

## FREEDOM, REASON, AND TRADITION

*It is a piece of idle sentimentality that truth, merely as truth, has any inherent power denied to error, or prevailing against the dungeon and the stake. Men are not more zealous for truth than they often are for error, and a sufficient application of legal or even of social penalties will generally succeed in stopping the propagation of either. The real advantage which truth has, consists in this: that when an opinion is true, it may be extinguished once, twice, or many times, but in the course of ages there will generally be found persons to rediscover it, until some one of its appearances falls on a time when from favorable circumstances it escapes persecution until it has made such head as to withstand all subsequent attempts to suppress it.*

—J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*<sup>1</sup>

*While rhetoric without reason is empty, reason without rhetoric is dumb.*

—Paul Feyerabend, "In Defense of Aristotle"<sup>2</sup>

There can be little doubt that Paul Feyerabend is one of the most stimulating, exasperating, outrageous and challenging philosophers of our time. The comparison that comes most readily to mind is Nietzsche; in fact, I think of Feyerabend as the Nietzsche of our day. Perhaps this explains why most of the reactions to Feyerabend's writings, especially *Against Method* (*AM*) and, as I expect, to his more recent *Science in a Free Society* (*SFS*) are almost entirely negative and rather venomous.<sup>3</sup> He's usually dismissed as a skeptic, an irrationalist, a crackpot, a crazy person, or some combination of these. I do not share this view, but think of Feyerabend as a mixture of an old-fashioned liberal and a critical rationalist—by which I do not mean a Popperian, but a proponent of the humanistic tradition of Socrates and Mill. (More generally, I see him as part of the tradition whose members include the older sophists,<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche,<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein,<sup>6</sup> as well as pragmatists<sup>7</sup> and existentialists.<sup>8</sup> A fuller discussion of these comparisons is out of place here.<sup>9</sup>)

In this discussion I shall confine myself to what I take to be the main outlines of the books under review.<sup>10</sup> There are many important and even exciting chunks of these books (not to mention his other writings)—for instance, his remarks on Popper (*AM*, pp. 213ff; *SFS*, pp. 115ff), Lakatos (*AM*, chap. 16; *SFS*, pp. 183ff), science and education (*AM*, pp. 295-309; *SFS*, pp. 80-100), replies to critics (*SFS*, pp. 175-217)—that must be left out of this account. More regrettably still, the rich and insightful details of

Feyerabend's views—for example, his remarks on Galileo (*AM*, chaps. 6-12; *SFS*, pp. 40-53), and his attempt to *use*, and not just talk about, the hermeneutical ideal that reason and history, science and myth, are inseparable elements of what he calls Cosmologies (*AM*, chap. 17; *SFS*, pp. 40-70)—cannot even be touched upon here. My discussion will be divided into three sections: Philosophy of Science, Reason and Tradition, and A Free Society.

#### PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

*AM* is subtitled "Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge." The opening sentence of the book reads: "The following essay is written in the conviction that *anarchism*, while perhaps not the most attractive *political* philosophy, is certainly excellent medicine for *epistemology* and for the *philosophy of science*" (p. 17). What does Feyerabend intend this remark to convey? Among other things, he claims that epistemological standards and theories—for example, rationalism and empiricism—and philosophies of science—for example, inductivism, deductivism, and Popperianism—fail to provide a sound understanding of science or rationality; indeed, they distort attempts at understanding. On his view, science, reason, history, and anthropology are inseparable; science and its history are part of the same process; and science and myth are inextricable components of a matrix consisting of a cosmology and a form of life (in the Wittgensteinian sense). Abstract categories, standards, and theories are useless by themselves. Feyerabend sometimes claims that people who appeal to such abstractions, and not himself, are actually committed to the idea that "anything goes," since anything can be made consistent with such empty abstractions.

More fundamentally, since science, history, and human beings are evolving, adhering to a strict system of rules is detrimental to learning and human freedom. This is especially so today, when more science, and lots of philosophy, is either an ideology or a business; where truth, to say the least, is not the main goal. Thus, to claim that one can, as Popper and Kuhn do, *start* with the assumption that science is closer to the truth, and embodies more rational procedures, than any other form of life, and to proceed from there to glean abstract categories and rules that function as universal standards, is at best tendentious and at worst grossly mistaken. Even if science is rational, it's not the most or the only rational enterprise. (*AM*, pp. 19-20) Hence, scientism is both incorrect and pernicious.

At bottom, anarchism is required for two reasons (*AM*, p. 20). First, fallibilism coupled with relative human ignorance ("The world is a largely unknown place") requires it. Second, humanitarianism (including the goal of individual freedom and happiness) requires it. Unfortunately, science and philosophy today are detrimental to both of these goals, which make "Truth" secondary in importance for Feyerabend. As he says:

The attempt to increase liberty, to lead a full and rewarding life, and the corresponding attempt to discover the secrets of nature and of man entails, therefore, the rejection of all universal standards and of all rigid traditions. [AM, p. 20]

Feyerabend claims that this attitude is rational today, although there may come a time when it's not reasonable to adopt this stance (AM, p. 22).

In support of his claim that science, philosophy, and other "rigid" traditions (which, in other works, he often calls ideologies) undermine the twin goals of humanitarianism and the increase of knowledge, Feyerabend invokes the following claims: Science often succeeds only by violating accepted rules (AM, p. 23). Arguments often hinder progress and change (since the call to "be reasonable" means "accept the *status quo*") (AM, p. 24). Individuals and institutions learn and develop; so what went before, or what is accepted now, is not better—it's just there first and so can't be used as an archimedean reference point (AM, p. 24). Arguments become useless if they don't persuade or move people (AM, p. 25).<sup>11</sup> He also invokes the idea of counterinduction (and the associated Principle of Proliferation), that is, the need to invent competing incompatible alternatives to accepted theories, as a way of testing their limits, in this context. (He holds the view that facts are theory-laden and that a theory can only be tested against another theory.) Feyerabend thus takes up the view that argumentation is dialectical, which comes out in Mill, Peirce, and Popper as well (AM, pp. 25ff). The joint method of tenacity and proliferation—of the clash of competing theories—is for Feyerabend the only way to increase knowledge and the open society. He thus articulates the reasons for this "pluralistic methodology" (AM, p. 30). On this view:

Knowledge is not a series of self-consistent theories that converges towards an ideal view; it is not a gradual approach to the truth. It is rather an *ever increasing ocean of mutually incompatible (and perhaps even incommensurable) alternatives*, each single theory, each fairy tale, each myth that is part of the collection forcing the others into greater articulation, and all of them contributing, via this process of competition, to the development of our consciousness. Nothing is ever settled, no view can ever be omitted from a comprehensive account. . . . Experts and laymen, professionals and dilettanti, truth-freaks and liars—they are all invited to participate in the contest and to make their contributions to the enrichment of our culture. The task of the scientist. . . is no longer 'to search for the truth', or to 'praise God', or 'to systematize observations', or 'to improve predictions.' These are but side effects of an activity to which his attention is mainly directed and which is to *make the weaker case the stronger* (as the sophists said) *and thus to sustain the motion of the whole.* [AM, p. 30]

I believe this to be the most important passage in all of Feyerabend's published work. The rest of AM is concerned with drawing out its method-

ological implications—that science and its history are inseparable parts of the same process; that science and myth are parts of a cosmology; that reason and its standards must be supplemented by history, anthropology, dreams, etc.; that detailed hermeneutic investigations of other cosmologies-cum-forms of life is important; and so on (*AM*, pp. 223-309). *SFS* looks at the broader social, political, and cultural ramifications of the view expressed in the passage and seeks to undermine the idea that science—and scientism—is the One True Religion.

Feyerabend's view can be summed up as follows. Given the assumption of fallibilism and ignorance, the ideals of humanitarianism and the open society, the facts that science is an ideology, that scientism is elitist and anti-democratic, and that freedom and happiness are more important than Truth, as conceived by scientism, we must, as he puts it, "keep all our options open." Every tradition has its strengths and limits. The clash of traditions is required for learning and freedom. Objective knowledge requires the clash of incommensurable alternatives, since knowledge consists, roughly speaking, in widening our horizons, while freedom consists in expanding our options. (This is why he calls for a separation of science and the state, to give people a real education and real choices [*AM*, pp. 295-309]). These traditions must not merely be *tolerated*; they must be *taken seriously*, which is why, for Feyerabend, liberalism and rationalism (as in scientism) are in conflict.

On Feyerabend's view the "bottom line," so to speak, is this: The hegemony of one tradition, viz., Western Rationalism, "enforces an un-enlightened conformity, and speaks of truth." But "*variety of opinion is necessary for objective knowledge. And a method that encourages variety is the only method that is compatible with a humanitarian outlook.*" (*AM*, pp. 45, 46)

Liberal rationalists, and thus, no doubt, many readers of this journal, will notice that Feyerabend is posing a dilemma for Enlightenment ideals: if "reason" means the tradition of Western Rationalism (as he often calls it), then reason and freedom are incompatible. If freedom and humanitarianism mean, roughly, the Enlightenment ideals expressed in *On Liberty*, then freedom cannot tolerate the appeal to Reason, as conceived by Western Rationalism. At the same time, Feyerabend is not a skeptic or an irrationalist. Nor does he deny that there is objective knowledge. On the contrary, one of his claims is that scientism inhibits the growth of objective knowledge. While the issues he raises are of fundamental importance, it is impossible to discuss them here. I shall, nevertheless, broach some of them in connection with my discussion of *SFS*, to which I now turn.

This book is fairly recent, and a word is in order about its contents. In Part One, "Reason and Practice" (pp. 13-70), Feyerabend goes over the themes of *AM*, although the style is very much toned down (for Feyerabend, that is!): it's generally less polemical and vitriolic and (to my mind) makes its case more persuasively than corresponding parts of *AM*. Part Two, "Science in a Free Society" (pp. 73-122), takes up and systematizes many themes of

some of Feyerabend's occasional essays.<sup>12</sup> It also extends the analysis of Part One and *AM* into the areas of culture and politics. I shall confine my discussion of *SFS* to these two sections. Part Three, "Conversations with Illiterates" (pp. 125-217), consists of reprints of Feyerabend's replies to some of the nastier and more distorted reviews of *AM*: Agassi, Gellner, Curthoys and Suchting, and others.<sup>13</sup> In these replies one finds many interesting restatements and embellishments on *AM*. Feyerabend is at his best here, although the essays are no less unkind than the reviews. I think he is entitled to be vitriolic against his critics, but at least he's not infected by the humorless, self-righteous attitude of his reviewers. That, however, is one person's opinion. In any event, Feyerabend's replies are extremely provocative and are themselves worth the price of the book.

I turn now to a brief review of those features of *SFS* that relate to the *AM* themes discussed previously.

#### REASON AND TRADITION

According to Feyerabend, rationalism, scientism, and traditional philosophical standards are embedded in a particular tradition and thus can't be used to *judge* other traditions. (In other words, the idea that they constitute an archimedean reference point outside all traditions is an illusion.) The clash between traditions, including that of Western Rationalism, and the resultant interaction between them, contributes to better theory and sounder practice. In fact, the clash between reason and practice is itself another example of the interactions between traditions. Feyerabend develops these claims by way of a discussion of idealism (ideas and standards of reason are autonomous and primary) and naturalism (reason is part of a tradition, which is autonomous and primary). The former view is associated with Popper, the latter with Burke, Kuhn, Polanyi. (Feyerabend's discussion of these views, and his related remarks on objectivity and subjectivity, reason and the passions, and rationality and skepticism [*SFS*, pp. 22-28, 163ff] are among the most interesting and instructive parts of *SFS*. They also show how hard it is to classify his views, as skeptic, realist, etc.). Feyerabend tries to combine these views, by way of a Hegelian-style synthesis, that he calls interactionism. (His remark [*SFS*, pp. 164ff] that reason and history must complement each other in a pluralistic methodology, which is also a prime theme of *AM* [chap. 17], is of a piece with his interactionism.) Feyerabend summarizes his position in this way:

Interactionism means that Reason and Practice enter history on equal terms. Reason is no longer an agency that directs other traditions, it is a tradition in its own right with as much (or as little) claim to the center of the stage as any other tradition. Being a tradition is neither good nor bad, it simply is. . . . They become good or bad (rational/irrational. . . advanced/primitive, humanitarian/vicious) only when looked at from the point of view of some other tradition. . . . *Relativism*,

in the old and simple sense of Protagoras, gives an adequate account of the situation which thus emerges. [*SFS*, pp. 8-10]<sup>14</sup>

This position is an outgrowth of the *AM* passage about the "ocean of alternatives" view and of his antisecularism. It is also in line with his allegiance to the humanistic tradition cited earlier in this review, which can perhaps be summed up by Gadamer's remark that it is an enlightenment prejudice to think that traditions are *per se* irrational. (This is the "naturalism" of Burke, Kuhn, Polanyi, Wittgenstein, and Protagoras<sup>15</sup> that also alludes to themes in pragmatism and humanistic existentialism, e.g., in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.)

The passage also suggests that Feyerabend is not an irrationalist or an extreme anarchist, since tradition is inescapable, useful, and reasonable up to a point. Yet, the idea that traditions are limited, that none deserves hegemony over all others, and thus require criticism and revision, explains his allegiance to Protagoras. But is Protagoras an enemy of reason?<sup>16</sup> According to Feyerabend, "Protagorean relativism is *reasonable* because it pays attention to the pluralism of traditions and values. And it is *civilized* for it does not assume that one's own village and the strange customs it contains are the navel of the world" (*SFS*, p. 28). Once again, humanitarianism and Reason are at odds.

Feyerabend later introduces a fourth view, pragmatism, which has some positive value, although it is ultimately too uncritical. He says this about the attitude of a pragmatist:

A pragmatic philosophy can flourish only if the...standards to be judged...are seen as temporary makeshifts and not as lasting constituents of thought and action. A participant with a pragmatic philosophy views practices and traditions much as a traveller views different countries. Each country has features he likes and things he abhors... He will also remember that his initial demands and expectations may not be very sensible, and so permit the process of choice to affect and change his 'nature' [which also evolves historically] as well... So a pragmatist must be both a participant and an observer [i.e., one who asks "what shall I do? vs. one whose goal is to find out what's going on" (*SFS*, pp. 18ff)] even in those extreme cases where he decides to live in accordance with his momentary whims entirely. [*SFS*, p. 19]<sup>17</sup>

This, I take it, is the outgrowth of Feyerabend's fallibilism and humanitarianism. For more details, the reader is advised to consult *SFS*.

#### A FREE SOCIETY

Feyerabend defines a free society as follows:

A free society is a society in which all traditions have equal rights and equal access to the centres of power. (This differs from the customary definition [of liberals] where *individuals* have equal rights of access to

positions defined by a special tradition—the tradition of Western Science and Rationalism.) A tradition receives these rights not because of the importance it has for outsiders (“observers”) but because it gives meaning to the lives of those who participate in it. But it can also be of interest for outsiders. . . . To give traditions equality is therefore not only *right* but also *most useful*. [*SFS*, p. 9]

These remarks are related to Feyerabend’s ideas about science and ideology, science education, the chauvinism of science in our society, and the tradition of Western Rationalism vis-à-vis other traditions. He evidently rejects the liberal view (expressed in *On Liberty*<sup>18</sup>) that, since scientism and rationalism are archimedean reference points, and since freedom and Reason vary directly, it is a mistake to let people believe what is false, or believed false. According to this view only true beliefs, or beliefs that aren’t settled, are to be tolerated. Ignorance is the only justification for tolerance, etc. Feyerabend’s connections to Protagoras, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, and others come out in his rejection of this view. (His remarks also show that the humanistic tradition, which consists also of Mill, Popper, and Socrates, is ambivalent on these issues.) Freedom as a higher value than Truth or Reason comes out here. So do similarities with writers such as Winch, Gadamer, and others.<sup>19</sup> Feyerabend’s development of a hermeneutical understanding of natural philosophy and science in *AM* is supplemented by a hermeneutical stance toward the understanding of traditions, which is coupled with an attack on the chauvinism of experts in our society and with Western Imperialism (*SFS*, pp. 63-65). Finally, a free society is a democratic society, where the people rule, so that if they want their children taught unpopular and allegedly “unscientific” beliefs and traditions (astrology, creationism, etc.) they have a right to do so.

For Feyerabend, the main questions a free society must face are these: “How can a society that gives all traditions equal rights be realized? How can science be removed from the dominant position it now has?” (*SFS*, p. 9). Science, in short, is no longer a liberating influence (*SFS*, p. 75), since it poses as the One True Religion (*SFS*, pp. 20ff). Feyerabend distinguishes, however, between *philosophical* and *political* relativism and denies the view that all ideas are of equal worth (*SFS*, pp. 80ff). But recognizing this doesn’t justify chauvinism of any kind, according to him.

These and other remarks, which cannot even be mentioned here, clearly show that humanitarianism, as conceived by Feyerabend, takes priority over everything else.<sup>20</sup> Anyone who holds the contrary opinion will not, in good conscience, be able to ignore his work. One can reject it, argue with it, even curse it. But to dismiss it as the work of a crank, madman, or irrationalist would be bad faith and self-deception of the highest order.

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1. In *Essential Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. Max Lerner (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 280.
2. In *Progress and Rationality in Science*, ed. Gerard Radnitzky and Gunnar Anderson, Synthese Library, vol. 125 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979), p. 176, n. 15.
3. *Against Method* (New York: Schocken, 1976); *Science in a Free Society* (New York: Schocken, 1979). Three articles that take Feyerabend seriously are: C. A. Hooker, "Critical Notice of Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science Vol. 4, no. 2," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 1: 489-509; Maurice Finocchiaro, "Rhetoric and Scientific Rationality," in *PSA 1978*, vol. 1, ed. P. Asquith and I. Hacking, pp. 235-49; Andrew Lugg, "Feyerabend's Rationalism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1977): 755-75.
4. See Laszlo Versenyi, *Socratic Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963). Also: Eric A. Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957). Cf. Feyerabend's early essay, *Knowledge without Foundations* (Oberlin, Oh.: Oberlin College, 1961).
5. See Tracy Strong, *Friederich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975).
6. See John W. Danford, *Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). Cf. Hannah Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972); Derek L. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Scientific Knowledge* (Lotowa, N. J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977).
7. See Richard M. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). (I am indebted to Rorty for many enlightening hours of discussion at his NEH seminar on "Epistemological and Moral Relativism," Princeton, summer 1979, and for the opportunity to read his forthcoming book.)
8. See John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (New York: Penguin, 1972).
9. In section 11 of *SFS* ("Origins of the Ideas of This Essay," pp. 107-22) and elsewhere (pp. 164ff), Feyerabend mentions some of the authors and movements I have alluded to. In addition, he mentions Kierkegaard, Hegel, Dadaism (*SFS*, pp. 120-21; *AM*, pp. 22ff), and Brecht. A comparison of Feyerabend's work with Brecht's "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties" (Appendix A to *Galileo*, Grove Press edition, 1966, pp. 131-50) proves most instructive. See here Feyerabend's essays: "The Theatre as an Instrument of the Criticism of Ideologies," *Inquiry* 10 (1967): 298-312; and "On the Improvement of the Sciences and Arts, and the Possible Identity of the Two," in *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 3, (1976): 387-416.
10. In an unpublished paper, "In Defense of Feyerabend," I consider his philosophy from a broader and more detailed perspective than is possible in this review.
11. Here Feyerabend is attacking the Aristotle-Descartes idea of pure reason (the active intellect, Cartesian ego) for whom pure logic is alone causally efficacious. Cf. Roy Edgley, "Reason and Violence: A Fragment of the Liberal Ideology," in *Practical Reason*, ed. S. Korner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 80-120, for another attack on this ideal, in the context of a critique of Popper and Kuhn.
12. See here the following essays: "Science, Freedom and the Good Life," *Philosophical Forum*, (new series) 1 (1968): 127-35; "Experts in a Free Society," *The Critic*, Nov./Dec. 1970, pp. 58-69; "How to Save Society from Science," *Radical Philosophy*, 1972, pp. 3-8; "'Science': The Myth and Its Role in Society," *Inquiry* 18 (1975): 167-81; "Imre Lakatos," *British Journal of the Philosophy of Science*, 1975, pp. 1-18; "Let's Make More Movies," in *The Owl of Minerva*, ed. C. Bontempo and S. Jack Odell (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975), pp. 201-10; "Rationalism, Relativism and Scientific Method," *Philosophy in Context* 6 (1977): 7-19; "On the Critique of Scientific Reason," in *Essays in Memory of Imre Lakatos*, ed. R. Cohen, P. Feyerabend, and M. Wartofsky (Boston: D. Reidel, 1976), pp. 109-45; "Philosophy



Today," in *Teaching Philosophy Today*, ed. T. Bynum and S. Reisberg (Bowling Green, Oh.: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1977), pp. 72-76.

13. See J. Agassi, "Review of *Against Method*," *Philosophia*, 1976, pp. 165-77; E. Gellner, "Beyond Truth and Falsity," *British Journal of the Philosophy of Science*, 1975, pp. 331-42; J. Curthoys and W. Suchting, "Feyerabend's Discourse against Method: A Marxist Critique," *Inquiry* 20 (1977): 243-371.

14. See Versenyi, *Socratic Humanism*, and Havelock, *Liberal Temper in Greek Politics*. For both writers, Protagoras was an advocate of democracy and the sort of freedom from the tyranny of rationalism that Feyerabend upholds. The rationalists of the day, mainly Plato and Aristotle, rejected both freedom and democracy. Once again, liberalism and rationalism are at odds.

15. For recent discussion of the relations among Burke, Kuhn, Polanyi, Popper, and Feyerabend, see Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy*; D. Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (London: Routledge, 1976), chap. 4; A. MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crisis, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," *Monist* 60 (1977): 453-73; idem., "Objectivity in Morality and Objectivity in Science," in *Morals, Science and Society*, ed. H. Tristram (New York: Hastings Center, 1978), pp. 21-40.

16. See Versenyi, *Socratic Humanism*, pp. 9-22.

17. See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, for an even further statement of pragmatism.

18. Mill's justification for tolerance is ignorance of the truth. But, since the goal of mankind is convergence on The Truth, some "contrivance" for continued toleration will be needed once this goal is achieved. Thus, Mill holds that the justification for tolerating criticism of Newtonian philosophy is to reinforce its truth. A far cry, indeed, from Feyerabend's views! Is it so obvious that Mill is right? See *On Liberty*, pp. 293ff. On Newton, see pp. 273ff.

19. See P. Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," reprinted in *Understanding and Social Inquiry*, ed. Fred Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1977), pp. 142-59; Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Truth and Method (New York: Seabury, 1975). Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre's interesting review, "Contexts of Interpretation," *Boston University Journal* 24 (1976): 41-46.

20. Cf. the following passage of *AM*: "... is it not possible that science as we know it today or a 'search for the truth' in the style of traditional philosophy will create a monster? Is it not possible that it will harm man, turn him into a miserable, unfriendly, self-righteous mechanism without charm and humour? ... I suspect the answer to all these questions must be in the affirmative and I believe that a reform of the sciences that makes them more anarchistic and subjective (in Kierkegaard's sense) is urgently needed" (*AM*, p. 175).