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# Reasons for Relativism: Feyerabend on Nietzsche and the Presocratics

Mugla University, Oct 1<sup>st</sup> 2009

## Introduction

- Feyerabend thought the Greek beginnings were foundational for Western science
- He changed his views on science in direct connection with his changing views on these Greek beginnings
- Feyerabends more general relativism towards different traditions is due to his work on the Ancients

2

## Outline

- I. The „Rise of Rationalism“
- II. Feyerabend's changing views on the „Greek Miracle“ (Nietzsche)
- III. Naturalistic Metaphysics? (Parmenides)
- IV. Criticism and Proofs? (Xenophanes)
- V. Relativism? (Protagoras)

3

## I. The „Rise of Rationalism“

“A study of Western Civilisation is [...] 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 Civilisation all over the globe. The ancient philosophers introduced and discussed some of the basic ideas of this civilisation...”

(Lecture-Notes 1990: PF 1-2-2)

4

## I. The „Rise of Rationalism“

“It was in Ionia that the first really rational attempts to describe the nature of the world took place”

(Kirk/Raven/Schofield, 1983: 83).

1. Naturalistic Metaphysics
2. Critical Attitude
3. Notion of Proofs

5

## II. Feyerabend's Changing View

The Ionian Philosophy of Nature developed "by a process of rational criticism which relentlessly investigates every aspect of the theory and changes it in case it is found to be unsatisfactory. The attitude towards a generally accepted point of view such as a cosmological theory or a social system will therefore be an *attitude of criticism* [...] This is the most fundamental difference between the closed society that is governed by a myth and an open society".

(*Knowledge without Foundations*, 1961: 48)

6

## II. Feyerabend's Changing View

„The 'rise of rationalism' in ancient Greece is a fascinating example of this attempt to transcend, devalue and push aside complex forms of thought and experience.”

(Notes on Relativism 1987: 65)

7

## II. Feyerabend's Changing View

„For the ancient Greeks, the Gods existed and acted independently of the wishes of humans. They simply were there. This is now regarded a mistake [...] because the Homeric gods cannot exist in a scientific world. Why is this clash used to eliminate the gods and not the scientific world?”

(Notes on Relativism 1987: 88)

8

## II. Feyerabend's Changing View

Why did Feyerabend change his mind?

1. Sociological Reasons:  
The "Berkeley-Experience" 1968
2. Philosophical Reasons:  
Lectures from the history of scientific praxis (von Weizsäcker)  
The rationality of dogmatism (Kuhn)  
The historicity of conceptual schemes (Kant, Nietzsche)  
The re-evaluation of the Greek Miracle (Bruno Snell, Evans-Pritchard)

9

## II. Feyerabend's Changing View

"Yet I think we shall have to admit, following a careful analysis of the structure of the world views which have been connected with different cultures, that they are genuine alternatives, genuinely different manifest images"

"I always wanted to write about the nature of myth in order to show that they are fully blown world views. All I can do here is quote some Nietzsche ... (On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense)"

(Letter to Smart, Dec. 1963: PF 2-7-77)

10

## II. Feyerabend's Changing View

... In his earlier life Nietzsche was very much interested in the philosophy of nature and he intended at some time to write a systematic treatise on this topic. He adopted for some time Mach's point of view and he interpreted this point of view as showing that the world in which we live (our perceptual world) is a mental construction, and that different kinds of such mental constructions are possible. This brings him at some places rather close to Wittgenstein."

(Letter to Smart, Dec. 1963: PF 2-7-77)

11

## III. Naturalistic Metaphysics?

"The Pre-Socratic philosophy of nature introduced a unified substance and a unified model of the world"

"Intuition loses its authority and men disconnects themselves increasingly from their ambient nature"

"Terminological considerations now constitutes the core of human engagement with nature and defines the nature of things"

(Naturphilosophie, 1976: 215a)

12

### III. Naturalistic Metaphysics?

„Now take those constructive principles that underlie every element of the cosmos (of the theory), every fact (every concept). Let us call such principles *universal principles* of the theory in question. Suspending universal principles means suspending all facts and all concepts. Finally, let us call a discovery, or a statement, or an attitude *incommensurable* with the cosmos (the theory, the framework) if it suspends some of its universal principles“

(*Against Method* 1975: 205)

13

### III. Naturalistic Metaphysics?

“The third example [in *Against Method*] was the transition from the aggregate universe of Homer to the substance universe of the pre-Socratics. This example does not belong to the history of science, but it explains features, which play a role in this history. The explanation of incommensurability which follows, exactly fits transitions, such as the transition from Aristotelian Physics to Classic Mechanics as well as the transition from Classic Mechanics to the Theory of Relativity and/or Quantum-theory“

(*Erkenntnis für freie Menschen* 1980: 33)

14

### III. Naturalistic Metaphysics?

- The Homeric worldview is an alternative worldview, a fundamental theory
- This worldview was not falsified, history, not argument undermined the traditional beliefs
- The naturalistic metaphysics of the Pre-Socratics was not proven, it was counter-intuitive, and could not point to empirical success
- “This is how Western philosophy of nature begins. Fundamental transformations did not occur since”

(*Naturphilosophie*, 1976: 216)

15

### IV. Criticism and Proofs?

„But if cattle or lions had hands, so as to paint with their hands and produce works of art as men do, they would paint their gods and give them bodies in form like their own-horses like horses, cattle like cattle“

(Xenophanes, DK 21B15)

Xenophanes showed by means of a *reductio ad absurdum*, that the Homeric image of the gods is wrong

(cf. Kirk/Raven/Schofield, 1983: 184)

16

### IV. Criticism and Proofs?

This supposedly *reductio ad absurdum* might be thought of as follows:

The gods are either

A: subjective and local, or

B: they are not.

If A, then animals would have animal-like gods,

Animal-like gods are absurd (empirical or analytical?)

Therefore B: gods are neither subjective nor local, and therefore must the Homeric picture be wrong

17

### IV. Criticism and Proofs?

“I summarise: Xenophanes mocks the traditional gods because of their anthropomorphic features“

“Xenophanes rejects the Homeric world view but he has not given us any arguments against it“

(*Reason, Xenophanes ...*: 1987: 95, 98)

“Proofs do not solve the problem – they are just as culture-dependent as myths and fairy tales: not everybody accepts the reconstructions that are needed if proofs are to succeed

(*Conquest of Abundance* 1999: 55)

18

## V. Relativism?

Truth and certainty is impossible to achieve, but reasonably justified opinions (*doxa meta logou*). All humans are similarly gifted in politics, there is no need for experts.

Different approaches receive different responses from nature, and they all consist of subject-sided and object-sided moments (*man is measure*).

Abundance, open-Mindedness and terminological vagueness are conditions of scientific and social progress

19

## V. Relativism?

"*ton hetto de logon kreitto poiain*"

(Protagoras, DK 80B6b)

"to make the weaker argument stronger"

(Schiappa, 2002: 107)

Proliferation of Theories and Traditions in order to create human progress.

20

## V. Relativism?

"There may, of course come a time, when it will be necessary to give reason a temporary advantage and when it will be wise to defend its rules of exclusion of everything else. I do not think that we are living in such a time today."

(*Against Method*, 1975: 22; 1983: 13)

"This was my opinion in 1970 [...] Times have changed. Considering some tendencies [...] I think that reason now should be given greater weight not because it is and always was fundamental but because it seems to be needed, [...] to create a more human approach."

(*Against Method*, 1993: 13)

21

Thank you very much!

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