is the awkward question of the interest of Feyerabendian relativism when it is itself understood relativistically. Feyerabend is undoubtedly right to argue that his views are immune to the charge of internal inconsistency in that they are 'made within a particular tradition' and are not intended to define 'the one and only possible way of living' (61, 59; see also 39, 73 and 83). But this only exacerbates the problem since it is now unclear why anyone not already committed to Feyerabend's point of view should bother hearing him out. What he needs to show is that we ought to promote cultural diversity whatever our interests (or else that we should become interested in the sort of things that interest him). The crucial issue is not whether 'defenders of plurality, freedom and democracy have neglected some important implications of their creed' (39) but whether plurality, freedom and democracy are desirable in the extreme form that Feyerabend favors.

These objections hold regardless of whether we interpret Feyerabend's suggestions as principles or as rules of thumb. It is a mistake to suppose that relativism can be shielded from criticism by the simple expedient of taking it to be 'a rule of thumb which is made definite by its applications' rather than 'a principle which "entails" consequences' (41; see also 45). Besides the difficulty of understanding the notion of a rule of thumb 'which, apart from [its applications], does not "entail" anything,' the criticism just raised holds for applications

pronounced dead, then resurrected' (33)? The more plausible view would seem to be that the number of theories that stage comebacks is rather small and that those that do come back mostly do so in quite different forms.

of the relativist principle no less than for the principle itself. Questions about the value of expert advice, the nature of the tradition with which the notion of truth is associated and the promotion of cultural diversity arise even if 'the meaning of [relativism] must be established before it is applied, or argued about' (45).

Nonetheless we should hesitate before dismissing Feyerabend's discussion out of hand if for no other reason than that he can also be interpreted as adumbrating a stance or 'outlook' as opposed to a 'premise' or 'rule' (see 45). Nothing said so far undermines his view that relativism is good medicine for the ills that now afflict us or shows him to be wrong in thinking that our present social arrangements could benefit from a little more freedom and a little more democracy. If nothing else, it is not unreasonable to suppose that he has provided 'a good starting point for Western intellectuals trying to improve their own life and the lives of their fellow human beings' (62). While a more rationalist approach may be required in the future, for the time being Feyerabend's relativistic approach may well be just the one that we require.

But what does such an outlook involve? One can, as one would expect, find Feyerabend arguing for radical positions concerning the various social, political and epistemological problems that now confront us; it is not for nothing that *Farewell to Reason* appears under the imprint of New Left Books. But insofar as he can be said to be defending a relativistic stance and not ratiocinating about people he has never seen, the thrust of his argument is directed towards the altogether different conclusion that individuals should be left to their own devices, that they should be permitted to live their lives in the manner to which they have become accustomed. In fact, Feyerabend's fundamental stance is reminiscent of nothing so much as old-fashioned conservatism. What we have, he often seems to be saying, is what we need and what we need is what we have.

If this sounds odd, recall that Feyerabend regards attempts to alter our institutions as unhelpful, even pernicious, and that he extols as well as denigrates things as they now stand. It is not just that he believes that 'some industrial societies are [even now] democratic... and pluralistic' (39), that he agrees with Herodotus that 'custom is the king of all' (42) and that he takes 'laws, religious beliefs and customs [to be] *valid* in their domains' (43). He also rejects the enlightenment conception for rational conduct and defends practice and accumulated lore over theory and the pronouncements of experts. For him as for Frederick von Hayek theories of liberty 'based on an interpretation of traditions and institutions which had spontaneously grown up and were but imperfectly understood' are superior to theories 'aiming at the construction of a Utopia' (53).

Even science should be left to develop in its own way and be safeguarded from the attempts of citizens and politicians to dictate how it ought to be conducted. In Feyerabend's view 'freedom for science' is just as important as 'freedom from the sciences' and 'science, within our democracies, needs protection from non-scientific traditions' no less than 'non-scientific traditions need protection from science' (41). He does indeed hold that 'scientists may profit from a study of logic or of the Tao' but he also insists that this type of study 'should emerge from scientific practice, it should not be imposed' (42). Indeed he even goes so far as to argue that science now generally functions as a 'Protagorean practice' — involving 'a variety of approaches based on a variety of modes and successful in restricted domains' — and that it is marred only by 'grandiloquent promises and superficial popularizations' (53; see also 12 and 38).⁴

That Feyerabend should argue for conservatism is remarkable only given his radical rhetoric; it is entirely unsurprising given the close alliance between relativism and conservatism regarding the possibility of external critiques of existing institutions and 'planning by reason.' To argue that traditions should be accorded equal rights and opportunities is after all tantamount to arguing that it is pointless to go to the trouble of changing those now in place. And one can hardly reflect 'the export of "freedom" into regions ... whose inhabitants show no desire to change their ways' (39) without also rejecting its importation into Western society and science, the 'inhabitants' of which seem generally well pleased with their lot.⁵ What needs emphasizing is not that 'one can be a relativist and yet defend and enforce laws and institutions' (44) but that one has little option but to defend and enforce them once one has embraced the relativist option.

4 Here my point is that Feyerabend frequently expresses himself as being content with science as presently practised and that he is led by the logic of his position to do so. I am aware that he is also critical of much scientific research and that he even goes so far as to argue that scientists are responsible for the havoc wreaked by the application of their theories (see esp. 299).

5 Admittedly Feyerabend allows that 'tyrannical action' may be appropriate in exceptional circumstances (see 28). However, since he is in no position to distinguish between beneficial tyrannical actions and harmful ones masquerading as 'exceptions,' this concession amounts to very little. Obviously it is no help to argue that 'local consultation should be carried out as far as possible and ... resumed the moment the danger recedes,' this being something to which most tyrants are only too willing to agree.

What has gone wrong? How could someone as antipathetic to contemporary society and science as Feyerabend end up arguing that the status quo is generally satisfactory? No doubt a large part of the reason is that he takes rationalism and relativism to be the only possible options. For all his distaste for traditional philosophical theorizing, he embraces the traditional identification of antirationalism with relativism and takes it to go without saying that anyone committed to the former incurs the obligation of defending the latter. Where he differs from his rationalist opponents is not with regard to how the matter should be understood but solely with regard to the inferences that ought to be drawn. Whereas they resist the antirationalist challenge on the grounds that relativism is too awful to contemplate, he takes it to be unanswerable and relativism to be therefore inescapable.

What Feyerabend notably fails to consider is the possibility of rejecting both points of view.⁶ Taking rationalists to have exclusive rights to the unrelativized notions of truth, reason, and objectivity, he overlooks the possibility that right and wrong, good and bad, useful and useless are determined neither by universal criteria of excellence nor by the traditions and customs that happen to be in place but by the nature of the issues in question and what happens to be known at the time. In particular he may be criticised for ignoring the fact that individuals who differ substantially in what they believe and how they act are often fully justified in taking their own beliefs and actions to be objectively superior. For Feyerabend — as for the rationalist — one commits oneself to relativism the moment that one introduces considerations of context and circumstance into one's account.

By the same token it is clear that rationalism and relativism do not exhaust the options in the area of political and social affairs. The absence of blueprints for improving institutions does not mean, as Feyerabend seems to believe, that attempts to improve the institutions already in place are always arbitrary, still less that external interference is never warranted. To hold that every suggested change must be judged on its own merits is not to hold that all changes are equally good — rather the opposite. While the difficulties of making

6 Here I focus on Feyerabend's main argument. There are also a number of passages in the 'Notes on Relativism' — still to be considered — that suggest a very different view of the matter.

the requisite discriminations should certainly not be overlooked, neither should the experience that we have acquired over the years concerning what does and what does not normally work. And besides, are not many of the advantages of contemporary life plausibly regarded as a relatively direct result of the very sort of 'external interference' that Feyerabend deplores?

Thus I would argue that Feyerabend and like-minded social critics should treat relativism with the disdain that they normally reserve for rationalism. Instead of devoting their attention to the thankless task of developing a nonrationalistic philosophical account of human thought and action, they would do well to consider what exactly such an account would provide and whether we can get by without it. If society requires the kind of radical overhaul that Feyerabend speaks of, our best policy is surely to attend to the nature of its shortcomings and how these may be remedied. Far better, one would have thought, that we focus on the role of experts in society, the ways in which science is misused, the value of citizens' initiatives and the various other specific issues that are (by Feyerabend's own reckoning) in need of special attention.

There is some reason to think that Feyerabend himself would welcome this conclusion. Although he devotes considerable effort to articulating a general philosophical account of how we ought and ought not to proceed and to defending his views against philosophical objection, he also flirts with the possibility that it is the project of philosophical theorizing that is at fault, not just this or that philosophical theory. In particular, his commitment to relativism understood as a general theory (or principled outlook) is considerably less than total and he can plausibly be read as arguing that the trouble with traditional versions of relativism is that they are pitched at too high a level of abstraction. Actually it is not hard to cobble together a conception of thought and action from his remarks that is as far from relativism as it is from rationalism.

In this regard it is important to bear in mind that Feyerabend himself holds that criticisms of his views frequently miss the mark because they are based on 'only part of [his] story' and he is incorrectly read as proposing a 'theory of science and knowledge' (284). To do justice to his position we must remember that he distinguishes 'practical relativism' — which he accepts — from 'philosophical relativism' — which he rejects (63). For him, relativism has to do with 'human relations,' not with 'concepts' (83; see also 80) and his continuing use of abstractions 'such as the idea of a "free society"' merely attests to the difficulty of shaking the 'theoretical approach' (318). Furthermore, he is not in the least averse

to speaking of 'reason (with a small r)' (12) or to judging 'every case ... on its merits' (32) or to citing 'grounds' for his views (34).⁷

More surprisingly still, Feyerabend repudiates what I have been characterizing as his official position when he insists that 'different Protagorean worlds [can] clash' and that 'debates between their inhabitants are therefore [not] impossible' (54). Far from arguing that 'colliding groups' cannot resolve their differences, he takes them to be able to do so — frequently if not always — by means of an 'open exchange' (25). It is, he argues, a mistake to take 'the way of power' to be the sole alternative to 'the theoretical approach' since 'the tradition adopted by the parties [to a dispute may be] unspecified at the beginning and [develop] as the exchange goes along' (25, 29). In fact in these and similar passages he appears to be defending rather than challenging the conception of a 'rational debate' (as this is usually understood, as opposed to how it is understood by rationalists). As he himself acknowledges, his differences with 'objectivist philosophers' centre on the practically irrelevant issue of whether rationality (and morality) should be thought of as possessing a 'universal core' (see 29).

Finally, there is Feyerabend's remarkable view that 'the ideas of truth, reality and rationality make excellent practical sense' and his explicit criticism of attempts to provide them with 'relativistic analyses' (63). He does indeed argue that 'reality' is 'best attributed to an event together with a type, and not absolutely' (64). But what he is mainly concerned to argue is that we have no need of the philosopher's conception of Reality with a capital R, of 'reality' in quotation marks. The plain fact of the matter is that general philosophical queries 'do not even count as genuine.' In everyday social and scientific life 'the problem is not [the philosophical one of] what is "real" and what is not' but rather the nonphilosophical one of 'what occurs, in what connection, who was, or could be misled by the event and how.'⁸

7 Even at his most relativistic, Feyerabend is prone to backtrack and to offer what for all the world look like reasons. Thus he no sooner dismisses the invitation to take a stand concerning concentration camps as 'quite idiotic — I sing my aria, the Nazi sings his' than he points out that 'Auschwitz is an extreme manifestation of an attitude that still thrives in our midst ... in the treatment of minorities ... in education ... in the nuclear threat ... in the killing of nature [and so on]' (313).

8 Significantly, Feyerabend is at pains to remind us that 'telling the truth usually means telling what happened in a particular situation,' that 'there are cases where a witness can give an answer and would be rightly called a liar if he said that he did not know,' that we can justifiably 'speak of real things despite all the illusions

Feyerabend's strategy here is to change the subject and to note some home truths. His primary claim is that we should resist the lure of the 'abstract approach' and direct our attention (at least in the first instance) to the various ways in which everyday distinctions are actually employed. In his view the danger of subsuming 'the ingredients of complex worlds ... under abstract concepts' can hardly be overstated and philosophical problems about the true nature of things arise because of the confused ways in which we think about the world rather than because of any special difficulty about what it is really like (64). It is, he argues, wrong to regard "'problems of reality" [as] fruits of more refined ways of thinking'; the reason that they crop up is that 'delicate matters are compared with crude ideas and found to be lacking in crudeness.'

It is an interesting question to what extent Feyerabend's analysis of present-day social arrangements is consistent with the rejection of relativism. Of course large stretches of his argument stand and fall with his relativistic conception of truth, reality, and rightness and many of his specific suggestions are subject to the criticism that they are no less authoritarian and sweeping than those of the self-appointed experts that he delights in excoriating.⁹ Nevertheless, many of his diagnoses and prescriptions can be defended independently of his general philosophical defence of relativism (and without 'shooting the breeze'). And it is even possible to disentangle most of the theses that he discusses under the rubric of relativism from this doctrine and to square them with the adoption of an antirelativist stance.

an inventive magician might conjure up' and that 'it makes sense to say that the room in which I am now sitting is real but the room in which yesterday, in a dream, I saw an elephant riding on a sparrow was not' (63; see also 49 and 64). When considering these matters it is especially important to remember that rationalism is a philosophical theory, not a restatement of what everyone knows. One does not become a rationalist simply by referring to reason or by expressing an interest in the various ways in which individuals attempt to figure out how things work and how best to cope.

- 9 Consider, for instance, his confident view that we would be far better off if 'scientists ... had no greater influence than plumbers' and 'important decisions [were] made ... by "the people" themselves' (55, 62). Unfortunately, Feyerabend frequently writes in a manner which — to use one of his own phrases — 'sounds impressive but gives no hints of what the implications for the real world are supposed to be' (277; see also 142).

This is perhaps clearest in the case of Feyerabend's more specific views about cultural diversity and the relativity of judgment. Evidently one can reject relativism while allowing that profit may be gained from 'studying alien cultures' (20) and while maintaining that 'experts and governmental institutions must adapt their work to the traditions they serve' (41). Nor, given appropriate qualifications and amendments, is there anything particularly relativistic about his view that 'important matters should... be referred to the (perceptions and thoughts of the) people concerned' (48) or his contention that 'the world, as described by our scientists and anthropologists, consists of (social and physical) regions with specific laws and conceptions of reality' (61). Nor, finally, is the antirealist debarred from acknowledging that 'the idea of an objective truth ... was always accompanied by, and often mixed with, more practical (empirical, "subjective") traditions' (72-3).

More importantly, once we turn our backs on relativism we can retrieve some of Feyerabend's central criticisms of contemporary society and provide them with some much needed support. Instead of relying on the nebulous charge of cultural monotony and tub-thumping about democracy, freedom, and pluralism, we can bring out the specific ways in which alternative forms of life are (and are not) superior to our own, explore the strengths and shortcomings of citizens' initiatives and argue in detail against looking to science to cure all our ills. In particular, it is difficult to see how the important grain of truth in Feyerabend's criticism of the 'theoretical approach' as 'conceited,' 'ignorant,' 'superficial,' and 'incomplete' can possibly be defended without renouncing the relativist standpoint (see 25-7), to say nothing of his contention that Western arrogance is largely responsible for the spread of hunger, violence, scarcity, alienation and underdevelopment (see 30).

And, last but not least, there is the important fact that antirelativism accords well with Feyerabend's goal of broadening the terms of our social and epistemological debates and his belief that the more criticism, the better. Contrary to what he would have us believe, we limit our options when we commit ourselves to relativism no less than when we commit ourselves to rationalism (albeit in different ways). In adopting a relativistic standpoint we restrict ourselves to defending our views relative to the traditions with which we are associated (and to reminding defenders of plurality, freedom and democracy of the 'implications of their creed'). It is only by repudiating the relativist straightjacket that we can argue as we normally do and employ all the resources to hand. Even if cultural diversity is in fact a panacea, we would still be best advised to proceed

'opportunistically' with an eye to the exigencies of the situations in which we wish it to flourish (compare 20).¹⁰

As I read Feyerabend, then, the basic difficulty with his view is not that he goes too far in rejecting traditional philosophical views but that he does not go far enough. We should indeed dismiss philosophical attempts to forge a 'direct line to heaven' (28) and forswear introducing 'caricatures' of the rationalist's conception of reason to accommodate the complexities of history (17). But we should also shun the temptation to regard tradition as a surrogate for reason and to elevate freedom and democracy to the status of explanatory philosophical principles. It is no less a mistake to follow the relativist and fetishize cultural diversity than it is to follow the rationalist and fetishize reason. To recognise that we are on our own is not to repudiate rationalism in favour of relativism, but to bid farewell as firmly and as finally to the one as to the other.¹¹

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10 I should also stress it is a mistake to think of tradition as necessarily coercive and antithetical to reason. While some traditions do indeed call for compliance and subservience, many do not. After all, reasoning may itself be usefully regarded as a tradition and it is not in the least improper to speak of traditions of criticism and protest.

11 In writing this paper I have benefited from H. Duncan's and M.H. Wilson's comments.