

CHAPTER 2

FEYERABEND, LAKATOS AND ANARCHISM

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter 1 we have seen that Feyerabend can be construed as conducting a *reductio ad absurdum* of what I have called 'Rationalism': the thesis that rationality is to be understood as the application of universal, a-temporal and necessary rules in an algorithmic manner. In conducting his *reductio* Feyerabend targeted specific versions of 'Rationalist' philosophy: empiricism and Popper. However, Feyerabend believed that his attack on 'Rationalism' was generally successful: any 'Rationalist' position will fall prey to *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation.

If we accept that Feyerabend's analysis of empiricism and Popper is correct, then there are two responses which a 'Rationalist' can make. Firstly, the 'Rationalist' may be unperturbed about the fate of the particular sets of 'Rational' rules associated with empiricism and Popper: they may accept that those particular versions of 'Rationalism' are inadequate and incorrect theories of rationality. However, this only highlights the inadequacy of those particular versions of 'Rationalism', it does not refute the 'Rationalist' program itself: new, as yet unrefuted, sets of necessary, universal and a-temporal rules may be proposed which will prove to be sufficient for explaining rationality. This seems to be part of the sentiment behind Laudan's comment that "neither Feyerabend nor anyone else has shown that all the *extant* rules of scientific methodology are inadequate, let alone that all possible rules are discredited." (1996, p. 105) This would be a valid response if we take Feyerabend as arguing against rationality *tout court*. But Feyerabend is arguing against a particular *program* of rationality; as such, Feyerabend only needs to show the inadequacy of important, powerful and influential versions to cast doubt upon the program in general.¹ Of course, as Hooker pointed out, what is needed is an alternative program of rationality which, moreover, will provide general explanatory reasons for the inadequacy of 'Rationalism'. The situation is analogous to scientific

¹ Cf. Brown (1979) where the idea is presented that there can be paradigms of rationality, which, like scientific paradigms, can enter degenerating problem-shifts.

paradigms: we do not ask that every possible permutation of a particular paradigm be refuted before rejecting the paradigm and proposing another. Rather, if important counter-instances can be provided, and an alternative paradigm proposed, then it is not necessary for every possible variant of the paradigm to be tested before we doubt the veracity of the paradigm in question.

The second response a 'Rationalist' may make is to widen the scope of acceptable 'Rational' rules. Instead of looking for a completely new set of rational rules, the 'Rationalist' may amalgamate various rules from existing systems: Popper's system, for example, may have strengths in certain areas; empiricism may also have advantages in certain contexts. Consequently, the 'Rationalist' may pick and choose individual rational rules which have been shown to be independently efficacious; thereby producing a complete system of rationality.

I propose that Feyerabend interprets Lakatos as following the second strategy as outlined above. For we saw in the previous chapter that Lakatos's Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes (MSRP) can avoid Feyerabend's attempted *reductio* of 'Rationalist' philosophies, because the methodological tool-kit of MSRP is wide and rich enough so as to circumvent the conclusions resulting from Feyerabend's analysis of the arguments of Galileo. In this chapter I want to show that the same strategies which protect Lakatos's MSRP from Feyerabend's *reductio* in individual cases, such as that of Galileo, are also the means by which Feyerabend constructs a general *reductio ad absurdum* argument against Lakatos's MSRP. And as Lakatos's MSRP may be considered to be a paradigmatic example of the more general 'Rationalist' stratagem, the arguments can also be seen to be a *reductio* of the general strategy.

In particular, Feyerabend's 'epistemological anarchism' must be understood within the context of his *reductio* of Lakatos's 'Rationalist' MSRP. Just as, according to Feyerabend, Empiricists and Popper must either give up their 'Rationalist' positions, or accept the idea that large amounts of paradigmatically rational episodes in the history of science were irrational, so too Lakatos must either give up the remaining 'Rationalist' strands in his MSRP, or accept the idea that the history of science is a chronicle of 'anything goes' anarchism. Feyerabend does not believe that the history of science is irrational, in any absolute sense. What he does believe is that science *appears* irrational when viewed from the perspective of certain 'Rationalist' philosophies. Similarly, Feyerabend is not a committed anarchist, and his support of anarchism is of a very idiosyncratic nature. Feyerabend doesn't mean by anarchism what many people mean by

anarchism: he doesn't take it to mean chaos or complete disorder. However, from the perspective of 'Rationalist' philosophies, the history of science seems to exhibit unprincipled change, chaos and anarchism.

In this chapter I will, (i) present Feyerabend's *reductio* of Lakatos's MSRP and examine the question of whether Lakatos can reply to these charges of internal incoherence. (ii) Elucidate a second argument of Feyerabend's to the effect that, even if Lakatos can avoid the charges of internal incoherence, he is still guilty of begging the question concerning the nature of rationality. (iii) Dispel the idea that Feyerabend welcomes the conclusion that science is anarchistic. And (iv) Show that, through the analyses of (i), (ii) and (iii), we can begin to see the positive aspects of Feyerabend's philosophy.

2.2 FEYERABEND'S *REDUCTIO* OF LAKATOS'S MSRP.²

2.2.1 Introduction.

Lakatos's philosophy can be seen as an attempt to provide positive answers to three questions. Can we draw a demarcation between science and non-science? Can we distinguish rational factors in science from irrational, or a-rational factors? And, based upon the answers to the first two questions, can we give prescriptive, heuristic advice to working scientists? The specific content of Lakatos's answers to these questions must be seen as resulting from his exposure to the philosophies of Popper and Kuhn. From Popper, Lakatos inherited the 'Rationalist' ideals that the answers to the questions must be of a universal, a-temporal and unequivocal nature. From Kuhn, Lakatos came to realise that Popper's normative methodology did not provide a reliable guide when it came to explaining the history of science.

Applying Popper's methodology to the history of science resulted in too much science, and too many scientists, being labelled irrational. But if this is the case, then an explanation of the apparent progressiveness and rationality of science becomes inscrutable: if scientists behave irrationally, but, nevertheless, science continues to rationally progress, then one of the few options is to enlist the 'cunning of history' to compel world₂ entities to mirror the denizens of world₃. Lakatos does not take up this option. Instead,

² In what follows I take my cue from Feyerabend. I elaborate on, expand, and add to Feyerabend's arguments, which can be found in (1975), ch. 16 and (1976). However, I do not rely specifically upon Feyerabend's presentation of the arguments. In this sense, I want to bring out the objective characteristics of Lakatos's MSRP, which are the source of Feyerabend's *reductio*.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-1350-8>

Feyerabend and Scientific Values

Tightrope-Walking Rationality

Farrell, R.P.

2003, X, 259 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1350-8