

CHAPTER 1

FEYERABEND'S *REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM* OF 'RATIONALIST' PHILOSOPHIES

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Paul Feyerabend begins his notorious book *Against Method* (1975) in the following manner:

The following essay is written in the conviction that *anarchism*, while perhaps not the most attractive *political* philosophy, is certainly excellent medicine for *epistemology*, and for the *philosophy of science*.

The reason is not difficult to find.

'History generally, and the history of revolutions in particular, is always richer in content, more varied, more many-sided, more lively and subtle than even' the best historians and the best methodologist can imagine. History is full of 'accidents and conjunctures and curious juxtapositions of events' and it demonstrates to us the 'complexity of human change and the unpredictable character of the ultimate consequences of any given act or decision of men'. Are we really to believe that the naive and simple-minded rules which methodologists take as their guide are capable of accounting for such a 'maze of interactions'? And is it not clear that successful *participation* in a process of this kind is possible only for the ruthless opportunist who is not tied to any particular philosophy and who adopts whatever procedure seems to fit the occasion? (1975, pp. 17-18)

Feyerabend goes on to conclude that "a complex medium containing surprising and unforeseen developments demands complex procedures and defies analysis on the basis of rules which have been set up in advance and without regard to the ever-changing conditions of history." (1975, p. 18)

If we examine these passages carefully, then we will find contained within them aspects of Feyerabend's positive philosophy, and also what Feyerabend finds objectionable about philosophy and theories of rationality. Firstly, Feyerabend states that anarchism is 'excellent medicine' for epistemology and philosophy of science: epistemology and philosophy of science are sick and anarchism will remedy the situation. This way of expressing his thesis is highly important: once we are well we do not continue to take medicine. We can also see that a 'healthy' epistemology would be one which was complex rather than simple; multifarious rather than uniform; contextual rather than independent of context and universal;

and responsive to the idiosyncrasies of history and particular situations, as opposed to unchangeable and atemporal.

We can see that Feyerabend is not contending that there is no such thing as rationality or reason. Rather, Feyerabend is contending that a particular way in which rationality has been conceived, a particular theory of rationality, does not fulfil the function for which it was designed: the complexity, vagaries and unpredictableness of human activity evades explication in terms of the theory of rationality which Feyerabend criticises. Consequently, Feyerabend proposes anarchism as the dialectical antithesis of the received view, not in order to replace that view with its antithesis, but so as to generate the debate which will create a new synthesis more sensitive to context and complexity. Feyerabend states that

My intention is not to replace one set of general rules by another such set: my intention is, rather, to convince the reader that *all methodologies, even the most obvious ones, have their limits*. The best way to show this is to demonstrate the limits and even the irrationality of some rules which she, or he, is likely to regard as basic ... Always remember that the demonstration and the rhetoric's used do not express any 'deep convictions' of mine. They merely show how easy it is to lead people by the nose in a rational way. An anarchist is like an undercover agent who plays the game of Reason in order to undercut the authority of Reason. (1975, pp. 32-3)¹

Prima facie, this seems to be a statement to the effect that the arguments of (1975), at least, should be construed as instances of *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation. In order to force the reconceptualisation of rationality, Feyerabend wants to prove that the adoption of 'Rationalist' theories of rationality lead to consequences which are anathema to those very theories: unremitting allegiance to 'Rationalist' theories should lead to the adoption of anarchism. Moreover, Feyerabend states that

if an argument uses a premise, it does not follow that the author accepts the premise, claims to have reasons for it, regards it as plausible. He may deny the premise but still use it because his opponent accepts it and, accepting it, can be led in a desired direction. If the premise is used to argue for a rule, or a fact, or a principle violently opposed by those holding it, then we speak of a *reduction ad absurdum* (in the wider sense.) (1978c, p. 156)

Feyerabend then goes on to explicitly state that the arguments of (1975) were indeed meant to be of the nature of a *reductio*. (1978c, p. 157)

It could be replied that Feyerabend only said this after the fact: after the many criticisms of his work appeared he used the idea of a *reductio* as a means of avoiding those criticisms. But this cannot be supported. Even if we ignore the quotation above from (1975) there are other passages which support the idea that Feyerabend is conducting a *reductio*. For example,

¹ Notice the capital R in reason.

Feyerabend replies to criticisms of his earlier papers given by Machamer, by saying that

Machamer frequently misunderstands my way of arguing. Thus he objects to my saying that Kepler's optics is refuted by simple facts, because I have also stated that theories cannot be refuted by facts. This were a valid point if at the passage in question I had been talking to *myself* ... But I did not talk to myself. I addressed people who *accept* the rule of falsification, and for *them* the example means trouble. Logicians are apt to call this an *argumentum ad hominem*. Quite so: in my essay I am addressing *humans*. (1975, pp. 113-14)²

If we accept the idea that Feyerabend is conducting a *reductio ad absurdum* of 'Rationalist' philosophy, then we are still left with the question, what exactly is Feyerabend reducing to absurdity? What premises does Feyerabend use? Consequently, I will now present an account of what Feyerabend takes to be 'Rationalist' philosophy, or 'Reason', with a capital 'r'.

1.2 FEYERABEND'S CONCEPTION OF 'RATIONALIST' PHILOSOPHY.

It is my contention that what Feyerabend identifies as 'Rationalist' philosophy, 'Reason', or abstract, universal rationality, is the philosophical theses associated with what has come to be called Formalist rationality, or the classical model of rationality. Formalist rationality is a general picture of rationality which has become increasingly identified and criticised since the downfall of logical empiricist philosophy.³ This is not to contend that it is solely linked to that philosophy: though it did play a role in logical empiricism in an especially stark manner, it did not originate with that philosophy. In fact, whether supported or denied, it can be seen as having had a long and continuous history, setting the boundaries of philosophical debate from the very beginning of Western philosophical speculation to the present day. It is especially important to note that Feyerabend, and others,

² The distinction between *ad hominem* and *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation is very unclear. *Ad hominem* argumentation is sometimes used exclusively as the description of informal fallacious argument where a person's character is presented as a reason to not believe what they say. In its non-fallacious form, where a person's substantive claims are shown to result in contradiction, the *ad hominem* argument becomes identical to what some take as *reductio* argumentation. I assume that a *reductio ad absurdum* argument is most nearly captured by the idea of the non-fallacious *ad hominem* argument.

³ A good account of formalist rationality can be found in Brown (1988) Chs. I-III. Brown calls formalist rationality the classical model of rationality; I would prefer not to use that expression, as it may cause confusion with the classical rationalists (Descartes, Leibniz, et al). I will also later give reasons why the expression 'formalist rationality' does not fully, and thus not adequately, capture what it is that Feyerabend finds objectionable. Other accounts can be found in Hooker (1991a), Toulmin (1972) and Nickles (1980b), (1980c). Cf also Bernstein's account of 'objectivism' (1983).



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