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THE LONG INTERVIEW

‘We’re all Feyerabendians now!’: Where Science and Society Meet – The Contemporary Relevance of Paul K. Feyerabend, 1924–94

Feyerabend scholar **Ian James Kidd** is interviewed by Richard House – with a commentary by **Onel Brooks**

Introductory Note

It is fittingly exactly 50 years as we write since the publication of the first iteration of what was to become one of the most controversial publications in the history of the philosophy of science – Paul K. Feyerabend’s ‘Against method: outline of an anarchistic theory of knowledge’ (Feyerabend, 1970a) – subsequently published in book form by New Left Books in 1975. Such was the opprobrium heaped upon Feyerabend by a philosophical and scientific establishment-on-the-warpath that Feyerabend went into a depression (Feyerabend, 1995: 147), and in his autobiography he even wrote, ‘I often wished I had never written that fucking book’ (ibid.). Yet I suspect I count as just one amongst a considerable numbers of critical scholars who are eternally grateful that Feyerabend *did* have the courage to write that effing book. For on its 1975 publication, he almost instantly became a folk hero of the counter-culture that was contemptuous of the narrow positivism of the mainstream natural and social sciences (‘scientism’), giving a voice as he did to concerns about modernity and the Enlightenment project that were shared by a great many of us. And in the words of my esteemed interviewee, philosopher and eminent Feyerabend scholar Ian James Kidd, ‘We’re all Feyerabendians now!’ In this (very) long interview, we hope to show just why this is so – and also why the prescience and relevance of Feyerabend’s radical thinking about science, technology, scientism, nature and society could hardly have greater relevance today.

Richard House
Stroud, November 2020

Richard House [**RH**]: Ian, it’s a great honour for me to be able to interview you as one of a select number of eminent philosopher-scholars who have written major works about the late, great philosopher of science Paul K. Feyerabend.

Perhaps at the outset I should confess that I’m one of those distinctly annoying ‘gadfly amateur philosophers’ who tends to ‘mine’ the philosophy literature for lines and arguments that support my own position – not something I’m especially proud of; and I’m certainly aware of the pitfalls of so doing! I did study one year of a two-year philosophy Masters programme around 30 years ago – but gave it up when I couldn’t any longer bear the narrow analytical-philosophy mindset that dominated the university department I was in. So I think bringing my kind of ‘looser’ approach together with a top philosopher like yourself might create a fascinating and ampliative synergy in terms of

an interview about the great man (hereafter, PKF) and his contemporary relevance. But if any of my questions are philosophically incoherent, I'm sure you'll tell me! – and I'd positively welcome that.

I first discovered PKF's work in the mid-1970s when I was starting a social-science Ph.D. at the University of East Anglia (Norwich), and immersed myself in the philosophy of science literature for arguments against positivism… – and of course I soon came across PKF's classic book *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (Feyerabend, 1975a). Can you tell our readers, first, about your own early philosophical journey with PKF, and the context in which it started?

Ian James Kidd [**IJK**]: Feyerabend always had more admirers than followers! Many enjoy his work for its energy and eclecticism and its provocations. Others dislike those traits, seeing them as signs of irreverence or sloppiness. Obviously, there's truth in both perspectives, and a main theme of my work on Feyerabend has been the effort to work out a clear sense of what's good, and what's best abandoned or re-tooled. I therefore think of myself as a critical admirer – alert to his failings while also enthusiastic about his contributions. It can be difficult, though, partly since Feyerabend was often his own worst enemy. The first chapter of Eric Oberheim's excellent book, *Feyerabend's Philosophy* (2006), tackles these interpretive difficulties.

I first encountered Feyerabend in my third year of undergraduate studies. Despite having never done any philosophy of science, doing an advanced module called 'Philosophical Issues in Contemporary Science' seemed a good idea. Like many students, I found him fun and the ideas attractive. A year later, during my Masters, I was writing an essay on Thomas Kuhn – one of Feyerabend's sparring partners[1] – and that rekindled my interest. Not enough, though, since my original doctoral plan was a project on Nietzsche, Mill and individuality. Lack of supervision options meant I opted to work on my second choice – the role of anomalies in Kuhn's philosophy of science. Unfortunately, the ideas didn't really come to life for me. One rather glum December day, I came across Feyerabend's *Conquest of Abundance* (2001). The book gripped me – its subtitle, 'A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being' – was so evocative. I instantly decided to change my project. Fortunately, my supervisor, Robin Hendry, agreed. He studied at the LSE and was well-versed in Kuhn, Karl Popper, Imre Lakatos, and Feyerabend, and had taught me since that third-year module. I owe a lot to his training. From then on, I never looked back!

In certain respects, working on Feyerabend was not a good topic, professionally speaking. He was considered 'old hat', and contemporary philosophy of science wasn't engaged with the issues that people associated with *Against Method* – like the rationality of theory changes and scientific method. Feyerabend was a staple of 'Introduction to Philosophy of Science' courses, but – it was thought – not of contemporary interest. Luckily, there is now a growing group of Feyerabend scholars trying to change that perspective.

RH: I'm delighted you're a 'critical admirer' of PKF, Ian – that's ideal for this interview, which I'm sure neither of us want to be an uncritical sycophantic eulogy; and yet to create a space in which Feyerabend's contributions can be fully honoured feels so important. And I for one am also delighted that you ended up doing a Ph.D. on PFK rather than on Nietzsche or Kuhn! – and especially because I'm convinced that Feyerabend's robust (and in some ways counter-cultural) views on science could hardly be more relevant today (but more on that later).

I just read your Ph.D. (Kidd, 2010), and I must say it's an enthralling read. At the risk of embarrassing you, it evokes great respect and admiration in me that your interest in Feyerabend took preference over choosing a research topic that would have had more professional kudos and career credibility within Philosophy. I think that's the kind of scholarly authenticity that PKF himself would have loved – indeed, I just read that he always faithfully followed his own predilections wherever they led, rather than opportunistically trimming to fit in with prevailing fashions or 'regimes of truth'. Perhaps being 'his own worst enemy' (your phrase) was a price worth paying,[2] if the alternative would have been inauthenticity and not being true to himself.

We might come on to how this perhaps contributed to his reputation within Philosophy later.

One of the things that always drew me to PKF was what an engaging character he was – the (no-doubt carefully chosen) un-PC photo of him on the first-edition dust jacket of *Against Method* (Feyerabend, 1975a) had me loving the man before I even opened the covers of the book! I'm wondering whether being a charismatic character as a philosopher might be a difficult place to inhabit in an academic discipline in which rationality is all, and with traits like rhetoric, irreverence and charisma being seen by many as distractions from 'the real work' of philosophy. I'm wondering whether you think PKF himself would have accepted that he was his own worst enemy – and I'm sure you must have anecdotes about him that speak to the extraordinary character he was.

IJK: Well, I do best, philosophically, when following my interests. I wrote a little blog piece (Kidd, 2019a) a while back that discussed my various motivations for working on Feyerabend. They included virtuous ones, like the intrinsic interest of his work, but also more vicious ones, like my inability to discipline my attention! But it's important to balance authenticity with other values, such as a pragmatism about the realities of academic philosophy. In a later blog post (Kidd, 2019b), I distinguished being good at philosophy from being good at *academic* philosophy – roughly, meaning that the skills and dispositions that help one to philosophise well are often quite different from those which enable one to navigate well through academic philosophy.

Feyerabend was often disdainful of the academic norms of philosophy in ways that, in a certain sense, did seem to harm his uptake. After the publication of the book *Against Method* (*AM*) in 1975, for instance, he was very stung by criticisms and so doubled down with the wilfully provocative hyperbole one sees in his 1978 book *Science in a Free Society* (*SFS*; that was the book that really secured his 'bad reputation', I think). *SFS* has some good ideas but, unfortunately, lots of rudeness and some needless extreme claims. The notorious third part of that book contains replies to critics of *AM*. Feyerabend titled it 'Conversations with Illiterates'! Okay, at that time he was in a bad state – alone, grieving the death of his friend Imre Lakatos, and so on, as he details in his autobiography *Killing Time* (Feyeraband, 1995). So, the rhetoric and polemic were understandable, but led to decisions that did hurt his reputation among philosophers of science.

After the *AM–SFS* period – from 1975 to 1978 – my sense is that Feyerabend and mainstream philosophy of science mutually parted ways. He stops publishing in established philosophy journals – with occasional exceptions, like his 1989 piece in the prestigious *Journal of Philosophy*. He starts reading more in anthropology and development studies, and turns his interests to wider cultural issues. He experiments with various forms of relativism. He retains his undying love for the physical sciences and their history. By the early 1980s, though, he's doing his own thing, and secure in his tenured professorships at Berkeley and Zurich. I don't think he much rued his lack of a stellar reputation within philosophy. I don't think he wanted a seat among the pantheon! He did the work he enjoyed and did the work he felt mattered, like correcting certain misconceptions about science – those 'myths', as he called them, like methodological monism or the value-freedom of science.

I like to think that Feyerabend also quietly approved of some emerging directions in philosophy of science, especially the work of the so-called 'Stanford school' – folks like Nancy Cartwright, John Dupré and Ian Hacking who were attentive to actual scientific practice in the lab or at the workbench, and emphatic about the social and value dimensions of scientific knowledge and research. It's striking that the sorts of claims that helped to make *Against Method* controversial are, today, inherited common sense – i.e. that this thing called 'science' is pluralistic, disunified, shot through with social and epistemic values, shaped by historical contingencies and so on. That messier vision of science came from sociology of science and the Stanford School work on scientific practice, but one of *their* main inspirations was Feyerabend and his attacks on abstract models of science. Indeed, when giving talks to philosophers of science, I sometimes opine that we're all Feyerabendians now!

RH: I'm delighted I got 'side-tracked' into reading your two blogged articles, Ian (Kidd, 2019a, b): they certainly resonated with my own experience of working in academia. You commendably criticise 'pick[ing] whatever topic happened to be "hot" in philosophy of science and writ[ing] on that, regardless of whether it reflected [your] interests'; and from personal experience, I wholeheartedly agree with Marcus Arvan's post that 'not writing on stuff that truly fascinates you is a #1 way to kill one's joy in doing research'.

This relates directly to your 'crucial distinction between being good at philosophy and being good at academic philosophy' – with what you call 'academicking' '…requir[ing] a set of knowledge, skills, and virtues that are messily interwoven with complex systems of social power and gendered, racialised, and class privilege'; and with '"Playing the game", in terms of institutional and disciplinary politics, typically reward[ing] traits such as aggressive ambition, insincerity, and self-interestedness' (your words). I can assure you that these dynamics do feature in other academic disciplines! – and I'm wondering whether these nascent (neoliberal?) tendencies were what PKF began to be so contemptuous of in the mid–late 1970s.

I think some people just plain refuse to play those 'power games' – whatever the opportunity cost might be in terms of limiting one's ascendency up the slippery academic pole. And PKF would surely have raged against 'being good at *academic* philosophy… tending to outweigh being good at philosophy..., becom[ing] increasingly at risk of overrewarding those who are trend-savvy, self-promotionally forceful, and professionally cunning' (your words) – in what one blog poster terms a 'miserable, abusive professional environment'.

So I wonder whether PKF's own scarcely disguised contempt for 'intellectuals' (e.g. Feyerabend, 1978) is related to these latter professionalisation and ambition-driven concerns – i.e. what he refers to as 'the rise of *a new breed* of intellectuals' (ibid., p. 183, my italics); and in his 'Marxist fairytales' response, he speaks of 'the shaping of society [being] done by its citizens, not by *power-hungry intellectuals*' (ibid., p. 182, my italics). When PKF declares that 'I am not a scholar, and have no wish to be a scholar' (ibid., p. 150), I find myself wondering: (a) was this his view from the mid-1970s and onwards, but not before this?; (b) was it the academy itself that changed over this period, thus generating PKF's contempt, or did Feyerabend change – or even, possibly, both? And (c) did PKF's academic critics defensively shoot the messenger and ignore the message that he was conveying about the nature of the academy and the institutions of mainstream science? – albeit irreverently, and with little if any attempt to engineer a constructive conversation across the noxious divide he was in part identifying, and partly himself creating.

Responding now to your previous answer, and related to the above: I'm actually currently just finishing PKF's notorious book *Science in a Free Society* – which I'm enjoying and admiring enormously, and am wondering why he himself came to repudiate this book. Focusing for a moment on the process rather than the content of his criticisms: I can see how this book burnt bridges with erstwhile academic colleagues; but my sense is that the response to *AM* left PKF feeling that he'd 'had it' with both academia and the vested interests of mainstream science, and so *Science in a Free Society* was his parting shot, in which he invoked rhetoric and hyperbole to call out their worst excesses. I'm wondering how else someone with his emerging views was going to challenge what he saw as the complacency, arrogance and dubious legitimacy of mainstream science without taking it head on?

Perhaps his naivety was in blinding himself to the enemies he would inevitably make in the process; and perhaps if he'd realised beforehand that this would be the outcome, he might have at least tried to temper his diatribe, and so render his criticisms more hear-able by those at which they were aimed. As you can see, I'm still trying to understand why PKF himself came to so regret writing this book (which, to this reader at least, is a brilliant broadside against science and its then-nascent technocratic and authoritarian tendencies).

Lots (too much!) there – do just pick up on whatever sparks your interest, Ian, and ignore the rest!

IJK: Well, all shared human enterprises share certain very general sorts of problems. Aggressive ambitiousness, competitiveness, temptations to ruthlessness, the sorts of superficial performances that we'd call 'playing the game', and so on. Wherever one finds people, one finds those sorts of behaviours. Certainly, academics are not immune to such temptations, and Feyerabend was – like many others – rightly critical of naive or self-aggrandising conceptions of scholars as a purer sort of creature! He was also susceptible to various common failings, of course, like the thrill of zealous provocation. In those two blog posts, my aim was to call attention to certain behaviours and the structures of incentives and pressures that feed them.

Feyerabend's attacks on 'intellectuals', though, go way beyond those sorts of very reasonable concerns about the social and professional structures of contemporary academia. As usual, there's a rapid shift from the sensible to the extreme! I've not thought systematically about the content or the cogency of his anti-intellectualism, nor assessed its sincerity. A critic may offer a tart *ad hominem*: if Feyerabend thinks intellectuals are so irredeemably awful, why did he keep up scholarly writing and university teaching, and why didn't he resign his two professorships at Berkeley and Vienna, two of the most prestigious universities in the world?

I think there are several replies one can make. To start with, many of Feyerabend's denunciations of scholars are clearly exaggerated and not to be taken at face value. If pushed, he'd likely admit that there are good and serious scholars authentically pursuing worthwhile projects. Presumably he counted himself in that group! Certainly, into the 1980s he expressed genuine admiration for those scholars engaged in projects aimed at the improvement of human life – in development studies, for instance, and primary environmental care. (Tellingly, his third wife, Grazia Borrini, was involved in that work and, I think, showed him the concrete positive contributions that scholarly work, done well, can make to people.)

But that points to a second reply: Feyerabend's criticisms of scholars often came from a good place. Clearly, he thought that scholarly work ought to contribute to the happiness or flourishing of people – a claim he makes at least as early as the 1968 paper, 'Science, freedom, and the good life'. Sometimes he calls this a 'humanitarian' criterion, of advancing the freedom, happiness and flourishing of human beings – hence his admiration for John Stuart Mill. But that could make it seem as if scholarly work is only valuable instrumentally, in terms of its contributions to human flourishing. What, then, of cosmology or particle physics? Well, he might very reasonably reply that a good and flourishing life isn't exhausted by the material basics of life, vitally important as they are. To really flourish, we need complex imaginative, intellectual and aesthetic satisfactions, too.

Such points, though, complicate the question of Feyerabend's anti-intellectualism. Was he only really attacking scholars who are arrogant, complacent and lazy? That fits with his 'defences' of astrology, alternative medicine and the like, which in several papers I argue are really criticisms of the scientists and philosophers who dismiss them out of ignorance without argument (Kidd, 2013, 2016a, 2018). Fine, but that does not make for anti-intellectualism in any serious sense of the term. Indeed, that sounds to me more like a *defence* of intellectualism. It's the demand that intellectuals hold themselves to the high standards of conscientiousness, reflectiveness, and critical rigour that are constitutive of their special authority.

So, my own downbeat view is that Feyerabend respected and admired science and scholarship for instrumental and intrinsic reasons. He respects curiosity, understanding and an enhanced appreciation of our place in the wider scheme of things that science, philosophy and other enterprises can afford. But he was sternly critical of scholarly vices like arrogance, laziness, and complacency.

Certainly, that's my own view about intellectuals: we should conduct ourselves according to the virtues constitutive of our profession, and take great care to avoid the vices and failings to which we are prone! Arrogance is hardly confined to academia, even if academic environments might be fertile ground for arrogant attitudes and behaviours

to grow. The challenge, then, will be to specify the range of virtues and vices that scholars or intellectuals ought to cultivate, and properly define them. That requires retrieval of the older concept of *professional virtue*s, which I think helps us to make sense of a lot of Feyerabend's patterns of criticism and praise. He loved bold, original and expansive thinkers who enrich our sense of the variety of ways of conceiving of and living within the world. He praises creativity and curiosity and tenacity. He also disliked arrogant and closed-minded people who wanted to shut down possibilities without good reason. So, there's a sort of character ethics in there – an ethics organised around excellences and failings of character. But alas, Feyerabend never went very far into ethics. In a later interview,[3] just prior to his death, he remarked that everything he read in ethics bored him!

RH: As a therapist it's tempting to psychologise (or even psychopathologise) PKF's (habitual?) 'rapid shift from the sensible to the extreme' – but I'll refrain from pursuing such a line here! However, I'd like to take this opportunity to ask an academic philosopher whether exaggeration, rhetoric and/or emotional and passionate expression can ever be construed as a legitimate form of argumentation within the Philosophy discipline – for example, so as to turn a searching light on a particular issue which it might be very difficult to lay bare and examine by any other means. Perhaps you could say something about PKF's challenge to (scientific) rationalism and reason in relation to this question, Ian? (Feyerabend, 1987). This is certainly very relevant to Humanistic Psychology, which tends to be very suspicious of 'the academic' and 'the overly rational' taking precedence over the full passionate engagement of, and immersion in, direct personal experience (or 'head over heart', in the jargon).

I'm also interested in the extent to which (your words) 'Feyerabend's denunciations of scholars' actually *were* 'exaggerated'. (That PKF was perhaps hypocritical in staying on as a highly salaried professor doesn't necessarily have any relevance to the extent to which he was on to something here.) And while we'd ideally need a clear and sufficiently shared view about what, for him, constitutes an 'intellectual', I do think a case could be made for PKF having an 'anti-intellectual' stance, if we can show that there is something *intrinsic to* 'claimed expertise' (let's call it) that generates the kind of dismissive arrogance that he wrote about in relation to (e.g.) alternative medicine, astrology etc. (which you write about so illuminatingly in Kidd, 2013 and 2016a).

Relatedly, I'm also wondering whether PKF might have been referring to something that I've repeatedly experienced on the street as a campaigner and activist – i.e. people who play what I call the 'I'm a scientist…' card – with those words clearly conveying an *unspoken power-narrative* that goes something like this: 'I'm a scientist – so I know what I'm talking about far more than you do – therefore my view on *whatever-it-is* prevails simply by virtue of my superiority to you, and my expertise' (end of discussion). I do wonder whether this attitude displayed by those who claim the 'scientific expert' mantle was the kind of arrogance that PKF was so annoyed by.

For me, the core issue is about genuine *open-mindedness*; and my hunch is that it seems to be particularly difficult for people who self-define as 'experts' (in any field – and quite possibly including me!) to remain *genuinely* open-minded (as all scientists surely should be!). I know PKF also had a lot of critical things to say about expertise and 'the expert', which is quite likely a related issue (we also have things to say about it in the therapy world, by the way! – e.g. Mair, 1997). I'd welcome your perspective on this, Ian.

IJK: Philosophical engagement isn't – and has never been – simply the cold exchange of ideas and arguments. Let's go back to Aristotle's account of rhetoric. There are three aspects – *logos* (the ideas, arguments, reasons), *pathos* (the moods, emotions, feelings), and *ethos* (the character or personality of the participants). Effective persuasion often, if not always, requires a combination of all of these. Sometimes an argument or reason by itself might work – OK. Often, though, what is needed is some skilled combination of *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos*. Feyerabend was a very skilled rhetorician and, by all accounts, a very charismatic speaker and skilled arguer.

When Feyerabend condemns 'rationalism', it's not because he wants to do away with reason or rational enquiry – not at all! Rationalism, for him, usually refers to untenably narrow or constricted forms of rational engagement, ones that are untenable because they are, or aspire to be, decoupled from our affective and imaginative capacities. Rationalism of the sort he attacked is a form of myopia about reason – the attempt to employ a stunted form of reason, cut off from the other human capacities that it needs in order to do its work properly. In a sense, it's a false dilemma to ask people to choose between 'head and heart'. First, we usually need both, and secondly, any attempt to draw any stable distinction is likely to fail. In fact, one of the very welcome developments in philosophy of mind and emotion has been the gradual dissolution of that distorting reason–emotion dichotomy (I'm thinking here of folks like Antonio Damasio, although the rejection of this dualism was already a theme of other philosophers, from the late Mary Midgley to William James in the nineteenth century). In classical Chinese philosophy, by the way, there's no distinction between the affective and the cognitive: *xīn* (心) is usually rendered as 'heart-mind' or, less elegantly, as 'the thinking heart' or 'the feeling mind'!

You also asked about Feyerabend's anti-intellectualism. I think there's space here for a scholar to sit down and assess those remarks – to order them a little. Clearly his meaning and target were often vague. Sometimes there was rhetoric but without any arguments. John Preston has some nice criticisms of Feyerabend's *la trahison des clercs* in his 2002 review of *Conquest of Abundance*. Actually, the title concept of that book might help us think about Feyerabend's attitudes towards intellectuals. Much of the 'abundance' of the world comes from *us* – from human beings exercising their intellectual and imaginative capacities. Science, philosophy and much else contribute to the abundance of the world that Feyerabend was so keen to celebrate. If you read the introduction to that book, you'll see that Feyerabend is critical of 'intellectuals' who tend or intend to 'cut down' the abundance of the world through invidious forms of reductionism, disciplinary imperialism, oppressive arrogance, and so on. But there's obviously praise of those intellectuals – philosophers and physicists and others – who contribute to the marvellous abundance of the world. Now, that doesn't mean that we need to just proliferate without limits. Nor does it mean we should never remove aspects of that abundance. But it does mean that Feyerabend is distinguishing, even if implicitly, between better and worse forms of intellectualism – better and worse ways of conducting oneself intellectually.

When Feyerabend wrote about astrology, he wasn't defending its merits, but rather leaping in to intervene in what he thought was an abuse of authority by scientists who had abandoned argument and instead turned to bullying and power plays. The defences are *really* defences of our collective rational and moral standards – don't criticise in ignorance, do your research, play fairly, don't abuse your power, and so on. Interestingly, this makes Feyerabend a much more *conservative* figure than is supposed by many people – friend and foe.

RH: The distinction you draw between rational enquiry and Rational*ism* is really helpful and illuminating for this non-philosopher, Ian – thank you. Such distinctions, nuances and clarifications are so important, as it would be so easy to misrepresent Feyerabend's position on these issues (either over-criticising *or* over-praising him! – and I'm sure PKF must have felt misrepresented at the hands of at least some of his more trenchant critics).

It's also very interesting to read of Aristotle's perspective on argumentation ('rhetoric'), and that what you call 'the other human capacities' are *needed* in order that rational inquiry can 'do its work properly'. I do wonder whether this is a widely held view right across the philosophy discipline; for Philosophy certainly has a reputation for being single-mindedly about logic and rationality, with the emotional dimension firmly kept out of things (I certainly experienced this in a university philosophy department in the early 1990s).

I'm delighted that you've mentioned Damasio, Midgley and William James! – all three are great 'friends' of the humanistic approach to psychology, and occasionally get a citation, or even an article, in *Self & Society*! (e.g. Beichman,

2019). I'm a great admirer of Mary Midgley's work; and I remember well the excitement amongst my colleagues when Damasio's path-breaking book *Descartes' Error* came out all those years ago (Damasio, 1994). What you say about 'the thinking heart' and 'the feeling mind' will likely be music to the ears of our 'humanistic' readers, for it coheres with the humanistic allegiance to a holistic, non-reductive perspective on human being (e.g. House, 2018).

Re PKF's 'defence of our collective rational and moral standards', and his injunction that intellectuals/scientists shouldn't abuse power: in this he seems to be making an important intervention into the practice of science that for me has great relevance today, with the way that '*the science*' is being deployed in various public and policy discourses (and I'm not just referring to the pandemic). I'm not aware of PKF having cited Foucault's work on power, but he certainly cites Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), when he approvingly quotes Lyotard in a footnote in *Farewell to Reason* (p. 3) – where he writes: '…knowledge has become a commodity, its legitimacy linked to the legitimacy of the legislator: [quoting Lyotard] "science seems more completely subordinated to the prevailing powers than ever before…."'. I do wonder what PKF would be saying today if he were witnessing the (exalted?) place that science (and scient*ists*) currently occupy in cultural and political discourse (and with anyone who dares to question 'the science' immediately being silenced with the conversation-terminating trope of 'conspiracy theory!').

Tellingly, Lyotard also went on to write about what he called the 'inhuman condition' (Lyotard, 1991; Sim, 2001; Woodward, 2016); and as Ian Hacking baldly states on the dust jacket of *Conquest of Abundance*, 'Paul Feyerabend was a humanist'. I do wonder what could be spawned by bringing together PFK, Foucault and Lyotard's thinking in relation to the current direction in which a technology-fuelled scient*ism* is heading. (In passing – citing Lyotard and Foucault could have taken us into the 'postmodernism' question in relation to PKF, but I hope we can return to that later.)

IJK: It's difficult to generalise across academic philosophy – there are so many members, departments, and so on. Doubtless some subscribe to narrow rationalist conceptions of philosophising, and doubtless those are sometimes appropriate and legitimate (when doing very abstract subjects like philosophy of logic, perhaps). As usual, the danger lies in narrowing our range of tools and adopting distortingly simplified conceptions of our subject matter. (Those two failings often go together, of course.) Abstraction is not, in itself, a sin. It's often a very effective strategy for investigating complex topics. The danger occurs when one stops half-way, as it were, and forgets to return to the wider context and complexity one abstracted away from. Ditto rationalism. It is often productive to temporarily exclude from our thinking certain emotional impulses – as long as one does not then slide into their perpetual banishment. I think Feyerabend was averse to these sorts of epistemic failings – as are the other philosophers I mentioned, like Midgley and William James.

One task for philosophy of science is to look out for these sorts of failings as they show up in our understanding and management of the sciences. Feyerabend at one point called this a 'critique of scientific reason' – a critique, in Kant's sense, of the nature and limits of this thing called science. The critique of methodological monism offered in his book *Against Method* is a key part of that. Close attention to the actual history and practice of science shows that there is no such thing as *the* scientific method, in the sense of a set of fixed, singular and context-invariant methodological rules that apply whether one is studying sunflowers or supernovae. What we find, argued Feyerabend, is a messier, more complex assemblage of formal and informal methods, *ad hoc* adjustments, experimental fudges, creativity and imagination, and a fair bit of contingency and luck. This is clear to anyone who's actually performed scientific research – in the lab, at the workbench, in the field. But it tends to be disguised by the sorts of models of science popular during the mid-twentieth-century that Feyerabend was reacting against – like Karl Popper's falsificationism.

The critique of certain philosophical models of science connects to the sorts of social and political issues you raise – about the epistemic authority of

the sciences in many societies. Feyerabend is admirable for his efforts to get mainstream philosophers of science to take seriously those dimensions of the sciences. (There are a couple of excellent studies of the history of philosophy of science by George Reisch and Heather Douglas explaining *why* American philosophy of science decoupled itself from social and political questions – see Reisch, 2005; Douglas, 2009) But as usual, Feyerabend tended to be rather hot-headed, calling for a 'separation of science and the state' and so on. Contemporary scholars of his work, including Matthew Brown and Helene Sorgner, have very nice work on views on science, expertise and democracy (Brown, 2016; Sorgner, 2016). These days there is a lot of outstanding work on science, values, policy and expertise (an excellent example is what Carla Fehr and Kathryn Plaisance call 'socially responsible philosophy of science' – Fehr & Plaisance, 2010). Interestingly, feminist philosophers of science were doing precisely the sort of work that Feyerabend called for – engaged, pluralistic, socially sensitive and so on. To my knowledge, though, he didn't engage with it much at all – a pity.

Actually, his neglect of feminist philosophies of science is part of a wider pattern. There are many philosophical traditions, figures and movements that shared his concerns with which he never, to my knowledge, seriously engaged. Pragmatism and postcolonial science and technology studies are two others. Feyerabend is a pluralist, but a 'patchwork pluralist' – that is, always engaging with classics, history of science and art, and his beloved philosopher-physicists, but never with other areas pertinent to his interests, like social epistemology or political theory. I sometimes suspect he looked elsewhere, but rarely went deeply into them. We know, for instance, that he read some Foucault (who is mentioned positively in his correspondence with Lakatos) and Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences* (1936/1970 – which I don't think he properly understood) and Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*. But I've argued that we can't plausibly class Feyerabend as a postmodernist, because his conception of the sciences is ... well, too *modern*. What mattered to Feyerabend was maintaining a constant critical relationship with the sciences, exploring and trying to expand their current limits and guarding against excesses and abuses, so that they can keep delivering us the epistemic and practical goods that ameliorate human life. That's one sort of humanism, but there's a further sort – the sort one sees in Nietzsche and William James – according to which we can never pretend to objective knowledge of the nature of reality in itself, since all of our knowledge and experience is indelibly characterised by all-too-human interests and concerns. (We can't, as James said, 'weed out the human contribution'.) That might rule out certain forms of scientific realism, but one needn't be a scientific realist in order to respect and admire the sciences in the ways recommended by Feyerabend.

RH: I'm fascinated and excited by what you say about a 'socially responsible philosophy of science' and also the feminist philosophy of science, Ian. In the autumn issue of this journal we had a great article on patriarchy (Kashtan, 2020) – and I'm now realising that we also need a specifically *patriarchy-informed critique* of mainstream science as well as an epistemological, political, cultural and spiritually informed one. Is this what feminist philosophy of science attempts to do? – and would PKF have approved of this critical line, I'm wondering? Your characterisation of PKF as a 'patchwork pluralist' rather than a systematic one certainly rings very true. As a genuinely free spirit, it seems that he picked and chose what to pursue, and that having this freedom, and single-mindedly pursuing what inspired him and caught his imagination, were more important to him than any drive to systematisation. And I can see how that trait could easily annoy at least some more conventional academic sensibilities!

Re the science question (if I may call it that), in passing in relation to the 'History of Ideas', I noticed that in his autobiography, PKF refers to a workshop on Goethe's theory of colour led by 'a follower of Rudolph [sic] Steiner' (Feyerabend, 1995, p. 160) – indicating that PKF was certainly aware of Steiner. I just wanted to quote Steiner on positivism and scientism from 1914 and 1918 – in words that sound uncannily like the PKF of *Science in a Free Society*: '…natural science has become much more dogmatic than the old religions. Today, people… stick to dogmas more rigidly and seriously than was the case with the old

religious dogmas…. Science is not readily inclined to accept new views' (Steiner, 1914, quoted in Žilavec, 2020). And in addition, 'What has suffered most in recent years are judgements that have allowed themselves to be clouded by submission to authorities' (Steiner, 1918, quoted in Žilavec, 2020). And Steiner is equally withering about what he saw as the scientific positivism of his time:

> The day that sees an end to the denial of the spirit, a denial that is characteristic of modern positivism, the day that we recognize that we must build upon a thinking freed from the tyranny of the senses, upon spiritual investigation, including all that is called science in the ethical, social and political domain, that day will mark the dawn of a new humanity. (Steiner, 1918)

And according to another PKF scholar Eric Martin, Feyerabend wrote that

> secular materialists who did not share [spiritual orientations] should not seek to establish their own experience of reality as a default one arising from the correct interpretation of nature: first, because theirs was not a privileged experience of reality, and second, because their own sensibilities and experiences of the world were themselves, perhaps, attenuated. (Martin, 2016, p. 131)

Steiner would have whole-heartedly concurred with this. I do wonder about the extent to which the later PKF and Steiner were (somewhat improbable) kindred spirits on these questions. Again in passing, Steiner was also emphatic and explicit that science should be part of what he called 'the free cultural sphere' and not in any way in cahoots with the State (or, for that matter, with free-market capitalism) – a view in tune with what you call Feyerabend's 'hot-headed' calling for a 'separation of science and the state'!

On the key issue of materialism, I was very struck by PKF saying loudly and clearly at the end of *Farewell to Reason* (p. 313) that 'The problem is the growing disregard for spiritual values and their replacement by a crude "scientific" materialism…'. Martin has also written the following:

> Earlier in his career Feyerabend made important contributions to materialist philosophy, prominently though his sketch of eliminative materialism in the philosophy of mind. *He subsequently rejected materialism*, describing it as a 'depressing' picture of the world that has no authoritative claim compelling acceptance. (Martin, 2016, p. 132, my italics; see Feyerabend, 2011, p. 35)

So it appears that over his career, PKF moved from being a pretty fully fledged materialist and ended up embracing a worldview that was far more tolerant towards the spiritual, and even the mystical. I wonder what your take is on this, Ian; and I also wonder whether this shift might – at least in part – account for why PKF ended up being perceived as an 'enemy' of science who had pointedly deserted the scientific-materialist creed.

This might also be the point to raise the question of materialism's 'regime of truth' (if I can use that term), and the wider question of 'modernity'. I've already said far too much again, so just one brief question. Did PFK ever explicitly get 'on the case' of modernity, as philosophers like Stephen Toulmin and Richard Tarnas have done? (e.g. Toulmin, 1990; Tarnas, 1991). As someone who was so interested in the *history* and *temporal evolution* of science, it would perhaps be both notable and surprising if PKF didn't 'take on' modernity. (I also really want to pick up on the 'p' (= postmodernism) question – but that can wait a bit.)

IJK: I think Feyerabend would've made better progress in many of his concerns if he had engaged with work in feminist philosophy of science. It shares his concerns to promote epistemic pluralism, to emphasise the social dimensions of scientific work, and to expose the epistemic injustices that corrupt science and society alike. Much of what he tried to do, often badly or naively, feminist philosophers of science did much better. Sandra Harding (e.g. 1986), Evelyn Fox Keller (e.g. 1985) and others provide far more complex insights. This is, I think, a case where being an unsystematic free spirit really held Feyerabend back. Spontaneity, freedom and eclecticism are all very well, but they must be augmented by the dull-sounding virtues of carefulness, conscientiousness, and diligence.

Otherwise, you miss out on tools and experts you really need to get your work done to a high standard.

Actually, that temperamental failing of Feyerabend's is also pertinent to your points about Steiner. There's a lot of what we might call existential critique of scientific naturalism in the Continental European philosophical traditions, especially in the Austrian and German traditions. Heidegger, Husserl, Weber and others – all of them warned of, to quote some of their terminology, the 'disenchantment', 'distress' and alienation inherent in a dogmatic embrace of a denuded scientific vision of the world. Such language and concerns resonated with wider popular audiences, whether or not they really understood the underlying theoretical claims. 'Reductionist' is a term still popular, I think, with certain critics of scientism, even to the point that it seems to be regarded by some of them as a dirty word! As the late philosopher Mary Midgley often warned us, abstraction and reductionism are not, in themselves, problematic. On the contrary, they are extremely valuable epistemic tools. Problems only arise when we misuse them. I think Feyerabend thought much the same about science and philosophy.

Anyway, back to Steiner, I doubt Feyerabend knew much about him or really engaged with him. One tendency among eclectics is that they don't go into detail, and are thus liable to mislead readers into thinking they're keen on things when they're not. I will tell my students that it is better to go into depth about one thing rather than skim very superficially over many things. As I've argued elsewhere, Feyerabend's failures to produce a decent political philosophy arose from his failure to read widely enough in that direction! (He tells us as much in one of his later interviews.) But it's clear to me that some of the broadly cultural, politically and existential concerns floated in the later writings of the late 1970s onwards could only have been properly worked out if he'd read more existentialism, phenomenology, feminist philosophy, and so on. All we get, though, are a few passing references, here and there, to Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences* and other texts, and lots of glaring omissions.

You also ask about the spiritual or mystical dimensions of the later writings. I'm told by some of Feyerabend's friends that he was not religious. Certainly, I don't see any strong religious character to the later writings. The later writings do claim that reality, in itself, is 'ineffable' – resistant even in principle to conceptual articulation and description. That sort of claim has been a part of certain religious traditions, but need not be. (Kant was an ineffabilist of that sort, at least on some interpretations.)

I think those claims about the ineffability of reality is tough. For one thing, Feyerabend does not really provide us with robust arguments, even if we can try and provide them by looking to other thinkers, like Kant, Nietzsche or William James. We could interpret the ineffabilism as a sort of perspectivism, where different theories or worldviews offer us different perspectives on reality, but ones too indelibly shaped by our all-too-human interests, practices and purposes to pretend to describe how reality is in itself, independent of what William James called 'the human contribution'. I think one could make an argument like that fit the rather scattered remarks on ineffability and Being in the later writings. But again, the ineffability of reality can function as an epistemological and metaphysical thesis about our epistemic situation relative to the nature of reality. It needn't take on any religious or spiritual significance, and I don't see much evidence that Feyerabend was really interested in that, anyway.

RH: I'll try to be briefer this time, Ian! I keep wondering whether from the late 1970s onwards, PKF really moved more into the field of the *sociology* of science (and of knowledge), as opposed to being a *philosopher* of science. And if there's anything in this designation, perhaps his later work is less 'problematic' if seen more as sociology than as philosophy (and I'm not denigrating Sociology in suggesting that). I also wonder whether PKF might have to some extent paved the way for the likes of Harding and Fox Keller with at least the seeds of a critique of patriarchal scientism in the 1970s: they may have been aware of his work, and were certainly writing after his *Against Method* and *Science in a Free Society* were published. And again – not to criticise Sociology as a discipline in any way! – but I'm

also wondering whether being an 'unsystematic free spirit' might be more acceptable in sociology than in philosophy!

(In passing, I'd love to discuss your point that 'it is better to go into depth about one thing rather than skim very superficially over many things' – but perhaps (and alas), this isn't the place for that discussion!)

IJK: Feyerabend certainly helped open a space for the sociology of science, partly by making the case for greater sensitivity to the history and practice of science. Others helped too, of course, most famously Thomas Kuhn, but also now largely forgotten figures, like Jerry Ravetz. The opening page of his 1971 book *Science and its Social Problems* state his interests well: 'the problems of the character of scientific knowledge, of the sociology and ethics of science, and of the applications of science to technology and human welfare'. Certainly, feminist philosophers of science credit Feyerabend with helping clear the way for more socially situated approaches, although usually by lumping him together with Kuhn and other advocates of post-positivist philosophy of science. I did once ask Sandra Harding about Feyerabend; she agreed that some of his later works did play into themes later developed by postcolonial science and technology studies.

The problem is, though, that Feyerabend did not give detailed case studies, nor do the sociological work. Perhaps that is not a problem – one can help by clearing space for certain kinds of work, or by urging those in one field to take seriously work in another, or by showing the fruits of drawing on others' work. Feyerabend clearly admired the big-name philosophers of science of the 1980s and 1990s, like Ian Hacking and Nancy Cartwright, who engaged closely with the interplay of science, values and practices. Perhaps he was quietly very pleased with how the philosophy of science developed. Certainly, he would have liked the movement devoted to 'integrated history and philosophy of science', at whose annual UK workshops I regularly beat the drum for Feyerabend!

RH: These are great answers – thank you! I'm so happy to hear that PKF has at least some recognition in the sociology of science – something I believe he richly deserves. Whether it was courage (Foucault's 'fearless speech'), recklessness or (arrogant?) bravado – or some combination of these – I'm delighted that he spoke out as he did about the authoritarian tendencies of science and technology way back in the 1970s (and he must surely have been aware of the opprobrium that this would attract from certain directions).

Referring back, there's perhaps an important point to make about being 'religious' and being 'spiritual' not by any means necessarily being synonymous. Can I assume from what you say that you're not convinced by the detailed case that Eric Martin makes for the more spiritual dimension of the later Feyeraband (Martin, 2016)? From my psychologist's viewpoint, I also wonder about the developmental aspect of being a philosopher – and that the *human* aspects of an individual's development can influence their philosophical commitments over time that go well beyond the internal logic of philosophical positions (though I can hear my teachers from the early 1990s saying '…but that's got nothing to do with Philosophy!').

Your point about reductionism is interesting; and yes, 'reductionist' does tend to be a term promiscuously deployed as a term of abuse by humanists like myself without perhaps sufficient understanding of both what we're saying, and its implications. Again, Steiner was emphatic that we should start from the whole (not least, in teaching in Waldorf schools), and *only then* go to the parts. That was the anti-reductionist 'holism' that he consistently championed, and which strongly attracts humanists like myself.

IJK: My thinking about Feyerabend in relation to religion and spirituality is complicated by the fact that I also have independent research interests in the philosophy of religion and the spiritual life. In that work, my concerns have been to challenge overly narrow and abstract approaches to philosophising about religion – or the plurality of things crammed under that label – by urging a closer engagement with actual religious practices and communities. One of my main inspirations here is Mikel Burley at the University of Leeds (e.g. Burley, 2016). He uses anthropological work to offer more empirically complex accounts of

religions, and takes inspiration from the later Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In an interesting curio, it was Wittgenstein's emphasis on the multifariousness of actual practice and activity that helped inspire Feyerabend's approach to science. So, there are genuine if indirect connections between my thinking about science and religion that trace back to Wittgenstein! In the case of Feyerabend and religion, then, I don't see in his writings any genuine sort of spiritual aspiration. It's possible to interpret certain remarks in *Conquest of Abundance* in those terms, as Eric does in his paper – a rare example, by the way, of something thinking about those issues. I'm sure there are existential themes to the later writings, but thinking existentially need not entail thinking religiously. The really deep temperamental impulse one sees in Feyerabend, I think, is a profound hostility to conceit, dogmatism, closed mindedness, and other ways of being closed to epistemic (and perhaps existential) possibilities. The abundance of the world should be exulted in and celebrated, not occluded or denied by those in the grip of narrowing ideologies. I think he had what Bas van Fraassen called the stance of 'abiding wonder' at the world (Van Fraasen, 2004), a sense that it cannot be exhaustively captured by our scientific theories and descriptions. William James says similar things about temperaments, of course.

RH: I want to ask you about PKF in relation to postmodernism and his (perhaps lesser known) nature philosophy, Ian; but can I first briefly ask you about the collapsing of science into technology, and the confusions that arise from this? (written about by people like Andrew Feenberg and Sergio Sismondo – e.g. Feenberg, 2010; Sismondo, 2010). Can PKF in any way be seen as a precursor to these vitally relevant contemporary discussions, or is it again more a matter of his having made scatter-gun remarks that were more promissory than of any real substance?

IJK: I don't know enough about the philosophy of technology to say much about its relation to the sciences. Some modern scholars like the term 'technoscience', to emphasise the contingent ways they have become entangled. (Steven Shapin uses the term in that sense (e.g. Shapin, 1988), and it has been applied retrospectively to Auguste Comte). Feyerabend does not say anything dazzlingly original about the relation of science to technology, at least to my knowledge, although those better acquainted with the relevant scholarship might correct me on that. He'd make the usual Feyerabendian points – those singular terms disguise what are really complex clusters of things, that they will be shaped by contingent social histories, that they are each messily bound up with one another and the wider hurly-burly of human life, and so on. I often think that what Feyerabend really wanted to emphasise was the *messiness* of the world. 'Abundance' is a prettier term, I think, but really it's the *mess* that most strikes him!

RH: Psychoanalytically inclined psychologists (especially Kleinian ones) could say a lot about being 'struck by mess' – but I'd better not go there in this interview!

Regarding Feyerabend's alleged postmodernism: I know that you've challenged the view that PKF was in some sense a postmodernist (Kidd, 2016b), and that PKF himself expressed contempt for the 'obfuscations' of the likes of Derrida (Feyerabend, 1995, p. 180); but on the other hand, John Preston has made a detailed case for PKF at the least having postmodern tendencies (Preston, 2000). Of course defining what 'postmodernism' consists in is notoriously controversial and problematic – and perhaps even 'caus[es] more trouble than it is worth' (Rorty, 1991, p. 1). Yet in the sense that PKF was avowedly critical of at least the fruits of (late) modernity, if not its very project, does not this *of itself* justify perhaps a loose designation of '*post*modern' for PKF's later concerns and commitments?

IJK: There are several problems to deal with here. Postmodernism is a broad constellation of movements, themes and attitudes. Feyerabend's work was very diverse and contains lots of changes and obscuring rhetoric. There's also a relative lack of engagement with and sympathy for postmodernism among analytical philosophers of science. In my 2016 article, I consider three characterisations of philosophical postmodernism. Two are rejected fairly swiftly as either not being coherent, or not plausibly applying to Feyerabend,

or both. A third characterisation involves a theme of 'depthlessness', but, again, I argue that that doesn't fit his writings at all.
What's better, I think, is a term that the philosopher (and admirer of Feyerabend) John Dupré has used – 'critical modernism'. That suits Feyerabend well – a critical respect for various institutions and projects of modernity, including the sciences, which is something I try to develop more in a forthcoming paper ('Feyerabend, science, and scientism' – Kidd, forthcoming/2021). A critical modernist endorses those institutions and projects, but is honest about their limitations and failings, and works hard to try to overcome them. As Feyerabend argues in his fun little essay, 'How to defend society against science' (1975b), the sciences can be very good, epistemically and socially, but only if used with due care and if subjected to constant critical vigilance of the sort that can be supported by the philosophy of science. Put in those terms, I don't see any good grounds to see Feyerabend as a post-modernist. He's a critical modernist.

RH: Well on this specific issue I might find myself taking issue with PKF (which happens very rarely indeed) if he were alive today! Specifically, I would want to argue (and of course against folk like Jürgen Habermas too) that there are forces and processes that are *intrinsic to* establishment science in late capitalist society / late modernity that inevitably generate the kinds of issues that PKF highlighted around scientism, abuses of power, and even shading into the technocracy question. Relatedly, I guess this issue also turns on whether the Enlightenment Project itself (if we can call it that) is also fundamentally flawed, with Descarte's Cartesianism, and Francis Bacon writing of nature being 'bound into service, hounded in her wanderings and put on the rack and tortured for her secrets'. And also George Steiner's prophetic, early depiction of the search for truth as a 'hunt' (Steiner, 1978). But alas this isn't the place for such a discussion!

My (possibly!) penultimate question is a highly topical one, Ian – on PKF as a *philosopher of nature*. I've recently been reading this 'forgotten work' of his (published in English in 2016; originally published in German in 2009 as *Naturphilosophie*), and it seems to open up many of the issues we've touched on in this interview – and will also be of some interest to our readers because of its environmental relevance. For example, I was struck by this comment by Eric Martin – 'Feyerabend was clearly sympathetic to "people who would like to approach nature in a more personal way" (Feyerabend, 2011, 38) than the typically impersonal approaches of objectivizing scientific procedures' (Martin, 2016, p. 133).

But first, I did just want to say that I'm increasingly getting the sense that PKF had a huge range of interests that greatly enthused him, and possibly with a predominantly sanguine temperament – something I can identify with. And what can often happen with such people is that they do sometimes play 'fast and loose' with their subject matter because there's just so much they have to say; and so to focus methodically on drilling down into 'knowing more and more about less and less' in relation to a specific subject would entail a great sacrifice for someone whose whole being wants to engage passionately and wide-rangingly with the rich abundance of the world. Of course I'm defending PKF again! – but I want to say that he would almost certainly have paid a great *personal* price if he *had* forced upon himself, against his nature, the discipline of the systematic, methodically thorough thinker; and in my view we would also have been the losers, for we would have lost much of the richness and range of this great mind, and its creative and often subversive commitments.

To my question! It's always so exciting to discover a master's lost work! Can you say something about the importance of PKF's *Philosophy of Nature* – what Heit and Oberheim refer to as 'a genealogy of modern views of nature in light of past *and possibly even future* alternatives' (2016, p. xxi, my italics) – in the context of his overall philosophy and worldview; and whether it has any relevance to the environmental concerns of today (the latter being something Feyerabend was very aware of, of course). And is it perhaps at least as much a work of historical *anthropology* as of philosophy?

IJK: The term 'philosophy of nature' needs some careful handling. In English, it might sound as if it refers to environmental philosophy, whereas the

German, *Naturphilosophie*, refers to a rather different project – something more like the task of developing large-scale conceptions of the nature of the world. *Natur* arguably means something more like 'cosmos' in Greek, I think. Certainly, what Feyerabend discusses in the recently published book, *Naturphilosophie*, are large-scale conceptions of the origins and nature of reality – whether mythological, philosophical or scientific (terms whose distinctions are blurry, of course). We know he started writing that book alongside what became *Against Method* back in the 1970s – there are scattered references to it in his letters of the time. It's also continuous with his interests in changes of world-picture, like the alleged shift away from the paratactic-aggregate cosmology described in *Conquest of Abundance*.

In a sense, Feyerabend's aim was to emphasise the plurality of ways of conceiving of the world that communities of human beings have developed. Whether he succeeds is another question – in my review of the book (Kidd, 2019c), one of the problems I flagged was the imbalance of the project. He was fascinated by ancient Greece but then rushes through hundreds of years of subsequent intellectual history in a few dense chapters. Unsystematic, again!

Moreover, the ambition of *Naturphilosophie* was probably unworkable for someone like Feyerabend. He wanted to describe shifts in these worldviews from the Stone Age to quantum mechanics – a task that, if really taken seriously, would require dozens of volumes. *Conquest* (2001) took the wiser, more modest approach of describing a few selected episodes from that vast story and using them to push some general themes. These include the remarkable vitality of culturally diverse ways of life, the contingency of the modern scientific picture of the world, and a sort of cosmopolitan thrill in our collective human achievements. There's also the anger and frustration as the wilful destruction of that cultural and intellectual diversity and the baleful environmental effects.

I read *Conquest* and other later writings as expressing a profound sadness at the various tendencies that conspire to erode the epistemic and cultural diversity of the human world. There's quite a bit of 'green' anxiety about environmental destruction and some 'post-colonial guilt', too. Those who cherish abundance should despair to see it lost needlessly and – if possible – offer means of conserving what remains and creating new future richness. I think that's one clear theme of so much of Feyerabend's work.

RH: Again so much to pick up on from this rich answer, Ian – though I'll reluctantly refrain! But can I just cheekily squeeze in a penultimate question about the democratisation of science? Thorpe and Welsh (2008, online) have argued that '*A philosophical manifesto* for new social movement engagement with science… can be seen in the work of… Paul Feyerabend' (my italics). They maintain that 'Feyerabend's writing prefigured contemporary debates and experiments in citizen science, arguing that "participating in citizens' initiatives" was the minimum requirement to achieve wisdom and justice in dealings in this area… [l]aymen can and must supervise science" (Feyerabend, 1982: 107, 96–7)'. I think a related point is that made by Heit and Oberheim, that 'for the later Feyerabend, scientific progress does not necessarily coincide with cultural and social progress' (Heit & Oberheim, 2016, p. xx). If we accept for a moment that establishment techno-science (if I may call it that) does indeed have authoritarian tendencies (e.g. Gordon, 2015), can PKF claim any credit for both articulating this phenomenon (most notably in Feyerabend, 1978), and also at least naming what needs to happen (i.e. citizens' democratic control of science – e.g. Wiggins & Crowston, 2011) in order to counter such arguable authoritarianism?

IJK: Well, Feyerabend was certainly a loud voice in calling for the democratisation of science, at least within the community of mainstream philosophers of science of the 1970s. Unfortunately, the rhetoric often did more work than the arguments he gave, even if some recent scholars, like Matt Brown and Sarah Roe, are looking at them again in a more sympathetic manner. Philip Kitcher did make some positive noises about Feyerabend's work in his 2012 book *Science in a Democratic Society*, the title of which is an obvious nod to *Science in a Free Society*. But Kitcher was much more systematic! A lot of subsequent work in science and technology studies and sociology of science takes a much more

systematic approach to the democratisation of science – we now have a lot of very sophisticated work on that. I don't think they draw much on Feyerabend's work, though, although maybe Matt and Sarah will change that. I gather that Feyerabend's later writings got more traction outside of philosophy – in anthropology, for instance; so perhaps he did have a more diffuse influence than is currently appreciated. Exploring that would be a good task for a Feyerabend scholar!

RH: Well he certainly impressed and inspired me! – as I hope will be clear from this interview – and I'm no philosopher (but I'd eagerly become a Feyerabend philosopher-scholar if I wasn't in the twilight of my academic career). I'm assuming I certainly can't have been the only non-philosopher inspired by PKF! In my view, sometimes it takes someone – anyone – to have visionary insights and intuitions, someone who is able to see straight to the heart of things without necessarily reaching those insights and 'visions' via the conventional rationalist route (which is part of PKF's very point about 'method', as I understand it). I experience PKF as one of those rare people with that capacity. And it might even be that to possess such a capacity is actually incompatible with the more systematic, rationalist approach that you say PKF often or usually lacked. That's perhaps more a conversation for psychology than philosophy, however! – and one our readers might wish to engage with in responding to this interview.

Ian – for me, doing this interview has been one of the most exciting projects I've engaged in for a long time; huge gratitude to you from me, and I'm sure from all our readers, for the care and time you've given to this interview. It's hugely appreciated, and incredibly generous and patient of you, a busy academic philosopher in Covid times, to have given all this time to answering the (sometimes philosophically naïve) questions and questings of this PKF-loving non-philosopher!

One final question. I have a sense that we've created something of *a dance* in this interview between my perhaps relatively uninformed enthusiasm for the later PKF, and your more qualified and nuanced admiration that has (probably rightly) encouraged me to be a bit more careful and discerning in my fulsomely uncritical admiration!

Earlier, you memorably wrote that 'We're all Feyerabendians now!' Can I ask you to end the interview by saying why you think Paul Feyerabend is an important philosopher (of science) and thinker, what the nature is of any recognition he justly warrants, and why you believe he's still important today. The final words are fittingly yours.

IJK: Well, Feyerabend disliked the conceit that only academics, scientists or others with specific sorts of specialised training could have anything to contribute to certain debates. From the late 1970s, at least, we see emphases on the important contributions of technicians, artisans, aboriginal peoples and others either marginalised or derogated. In a sense, this is a critique of scientism, technocratism, and so on; but there's also the worry that all sorts of expertise have their limits. Certain perspectives, no matter how sophisticated, have their limitations. Attending to them, in practice, often means drawing on other perspectives. That's a sort of robust pluralism, even if it often got badly expressed by Feyerabend, who dramatically rushed to extreme examples, like witchcraft and astrology.

In later writings, he credits his third wife, Grazia Borrini – a physicist and an activist – for introducing him to more effective examples of collaborative practice, for instance from development economics.[4] In a sense, that's consistent with a sort of conservative spirit – a faith that, very often, people know very well how best to manage their own affairs, such that their local situated expertise ought to be respected. There's also the similarly conservative conviction that abstract 'solutions' should not be presumptively imposed on to people from afar. If you read Feyerabend alongside Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott, you get a far more conservative character than the 'epistemological anarchist' of popular fame!

As for his importance as a philosopher of science, well, what he represented was a broader conception of the scope and agenda of philosophy of science. He wanted to take the existing concerns of the

subject and connect it to a wider array of concerns, to take seriously the fact that science is a major institution in human life. Granted, many later philosophers have done that, especially in the direction of values, policy and the epistemic authority of science. But there is still more expansion to come. Heidegger, Husserl and others reflected systematically on the existential and cultural dimensions of the scientific picture of the world. I think we do well to read Feyerabend as part of that tradition, as I argued in an article reflecting on the ways he was influenced by Wittgenstein (Kidd, 2017). Doubtless Feyerabend would be happy to see the ways that philosophy of science has expanded itself over the years – and certainly one hopes that he wouldn't any longer dismiss is as 'a subject with a great past'! If he played some small part in ensuring it also has a great future, that's good enough for me.

Notes

1 Feyerabend's most famous critique of Kuhn came in an influential 1970 paper, 'Consolations for the specialist'. It warned that Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was smuggling in a normative vision of science under the guise of a purely descriptive account of its history. Moreover, Feyerabend argued that Kuhn's vision of science – organised around a single dominant 'paradigm' – would suppress the natural plurality of scientific activity and so undermine enquiry.

2 There exists an edited collection on Feyeraband titled *The Worst Enemy of Science?* (Preston et al., 2000). It's amusing that this is the title of a volume devoted to PKF. The phrase, though, originally came from an article that appeared in *Nature* magazine (Theocharis & Psimopoulous, 1987) condemning philosophy of science, and PKF in particular.

3 This interview was conduced by Joachim Jung and printed in *The Worst Enemy of Science* anthology (Jung, 2000).

4 Borrini founded and runs the Paul K. Feyerabend Foundation (https://www.pkfeyerabend.org/en/) which carries on that important work – check out their website, which includes an audio recording of Feyerabend in conversation.

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Invited Commentary

Conquering abundance, curtailing complexity, reducing richness: comments on a conversation about Paul Feyerabend

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The idea that the abundance of a conversation, engagement or situation is not something that can be conquered and listed is perhaps common in some philosophy and literature. (Can we create a conquering list of *Hamlet*?) Plato, we might imagine, was appreciative of this, and left us conversations rather than treaties. The conversation between Ian James Kidd and Richard House cannot be conquered, contained and listed, but like all good conversations, much might be said about it, said in conversation with it, following on from it, by way of associating to it.

The time in which we live, though, is in some opposition to idle conversations about a philosopher, especially a philosopher like Paul Feyerabend. (Are there philosophers like Feyerabend? I will come to this in a while.) It favours and funds STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), as if they capture all and only what is important. It favours clear, neat, time-saving summaries that get to the point, abstract what is important, list what is true, meaningful and worthwhile, discarding what is not 'relevant' or is redundant, and it favours methods for getting this job done efficiently.

It might be possible to conduct some sort of research on this conversation on Feyerabend, approaching it in the right sort of way (according to somebody's standards), and at least come out with a list of themes, or otherwise to find a way of measuring and weighing the meanings, ideas and suggestions that appear in the conversation. Is it possible, even here, to hold that there is a way of representing what really happened, an orthodox and true account?

At one point, Richard likens the exchange to a dance, and surely it could be danced by people who have cultivated that sort of approach. It might be painted or sculpted, with Richard overflowing with enthusiasm and Ian more cautious but certainly not lacking in appreciation when it comes to this philosopher. In this dance, which seems spirited and well behaved, Richard calls on Rudolf Steiner. What he has to say and quote here makes it clear that Steiner has something important to contribute to this conversation, and to many conversations, about our submissions and subjugations to authorities, conformity, neoliberalism and scientism. To this call, Ian is able to give a response that is about Steiner in part and also about many other writers and thinkers, such as the American philosopher of feminism and postcolonial theory, Sandra Harding, the American physicist, author and feminist, Evelyn Fox Keller and the more familiar Continental philosophers, who might be irreverently referred to as 'the usual suspects'.

There is much to return to in this interview. Certainly there is what is said about Feyerabend's opposition to what, following the Wittgenstein scholar P.M.S. Hacker and a psychotherapist who was deeply influenced by Wittgenstein, John Heaton, I refer to as 'scientism', and what, following Heidegger and David E. Cooper, I refer to as 'technicity' or 'technicism'. I understand by these terms the overvaluing of science and technology to the point where they push out all other ways of thinking and being, so that nothing else even makes sense to us. People, then, are thought of and treated as if they have 'dysfunctions' to be 'cured' or repaired as efficiently as possible. They are standing resources to be used efficiently, and must be returned to a state where they can be so used. Psychology and psychiatry

are disciplines for 'fixing' and returning to full functioning people who have impairments in their minds or brains. Feyerabend, along with Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Nietzsche and the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi or Chuang Tzu, are against this dehumanising elevation of science and technology that leads us to destroy our world and narrow our hearts (Brooks, 2020).

Unsurprisingly, there is much in this conversation about how abundance cannot be conquered, how through science and theories we seem to have the idea that we might systematise, finally grasp and represent authoritatively what is really there. Feyerabend, along with the philosophers recently mentioned and many others, wants to wake us up to the unconquerable abundance of our lives and the fact that our little nets and small sieves may get hold of something, but we are poor and deluded if we think that what we are left with is somehow some objective image or representation of the world and our lives.

As indicated above and supported in the conversation between Ian and Richard, Feyerabend may be thought about as part of a tradition of philosophers who are trying to tell us about our limits, limitations and hubris, including how our preoccupation with 'progress' may be double-edged and damning. I think that he understood, and can be taken as elaborating on, Nietzsche's comment that physics is also a way of describing the world according to our needs and interests, not a way of 'explaining' the world (Nietzsche, 1982: *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 14). The preface of this book, for example, introduces an anti-dogmatism that might be similar to Feyerabend's, and section 111 of *The Gay Science*, 'Origin of the logical', claims that we cope with abundance by habitually jumping to conclusions, and treating as the same what is only similar, simplifying our world, conforming, evading our choices and responsibilities (Nietzsche 1974: *The Gay Science*: Section 111).

Feyerabend's *Conquest of Abundance* and *Against Method* may be read as elaborating on Nietzsche's claim that 'God is dead' and we need to kill his shadows, too, or that we need to be wary of claiming and imagining that there is a perspective from which God sees and which we might attain, and that there is a method that propels science which will lead us close to God's perspective, or is closer than any other way of speaking or seeing.

In his last paragraph of comments, Ian says:

> Heidegger, Husserl and others reflected systematically on the existential and cultural dimensions of the scientific picture of the world. I think we do well to read Feyerabend as part of that tradition, as I argued in an article reflecting on the ways he was influenced by Wittgenstein.…

If this conversation is conceived as sung rather than danced, there is one note in it that jars: the reference to Feyerabend as having a 'conservative spirit' or his 'conservative conviction'. This Ian clearly says is 'a sort of' 'conservative' spirit or faith that does not want to impose abstract notions and solutions on people, a respect for what is local, situated and might be vulnerable to what is grand and sweeping.

However, if 'conservative' is usually taken to mean a commitment to traditional values, opposition to change and innovation, as well as favouring free enterprise, private ownership, upholding traditional ideas and supporting hierarchies and authority, I would hesitate to use this term to describe Feyerabend. It is more tempting to say of him that he is the enemy of conservatism, orthodoxy and rigidity, and is better cast as Prometheus, the Titan Thief of Fire or Creativity, giving to mortals and non-experts what is often assumed to be the sole sacred possession and privilege of the gods of science.

Here may be the place to confess my sins: my unorthodox, irreverent and wayward uses of Feyerabend. It is many years since I was a serious student of the philosophy of science, preoccupied with Feyerabend, Kuhn and Popper and how to distinguish science from non-science or nonsense. (But clearly a psychotherapist does not really leave these sorts of considerations behind.) This interview reassures me that the Feyerabend I think I remember is related to the

one discussed. Nevertheless, in spite of my not spending my nights poring over his works, I have sometimes recommended Feyerabend to students. Usually, they have never heard of him. These tend to be doctoral students in psychotherapy or counselling psychology who are interested in scientism, the role of technology in our thinking and our lives, in the limits of language or the limits of what we can say, and those engaged in qualitative research and thinking about method and methodology. For, just to expand a little on the latter, surely if we take his argument that the physical sciences are anarchic and do not follow any methodological rules, that such rules do not generate or further scientific progress, then we need to think again about what we are doing when we insist that respectable research is qualitative research, and we must have methodology discussions and adherence to method. Does Feyerabend suggest that we might get something richer, more interesting and inspiring if we were to be less preoccupied with presenting ourselves as 'scientific' and therefore preoccupied with method and methodology?

If my first confession is that I am no longer a serous conscientious reader of the philosophy of science, my second, which is closely related to the first, is that when my colleagues talk to me about 'epistemology and ontology', I often struggle not to glaze over. For years I was embarrassed about this. For in spite of studying 'epistemology and ontology', I could not understand why they were talking about these terms, unless it was part of some attempt to give legitimacy to what they were doing: giving it some sort of claim to be 'scientific'. It often seems conformist, dishonest, something to pay lip-service to.

Feyerabend helps us to think about this a little. If we consider his argument that the hard sciences are essentially anarchic and that being a 'ruthless opportunist' in the face of the accidents and abundance we face is what is crucial for 'successful participation' in the hard sciences (Feyerabend, 2008, pp. 9–10), why would anyone advocate that students of counselling psychology or psychotherapy need to state their epistemological position, and outline and follow a recognised methodology? Perhaps it has happened already, but I long for the day when a student will state their epistemological and methodological position as 'unscrupulous opportunism' (Feyerabend, 2008, p. 10) and use Feyerabend's work to argue this. (I dare say that rather than 'unscrupulous opportunism', what we are likely to get is a claim to being 'pluralistic'.)

My third confession is that there is another group that I recommend him to in my enthusiasm, and only later do I find myself worrying about the recommendation. They are students who are studying psychoanalysis, although I often muse on the fact that for any psychotherapist, what we should be aware of all the time is the abundance of what we are in: the many things that clients do and say, the way they say, how they look, what we think, feel, how we find ourselves entranced or distracted, and the many ways there are to try to make sense, including our much-overvalued theories. Perhaps if we can be more aware of this, we might learn to resist the temptation to think that we are in possession of the one true theory that finally conquers this abundance.

Sigmund Freud writes, 'He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger-tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.' (Freud, 1905, p. 114)

One response to such a statement, and perhaps the only one we might see if we have been well educated to be 'scientific', is to ask if this is true or false, and maybe to ask for his evidence. It may even be possible to imagine that research might be attempted to establish whether this is really so, and whether no person has ever gone to his or her death, secrets intact. (But how could this be done? How could this be proved? Not a head of state or journalist or soldier?) Thus Freud, who also wanted to present himself as the serious scientist of the mind, might be disproved and discarded.

One version of psychoanalysis, not the only version and not the truth, is that it is a way of thinking about and intervening in our relationship with ourselves, with other people and the rest of the world around us. It is a way of

engaging with complexity, ambivalence, our polymorphic, polysemic existence, overflowing with its pleasures and desires, suffering and losses.

Freud can be regarded as teaching us to see how we float in an overflow of meaning and significance, in spite of our attempts to keep silence about what matters to us, in spite of our attempts not to see, hear and otherwise sense. It is possible to read Freud as alerting us to the abundance that we are in, in and out of the consulting room, the richness that we often do not have eyes to see and ears to hear. It is as if he is telling us that there is something repressible but exuberant, conformist and agreeable, subversive and disruptive about what we are, that there is a measure that we attempt to observe and overflow, and that there is a measure in his writings that he both observes and subverts. This is a Freud who tells us that one of the problems is our coping with abundance, and thinking that we might capture this rather than flow with it to the next association.

The Feyerabend of my memory can be recommended as someone who is against orthodoxies, and especially the idea that a theory can become *the* true theory or model. Like Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Sartre and many others, he tries to direct our attention to the abundance of the life we are living, what is in front of us, and our tendency to fall into bad faith about ourselves, our tendency to shut ourselves up in some received version of how we should be and what we should think, our tendency to keep our lives and our spirits small. I recommend this Feyerabend, and this interview on him, to those who are interested in existentialism, phenomenology, psychotherapy research, and/or in science and its philosophy and history.

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