

‘Screw you, I’m going home’

Ian Hacking

- *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction Versus the Richness of Being* by [Paul Feyerabend](#), edited by [Bert Terpstra](#)
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Paul Feyerabend, the philosopher of science and famous iconoclast about the sciences, wrote in *Killing Time*, his autobiography published post-humously in 1996, that ‘in an incautious moment’ he had promised his young wife that he would produce ‘one more collage, a book no less, on the topic of *reality*’. He stopped work in November 1993 when he became ill, and died soon afterwards, at the age of seventy. So now we have even more of a collage than he intended. Half the published book is literally half a book, for at page 128 we find the final footnote: ‘Here ends the manuscript.’ The remaining 140 pages are versions of papers written after 1989, which run parallel to the book he was writing. We owe the excellent editing to a Dutch engineer working for Shell: Bert Terpstra had sent an intelligent fan letter out of the blue, too late for Feyerabend to have read it. On the strength of that letter Feyerabend’s widow, Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend, had the wit to choose him as editor.

They missed just one thing: the letter to the reader, [printed below](#), almost certainly intended as the foreword to the book. It turned up rather dramatically last October, when (following the official opening of the Feyerabend archive at the University of Konstanz) the archivist returned a floppy disk to Dr Borrini-Feyerabend. She was looking casually through it on the Sunday she returned home, and found the letter, which is printed here for the first time, with her permission.

The ‘abundance’ of the ironic title of the book refers to our world of incredible variety, almost boundless in its perspectives. We who are the heirs to the civilisations of Europe, the Mediterranean, West Asia and North America, have tamed and trammelled that abundance. The subtitle makes the point: ‘Abstraction versus the Richness of Being’. Since Richness of Being sounds like a Good Thing, we infer that Feyerabend thought Abstraction a Bad Thing. Well, not quite, for what he really opposed was what Blake called ‘single vision’: ‘May God us keep/From Single vision – Newton’s sleep.’ Which can only encourage a belief in Feyerabend’s anti-scientism. His most widely known book, *Against Method* (1975), was intended to be one of a pair of books, the other written by Imre Lakatos, who died suddenly in 1974. I reviewed the recently published correspondence between the two friends in these pages (20 January). The book was not against either science or method, but against the idea that there is some unique and best methodology to follow in order to produce good science or good anything else. The best remembered aphorism from that book, ‘anything goes’, did not mean that anything except the scientific method (whatever that is) ‘goes’, but that lots of ways of proceeding, including the innumerable methods of the diverse sciences, ‘go’. It also meant that an anti-rationalist like Feyerabend was perfectly entitled to use rationalist arguments to discomfit the rationalists he opposed. What Feyerabend disliked was any kind of intellectual or ideological hegemony. His favoured text was Mill’s *On Liberty*, even if his own preferred style was Dada. Single-mindedness in

pursuit of any goal, including truth and understanding, yields great rewards; but single vision is folly if it makes you think you see (or even glimpse) *the* truth, the one and only truth.

This half-book is not, however, a paean to proliferation and a denunciation of abstraction. It shows a new concern for the way in which different visions can learn from each other, and one vision grow out of another. Feyerabend and Thomas Kuhn between them made famous the idea that competing or successive scientific theories or world views are ‘incommensurable’. That sloganeering word acquired a lot of meanings, but the core idea was that different principles or ways of thinking could not speak to each other: no common language could encompass both; no shared standards could decide which was best. Kuhn spent his last years trying to produce a precise theory of language and classification that both explained incommensurability and made it inevitable. (There is a two-thirds finished last book by Kuhn, too, but his editors seem not to want speedy publication.) Feyerabend happily went in the opposite direction. He came to realise that incommensurability, when it did exist, was the result of dogmatism or excessive abstraction, usually of the two together. One could continue the argument, suggesting that Kuhn came to expect incommensurability because he turned flexible ordinary languages into abstract structures between which mutual translation or adaptation had been engineered out.

Karl Popper long inveighed against ‘the myth of the framework’, of which incommensurability is a special case. There is no arrangement of ideas and practices so rigid that it extinguishes human creativity. Paradigms may begin with achievements, and end in laziness. But we don’t need to get stuck in a rut. Feyerabend became increasingly hostile towards Popper the infallible fallibilist, but he, too, came to acknowledge that frameworks of thought, if not exactly myths, are far from rigid. And his targets ranged further afield than the sciences. He had once been pretty much a cultural relativist, allowing every culture to do its own thing, so long as, in Millian spirit, it did not intrude too much on others, but though he does not say so exactly in this book, he became increasingly incensed by cruelty, even when it was sanctioned within the cultures that practised it. He thought that clitoral excision was unconscionable; and in one polemic against the banality of philosophers he argues for active, even armed intervention in the lives of people who have been torturing, raping and killing each other. He thought indeed that we have the right to intervene in whatever ways can seem useful to mitigate what we consider to be evil. Practical advice is thin, however. Those who support ‘female rights have to start such processes on the spot, *and with due attention to the opinions of the locals*’. True enough, but specifics are lacking.

Feyerabend had one theoretical justification for interventionism, summed up in an aphorism that pleased him: ‘Potentially, every culture is all cultures.’ Distinct peoples have been learning from each other ever since they came face to face again after separating at Babel. Mutual adaptation may be difficult, but is always possible – that is why the abstract doctrine of incommensurability must be superseded. Revolutionary thoughts can take hold within a culture. Feyerabend combines this part of the argument with another thread, flagged by the book’s subtitle. This is his uncompleted tale – a sort of intellectual archaeology – of abstraction overcoming abundance.

The tale begins in Greece. Another point of resemblance between Feyerabend and Popper was that both glossed passages of Presocratic, Platonic and even Aristotelian philosophy in ways to make the hair of

classical scholars stand on end. Both had a very traditional vision of their culture, once cultivated in German gymnasia and Oxford colleges: Western civilisation was formed and is still formed by its Greek roots. The ancient texts are keys to understanding ourselves, especially those we call Presocratic. Feyerabend, however, turns not to pre-philosophers but to an epic hero: he uses Achilles as his example of someone breaking away from custom and established language, and so changing a world.

By Book 9 of the *Iliad* the Greeks are terrified. The Trojans are on the march; their fires are visible at night. The enemy strength seems overwhelming. Agamemnon has treated Achilles shabbily, taking back the booty and women granted him for his heroic exploits. Achilles is bitter; he will decamp and sail home. Desperately needing Achilles' army, leadership and charisma, Agamemnon offers to restore all the wealth and women, plus a good share of the prospective loot from Troy. Achilles says, in effect: 'Screw you, I'm going home.' I'm ignorant of Greek and use an up-to-date, colloquial translation (Stanley Lombardo's), so I don't scent even a whiff of 'incommensurability' in the story. Achilles has wised up to a pointless war which isn't even profitable because the commanding officer steals his spoils.

I cannot imagine Agamemnon
Or any other Greek persuading me,
Not after the thanks I got for fighting in this war
Going up against the enemy day by day.
It doesn't matter if you stay or fight –
In the end, everybody comes out the same.

Yet Feyerabend has found scholars, in the *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* as well as the *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, who claim that Achilles is 'the one Homeric hero who does not accept the common language', who 'has no language with which to express his disillusionment. Yet he expresses it, and in a remarkable way. He does it by misusing the language he disposes of.' Worse, says the philologist, he cannot absent himself from that language. It is honour, or rather the Homeric word for it, that is in question. For example, old Phoenix tells Achilles that it is no good coming and saving the Greeks at the last moment.

Come while there are gifts, while the Achaeans
Will still honour you as if you were a god.
But if you go into battle without any gifts,
Your honour will be less, save us or not.

To which Achilles retorts:

I don't need that kind of honour, Phoenix.
My honour comes from Zeus, and I will have it
Among those beaked ships as long as my breath
Still remains and my knees still move.

There are other contretemps about honour throughout Book 9. One scholarly claim is that the archaic notion of honour includes, for example, being possessed of rewards as one enters battle. Achilles breaks with that concept, moving to something more abstract (and more recognisable to me as honour). But he has no word to express this new idea, one that Feyerabend overstates as 'Achilles' passionate conjecture'. Feyerabend argues that although we don't know what actually happened on the Ionian shores, or even if there was a historical Achilles, we should use Homer's story as a parable for the flexibility of language. But also as a parable for the coming separation of reality and appearance, for the notion of real, invisible honour, free of visible gifts.

The Achilles story has the merit here of being a new move. The subsequent ramble through early philosophy, Xenophon, Parmenides and so on, traverses terrain that in this context is more familiar. Always Feyerabend casts the events as a battle of abstraction against abundance, with abstraction taking the laurels every time. The Greeks are defined by a list of instructive examples until Socrates moves in, saying he wants piety (or justice, or what-ever) – one definite thing – and is given a multitude of pious actions, but not piety. Socrates wins, so that we reject a 'mere' list of morally compelling examples; we are supposed to produce an abstract, explicit definition. The invention of geometrical proof is another waystage. Kant thought that 'a new light flashed upon the mind of the first man (be he Thales or some other) who demonstrated the properties of the isosceles triangle.' Feyerabend is not much impressed by the invention of proof, rightly holding that it isn't the momentary flash on a single mind, but wrongly implying that mathematical proof is just one among many tricks played in order to persuade people.

Feyerabend's evocations of abundance are themselves rather arid and abstract, a dutiful list of varieties. He does not bring out the full way in which disparate visions mesh. There is none of the sweep of Hopkins's invocation of 'all things counter, original, spare, strange'; one of the most powerful odes to abundance ever written, it ends with the words: 'He fathers forth whose beauty is past change/Praise him.'

The history-as-parable style of the tale of abstraction itself becomes abstract. One feels that *les jeux sont faits*: granted another decade Feyerabend would have given us more chapters but not tightened up the argument. He would, on the other hand, have derived an advantage of a different sort. He goes on at length, arguing that every one of the great transitions he notes involves a host of social factors. The still inchoate activity now known as 'social studies of knowledge' was just beginning to flourish in 1993, and Feyerabend would not have known much of it. He refers enthusiastically to only one practitioner, Andrew Pickering on quarks. By now he would have been able to refer to dozens of well-researched instances of radical change, even in the most rigorous of sciences, occurring within a heterogeneous social matrix itself necessary for the creation and uptake of radical ideas.

I have said nothing of the avowed topic of this book in preparation, 'reality'. Feyerabend underlined his opinion thus: '*We regard those things as real which play an important role in the kind of life we prefer.*' He called this the 'existential' component of his philosophy, meaning that at heart, reality is a matter of how we choose to live. He thought this is true of Achilles, whose 'disappointments made him see a different world'. He thought it equally true of the high-energy physicists who had just seen a different world in the W and Z particles discovered at the CERN research facility in Geneva, near where Feyerabend was writing. He

nicely puts down what he did respect, J.L Austin's analysis of the use of the English word 'real'. That analysis, Feyerabend says wryly, shows just what plays an important role in the kind of life preferred by Oxford dons. He was on the edge of using the phrase 'forms of life'. To grasp the realities of Achilles, Oxford or CERN, you have to live their respective lives. And – this was his key point – you can move into CERN and live its life, even if you begin as a scholar of Homeric Greek. But there is no doubt that his italicised words about what we regard as real need a lot more working out than you will find here.

I have been fairly close to some of the issues Feyerabend addresses, but it is well to remember that he had a wider audience who find his ideas profoundly liberating. He is great fun, but there is more to it than that. Bert Terpstra was a very successful applied scientist; he had a worldview entirely consonant with his scientific work. But in the rest of his life he had an entirely different way of seeing things; and his scientific view, he thought, was inconsistent with it, for it taught that only one view is true. After reading Feyerabend's previous work, he wrote with deep feeling asking if that was the point, that many visions can and should coexist. The high seriousness of the question made Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend choose him to edit the uncompleted manuscript. Those pedants who dismiss the gadfly as a joker should remember that Paul Feyerabend speaks to many people in intellectual turmoil with exactly that high seriousness which moved Bert Terpstra. I wrote these words before Feyerabend's new-found 'Letter to the Reader' of *Conquest of Abundance* turned up. It is a gentle but superb testament to what became his fundamental concerns.

Letter to the Reader

In a few pages you will find a story written in a style you may be familiar with. There are facts and generalisations therefrom, there are arguments – and there are lots of footnotes. In other words, you will find a (perhaps not very outstanding) example of a scholarly essay. Let me therefore warn you that it is not my intention to inform, or to establish some truth. What I want to do is to change your attitude. I want you to sense chaos where at first you noticed an orderly arrangement of well-behaved things and processes. It is clear that only a trick can get me from my starting point – the footnote-heavy essay I just mentioned – to where I would like you, the reader, to arrive.

My trick is to present events which dissolve the circumstances that made them happen. Given the circumstances, the events are absurd, unheard-of, frightening, evil – they simply do not make sense. I take a closer look at the circumstances and find features that may be regarded as anticipations of the event. The features are not unknown; they are not hidden either; however, they can be read in a variety of ways and only some readings create trouble. The absurdity is therefore not laid out in advance; it is created by living in a certain way – and so is the sense perceived by those who produce the disruptive event. What is interesting is that both parties use the same material; they start from the same life, but they continue in different directions. (The same applies to the scholars who years and even centuries later try to figure out 'what really happened'.)

I conclude that the life we lead is ambiguous. It contains not only one future, but many and it contains them neither ready-made nor as possibilities that can be turned into any direction. It is not at all different from a movie, or a specially constructed play. Imagine such a play. It has gone on for about forty minutes. You

know the characters, you have become accustomed to their idiosyncrasies, you are already tired of their peculiar habits. Now they stand before you with their familiar gestures and it seems that nothing interesting is ever going to happen – when suddenly, because of a trick used by the writer, the ‘reality’ you perceived turns out to be a chimera. (Alfred Hitchcock, Anthony Shaffer and Ira Levin are masters of this kind of switch.) Looking back, you can now say that things were not what they seemed to be and looking forward with the experience in mind you will regard any clear and definite arrangement with suspicion, on the stage, and elsewhere. Also, your suspicion will be the greater the more solid the initial story seemed to be. This is why I have chosen a scholarly essay as my starting point.

It is very important not to let this suspicion deteriorate into a truth, or a theory, for example into a theory with the principle: things are never what they seem to be. Reality, or Being, or God, or whatever it is that sustains us cannot be captured that easily. The problem is not why we are so often confused; the problem is why we seem to possess useful and enlightening knowledge.

You must also resist the temptation to classify what I say by giving it a well established name, for example the name of relativism. Relativism as defined by philosophers and sociologists is much too definite a view to fit the situation – unless it is regarded as a passing chimera, or as a rule of thumb. You cannot even deny the existence of eternal truths unless the denial is again meant as a cautionary hint given to those visiting the theatre of life. Is argument without a purpose? No, it is not; it accompanies us on our journey without tying it to a fixed road. Is there a way of identifying what is going on? There are many ways and we are using them all the time though often believing that they are part of a stable framework which encompasses everything. Is there a name for an attitude or a view like this? Yes, if names are that important I can easily provide one: mysticism, though it is a mysticism that uses examples, arguments, tightly reasoned passages of text, scientific theories and experiments to raise itself into consciousness.

This, my dear reader, is the warning I want you to remember from time to time and especially when the story seems to become so definite that it almost turns into a clearly thought-out and precisely structured point of view.

Paul Feyerabend