



Reasons for relativism: Feyerabend on the ‘Rise of Rationalism’ in ancient Greece



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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that essential features of Feyerabend’s philosophy, namely his radicalization of critical rationalism and his turn to relativism, could be understood better in the light of his engagement with early Greek thought. In contrast to his earlier, Popperian views he came to see the Homeric worldview as a genuine alternative, which was not falsified by the Presocratics. Unlike socio-psychological and externalist accounts my reading of his published and unpublished material suggests that his alternative reconstruction of the ancient beginnings of the Western scientific tradition motivate and justify his moderate Protagorean relativism.

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1. Introduction: on the significance of early Greek thought

“Why study ancient philosophy?” This is a question Paul Feyerabend explicitly states to himself and to his audience at the beginning of one of the last classes he taught at a university.¹ He considers mere intellectual curiosity, probably triggered by the occasional presence of ancient philosophers in contemporary media and culture, but rejects such *l’art pour l’art* approaches. Academic research-topics, which are funded by the public, “should in the last resort have some advantage for the people outside the universities—they should not merely be intellectual masturbation”

(Feyerabend, 1990: 1) Such a standard in mind, he states that the ancient philosophers indeed lived a long time ago in a world significantly different from ours and “had no idea of science, or of Christianity, or of Buddhism, or of Marxism. Some of the major forces today.” Not only addressed these thinkers an audience very different from us, a focus on ancient Greek philosophy also seems to perpetuate unjustified Eurocentric prejudices. To illustrate how and why this “is not an abstract question”, he refers to recent developments at Stanford University, where a new humanities program was introduced, “that omitted ancient philosophy as being *parochial* (narrow minded)—it is concentrated on a period of *Western Civilization* that was important to the intellectual leaders of this Civilization but meant nothing to others” (Feyerabend, 1990: 1). Consequently, the new program “concentrates on a survey of science, Christianity, African, Chinese etc. thought instead. *Things that affect us today.*” However, Feyerabend remarks: “I think this is a rather short-sighted procedure” (Feyerabend, 1990: 1).

This judgment might be puzzling to those who know Feyerabend as an outspoken opponent of the arrogant role of the West, but he provides two reasons for his disagreement: “1. A study of

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¹ The following somewhat extensive quotations are from unpublished lecture-notes preserved in the Feyerabend-collection at University of Konstanz, entitled: “Ancient Philosophy 1990”. The cover-sheet states in German, “Letzte Vorlesung: Moderne Probleme in antiker Sicht, oder: Der verdächtige Ursprung der Erkenntnistheorie”, while the notes themselves are in English. Most likely he used them for his last term at Berkeley in 1990. The call-number of this material is PF 1–2. I am very grateful to Dr. Ulrike Parakenings.

Western Civilization is not parochial, but most important for many of the problems (and some of the good things) that exist today world wide are due to the (often violent) expansion of Western Civilization all over the globe. It is quite important to know this animal, W[estern] C[ivilisation], if we want to understand our present situation" (Feyerabend, 1990: 1). Unlike many critics of Eurocentrism, Feyerabend insists to investigate the sources of the peculiar but dominant occidental development. For this purpose he mentions "Theodore von Laue: *The World Revolution of Westernization*". In direct contrast to more self-confident appraisals, von Laue argues in his 1989 study that the violent expansionism of the West could be held responsible for much of the war, violence, economic and ecological problems on the globe. To study ancient philosophy is important because it could count as research into the roots of this process. Therefore the second reason we should (still) study Greek thought is that "ancient philosophers introduced and discussed some of the basic ideas of this Civilization, and their discussion is very enlightening because it is not yet obscured by all sorts of technicalities. The basic ideas are discussed in their most simple and effective form" (Feyerabend, 1990: 1).

Along the lines of these assumptions, Feyerabend devoted significant parts of his work to the study of ancient sources, most prominently in *Against Method* (AM) and in *Conquest of Abundance* (CA), but even more so in the posthumously published *Naturphilosophie*, which he wrote in the early seventies, parallel to AM. These sources prove that indeed one "of the projects which Feyerabend worked on for a long time, but never really brought to completion, went under the name 'The Rise of Western Rationalism'" (Preston, 2012: 2.16). By means of a discussion of the significance of this project and of what he actually achieved in that direction, I aim to accomplish four goals: First, I want to explain his increasing interest in the 'rise of rationalism' and how his philosophy of science helps to re-evaluate the traditional view on the supposed Greek discoveries of 'nature' and 'criticism' (2). The next section illustrates how Feyerabend changed his views on the historical and systematic relation between myth and reason. Departing from earlier, more Popperian views, the later Feyerabend became very critical of the traditional reconstructions of early Greek thought (3). Third, I argue that his later radicalizations, namely his move from theory-proliferation as a mean of progress in the sciences to the more relativistic views on the scientific tradition *as such*, are (in part) due to these investigations. They encouraged him to conceive of Western science as a non-universal tradition among others. These changes do not mainly result from his socio-psychological Berkeley-experience, nor do they rely on the notorious incommensurability-thesis, but they are encouraged by Feyerabend's research in non-scientific world-views and date back to the mid-sixties (4). He radicalizes critical rationalism and proposes to evaluate 'Western science' in the light of genuine alternatives. His reconstruction of early Greek thought suggests that the Homeric world provides such a genuine alternative (5). Even if we acknowledge severe difficulties to perform such a comparison, my fourth goal, finally, is to show that his civilized and rational Protagorean relativism could be understood and defended better on the basis of these considerations (6).

2. Philosophy of science and 'the rise of rationalism'

It is a widely held view that the historical and geographical beginnings of scientific thought lie in ancient Greece some time between 800 and 400 BC. From Aristotle onwards many historians of Western philosophy and science express this view, however different in detail: "It was in Ionia that the first really rational attempts to describe the nature of the world took place" (Kirk, John, Raven, & Schofield, 1983: 75). The "Presocratics invented

the very idea of science and philosophy. They hit upon that special way of looking at the world which is the scientific or rational way" (Barnes, 1987: 16). "The Ionian Greeks introduced a new conception of nature and natural science in the sixth century B.C." (Crombie, 1994: 97). Their thinking "marks an unprecedented step in human thought" because they were "subjected to norms of rationality, as those of their mythologizing predecessors were not" (Taylor, 1997: 2). "Thales of Miletus was the originator of scientific thought" (O'Grady, 2005: 29). Such accounts are not reserved to 19th century phil-Hellenism, they are prevalent and they basically assume a transition from myth to reason by which the Greeks invented or discovered a new mode of understanding the natural, theoretical, ethical, and social world. The new mode of thought is qualified quite vaguely as 'rational', 'really rational', 'scientific', or 'scientific or rational'; and it is considered to be foundational for the specific development of Western culture and science.

In spite of the generally shared acceptance of what I call 'the traditional view', most scholars are also jointly aware of numerous difficulties in explicating and defending it (Heit, 2007). Most, if not all, would freely admit that "the extraordinary emergence and development of scientific thinking in ancient Greece is a historical problem of the first order, and not just for ancient historians" (Rihll, 2002: 21). The (mainly unsolved) difficulties regarding this supposed 'extraordinary emergence' are of two connected kinds: Firstly, it poses historical or empirical problems: When did the rise of rationalism take place? How was it brought about? Was it an autochthonous and original Greek achievement, or did it dwell on non-Greek influences and predecessors? Was it paralleled in other cultures, or was it a singular development? How does this supposed Greek transition relate to the specific later developments of the West? Is there really continuity? The second set of problems is more philosophical: What does it mean to be 'rational' or 'scientific'? Are there specific features of rational or scientific modes of thought? What demarcates them from alternative or preceding modes or worldviews?

While the first set of problems may in principle be solved by historical study, the second set is more fundamental, since we cannot hope to observe the origin of scientific thought without a concept of science. The demarcation between 'scientific' and 'non-scientific' falls in the domain of general philosophy of science. It could therefore be expected that historians of Greek thought would refer to related discussions in philosophy. Actually, already in 1979 the eminent classicist Geoffrey Lloyd asserted that a main area, where "recent contributions have far-reaching implications for the understanding of the early development of science in the philosophy and sociology of science itself, where the work of Popper, Kuhn, Feyerabend and Lakatos on the demarcation between scientific and other forms of knowledge and on the growth of science has been especially influential" (Lloyd, 1979: 3). But in spite of this programmatic proposal, not much work has been done to relate these two fields. One reason might be the ultimately inconclusive career of the demarcation-problem (Laudan, 1996: 210–212). Consequently, Tracey Rihll summarizes that "on the whole, modern philosophy of science has not been particularly useful for the study of ancient science" (Rihll, 2002: 6). This diagnosis is unfortunate, since assuming a different set of beliefs about scientific thinking (metaphysical, inductivist, falsificationist, epistemological anarchist, etc.) will lead historical research to focus different sets of figures and phenomena. The claim on a 'scientific' or 'really rational' character of Greek thought cannot be validated without addressing them. Therefore it seems worthwhile to examine contributions of philosophy of science, namely since two of the philosophers Lloyd mentioned actually dedicated important parts of their work to the topic.

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