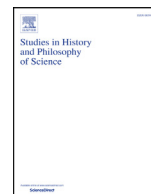




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Relativism in Feyerabend's later writings



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ABSTRACT

This paper reconstructs, and distinguishes between, Feyerabend's different forms of relativism in his later writings. *Science in a Free Society* remains close to familiar forms of relativism, while, at the same time, developing an original but under-argued form of political relativism, and rejecting "conversion" models of cultural exchange. *Farewell to Reason* moves away from common renderings of relativism, and develops a range of different new forms. Central here are links between relativism, skepticism and infallibilism. In the last six years of his life, Feyerabend often criticizes a peculiar radical form of relativism that arguably no-one has ever proposed or defended. In the same context, Feyerabend sketches an "ontological" form of relativism. It combines "Kantian humility", metaphysical pluralism and constructivism.

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1. Introduction

Forty years ago, Imre Lakatos and Elie Zahar called Paul Feyerabend "our most brilliant cultural relativist" (1975: 367). Not everyone at the time agreed with the expression "most brilliant", but there certainly was widespread agreement that to discuss relativism meant, first and foremost, to engage with the author of *Against Method*. Today the situation has changed. In the contemporary literature on relativism one finds only brief and perfunctory references to Feyerabend's work. Indeed, one might even say that Feyerabend is "treated as a dead dog"—to echo Marx' famous lament about the absence of Hegel in socialist discourse of the 1860s (Marx, 1980: 27).

This paper is an attempt to work out whether Lakatos' assessment is dated and whether we today are justified in ignoring Feyerabend's contributions. In other words, I aim for a re-evaluation of Feyerabend's considerations for and against different versions of relativism. Given limitations of space, my re-evaluation will have to be limited in scope. First, I shall restrict myself to the writings from the late seventies to the mid-nineties, especially to *Science in a Free Society* (1978), *Farewell to Reason*

(1987) and *Conquest of Abundance* (1999). Needless to say, I leave aside the texts prior to *Science in a Free Society* not because they are unimportant, but because they demand a separate and detailed investigation. Moreover, and second, I shall say nothing on the thorny topic of incommensurability. This part of Feyerabend's oeuvre has recently been investigated in considerable depth by several scholars, and I have little to add to their results (Hoyningen-Huene, 2000; Oberheim, 2006; Preston, 1997; Sankey, 2011).

My paper has six parts. In Sections 3 to 6 I shall go over Feyerabend's claims for and against relativism in some detail, sticking closely to the original texts, and offering something of a running commentary. Perhaps this is not the most rhetorically elegant mode of presentation, but it seems best suited to track the changes—book by book—in Feyerabend's thinking. Section 7 attempts an overall summary assessment. I begin, in Section 2 with an introduction to what I shall throughout refer to as the "standard model of relativism".

2. The standard model of (epistemic) relativism

The expression "standard model of relativism" is to be taken with a large pinch of salt. It is not meant to refer to an eternal or universally accepted standard. "Standard model of relativism" merely seeks to capture some currently popular characterization of

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variants of the position. I have arrived at this model by collecting definitions and characterization of relativism from both friends and foes of the view, including Barry Barnes and David Bloor (1982), Paul Boghossian (2006), Gilbert Harman (Harman & Jarvis Thomson, 1996), Gideon Rosen (2001), F.F. Schmitt (2007), Bernard Williams (1981), and Michael Williams (2007). Feyerabend's texts were not consulted. My aim was to have an independent and stable standard against which to measure his changes in view. Finally, the suggested model could of course be developed at much greater length than I have space for here. I shall take up this challenge elsewhere. But I hope that even in its current sketchy form the model can be used as a grid or foil for understanding Feyerabend's position. I shall explain this model focusing—as an example—on epistemic relativism.

- (1) *Dependence*: A belief has an epistemic status (as epistemically justified or unjustified) only relative to an epistemic system or practice (=SP). (Cf. Williams, 2007: 94).

I write “epistemic system or practice” in order to indicate that *Dependence* is compatible with both a “generalist” and “particularist” understanding of epistemology. *Dependence* also allows for a further choice regarding SPs. In saying that a belief has an epistemic status (as justified or unjustified) only relative to an SP, the relativist might refer to either the SP of the relevant believer, or to the SP of the attributor or evaluator. (Boghossian, 2006: 72; Cf. White, 2007, Williams, 2007).

- (2) *Plurality*: There are, have been, or could be, more than one such epistemic system or practice.

Given *Plurality*, relativism is compatible with the idea that our current SP is without an *existing* alternative. Moreover, *Plurality* permits the relativist to be highly selective in choosing those SPs with respect to which relativism applies. He might for example restrict his relativistic thesis to just two SPs. For instance, one can be a relativist about science and religion, considering each an SP in the sense of *Dependence*.

- (3) *Exclusiveness*: SPs are exclusive of one another. This can take two forms:
- (a) *Question-Centered Exclusiveness*: There are sets of yes/no questions to which SPs give opposite answers.
- (b) *Practice-Centered Exclusiveness*: There are no yes/no questions to which SPs give opposite answers since their concepts and concerns are too different. SPs exclude each other in that the consequences of one SP include such actions or behaviors as are incompatible with the actions and behaviors that are consequences of other SPs. Users or members of one SP are not able to fully understand the actions and behaviors common in other SPs. (Williams, 1981, 1985).

Exclusiveness tries to capture the sense in which—under a relativistic conception of their relationship—SPs have to *conflict*. This idea is in tension with the further assumption, made by some authors, that relativism concerns incommensurable SPs (here such incommensurability involves differences in categories that rule out an identity of propositional content across these SPs). The option of *Practice-Centered Exclusiveness* covers this eventuality. Two SPs can be compared, and can conflict, when they lead to, or require incompatible forms of action and behavior in an at least roughly specifiable area of human affairs. The requirement that the area of human affairs be specifiable safeguards that there is a certain degree of comparability. And the demand that the forms of action and

behavior involved are incompatible, makes sure that the condition of conflict is met.

- (4) *Notional Confrontation*: It is not possible for a group *G* holding an epistemic system or practice SP_1 , to go over to an epistemic system or practice SP_2 on the basis of a rational comparison between SP_1 and SP_2 . But *G* might be converted to SP_2 without losing its hold on reality. (B. Williams, 1981, 1985)

A “notional” confrontation differs from a “real” confrontation; in the case of the latter a rationally motivated ‘switching’ is possible. A conversion is not an altogether irrational event. Being converted to a cause is not the same as being self-deceived, brainwashed or drugged. There is no assumption that a conversion is a phenomenon of psychological or social pathology. This idea is captured by the phrase “without losing its hold on reality” (Williams, 1981: 139).

- (5) *Symmetry*: Epistemic systems and practices must not be ranked.¹

Symmetry can take a number of different forms that are worth distinguishing.

- (a) *Methodological Symmetry*: All SPs are on a par vis-à-vis social-scientific investigations.

The best-known version of *Methodological Symmetry* is perhaps the “Symmetry” or “Equivalence Postulate” of the “Strong Programme” in the “Sociology of Scientific Knowledge”: “... all beliefs are on a par with one another with respect to the causes of their credibility” (Barnes & Bloor, 1982: 23). I generalize this “postulate” in order to detach it from the requirement that explanations must be causal.

- (b) *Non-Neutrality*: There is no neutral way of evaluating different SPs.

Non-Neutrality is the main consideration usually invoked in defense of *Symmetry*. It does not preclude the possibility that some SPs agree on the standards by which their overall success should be judged. What *Non-Neutrality* denies is that such local agreement justifies the hope for a global or universal agreement.

- (c) *Equality*: All SPs are equally correct.

Most characterizations of relativism—by friends and foes alike—take *Equality* to be the natural consequence of *Non-Neutrality* and thus the best way to spell out *Symmetry*. But *Equality* makes a stronger claim than *Non-Neutrality*. This becomes easy to appreciate once we remember the typical challenge to *Equality*: what is the point of view from which *Equality* is asserted? On the face of it, *Equality* appears to presuppose a neutral point of view from which we can somehow see that all SPs are equally correct. And this very claim jars with *Non-Neutrality*.

¹ But why couldn't the relativist deny that there is a uniquely best system or practice while at the same time allowing that there are better and worse social practices? (I am grateful to one of my referees for raising this objection.) On the model of relativism suggested here, this position would not amount to a full-blown relativism. While the denial of the unique best system or practice is a relativistic element, the (presumably neutral) ranking of systems or practices into better and worse is not.

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