



## Feyerabend's perspectivism



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 30 December 2015

#### Keywords:

Perspectivism;  
Perspectival realism;  
Relativism;  
Being;  
Stage metaphor;  
Aristotle's principle

### ABSTRACT

Although, Feyerabend himself seems never to have used the term 'perspectivism' to designate a philosophical position, I think his views about science are very well characterized as perspectival. In fact, his later writings contain much that contributes to current thinking about perspectivism. I would like, therefore, to distinguish my own perspectivism from Feyerabend's. In the end, I will argue, his perspectivism is lacking enough of the critical bite that the younger Feyerabend found so attractive in Popper's philosophy.

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When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*

### 1. Introduction

Feyerabend himself seems never to have used the term 'perspectivism' to designate a philosophical position. Prominent among the many philosophical categories he deployed were 'realism,' 'objectivism,' 'rationalism,' 'relativism,' and his own 'epistemological anarchism.' Why, then, do I refer to his 'perspectivism'? Because I think his views are, although retrospectively, very well characterized as perspectival. I would like, therefore, to explore what Feyerabend's work might contribute to current thinking about perspectivism.<sup>1</sup>

This paper has a strong self-imposed limitation. With a few exceptions, I will limit my considerations to Feyerabend's post-humously published work, *The Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of*

*Abstraction versus the Richness of Being* (1999a)<sup>2</sup>. The main justification for this limitation is that I do not have sufficient command of his works to be responsible for the whole corpus. A second justification is that *Conquest* contains a chapter on perspective, although as an innovation in the history of art, not as a philosophical doctrine. A third justification is that this work represents Feyerabend's final, mature thought. Finally, *Conquest* has not yet received very much attention.<sup>3</sup>

### 2. Perspectivism

A perspectivist view of *scientific* knowledge has several levels, of which I will distinguish three. First is the claim that, as a matter of fact, all scientific knowledge claims are made within the framework of some perspective typically provided by instrumentation or theory (conceptual scheme, etc.). A stronger version would hold that, for broadly empirical reasons concerning both the world and human cognitive abilities, scientific claims *must* be conditional on a perspective. A still stronger claim is that there are no perspective transcendent facts that could be the object of perspective transcendent knowledge. So there could be no uniquely correct perspective. *Scientific Perspectivism* (Gieryn, 2006a) proceeds mostly at the first level with some gestures towards the second. I

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<sup>1</sup> Current perspectivist works include my own *Scientific Perspectivism* (2006a), van Fraassen (2008), and Teller (2012). The best-known perspectivist works available to Feyerabend were those of Leibniz and Nietzsche, but I do not think that he ever wrote about these.

<sup>2</sup> *Conquest* consists of two parts. The first is a lovingly edited 128 page version of Feyerabend's unfinished manuscript. The second part consists of a dozen essays, all but one published within two years of his death in 1994. These provide a kind of substitute for the missing part of the manuscript. One result of this organization, however, is a lot of repetition, particularly of Feyerabend's analysis of pre-Socratic philosophy. On the other hand, there are in many places an openness and richness of expression that are hard to convey in a critical paper such as the present essay. All otherwise unattributed page numbers in parentheses in my text refer to this work.

<sup>3</sup> Among those who have written explicitly about *Conquest* are Brown (2009), Clark (2002), Kidd, 2011, 2013, Munevar, 2002 and Oberheim (2006).

deliberately avoided the third level, not wanting to get involved with, among other things, the semantics and metaphysics of truth. A difficulty for me in reading *Conquest* is that Feyerabend does not distinguish these levels and so seems to me to be operating at all three levels simultaneously.

In *Scientific Perspectivism*, I argued for a ‘perspectival realism’ according to which claims made from within a perspective are nevertheless *intended* to be genuinely about the world, and thus “realistic,” even though not fully precise or complete. A contrast would be with a perspectival constructivism according to which, even if ostensibly about the world, the determinants of scientific claims are understood to be largely independent of how the world might be. The primary contrast, however, is with an objectivist (or metaphysical) realism according to which claims about the world are *intended* to be perspective transcendent, or at least framed in a uniquely correct perspective. Although, I am pretty sure Feyerabend is a perspectival realist, I have some worries that he may carry perspectival realism too far.

One final introductory remark. Throughout his career, Feyerabend became less and less interested in technical philosophy of science and more interested in connections between science and its broader cultural surroundings. But his fundamental views cover both science and society more generally. I will focus on science, but draw on what he says more generally.

### 3. The stage metaphor

The last chapter of the *Conquest* manuscript is on “Brunelleschi and the Invention of Perspective.”<sup>4</sup> It is, for Feyerabend, an example of how new ways of thinking grow within older ways and eventually transform the earlier institutionalized ways of doing things, in this case, producing two-dimensional images. In the process, Feyerabend introduces the metaphor of a stage setting as part of his explanation of how Brunelleschi proceeded.<sup>5</sup> In effect, Feyerabend says, Brunelleschi created an elaborate stage setting involving an object to be depicted and the materials to be used in creating the final image. Thinking in terms of stage settings rather than conceptual schemes (theoretical perspectives) has an advantage in that it automatically brings in both the material and social conditions necessary for the production. It emphasizes that these aspects of the setting are deliberately constructed for the particular purpose at hand. This is a useful antidote to thinking of epistemological perspectives exclusively in conceptual terms.

We do not have to speculate about the application to science, as Feyerabend makes the connection for us.

Like Brunelleschi’s setup, every scientific experiment involves two series of transformations and a comparison. Nature is transformed to obtain special events, these events are further transformed by data processing devices, scanners, etc. to turn them into evidence which is then compared with the outcome of a transformation of high theory through calculations, computer approximations, phenomenology, etc. (103)

He then refers to the UA<sub>1</sub> experiments at CERN in the 1980s which led to the discovery of the W and Z particles. He concludes:

Neither “nature” nor its theoretical image were faced directly; they were both transformed by complex and sophisticated processes. The notion of a stage containing projective devices omits details but retains the features needed for a general

discussion of problems of reality: the role of projections and the associated problem of the projection-independent existence of the aspects projected. (103)

The “associated problem,” of course, is that we have no access to any “projection-independent existence of the aspects projected.”

Here, Feyerabend champions a view central to my own scientific perspectivism. Stated in terms of a model-based understanding of scientific activities, the point is that in science there is never any comparison of general models with the world. Theoretical models are refined to capture the details of a particular experimental setup, and these refined theoretical models are compared with suitably constructed models of the data, the direct output of the experiment. One elaborate construction is compared with another elaborate construction. The result is a model–model comparison, not a model–world comparison.

### 4. Perspectives on being

I turn next to Feyerabend’s conception of “Being” referred to in the subtitle of *Conquest* because there is a direct line of argument from this conception to perspectivism. The concept of Being plays a key role in Feyerabend’s exposition, sometimes referred to as “Basic Reality” (215), “Ultimate Reality” (215), or, more simply, just as “Reality” or “Nature.” The connection to perspectivism is direct because, for Feyerabend, “Being as it is, independently of any kind of approach, can never be known ...” (205).<sup>6</sup> For “kind of approach,” read “perspective.” So, in my terminology, Feyerabend is a perspectivist. Furthermore, he is also a perspectival realist.

Much of *Conquest* is devoted to examining the transition from the conceptual world of Homer to that initiated by the pre-Socratics and completed by Plato.<sup>7</sup> Feyerabend’s view seems to be that, in the Homeric conceptual world, there is no strong distinction between appearance and reality. Everything is, so to speak, on the level of appearance. With the pre-Socratics, we get an idea of a reality that is increasingly abstract, removed from everyday experience. In the end, genuine reality consists of abstract objects such as Plato’s form of The Good. Everyday experience is mere appearance. Feyerabend takes Aristotle to have thoroughly rejected this move to an abstract reality. He is fond of quoting the following passage from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (e.g., 200–201):

... one cannot see what use a weaver or carpenter will have for his own profession from knowing the Good in itself or how somebody will become a better physician or a better general once ‘he has had a look at the idea of the Good.’ It seems that the physician does not try to find health in itself, but the health of human beings or perhaps even the health of an individual. For he heals the individual.

Feyerabend generalizes to what he labels “Aristotle’s Principle: *Real is what plays a central role in the kind of life we identify with.*” (201, original emphasis) Moreover, we can determine the different things that can play this “central role” in different cultures as creating cultural perspectives on what is real. So here the perspective is provided by elements of a culture rather than by scientific instrumentation or theory.

Feyerabend does briefly consider what he calls a “more modest and more ‘scientific’” formulation of realism in the form of a quotation from Einstein (171).

<sup>4</sup> Matt Brown, in particular, has explored Feyerabend’s use of the stage metaphor. See his (2009) and my reply (Giere, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> This metaphor comes naturally to Feyerabend, who once considered a career on the stage and retained an interest in the theater throughout his life.

<sup>6</sup> Again: “[W]e have evidence how Being reacts when approached in different ways, but Being itself and the conditions of its acting in a certain way remain forever shrouded in darkness.” (213, original emphasis).

<sup>7</sup> There are separate chapters in the manuscript devoted to Homer, Xenophanes and Parmenides respectively.

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