# Feyerabend, Mill, and Pluralism

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I suggest following Paul Feyerabend's own advice, and interpreting Feyerabend's work in light of the principles laid out by John Stuart Mill. A review of Mill's essay, *On Liberty*, emphasizes the importance Mill placed on open and critical discussion for the vitality and progress of various aspects of human life, including the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Many of Feyerabend's more unusual stances, I suggest, are best interpreted as attempts to play certain roles—especially the role of "defender of unpopular minority opinion"—that are necessary to fulfilling Mill's conditions for rational exchange and optimal human development.

**1.** Paul Feyerabend had a reputation, among many, for being anti-scientific, irrationalist, anti-methodological, anti-reason, a relativist about evidence, and an epistemological anarchist. More generally, he frequently anchors the "extreme relativist" end of many a comparison in philosophy of science. The slogan, *Anything Goes*, though, has certainly captured the philosophical imagination; as I have emphasized before (Lloyd 1996), this slogan is frequently misinterpreted as being Paul Feyerabend's *methodological recommendation* for conducting scientific research. Not so.

As Feyerabend himself said:

> *"anything goes" does not express any conviction of mine, it is jocular summary of the predicament of the rationalist:* if you want universal standards, I say, if you cannot live without principles that hold independently of situation, shape of world, exigencies of research, temperamental peculiarities, then I can give you such a principle.

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> It will be empty, useless, and pretty ridiculous—but it will be a "principle." It will be the "principle" "anything goes" (1978, 188; his emphasis).

Thus, Feyerabend's slogan was essentially a *reductio* against a certain form of rationalism, rather than a statement of his own positive view. I now suspect that one reason underlying the standard misreading of the slogan involves one of Feyerabend's genuine, positive, beliefs—specifically, his defense of the value of a *proliferation* of views and methods, and his insistence on the *tolerance* that must accompany such proliferation.

Feyerabend consistently traces his arguments for the central importance of proliferation of views and methods—and the appropriate attitudes of openness and tolerance—to John Stuart Mill's essay, *On Liberty*. When introducing Mill's ideas in his most extensive discussion of them, Feyerabend emphasizes and endorses Mill's view that, as Feyerabend puts it, "pluralism is supposed to lead to *truth*" (Feyerabend 1981b, 67, his emphasis). Or, as Feyerabend put it in *Science in a Free Society*, "the only way of arriving at a useful judgement of what is supposed to be the truth, or the correct procedure, is to become acquainted with the widest possible range of alternatives. . . . The reasons were explained by Mill in his immortal essay *On Liberty*. It is not possible to improve upon his arguments" (1978, 86).

**2.** There is, with Feyerabend, a pervasive difficulty of interpretation: his writings frequently exhibit a dialectical structure, some of them explicitly appearing in the form of dialogues. It is thus sometimes difficult to identify many of the views that Feyerabend articulates as being those that he would, in some other context, defend. Those who read his slogan, "Anything Goes," as "Paul Feyerabend's Positive Methodological Program" ran into just this difficulty. There is thus a serious question whether Feyerabend's regular appeals to Mill are best read as straightforward endorsements, or as moves adopted in particular battles, in which Feyerabend takes on the assumptions and standards of his opponents in order to beat them on their own turf (one of his favorite strategies).

I believe that Feyerabend's appeals to Mill's views were, in fact, genuine endorsements: Feyerabend *never* distanced himself from Mill's position, and he used it repeatedly in arguments aimed against other views. For instance, among his rather obsessive criticisms of Karl Popper, Feyerabend emphasized that the *good* parts of Popper's philosophy of science, which include his selectionist process and the emphasis on proliferation and criticism, were all actually *Mill's* views (Feyera-

bend 1981a, 141–142). I do not wish to pursue Feyerabend's attempts to undermine Popper's originality—preferring, as I do, the position that the good ideas in Popper were articulated and better defended by Charles Peirce and John Dewey—but I do think that the general questions about the pluralism of methods and views are highly relevant to today's philosophy of science.

Specifically, philosophers of science are working today within a context that includes the widespread philosophical rejection of any foundational doctrine of pure empirical content or sense-data, the acceptance of some constrained but very real embeddedness of evidence in theory, and the repeated failure of all attempted formulations of a set of methodological *rules*.

In addition, many thinkers have independently come to endorse some variant of a generally evolutionary picture of scientific inquiry, in which cultivation of variation—of interests, theories, and methods—is complemented by a variety of selection mechanisms to produce a *process of scientific change*. Feyerabend's endorsement of Mill's claim amounts to a claim that the *process of scientific change*, when it occurs within the preferred context of a plurality of views and methods, is one that leads toward truth; it does not simply wander around the space of possibilities, as some have described the biological evolutionary process as doing, nor does it pass from the views of one powerful ruling class to another.

Moving away from this claim in its most general form, when we consider Feyerabend's own arguments regarding specific candidate views and methods, we seem to run into trouble. Feyerabend did, after all, defend witchcraft, astrology, faith healing, Chinese medicine, and other non-scientific ways of understanding the world. It might seem that Feyerabend defeated his own purposes by doing so. Arguing that the widest variety of views and methods should be tolerated, pursued, and even nurtured, by those seeking knowledge of the world, Feyerabend could be seen—and *has* been seen—as displaying disregard, or even contempt, for empirical evidence, for sound reasoning, and for established scientific results, by his enthusiastic defenses of marginal, mythical, or magical systems, explanations, and practices.

To read him this way is to misunderstand what he is doing. To interpret Feyerabend's arguments in the light of John Stuart Mill's essay, *On Liberty*, in contrast, is to illuminate the stage that Feyerabend took himself to be on, and to understand properly the role he so frequently elected to play.

**3.** Let us turn to John Stuart Mill. We concentrate on Mill's long essay, *On Liberty*, co-written with his wife, Harriet Taylor, and first published

as a small book in 1859. The relevant section is Chapter II, "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion," in which Mill denies that people, "either by themselves or by their government" should "attempt to control the expression of opinion" (Mill [1859] 1977, 229).

"The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is," writes Mill, in a passage frequently quoted by Feyerabend, "that it is *robbing the human race*. . . . If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error" (Mill [1859] 1977, 229, my emphasis).

Mill argues for freedom of expression of opinion on four distinct grounds:

> First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility. Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.
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> "Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. . . . Fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience." (Mill [1859] 1977, 258)

Regarding the first reason, Mill argues: "the opinion which it is attempted to suppress by authority may possibly be true. Those who desire to suppress it, of course *deny* its truth; but they are not infallible. . . . To refuse a hearing to an opinion, because they are sure that it is false, is to assume that their certainty is the same thing as absolute certainty. All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility" (p. 229). For Mill, such an assumption of infallibility is not merely a moral problem—it has the effect of reducing the opportunity for humanity-at-large to ascertain truth.

The second argument, in which the kernel of truth in minority opin-

ions must be preserved—for the good of everyone—is particularly interesting. The situation is one where "conflicting doctrines, instead of being one true and the other false, share the truth between them" (p. 252). Given, then, the

> partial character of prevailing opinions, . . . every opinion which embodies somewhat of the portion of truth which the common opinion omits, ought to be considered precious, with whatever amount of error and confusion that truth may be blended. No sober judge of human affairs will feel bound to be indignant because those who force on our notice truths which we should otherwise have overlooked, overlook some of those which we see. Rather, he will think that so long as popular truth is one-sided, it is more desirable than otherwise that unpopular truth should have one-sided asserters too; such being usually the most energetic, and the most likely to compel reluctant attention to the fragment of wisdom which they proclaim as if it were the whole." (Mill [1859] 1977, 253)

Mill's third and fourth arguments are more subtle: he insists that, even if the received opinion is *true*, those holding it need—for their own good, and the good of everyone—to be "vigorously and earnestly contested." With no discussion challenging the view, people may *believe* the truth, but they will not believe it in a reasonable manner, that is, it will simply be a prejudice. Worse yet, Mill argues, without the presence of conflicting opinions, people cannot really understand the meanings of their own beliefs. These arguments rely on Mill's vision of the nature and operation of human judgment.

The fact that human errors are *corrigible* is, Mill says, a quality of the human mind which is "the source of everything respectable in man either as an intellectual or as a moral being" (p. 231). "He is capable," Mill writes,

> of rectifying his mistakes, by discussion and experience. Not by experience alone. There must be discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted. Wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument: but facts and arguments, to produce any effect on the mind, must be brought before it. Very few facts are able to tell their own story, without comments to bring out their meaning. The whole strength and value . . . of human judgement . . . [depends] on the one property, that it can be set right when it is wrong, [and] reliance can be placed on it only when the means of setting it right are kept constantly at hand. In the case of any person whose judgment is really deserving of confidence, how

> has it become so? Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct. Because it has been his practice to listen to all that could be said against him; to profit by as much of it as was just, and expound to himself, and upon occasion to others, the fallacy of what was fallacious. Because he has felt, that the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this; nor is it in the nature of human intellect to become wise in any other manner. The steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by collating it with those of others, so far from causing doubt and hesitation in carrying it into practice, is the only stable foundation for a just reliance on it" (p. 232).

This view of informed judgment forms the basis for Mill's conclusion that, *however true* an opinion may be, "if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth" (p. 243).

Furthermore, the only way to bring the reasons and arguments supporting a true belief into genuine contact with the believer's mind, is to hear the arguments of adversaries "in their most plausible and persuasive form; he must feel the whole force of the difficulty which the true view of the subject has to encounter and dispose of; else he will never really possess himself of the portion of truth which meets and removes that difficulty" (p. 245). In fact, Mill writes, "if opponents of all important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to imagine them, and supply them with the strongest arguments which the most skilful devil's advocate can conjure up" (p. 245).

**4.** This is where Paul Feyerabend comes in. I want to suggest that seeing Feyerabend as attempting to *enact* and *embody* these views of Mill, provides a valuable interpretive framework for his more peculiar actions and extreme views. In particular, I am suggesting that Feyerabend was compelled by Mill's account of the importance of rational discussion, and insisted—often without the consent of his interlocutors—on engaging in the *sort* of discussion which, for Mill, served as the foundation for rational opinion and conduct.

I do not mean to imply that Feyerabend kept his intentions secret—actually, after reading Mill carefully, it seems that Feyerabend left stage directions all over his contributions, asides announcing to his audience: "I am now playing a believer in a minority view in order to elevate the

intellectual and moral level of this discussion." Mill wrote, "I confess I should like to see the teachers of mankind endeavouring to provide a substitute for [a diversity of opinions]; some contrivance for making the difficulties of the question as present to the learner's consciousness, as if they were pressed upon him by a dissentient champion, eager for his conversion" (Mill [1859] 1977, 251). I am suggesting that Feyerabend often assigned himself the role of such a champion, and in doing so, was attempting to enact Mill's vision of the most productive form of interchange.

For instance, regarding his impassioned defenses of astrology, Feyerabend writes: "My use of examples from astrology should not be misunderstood. Astrology bores me to tears. However it was attacked by scientists, Nobel Prize winners among them, without arguments, simply by a show of authority and in this respect deserved a defence" (1991, 165).

In addition, Feyerabend carefully explained the motivation behind the form of many of his arguments: "attempts to retain well-entrenched conceptions are criticized by pointing out that the excellence of a view can be asserted only *after* alternatives have been given a chance, that the process of knowledge acquisition and knowledge improvement must be kept in motion and that even the most familiar practices and the most evident forms of thought are not strong enough to deflect it from its path" (1981a, xi).

Moreover, like Mill, Feyerabend saw the *beneficiaries* of his defenses of unpopular views as the observers of the interactions. Mill wrote, regarding the importance of the advocacy of minority opinions: "it is not on the impassioned partisan, it is on the calmer and more disinterested bystander, that this collision works its salutary effect" (Mill [1859] 1977, 257). Compare this to what might appear to be one of Feyerabend's more perverse—but typical—perspectives:

"A: Are you an anarchist?
B: I don't know—I haven't considered the matter.
A: But you have written a book on anarchism!
B: And?
A: Don't you want to be taken seriously?
B: What has that got to do with it?
A: I do not understand you.
B: When a good play is performed the audience takes the action and the speeches of the actors very seriously; they identify now with the one, now with the other character and they do so even though they know that the actor playing the puritan is a rake in his private life and the bomb-throwing anarchist a frightened mouse.

A: But they take the writer seriously!
B: No, they don't! When the play gets hold of them they feel constrained to consider problems they never thought about no matter what additional information they may obtain when the play is over. And this additional information is not really relevant . . .
A: But assume the writer produced a clever hoax . . .
B: What do you mean—hoax? He wrote a play—didn't he? The play had some effect, didn't it? *It made people think*—didn't it?"
(Feyerabend 1991, 50–51, emphasis added)

In sum, what at first (and second) glance may appear to be a scattershot and unprincipled approach to issues of scientific knowledge by Feyerabend is—plausibly—actually quite principled and unified, once we take seriously what Feyerabend says about Mill.

5. It could be objected that Feyerabend has *misapplied* Mill; after all, Mill's essay is usually remembered today for its defense of freedom of speech—especially the expression of heterodox religious views—against governmental authority. Mill's work on how *scientific* reasoning ought to proceed is presented in his *System of Logic.*

I find it difficult to deny that Mill, himself, saw the sciences, especially what he called the physical sciences, as operating within a smaller, perhaps more protected, set of expectations and norms; he wrote about these norms in his *System of Logic*, the first edition of which was published in 1848, and which he continued to revise and expand throughout his life. There is a sense in which Mill treated scientific topics as somewhat special cases of discussion, controversy, and resolution, for all of the obvious and sensible reasons.

In contrast to Mill's discussions in his *Logic*, which concern reasoning about facts and evidence, many of Mill's points in *On Liberty* are illustrated through explicitly religious cases, in which there was no promise of factual evidence to which appeal could be made. Hence, one could argue that Mill, in *On Liberty*, is responding to extremist and sectarian religious views, cases in which there is no evidential means for settling the issues at stake. Should we follow Feyerabend in applying Mill's arguments favoring pluralism—which seem to be addressing primarily views that remained outside the purview of scientific inquiry—to scientific knowledge? Does Feyerabend's appeal to Mill amount to a misapplication of Mill's argument?

I do not think so. Contrary to its reputation and use today, Mill stated explicitly that *On Liberty* is *not* primarily about the limits of government interference (p. 305). He was much more concerned about

*social norms*, claiming that protection is needed against "the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling," and that society sometimes "practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself" (p. 220).

The great bulk of the essay concerns how individual people (not governments) ought to respond when confronted with opinions and forms of life which are strange or disagreeable to them. The central point regards the inestimable value—to individuals and to society as a whole—of the existence and nurturance of a wide variety of ways of life. Given what he sees as individuals' natural, unreflective intolerance towards those who see and do things differently than they do (p. 227), Mill emphasizes the importance of reducing social and cultural sanctions against those who espouse minority views of any kind.

Perhaps even more crucial is the cultivation of attitudes and skills that, as Mill sees it, are necessary for the genuine flowering of human intelligence and creativity. These attitudes include tolerance, but Mill also demands much more; he advocates "social support for nonconformity" (p. 275). In fact, Mill argues, "In this age, the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. . . . the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained" (p. 269). Ultimately, Mill claims that "diversity of character and culture" is what has led to human progress (p. 274): "The only unfailing and permanent source of improvement is liberty, since by it there are as many possible independent centres of improvement as there are individuals" (p. 270).

Most importantly for Feyerabend's adaptation of it, this value of the diversity of opinion was not, for Mill, restricted to areas such as politics and religion, for which no factual appeals were available; Mill explicitly included the sciences in his recommendation of "absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical or speculative, scientific, moral, or theological" (p. 225). Moreover, science is included not solely on the basis of a principle of liberty, but on the grounds that pluralism is needed for attaining truth: "on every subject on which difference of opinion is possible, the truth depends on a balance to be struck between two sets of conflicting reasons. Even in natural philosophy, there is always some other explanation possible of the same facts; some geocentric theory instead of heliocentric, some phlogiston instead of oxygen" (p. 244). I conclude that there is, therefore,

no mis-application of Mill's views in Feyerabend's applying them to the scientific context.

6. Thus, Mill's primary preoccupation in *On Liberty* was with positive means of cultivating human flourishing, and not with delineating the limits of legitimate government interference. There *is* something radical, though, in Feyerabend's use of Mill—a use that is consonant with Mill's own views, but which is in tension with most twentieth century philosophy of science—namely, the aim of *recontextualizing* the sciences (and philosophical discussions of the sciences) back into their larger roles in human ways of living. Mill was including modern scientific approaches in the range of ways of living that individuals in a free society may choose among. Because people differ, different ways of life will be judged valuable by them:

> If a person possess any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode. . . . Such are the differences among human beings in their sources of pleasure, their susceptibilities of pain, and the operation on them of different physical and moral agencies, that unless there is a corresponding diversity in their modes of life, they neither obtain their fair share of happiness, nor grow up to the mental, moral, and aesthetic stature of which their nature is capable. ([1859] 1977, 270)

Furthermore, Mill defended the notion of each individual pursuing their own path on the basis of its value to the rest of human society. Under conditions of freedom, Mill writes,

> human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation; and as the works partake the character of those who do them, by the same process human life also becomes rich, diversified, and animating, furnishing more abundant aliment to high thoughts and elevating feelings, and strengthening the tie which binds every individual to the race, by making the race infinitely better worth belonging to. . . . There is a greater fulness of life about his own existence, and when there is more life in the units there is more in the mass which is composed of them." (p. 266)

What has sometimes been seen as Feyerabend's "anti-scientific" attitude is, I suggest, more appropriately interpreted as his taking this aspect of Mill's thought very seriously. The central point is not the moral one, that people should not be *made* to live in a way that they did not freely choose; it is that individuals truly can be the *the best judges*—better even than any scientific experts—of which way of living

is better for them, and that we could all benefit from these judgments. Consider the following passage:

> "B: Ever since people were discovered who did not belong to the circle of Western culture and civilization it was assumed, almost as a moral duty, that they had to be told the truth—which means, the leading ideology of their conquerors. First this was Christianity, then came the treasures of science and technology. Now the people whose lives were disrupted in this manner had already found a way of not merely surviving, but of giving meaning to their existence. And this way, by and large, was much more beneficial than the technological wonders which were imposed upon them and created so much suffering. 'Development' in the Western sense may have done some good here and there, for example in the restriction of infectious diseases—but the blind assumption that Western ideas and technology are intrinsically good and can therefore be imposed without any consultation of local conditions was a disaster. (Feyerabend 1991, 74)

Feyerabend applies this point equally to more specific areas such as medicine, in which scientific expertise should not—*for scientific purposes as well as moral ones*—be taken as a sufficient reason to reject other forms of expertise relevant to these aspects of life. Feyerabend writes, regarding traditional Chinese medicine, for example: "alternative medical systems are often parts of entire traditions, they are connected with religious beliefs and give meaning to the lives of those who belong to the tradition. A free society is a society in which all traditions should be given equal rights *no matter what other traditions think about them.* A respect for the opinions of others, choice of the lesser evil, chance of making progress—all these things argue in favor of letting all medical systems come out into the open and freely compete with science" (1991, 75, his emphasis).

Here, Feyerabend is not appealing to a simple libertarian right of people to live as they wish; he also provides suggestions regarding promising areas of scientific research, focusing on areas in which Western scientific medicine has weaknesses that may be corrected by the introduction of Chinese techniques and understandings.

7. In summary, I have suggested following Paul Feyerabend's own advice, and interpreting Feyerabend's work in light of the principles laid out by John Stuart Mill. A review of Mill's essay, *On Liberty*, emphasizes the importance Mill placed on open and critical discussion for the

vitality and progress of various aspects of human life, including the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Many of Feyerabend's more unusual stances, I suggest, are best interpreted as attempts to play certain roles—especially the role of "eccentric defender of unpopular minority opinion"—that are necessary to fulfilling Mill's conditions for rational exchange and optimal human development.

I wish that I could ask Feyerabend just how explicit and extensive his intentions were, to enact Mill's context for rational judgment. I missed my chance, but this is merely my painful loss. I have attempted here to characterize *our* loss—as philosophers of science—in terms that I believe cast a rather different light on Feyerabend's obstreperous and, to many, slightly insane defenses of unpopular viewpoints. He can be seen as trying to provoke us into protecting us from ourselves, and to highlight and actually *enact* the most fundamental principles by which human life is actually improved. For this, I would like to thank him.

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