



# The rise of western rationalism: Paul Feyerabend's story



John Preston

Department of Philosophy, The University of Reading, Reading RG6 6AA, UK

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## ABSTRACT

I summarize certain aspects of Paul Feyerabend's account of the development of Western rationalism, show the ways in which that account is supposed to run up against an alternative, that of Karl Popper, and then try to give a preliminary comparison of the two. My interest is primarily in whether what Feyerabend called his 'story' constitutes a possible history of our epistemic concepts and their trajectory. I express some grave reservations about that story, and about Feyerabend's framework, finding Popper's views less problematic here. However, I also suggest that one important aspect of Feyerabend's material, his treatment of *religious* belief, can be given an interpretation which makes it tenable, and perhaps preferable to a Popperian approach.

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## 1. Introduction

While working on *Against Method*, Paul Feyerabend conceived a project he called 'The Rise of Western Rationalism'.<sup>1</sup> At one point, he seems to have intended this for publication in a single book, although it never came to fruition as such. Instead, parts of the material survive in his published articles, many of which have been brought together in the volumes *Farewell to Reason* (Feyerabend, 1987), and *Conquest of Abundance* (Feyerabend, 1999). The same themes are also touched upon in the lectures (from 1992) recently published under the title *The Tyranny of Science* (Feyerabend, 2011). But the seeds of some of the ideas I have in mind are already clearly present in *Science in a Free Society*, where we find this:

[S]cience is not sacrosanct. The mere fact that it exists, is admired, has results is not sufficient for making it a measure of excellence. Modern science arose from global objections against what went on before and rationalism itself, the idea that there are general rules and standards for conducting our affairs, affairs

of knowledge included, arose from global objections to commonsense (example: Xenophanes against Homer) (Feyerabend, 1978, p. 16).

This link between science and rationalism comes to assume great importance in Feyerabend's later work. Having already suggested that science gained the upper hand in history by force and trickery, rather than by virtue of any intrinsic superiority, the aim of this project, I think it can safely be said, would have been to show that 'rationalism' came to supersede previous ways of thinking in much the same way. '[T]he "Rise of Rationalism in the West", he put it in one of his last papers, 'shows the same kind of contempt towards non-believers that accompanied the rise of modern science' (Feyerabend, 1995a, p. 10; Feyerabend, 1999, p. 261). (For more information on Feyerabend's motivations for engaging in such debates, see Helmut Heit's paper in this issue).

In this paper, I summarize some aspects of Feyerabend's account of the development of Western rationalism, show the ways in which that account is supposed to run up against an alternative, that of Karl Popper, and then try to give a preliminary comparison of the two, a comparison not of their fidelity to the ancient sources, but based on the conceptual tenability of their rival pictures. My interest is primarily in whether Feyerabend's story

E-mail address: [j.m.preston@reading.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.preston@reading.ac.uk).

<sup>1</sup> See the entry on Feyerabend in Turner (1987), p. 227. In 1982, Martin Gardner mentioned that the book, although 'eagerly awaited', had not yet been published (Gardner, 1982-3), p. 32.

constitutes a possible history of our epistemic concepts and trajectory. I express some grave reservations about that story, and about Feyerabend's framework, but I also suggest that one important aspect of his material can be given an interpretation which may make it tenable.

## 2. Knowledge in the ancient world

According to Feyerabend's potted history, life before the agrarian revolution (in the Neolithic era, *circa* 10,000 years ago) was really rather idyllic:

[E]very individual possessed all the knowledge and all the skills that were necessary for survival. Moreover, it took them only about two to four hours per week to take care of their necessities. Thus they could sit around, sing songs, philosophize or do whatever else seemed interesting and rewarding to them... The small groups of hunters and gatherers that roamed the countryside ... collaborated in a fairly democratic manner (Feyerabend, 1985, pp. 155-6).

Even after the agrarian revolution, when skills became specialized, the epistemic situation didn't change much. Ancient navigators, craftsmen, farmers, etc., were familiar with a great variety of materials, plants, animals; they could identify and alleviate bodily and mental afflictions; they traveled across national boundaries and assimilated foreign ideas and techniques (Feyerabend, 1993b, p. 6; Feyerabend, 1999, p. 265). An enormous amount of information resided in their customs, industries, and in the common sense of the time. Acquiring knowledge was part of living. The knowledge acquired was 'relevant', and reflected personal and group concerns (Feyerabend, 1987, p. 4). It was not yet a commodity.

This somewhat romantic view of prehistory has not gone unchallenged by archaeologists.<sup>2</sup> However, other archaeologists are still willing to defend something like this view.<sup>3</sup>

A clearer picture of the situation emerges when literature comes on the scene.

## 3. The Homeric period

In Hesiod's cosmology, the universe was originally formless ('Chaos'), and different powers battled to impose their own metaphysical-cum-social order onto things (as described in *Theogony*, and *Works and Days*). So there was no 'way the world is', but only different ways the world had been forced to be by divine and human agencies.<sup>4</sup>

Feyerabend presents the Homeric period as involving a related world-view, characterised by an *aggregative* metaphysic, part of which is already familiar to readers of the first edition of *Against Method*.<sup>5</sup> According to this conception, the natural world, like the political world, is subdivided into regions which are subject to different (natural) laws (Feyerabend, 1987, p. 96). Gods, like humans, have their *moirai*, their allotted shares of the world. These are separated from each other, and qualitatively different. Thus, the

world at large comprises an aggregate with different divinities ruling over its different parts. But the aggregate character of the Homeric world was not restricted to the very large—it is found also in the smallest constituents. In this world,

[t]here are no *concepts* that forge the human body and the human soul into a unit. There are no *means of representation* that would enable artists to give optical expression to such a unity. Both conceptually and optically, human beings are like rag dolls, sewed together from relatively isolated elements ... and functioning as transit stations for events (ideas, dreams, feelings) that may arise elsewhere and only briefly merge with a particular human being. Action in our sense does not exist in this world; a hero does not decide to bring about a certain event and then cause it, he *finds himself involved* in one series of events rather than in another and his life *develops* accordingly. All things, animals, carriages, cities, geographical regions, historical sequences, entire tribes are presented in this 'additive' manner—they are aggregates without 'essence' or 'substance' (Feyerabend, 1987, p. 97).

In his last works, Feyerabend extended his claims about the scope of this metaphysic even further. It applied, he suggested, not just to objects in the Homeric world, but also to the world-views of the Homeric Greeks and to the *concepts* which they used to evaluate their dealings with objects. The world-views in question were eclectic and opportunistic. They exhibit no coherent *knowledge*, i.e., no comprehensive truth that goes beyond an enumeration of details, but there are many *pieces of information*, obtained in different ways from different sources, and collected for the benefit of the curious. The best way of presenting such knowledge is the *list*—and the oldest scientific works (the Babylonian–Assyrian word lists (Feyerabend, 1995a, p. 5)) were indeed collections of facts, parts, coincidences, and problems in several specialized domains. In the time of Hesiod, for example, truth consisted in 'a summation of individual reports' (Feyerabend, 1984, p. 97).<sup>6</sup> (This, of course, is why Socrates continually runs into people who answer his 'What is ... ?' questions by presenting lists). Although, these lists contained an inner structure, their connecting principles were not explicitly formulated. That the gods themselves have complete knowledge does not mean that their gaze penetrates the surface to perceive a hidden unity beneath events, but only that they have the most complete lists at their disposal. The idea of a deeper unity lying *behind* phenomena is no part of this world view, according to Feyerabend.<sup>7</sup>

## 4. The demise of the Homeric world-view

How does Feyerabend think this Homeric world-view was deposed? Most Greeks took the information contained in their trades and crafts for granted (Feyerabend, 1993b, p. 6; Feyerabend, 1999, p. 265). However, the social groups which prepared what is now known as Western rationalism and laid the intellectual foundations for Western science refused to take this abundance at face value (Feyerabend, 1988b, pp. 166-7). Aiming at something more profound, some of their early social critics, 'philosophers' (as they came to be called), started the work of knowledge all over again, this time without the details but with a maximum of generality. They denied that the world was as rich

<sup>2</sup> For literature critical of this romantic view, see Keeley (1996), Leblanc (2003), and works by Samuel Bowles, detailed in Wilson (2012).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Brian Ferguson's essay in Arkush & Allen (2006).

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for impressing upon me the importance of this pre-Homeric phase. The up-for-grabs nature of Hesiod's reality clearly chimes with Feyerabend's own conception.

<sup>5</sup> Feyerabend (1975), chap. 17, especially pp. 232-49 and 260-77. Although this chapter is not reproduced in later editions of *Against Method*, this is emphatically not because Feyerabend disowned it.

<sup>6</sup> The fact that truths can be presented in a list, surely doesn't mean that truth = list, though.

<sup>7</sup> See especially Feyerabend (2011), pp. 16, 38, 58, 102.

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