

Between relativism and pluralism: Philosophical and political relativism in Feyerabend's late work



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ABSTRACT

Relativism is one of the most problematic terms associated with philosophical discourse, with Feyerabend considered among the most important twentieth century theorists subscribing to it. This paper provides a detailed overview of relativist positions advanced in Feyerabend's mid-to-late work and investigates the associated epistemic and political applications. Emphasis is placed on how Feyerabend supported certain aspects of relativism, and at what stage he rejected others. It is noted that Feyerabend had already imposed limitations on relativism in *Farewell to Reason*, in which he entertained the possibility of epistemic definition within stable contexts, and advanced the notion that opportunities and equality associated with political and cultural units could only be valid within a democratic system. In *Conquest of Abundance*, political relativism is largely discarded, while epistemological relativism is increasingly treated as an appeal for diversity in all areas.

In this re-reading of his work, it becomes clear that Feyerabend was already advocating a moderate form of epistemic and political relativism in the middle of his career, which he subsequently developed in the direction of "ontological pluralism" in his later work. This paper thus shows that Feyerabend's relativism should not be completely rejected, but rather that it continues to offer interesting food for thought.

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1. Feyerabend's positions on relativism

The "popular doctrine" (Feyerabend, 1988, 77) of relativism is one of the most complex and polarizing concepts within philosophical discourse. The problematic aspects associated with it are distilled in the arbitrary accusation that political anarchy and theoretical directionlessness are the necessary consequences of this viewpoint. This evaluation also made it difficult for Feyerabend, who was at times keen to provoke, to evaluate the concept impartially. The effect is that the term was temporarily shunned, with the intention of dealing with it explicitly at a later stage. Feyerabend is not a systematic author; rather, he describes his own approach as "historical and episodic" (Feyerabend, 1999, 17). Most of the ideas are formulated as historical examples and discretions,

reflecting his intention to tell stories rather than to "proceed in systematic fashion" (Feyerabend, 2011, 54). As Oberheim properly points out, Feyerabend was a "philosophical pluralist", "who did not argue from a single coherent point of view" (Oberheim, 2006, 24), but in whose work many perspectives of different origin and direction converge. Feyerabend's own use of the term "relativism" in special, with regard to his writings discussed in this paper, is neither stable in extent nor in evaluation. Upon first impression, Feyerabend's own evaluation is therefore just as ambivalent as the large-scale treatment of the term. Almost all of his late works outlined in this paper contain both emphatic rejections as well as focused integrations of his own theoretical concept.

This paper aims to carefully reexamine both the references to and function of this philosophical principle in Feyerabend's later work. A more systematic reconstruction fulfills the task of increasing the visibility of changes, problems and potentials of Feyerabend's relativistic conception and therefore provides a basis

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for a broader discussion and contemporary application of Feyerabend's ideas.

The thesis examined in this paper is that despite some alterations in focus and evaluation, Feyerabend did not entirely discard the concept of relativism, but rather that there are differences between the works discussed here, as well as between the political and theoretical scope: while Feyerabend adheres to an epistemic relativism, especially on political grounds, his late concept is better described as an ambition for pluralism.

The following (highly schematic) graphic provides an initial outline of the stable versus changing parameters in the different stages of his work (See Fig. 1):

First of all, a distinction can be made between the various subject areas associated with relativism: are we talking about political and cultural liberalism, which espouses in theoretical terms a tolerant worldview, or is the focus on genuinely epistemological concepts?

Second, we must consider whether the extent of Feyerabend's association with the term can actually be considered on any single basis. The historical differences and overlaps in Feyerabend's work will be illustrated by analyzing the positions advanced in *Science in a Free Society*, *Farewell to Reason*, *Tyranny of Science* and *Conquest of Abundance*.

This structure offers a guiding framework, upon which one can build. The chronology of Feyerabend's works, as illustrated in the graphic, forms the basis of the investigation and in each case two works with substantial overlaps will be investigated, with particular emphasis on *Farewell to Reason* and *Conquest of Abundance*.

Relativism will be investigated under the following subheadings:

Epistemic relativism (1.1 and 2.1) and political relativism (1.2 and 2.2) will be treated in separate sections. Feyerabend's works

will be treated chronologically, i.e. beginning with *Farewell to Reason*, with additions from *Science in a Free Society*, (1) followed by *Conquest of Abundance*, (2) which will be dealt with in two separate sections.

1.1. Epistemic relativism in *Farewell to Reason*

The treatment of epistemic relativism in Feyerabend's mid-to-late work is particularly formulated in *Farewell to Reason*. *Science in a Free Society*, which emerged in response to *Against Method*, predominantly focuses on political subjects and does return to epistemic themes to a lesser extent. For this reason, I will mainly focus on *Farewell to Reason*, in which Feyerabend outlines his position in eleven theses. The main points in this central statements are that traditions have epistemological and political "restricted domains" (Feyerabend, 1988, 43), whereby what is believed to be right or true has to be decided by the tradition and has no validity outside the field of this tradition. Traditions should also have equal chances and rights (s. Feyerabend, 1988, 40). I will refer to this in more detail in the following paragraphs.

My analysis is divided into three sections and will begin with comments on truth relativism, followed by sections on theoretical and methodological relativism.

1.1.1. Truth relativism

Feyerabend's notion of epistemic relativism is advanced by placing into context the idea that universal truth or a privileged access to reality is possible:

"R8: the idea of an objective truth or an objective reality that is independent of human wishes but can be discovered by human effort is part of a special tradition which, judged by its

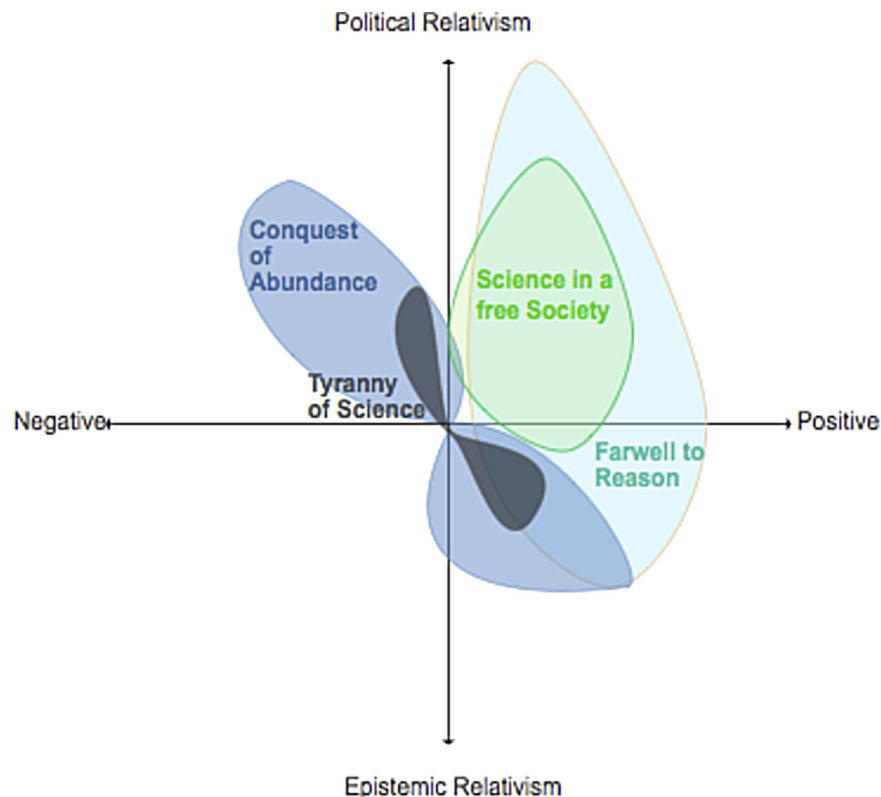


Fig. 1. This graphic outlines Paul Feyerabend's agreement and disagreement with the concept of relativism in the late writings, differentiated by epistemic and cultural perspective. (Illustration Lisa Heller).

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