

LET THE REAL FEYERABEND PLEASE STAND: INTERROGATING THE ONTOLOGICAL BASIS FOR A POST- MODERNIST EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

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Introduction

I consider it necessary to begin this interrogation of the ontological basis for a post-modernist epistemology of a human person with the assumption that there is a necessary relationship between metaphysics and epistemology. It is difficult to think of an epistemological stance without a corresponding metaphysics. By extension, it would be difficult to think of an epistemology of the human person without a given ontological stance. Ontology is the science of 'being' in general, covering such issues as the nature of existence and categorial structure of reality. As a term, 'ontology' has some additional special uses in philosophy. It is used to refer to the set of things whose existence is acknowledged by a particular theory or system of thought: it is in this sense that one speaks of 'the ontology of a theory'.¹ To this extent, the post-modernist epistemology of the human person must rest on a given ontological scheme, and interrogating this ontological scheme is the point of focus for this essay. The work, therefore, considers the metaphysical ground or justification of a post-modernist theory of cognition concerning the human person. In other words, the work raises the question, how does the postmodern condition influence our cognitive process concerning the nature of the human person?

The Received View of Rationality

Since the 17th century, rationality has been understood through a matrix of relations between ‘truth’, ‘objectivity’, ‘certainty’ and ‘reality’. This has been identified with a certain unique framework of principles and methods with reference to which we are to secure truth and objective knowledge; an impartial stand point for meaningful discussion, appraisal, comparison, and judgment. The task of identifying and characterizing this framework is one of the starting point of human inquiry in general and philosophy in particular.

The Cartesian epistemological program initiated in the 17th century, presents one of the attempts at developing a system of principles and methods for conducting human inquiry. Inspired by the desire for reliable knowledge, Descartes constructed a system which he bequeathed to modern thought of which he is often described as the father.² This system had the background assumption that, the order of nature is fixed and stable, and that the human mind acquired mastery of it by operating in accordance with principles of understanding that are equally fixed and universal.³ To most seventeenth century thinkers, this assumption was beyond question. It did not only influence the understanding of rationality at the time, it also determined the type of epistemological question that could be raised.⁴

In addition to this assumption, there is a certain disposition of the mind – a certain anxiety⁵ expressed in the belief that in our understanding of reality and our interaction with it, only two options are open to us: either we are equipped with some permanent, historical framework to which we can ultimately appeal or we are ineluctably led to relativism, historicism, scepticism, and irrationalism. And so, we are always faced with a choice between a certain binding set of ideals and epistemological chaos.⁶

It was generally believed that to resolve this anxiety, we require a fixed framework of universal and foundational principles. Descartes saw this and embarked on a search for what he called an “Archimedean point” in his *Meditations*.⁷ Beginning with the first meditation, he says, It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and doubtful was everything I had constructed on this basis: and ... I was convinced that I must once, for all, seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I want to establish any firm and permanent structure...⁸

The need for this project of establishing a securely grounded thought system is compared to the vision Archimedes. Thus, in the second meditation Descartes writes:

Archimedes, in order that he might draw the terrestrial globe out of its place, demanded that one point be fixed and immovable. In the same way, I shall have the right to conceive high hopes if I am happy enough to discover one thing only which is certain and immutable.⁹

In Descartes's view, the principles that guide our understanding of the world consists in the correspondence between "ideas" which the human mind found "distinct" and "clear" (such as the basic concepts of Euclid's geometry) and aspects of the world. It is in this correspondence that we establish the foundations of knowledge as well as the standard of rationality. Thus, at the very base of knowledge is, according to Descartes, the neutral activity of reason.¹⁰

An adequate analysis of the received view of rationality must consider the contribution of Descartes and Bacon to the development of ideas. In the 17th century, Aristotle's science faced challenges in the light of new discoveries in physics, astronomy and anatomy. Francis Bacon is often taken to be the spokesman to the new spirit and new method of science. His idea about scientific method subsequently became known as Baconian induction, and is expressed in his *Novum Organum*.¹¹ In a general sense, Bacon's contribution to modern thought can be discussed at two related levels. The first level concerns the classification of knowledge. This is laid out in book 1 of the *Novum Organum*. In it, he made what was probably the first systematic attempt to express a psychological motives and human interests that often lie behind various forms of philosophical outlooks. He discussed what he called "idols of the mind" which had up to his own time persistently stood in the way of objective knowledge, dominated and distorted men's mind and delayed the acquisition of true knowledge. The "idols of the tribe", for instance, are tendencies to see things in relation to one's own self, rather than as they are in themselves. In Bacon's view, man is not the measure of all things and we unthinkingly tend to impose order on phenomena which is not there. If we would command nature, he says, we must first learn to obey her. There are "idols of the cave", which are the predispositions of character and learning with which different individuals approach facts, rather than seeing them as there really are. The "idols of the market place" arise through the use of language, when we read back into nature, conceptions that have arisen through our using words, which actually stand for nothing. Bacon also identifies "idols of the theatre" which are due to the influence of philosophical system of our mind. In his view, we should not be misled by Aristotle's talk of experimentation and observation. Someone in the grip of a philosophical system, he says, including Aristotle himself had come to his conclusion before he did his experiment. The second level has to do with a new method of investigation, set forth in the most empiricist form. This consists in

making experiments and drawing general conclusions from them. These conclusions are then tested in further experiments.¹² Bacon's position is primarily an attack against what he called the sterility of pure deductive logic, which is never really able to increase knowledge. He insisted that the traditional syllogism was not a means of discovery, but only an aid for exhibiting the deductive consequences of what is already known. He also attacked the older induction by simple enumeration which applies only when the class of "all" things referred to is finite and accessible, as in the statement: "the founding members of the Royal Society are all males and over the age of thirty years".¹³ Bacon's new method of induction was believed to go beyond this Aristotelian method because it is able to produce generalisations about "all" things, not simple about some property of members of a finite enumeration.

However, Bacon was not unaware of the fact that we cannot prove the truth of an induction in a general sense. The idea of "all", he says, must always include the thought that there may be found an exception to the inductive generalisation, as this is always based on a finite number of instances. In this way, Bacon proposed that a single negative experience was all we needed to falsify an induction. Thus, although it was G.H. Von Wright and Karl R. Popper that expounded much later the principle that the laws of nature and theories are not verifiable, but only falsifiable, the credit of initial recognition of this principle should go to Francis Bacon.¹⁴ Science, he thought, would develop by compiling vast tables of actual data accumulated with the help of experiment and observation. Of course, he believed that the mere accumulation of facts would not necessarily yield knowledge. There must be, he argues, a selection whose establishment is also quite problematic.¹⁵

Nevertheless, many scientists are known to have expressed, in varying degree, their adherence to Baconian philosophy. For instance, Isaac Newton in his *Principia* (1682), explored and extended the inductive method from qualities of bodies on which experiments can actually be performed to "qualities of all bodies universally" (Rule 3, Bk. 3). In his words,

The sum total facts, which are not only given in sense experience but also the experimental philosophical propositions gathered from phenomena by induction, should be considered either exactly or very nearly true notwithstanding any contrary hypothesis, until yet other phenomena make such propositions either more exact or liable to exception.¹⁶

Bacon's writings inspired the concern by British philosophers for the analysis of the nature of inductive reasoning, a concern which culminated in J.S. Mill's *System of Logic* (1843). Importantly, while Bacon's classification of knowledge stands widely adopted, his

understanding of scientific methods presents an adequate framework. This is because he failed to appreciate the sense in which mathematics was already the language of science. He also underestimated the use of scientist need to make of imaginative hypotheses.¹⁷ On this, he was criticized memorably by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (B.XII. 4).

Yet, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Austrian philosopher and physicist, Ernst Mach (1838-1926) adopted Bacon's epistemology in his *The Science of Mechanics* (1893) and *The Analysis of Sensation* (1914). In his view, science is no more than a conceptual reflection upon facts whose elements are contents of consciousness, and are given to us in sensation. This means that scientific statements or theoretical terms must be reducible to statements about sensations.¹⁸ This is contained in his famous "Doctrine of Elements".

Science as the Paradigm of Rationality

From the foregoing, we are presented with the idea of rationality as a privileged framework of principles and methods to which we can ultimately appeal in our understanding of reality. It was noted that the attempt to codify these principles and methods found its significant expression first in the programmes based on the (new inductive) method of inquiry advocated by Francis Bacon in combination with the analytic method of deductive reasoning emphasized by Rene Descartes.¹⁹ The concern of these men was mainly to establish a "theory of knowledge", to discover a unique set of terms into which discourses may be reduced, or some privileged vocabulary by means of which discourses may be rendered commensurable. The programmes of inquiry initiated in the modern period were essentially attempts to establish our discourses on a secure foundation; that is, to justify our beliefs and actions, goals and policies with reference to a certain universal "tribunal of judgment".²⁰

The validity of this foundationalist task of epistemology was reiterated during the first half of the twentieth century in the works of philosophers in the analytic tradition who sought to ground human knowledge in, or reduce all discourses to, a certain system of formal language.²¹ Rooted in the works of Gottlob Frege, the analytic tradition influenced the works of Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap, Moritz Schlick and several others whose ultimate concern was how to make philosophy rigorous and scientific.²² They initiated a new tendency in philosophy, re-orienting epistemology towards an ideal system of propositions and methods; a complex of principles and rules. It is with reference to such a system that theories are to be constructed and corroborated.²³ The general aim of the new tendency was to sustain an adequate analysis of the character of

scientific investigations.²⁴ And so, epistemology as a “transcendental” inquiry into the meaning and conditions of knowledge was gradually replaced by a methodology pursued with an understanding of science as the source of genuine knowledge and paradigm of rationality.²⁵

The first significant representation of science as the paradigm of rationality and model of genuine knowledge, came with the positivist orientation. Positivism, along with phenomenalism, pragmatism, operationalism, and empirico-criticism, belong to the empiricist tendency. For the positivist, an inquiry into the conditions of knowledge can be meaningfully pursued only as a methodological inquiry into the principles and methods for the construction and corroboration of scientific theories. Thus, at the heart of the positivist philosophy of science is the belief in the exclusive validity of science.

In his contribution, Karl Popper argued that the problem of this age, which is the possibility and method of achieving progress in human knowledge, can be resolved only in the appreciating of the growth of scientific knowledge. In this regard, it is in following the principles and procedures of scientific inquiry that we are likely to arrive at a system that accurately depicts the world.²⁶ Thus, researchers in various fields of inquiry, ranging from history to psychology and sociology, which have, with much vigour, engaged in the quest for laws and theories, usually felt apologetic whenever their discipline fell short of the ideas derived from physical science. In the field of education, curriculum theorists have often considered science to be one of the basics, and since the time of Herbert Spencer it has been regarded as an indispensable component of liberal education.²⁷

The overwhelming popularity of this image of science arises, at least in part, from the great successes of recent science, particularly, physics.²⁸ In explaining this success, scientists argue that science has evolved some procedures of inquiry, and that the observed developments in science have been determined by acting on the basis of the outcome of the application of these procedures. These procedures constitute the scientific method, a privileged method in the hands of the scientific community, which disinterestedly and detachedly employs it to reach the scientific goals.²⁹

The Post-Modernist World View³⁰

In recent times, particularly since the second half of the twentieth-century, the intellectual world has witnessed the emergence of a certain shift in attitude towards reality (metaphysics or ontology), rationality and truth; a rejection of what could be referred to as the ‘received view’, and accompanied by a neo-Protagorean relativism. The idea of the ‘received view’ of rationality is here identified with the idea of a universal,

foundational, permanent framework of thought and discourse developed in the 17th century. The programs of discourse that represents this shift include those developed by Thomas Kuhn, Peter Winch, Donald Davidson, Paul K. Feyerabend and a host of others.

In his program, Paul Feyerabend proposed a pluralist conception of rationality, in particular, and worldview in general and meant to present this to stand in place of the enlightenment program characteristic of the modern period. For him, the modernist project has been shown to be sterile.³¹

The present study identifies the positivist worldview that constitutes the climax of modernism as well as the pluralist orientations of the post-modern which ushered in a rather reckless relativism. The study then goes further to establish a rejection of both positivist and post-positivist projects for reasons to be stated, and presents an alternative epistemology of the human person founded on a given ontology, while employing the methodology of education and a given scepticism to enhance a robust representation of the human person.

Feyerabend's 'Post' in the Post-Modern

In his representation, Paul K. Feyerabend sees the commitment to just one theoretical framework or cognitive scheme as 'Monomania'. The clearest form of this criticism today is best identified with Paul Feyerabend's postmodern orientation. A number of assumptions underscore his position. One such assumption is that, the theories, facts, and procedures that constitute the scientific knowledge of a particular time result from specific historical developments, and any such information cannot be about history-independent facts and laws – a rejection of the idea that tradition-independent points of view can overrule traditions. There are different points of view, ways of thinking and knowing. In the same vain, scientific theories branch out in different directions, use different and sometimes incommensurable concepts, and evaluate events in diverse ways. What counts as evidence or as an important or sound science or scientific procedure depends on time, profession and the research group. Nature can be and is indeed approached in many ways, and for every statement, theory or point of view believed to be true with good reasons, there exists conflicting arguments. Human experience, is not restricted to merely intellectual matters, but includes concrete human feelings, faiths and empathy, and involves more than just one single medium of discussion. And so, Paul K. Feyerabend is opposed to a certain program or tendency which, for want of a better name, is referred to as "Methodism", the idea of a method that contains fixed and binding principles for conducting the

business of science, politics or ethics. For Feyerabend, science is not the paradigm of rationality. It is just a belief like any other.

From the point of view of ethics, he privileges ethics without ontology. Furthermore, he proposes a movement from “boundaries without values to values without boundaries”.³² The core of Feyerabend’s moral philosophy is what he expressed in *Killing Time*, concerning the nature of moral character. For him, “A moral character cannot be created by arguments, education, or an act of will. It cannot be created by any kind of planned action, whether scientific, political, moral or religious”.³³ Here, Feyerabend indicates what should not be associated with moral character or where it does not derive from. Morality is not a product of education or any rational intentional, planned action. He compares moral character with what he calls “true love, which he says is a gift, not an achievement”. For him, the source or basis of morality or moral character is accidental, such as parental affection and friendship. These, he says, constitute the condition for some kind of stability or balance between what he refers to as “self-confidence” and “a concern for others”.³⁴ According to him, it is possible for us to create these conditions: conditions that are meant to ensure the needed balance as we are never able to create the balance itself. It is only when the balance is enhanced, that the idea of guilt, responsibility, and obligation make real sense. But without the balance between self-confidence and concern for others, these ideas become not just empty words but obstacles.³⁵ The idea of self-confidence of course, connotes a reliance on one’s abilities – abilities to engage one’s experience, one’s environment and one’s reality. The product of employing this ability is to enhance the individual’s wellbeing. The need for the project of modernity, of establishing a securely grounded thought system is compared to the vision of Archimedes. Thus, in the *Meditation II*, Descartes writes;

Archimedes, in order that he might draw the terrestrial globe out of its place, demanded that one point be fixed and immovable. In the same way I should have the right to conceive high hopes if I am happy enough to discover one thing only which is certain and immutable.³⁶

This immutable foundation – ontological reference is rejected by the post-modernist position of Paul K. Feyerabend and replaces it with Heterogeneity, chaos and pluralism.

Post-modern Ontology

At this point, it is pertinent to ask the question, is there any theory of ontology proposed by postmodern philosophy? In response to this question, it is to be borne in mind that Paul K. Feyerabend, presenting a prototype of the post-modern worldview, rejects any attempt to propose one singular general ground totalizing framework that could be a

reference point, and that could be a foundation for any inquiry. This is with regards to, not only a universal theory of truth, a fixed model of knowledge, a standard reference to method, but, indeed a foundation. And so, it presents a no-foundation epistemology as well as proposing an ontology that is not characterized by relativism, but a pluralism. What this means is that reality could be created, truth is formulated, knowledge is fabricated such that ontology which is the study of being, could only be said to be presented and created or formulated as need be. Reading Feyerabend therefore, one is tempted to raise the question, is it not the case that in proposing a no-universal foundational fixed theory of reality, by itself, proposes a universal theory? To this extent, the post-modernist proposal that there is no fixed theory of knowledge, truth and reality is itself a theory of truth, of knowledge and of reality – a philosophical dead end. Perhaps, an alternative reading of the post-modernist theory of the human person would reject any fixed set of principles, axioms and assumptions, claiming that the character of the human person is hydra-headed and its features are not just pluralistic, but actually indeterminate. We are not to reduce the human person to any fixed model, be it scientific, legal, ethical, or social. Rather, it would be a combination of all these and more. The human person would then be seen as a mystery that can be comprehended only inadequately by anyone even the self.

Thesis and Concluding Remarks

Identifying, with Bernard Lonergan this paper posit that the essence of the human person has to do with the fact that humanity is to be recognized in four characteristics. These characteristics belong to the human nature representing a fundamental orientation in the human person. These are (i) Search for truth (ii) Search for the good (iii) Search for the absolute/infinite and, (iv) Search for love. The human person in relating with these realities that is, truth, good, absolute and love employs the capacity of the senses, of understanding and of judging. The actions of these variables and their relationship with the human person are so complex that they can only be understood imperfectly. The human person, therefore, is driven to the actualization of truth, the good and love. These efforts remain always in the state of progress towards actualization. To this extent, the human person remains an ongoing project.

Endnotes

- ¹ Ted Honderich, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 671.
- ² R. P. Peerenboom, "Reason, Rationales, and Relativism: What's at Stake in the Conversation Over Scientific Rationality?," *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 34, No.14. (1990), 4.
- ³ Toulmin, *Human Understanding*, 45.
- ⁴ Toulmin, *Human Understanding*, 44.
- ⁵ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 9.
- ⁶ Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science and the Rising Culture*, (London: Fontana Paper Backs, 1984), 39, John Veith (Trans.) *Descartes: A Discourse on Method and Meditation of First Philosophy*, (London: Everyman's Liberty Press, 1979), 120-121.
- ⁷ Meditation I, In Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Eds.), *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 114.
- ⁸ Haldane & Ross (Eds.), *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 114.
- ⁹ Haldane & Ross (Eds.), *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 6.
- ¹⁰ Haldane & Ross (Eds.), *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 149.
- ¹¹ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, I, IX, In John M. Robertson ed., *The Philosophical works of Bacon* (London: University Press, 1965), 51-8.
- ¹² O'Hear, *An Introduction to Philosophy of Science*, 5.
- ¹³ Toulmin, *Human Understanding*, 57.
- ¹⁴ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 108-109.
- ¹⁵ Isaac Newton, *Principia* Bk. I, Rule 4, In B.I. Cohen (Ed.), 150.
- ¹⁶ Isaac Newton, *Principia* Bk. I, Rule 4, In B.I. Cohen (Ed.), 150.
- ¹⁷ Cohen, *Revolutions in Science*, 150.
- ¹⁸ Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie's World: A 3000 Year Adventure in Philosophy*, (Ibadan, Spectrum Books, 1996), 181.
- ¹⁹ Antiquity had its own system constructors in Plato and Aristotle. The Middle Ages have St. Thomas Aquinas who attempted to link Aristotle's system with Christian ethics and theology. After this came the Renaissance with a welter of old and new beliefs about nature and science, God and man. But it was not until the seventeenth century that any significant attempt was made to assemble ideas into a coherent systematic whole.
- ²⁰ Randell, P. Peerenboom, 'Reason, Rationales, and Relativism: What's at Stake in the Conversation over Scientific Rationality?' *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 34, No. 14. (November, 1990), 4.
- ²¹ James L. Battersby, "Professionalism, Relativism and Rationality" In P.M.L.A. Vol. 107, No. 1. (1992).
- ²² Harre, *The Philosophies of Science: An Introductory Survey*, 18. Many of the germinal ideas of Frege's philosophy are to be found in his *Conceptual Notations* (1879). His philosophy influenced Russell's thought. In the preface to volume I of Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* (1910), the authors wrote, "In all questions of logical analysis our chief debt is to Frege". In the same vein, Wittgenstein acknowledged Frege's influence on his thought. In the preface to

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Wittgenstein wrote, "I am indebted to Frege's great works and to the writings of Mr. Russell for much of the stimulations of my thoughts". Frege's influence on Carnap was also acknowledged by Carnap who studied under him at the University of Jenna.

²³ Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, 65.

²⁴ William Bechtel, *Philosophy of Science: An Overview of Cognitive Science*, (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1990), 1-15.

²⁵ Ted Benton, *Philosophical Foundations of the Three Sociologies*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 21.

²⁶ Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, (London: Hutchinson and Co. Publishers Ltd., 1975), 15.

²⁷ A.F. Chalmers, *What is this Thing Called Science?: An Assessment of the Nature and Status of Science and its Methods*, (London: Open University Press, 1990), 1.

²⁸ Newton-Smith, *The Rationality of Science*, (New York: Routledge, 1981), 1.

²⁹ D.C. Philips, *Philosophy Science and Social Inquiry*, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1988), 3.

³⁰ A system of beliefs that are interconnected: not merely a collection of separate, independent, unrelated beliefs, but an intertwined, interrelated and interconnected systems of beliefs.

³¹ Paul k. Feyerabend presents his position most clearly in *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1987) and *Farewell to Reason* (London: Verso, 1993).

³² Isaac Ukpokolo, "Navigating Feyerabend's Moral Philosophy from Boundaries Without Values to Values Without Boundaries" In *The Ethics of Subjectivity*, Elvis Imafidon Ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 201.

³³ Paul K. Feyerabend, *Killing Time* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 174.

³⁴ Feyerabend, *Killing Time*, 174.

³⁵ Feyerabend, *Killing Time*, 174.

³⁶ Elizabeth S. and G. R. T. Ross Eds. *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 149.