

Thinking up reality

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PAUL K. FEYERABEND

Philosophical Papers:

Volume 1, Realism, Rationalism, and Scientific Truth. Volume 2, Problems of Empiricism

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In 1962 Paul Feyerabend's article "Explanation, Reduction and Empiricism" appeared in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol III. If philosophy had overnight sensations, this would have been one. A senior colleague of mine still recalls how he hurried round the department drawing attention to the article, as one might to news of some major public disaster. This was the same year as T. S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Between them the philosopher Feyerabend and the historian Kuhn turned academic thinking about science upside down. Until then the philosophy of science had been a pretty dull affair. With few exceptions it had pictured science as accumulating truth through observation and experimental discovery. There was, it is true, some debate about the status of theoretical hypotheses (about gravitational forces, say, or sub-atomic particles) which went beyond what observation guaranteed. But whatever their exact status, it was generally agreed that such theories played an essentially secondary role, somehow tidying up after the serious business of uncovering empirical facts was done.

For Kuhn and Feyerabend scientific facts were made, not discovered. As they had it, the course of science was directed far more by the autonomous creation of speculative theories than by new experimental results. Indeed they questioned the very idea of objective "experimental results" existing independently of their changing theoretical surroundings. Thus, for example, even everyday observations of moving bodies were argued to depend for their meanings on variable assumptions about the causes of motion and the structure of space and time.

Of course the apparent implication, that even scientific truth was in the end just a matter of opinion, seemed somewhat absurd. But it was difficult to ignore the awkward questions that Kuhn and Feyerabend raised about the orthodox picture of science. For one thing, their apparently extreme views about observation could call on some respectable philosophical support. The rejection of the "given", of the idea that sensory awareness gives us unimpeachable access to the data, binds together a surprising number of contemporary philosophical schools: it joins the British linguistic tradition of Wittgenstein, Ryle and Austin to the American neo-pragmatism of Quine and Sellars, and there are similar ideas in French structuralism and post-structuralism. It is true that the specific thesis of the "theory-dependence of observation" adds something to this general philosophical theme. But the links are close, and indeed the first piece reprinted in these *Philosophical Papers* is a slightly obscure early article in which Feyerabend argues explicitly from a version of Wittgenstein's private language argument to the conclusion that it is only in the context of a surrounding theory (as in Wittgenstein's "language-games") that observation reports have meaning.

However, doubts about the authority of observation were only a part of Kuhn and Feyerabend's radicalism. Most philosophers, both inside and outside the philosophy of science, originally saw such doubts as merely of specialist interest. After all, did not the example of modern science show that it must somehow be possible to build up objective knowledge of how things are, however exactly the trick was done? What Feyerabend and Kuhn added in the early 1960s was the historical claim that, far from displaying a steady accumulation of knowledge, modern science kept on changing its mind. And this was not just a matter of new theories correcting old ones (a thought already familiar from Popper), but of radically

subverting them, of completely changing the conceptual spectacles through which the world is viewed. The idea of such conceptual ruptures was familiar from other areas of thought: what was surprising was the claim that the same thing happened within the history of even such hard sciences as physics, chemistry and astronomy.

Kuhn and Feyerabend drew rather different morals from this conceptual variability. Kuhn introduced the now hackneyed term "paradigm" to convey the way certain patterns of thought would hold sway for extended periods in any given area, until their replacement in a brief, traumatic "revolution". Feyerabend on the other hand saw science as permanent revolution. Even if scientists in practice sometimes lapsed into Kuhnian conservatism, there was always a role for the proliferation of alternative conceptual approaches.

But these differences about the frequency of change were of little significance beside their underlying agreement on the fact of conceptual variability. For this agreement meant it was no longer possible to view the theory-dependence of observation as merely of local interest. If observation depended on theory, and if theories retained no part of preceding views, then there seemed no avoiding the conclusion that each theory made its own world, and that choices between them were ultimately arbitrary. As Kuhn and Feyerabend independently came to describe it, competing theories in science were *incommensurable*, for lack of any common basis against which they might be evaluated.

Over the past two decades the philosophical reputations of Kuhn and Feyerabend have undergone a curious reversal. Originally Feyerabend was taken rather more seriously. Nobody liked his conclusions very much. But it

was allowed that he did serious philosophical work along his way to reaching them. Kuhn by contrast seemed a philosophical lightweight. Whatever his merits as a historian, he tended to overreach himself when articulating his epistemological views, and could appear naive when defending them. But recently Feyerabend's philosophical star has waned. And at the same time, and without any noticeable period of re-evaluation, reputable philosophical commentators have taken to referring to Kuhn as one of the major thinkers of the twentieth century.

Part of the reason for this is that Kuhn has become far more circumspect in his philosophical pronouncements. He now avoids the more tendentious of his earlier claims, and indeed is prepared to allow that there might perhaps be agreed standards with respect to which science can be seen as progressing. Feyerabend, on the other hand, has been moving with increasing speed in the opposite direction. Much of his recent work has been devoted to disproving precisely what Kuhn has been prepared to concede. He has attacked all attempts (most notably those of Imre Lakatos) to articulate principles of rationality which might accommodate the discontinuity of scientific theorizing. Feyerabend now advocates not only the proliferation of theories, but also the proliferation of methodological standards. In his view the history of even our modern Western scientific tradition displays no particular methodological pattern - different scientists have upheld different methodological principles, and some have upheld none at all. And from this he argues that Western science is just one tradition amongst many, with no special claim to authority. As to the supposed technological advances of Western

science, Feyerabend instances such alternative technologies as acupuncture and shamanism, and, for good measure, asks why technological efficacy should be so important anyway. These views go a long way beyond his earlier ones. They have won him some new friends (his last two works were both published by New Left Books), but academic critics have not surprisingly been quite unsympathetic.

"Most of these *Philosophical Papers* are more than ten years old, and even the more recent ones have been selected for philosophical substance rather than intensity of debate. And there is some new material, in the form of introductory remarks at various points, which goes some way towards showing why Feyerabend is not simply the poseur he has so often seemed to be.

Of particular interest are his remarks on realism, a subject on which he has for some time had little explicit to say. Back in the 1960s realism was to do with the status of the unobservable entities postulated by scientific theories. On this question Feyerabend's views favoured realism, if only because of his downgrading of observables. But now that the battle is over, the question is whether *anything* has properties objectively "out there", independently of the way they are categorized by human thinkers. Does science aim to limn the structure of reality, or is that structure made by science? And here Feyerabend stands on the other side. In so far as he allows realism it is as a ploy that the defenders of some system of thought might seek to adopt. Which is to say he does not really allow it at all. Indeed this becomes clear when at one point he explicitly commits himself to the view, for which the early Kuhn was so often castigated, that certain statements (about Greek gods, about phlogiston)

were once true, but have now ceased to be so.

This might just seem like more silliness from Feyerabend. But in fact his epistemological anarchism makes a lot more sense when set in the more general context of doubts about realism. In the last couple of years we have seen such figures as Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty arguing directly that rejection of the notion of "the given" means the abandonment of realism: if we never have direct access to anything, there is no point at which an absolute reality can get into the story. But while thus conceding that reality is in some sense constituted by our intellectual investigations, rather than providing an independent target for them, these writers would prefer to avoid Feyerabend's relativism. Instead they offer the suggestion that implicit in intellectual activity are values which will eventually channel different theoretical approaches in a common direction.

The importance of Feyerabend is that he shows this easy way out cannot be taken for granted. As long as we had at the back of our minds the idea of an independent reality to pull thought in the right direction, Feyerabend's insistence on the inexhaustible diversity of possible standards seemed merely provocative. But without such a reality the onus of argument has shifted. Little as we may like it, Feyerabend is in the driving-seat. He has actually done the historical work to show that sane men with good ideas, both within Western science and without, have hewn all kinds of different intellectual values. After Feyerabend, simply gesturing in the direction of some supposed common intellectual commitment is no longer going to hold relativism at bay. Indeed Feyerabend has made it very difficult to see how we can continue believing in the one true theoretical way.

Getting to know the self

Flint Schier

KARL AMERIKS

Kant's Theory of Mind: An Analysis of the Paralogisms of Pure Reason

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Karl Ameriks, in his splendid book, learnedly and carefully argues that Kant did not burn all his bridges to the realm of things-in-themselves but permitted reason, if not empirical science, an important but exiguous entry. Reason alone can attempt to provide the bridgehead, indeterminate and insecure as it is, but must not deceive itself that it can provide the foundation for a possible science either of rational theology or rational psychology.

Ameriks's special concern in this book is Kant's treatment in his first *Critique* of "rational psychology", which attempts to argue from features of experience to determinate conclusions about the nature of the soul, conclusions such as that the soul is simple, is a substance (in the sense of something unconditioned by anything else) and so on. Modern interpreters have appropriated some of Kant's arguments in the *Paralogisms* as though they were the prolegomena to some naturalized science of the human mind. But, as Ameriks makes clear, nothing could have been further from Kant's mind than the project of blazing a trail for a scientific conception of the self. Although Kant punctured the pretensions of rationalism as a science of the self, it is clear that he was doubtful that an authentically empirical psychology had any better chance of success (though Ameriks is rightly critical of Kant's rather feeble arguments against, for example, the materiality of the phenomenal self). If it is true that Kant did not, like Descartes, put the self on an epistemological pedestal, he is very far from putting mind on a par with nature and very far indeed from intimating

that there might be a unified science of nature treating mind from a third-person perspective as just one part of nature.

Kant's view seems rather to have been that the self, both as it is in itself (noumenally) and as it presents itself empirically to itself (phenomenally), has no special science attaching to it and that the empirical self is if anything more elusive than the external world, so far as attempts to gain determinate knowledge of it are concerned. Ameriks suggests that for Kant it is precisely because there is no set of laws governing the inner states of the self as such that the laws of nature, under which we subsume objects empirically external to us, are required for determinate self-consciousness. We can have determinate knowledge of our inner states only because of their intentionality - that is, only because they point to a realm of objects governed by regular laws. Self-knowledge is parasitic on knowledge of nature, but the self is not *in* nature. Kant has in fact inverted Descartes's reasons for dualism. For Descartes it was the special accessibility of the self which placed it outside the realm of an empirically dubious material world; for Kant it is the incoherence of the inner states of the self as intrinsically characterized that implies that they are outside nature, though they could not be cognized except for their reference to nature. There is little here in which the modern naturalist could take comfort.

Kant's attention to the absence of psychological laws has a modern ring. Some modern philosophers have taken what Donald Davidson calls the "anomalism of the mental" as reason for supposing that mental events must admit of a physical description under which they behave lawfully. As Ameriks makes clear, however, Kant thought that there was good *a priori* reason for supposing that no noumenal entity, and *a fortiori* no noumenal self, could be material. Noumena have to be substances, but matter, which Kant thought was infinitely divisible, could not possibly be a substance. Ameriks also points out, however, that Kant gives no reason for denying that phenomenal

materialism could be true. But surely the crucial interpretative point is that any such reduction or elimination of the mental realm was simply not on the agenda in Kant's day. Not even the most fanatical naturalistic psychologists of the time, such as Condillac or Hume, were attempting to subsume the self under the laws of physics; rather, they took the laws of physics as models which the laws of association might copy.

In the last chapter of the book, Ameriks gives us a useful discussion of Kant's views on the ideality of the self and time. There are weak and strong versions of ideality, and Ameriks argues that Kant held the stronger version. The weak view is that since self-knowledge is parasitic on knowledge of the phenomenal world, self-knowledge is phenomenal. Consequently, we must be as agnostic about the real nature of the self as we are about the nature of reality in itself. All we know of either sort of noumenal nature is how it appears to us. The stronger view argues that self-knowledge is always knowledge of mental events in time, but the real self is not temporal, so the self cannot really have any of the mental properties we think it has. Ameriks is unable to muster any very persuasive arguments for the stronger view. None the less, he thinks the ideality of time and hence of self-knowledge is at least coherent, as against those, such as Strawson, who have argued that it is not.

I am not so sure that it is coherent. One very persuasive view holds that the phenomena are "aspects" of the noumena - they are the noumena-as-they-appear-to-us. If this is the most intelligible way of reading Kant, as I think it is, then what are we to make of change? If change requires time, and the noumenon changes in its appearance-properties, then the noumenon would be in time. So we must say, apparently, that the noumenon only apparently changes its appearance-properties. But on the strong version of the ideality of time, this implies that the appearance-properties of noumena don't actually change. So phenomenal change and phenomenal time would also be

unreal. I agree with Strawson, as against Ameriks, that there is a crucial fault-line here; and it is one that indicates a basic instability in Kant's whole attempt to secure a haven for knowledge by erecting a cordon sanitaire dividing the phenomenal realm, of which determinate knowledge is possible, from the noumenal realm, of which we have no determinate knowledge. Scepticism appears to break out in the phenomenal realm just where Kant had hoped to pre-empt it.

Kant's general strategy of trying to set transcendental limits to possible knowledge generates automatically his distinction between the phenomenal realm and the noumenal realm. By restricting empirical science to the explanation of the order of appearances, he hoped to secure it from doubt, just as he hoped that by restricting the ambitions of the moral will to an exclusive concern with the purity of its own motives he could secure it an independent and "unconditioned" status. Kant's restrictive picture of rationality is starkly at odds with the expansive rationality embedded in modern science, a rationality that has cut itself loose from *a priori* limits and, powered by the hypothetico-deductive method, refuses to limit itself to appearances but claims to discern the patterns beyond experience. So far from being the modern he has seemed to some of his interpreters, Kant is the father of the critics of modernism, those idealists who have doubted and questioned the Faustian ambitions of reason in the theoretical and practical spheres. It is the great merit of Ameriks's indispensable study that it allows us to locate Kant squarely in his own time and place. If he doesn't succeed in convincing one that Kant's system as a whole is coherent or that it offers plausible alternatives to various modern positions on the leading issues of the day in epistemology and the philosophy of mind, he has none the less provided us with not only the best commentary we have in English on Kant's philosophy of mind, but one of the most stimulating perspectives on Kant's whole philosophy to appear for some time.

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