

Feyerabend on Human Life, Abstraction, and the Conquest of Abundance

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I offer a new interpretation of Feyerabend's 'conquest of abundance' narrative. I consider and reject both the ontological reading as implausible and the 'historical' reading as unconvincing. My own proposal is that the 'conquest of abundance' be understood in terms of an impoverishment of the richness of human experience. For Feyerabend, such abundance is 'conquered' when individuals internalize distorting epistemic prejudices including those integral to the theoretical conceptions associated with the sciences. I describe several ways, identified by Feyerabend, in which individuals can be led to occlude the richness of their experience in ways that are existentially impoverishing.

Keywords: abstraction, abundance, *Conquest of Abundance*, Feyerabend, human life science

Фейерабенд о человеческой жизни, абстракции и «покорении изобилия»

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Я предлагаю новую интерпретацию нарратива Фейерабенда о «покорении изобилия». Я рассматриваю и отвергаю онтологическое прочтение как неправдоподобное и «историческое» прочтение как неубедительное. Мое собственное предложение состоит в том, чтобы «покорение изобилия» понималось в терминах обеднения богатства человеческого опыта. По Фейерабенду, изобилие «покоряется», когда индивиды интериоризируют эпистемические предрассудки, включая те, которые являются неотъемлемой частью теоретических обобщений, связанных с науками. Я описываю несколько способов, выявленных Фейерабендом, с помощью которых можно заставить людей сокращать богатство опыта, что приводит к обеднению их существования.

Ключевые слова: абстракция, изобилие, *Покорение изобилия*, Фейерабенд, человеческая жизнь, наука



Why are so many people dissatisfied with what they can see and feel? Why do they look for surprises behind events? why do they believe that, taken together, these surprises form an entire world, and why, most strangely, do they take it for granted that this hidden world is more solid, more trustworthy, more “real” than the world from which they started?

Paul Feyerabend, *Killing Time*

Introduction

This paper offers a new interpretation of the narrative of a ‘conquest of abundance’, which is central to the later writings of Paul Feyerabend (1924–1994). At the time of his death, he was working a book, never to be finished, which was later edited and published, with a set of contemporaneous essays, with an evocative title – *Conquest of Abundance* – and a vibrant subtitle, *A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being*. What its editor, Bert Terpstra, created is a composite of three manuscripts: about a hundred pages, ordered into an introduction, three chapters and an ‘interlude’. Twelve contemporary essays – some long, some short – made up the second part. Feyerabend was working on this project, originally titled *Stereotypes of Reality*, since the mid-1980s. If there was a plan for the book, it does not survive, as far as we know.

Given these textual problems, any interpretation of the material published in *Conquest* must be tentative. It is not a finished book to be interpreted. Feyerabend constantly experimented with different ideas and also used the same examples in new ways; moreover, there is a new mood in these later writings, ‘a quieter, more wondering attitude’, as his widow, the social activist and researcher, Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend, explained [Feyerabend, 2001]. Familiar themes from the better-known earlier work are still there – such as the pluralistic conception of science – even as new themes come into view, such as the ‘ineffable’ character of ultimate reality. Certain older themes are revisited and given new inflection – as early as 1963 one finds Feyerabend emphasizing a ‘moral choice’ between zealous pursuit of ‘scientific efficiency’ and the cultivation of ‘a rich human life’ [Feyerabend, 1981a, p. 163].

Scholars do agree, however, that *Conquest* has the following general themes. Feyerabend describes what he calls the ‘conquest’ of the abundance of the world; this process was already underway during the ancient period of Greek philosophy; abundance has epistemic and cultural aspects and loss of the one entails the loss of the other; conquest is associated with a movement towards uniformity and monotony and is existentially and culturally disastrous; philosophers, ‘intellectuals’ and their



schools have been some of the main drivers of this conquest [Clark, 2000; Downes, 2002; Hutto, 2002; Jacobs, 2006]. Of course, these and other commentators do not agree on the details.

Each of the themes invites many questions, when considered individually and especially when arranged as a broad thesis. What does Feyerabend mean by the ‘conquest of abundance’. What is this ‘abundance’ he celebrated? What does it mean to speak of abundance being ‘conquered’? How could one establish dramatic claims about long-range historical tendencies toward uniformity? Even if one accepts that claim, could one not speak of movements and counter-movements, and would this amendment damage Feyerabend’s claims? How could concerns about a ‘conquest of abundance’ be connected to other critical narratives developed by other 20th century philosophers?

To interpret the themes of *Conquest*, it can be very helpful to see the as developments of his earlier work. *Farewell to Reason*, published in 1987, discusses the importance of cultural diversity and anticipates many of the themes of *Conquest*:

What is being imposed, exported, and again imposed is a collection of uniform views and practices which have the intellectual and political support of powerful groups and institutions. By now Western forms of life are found in the most remote corners of the world and have changed the habits of people who only a few decades ago were unaware of their existence. Cultural differences disappear, indigenous crafts, customs, institutions are being replaced by Western objects, customs, organisational forms [Feyerabend, 1987, p. 3].

However, if the ‘conquest of abundance’ turns out to be a rebranded postcolonial critique, then it may turn out to be less interesting. After all, Feyerabend did not engage with work that was later called ‘postcolonial science and technology studies’. In any case, what we find in *Conquest* seems different from postcolonialist critiques of science and modernity. For instance, there is the important, if elusive theme of ‘conquest’ and its relation to *existential impoverishment*. Moreover, the general narrative was in Feyerabend’s mind since the early ‘70s, predating his interests in cultural diversity. At that time, he started a multi-volume history of Western philosophy of nature, starting from the Stone Age to the present day [Motterlini, 1999, pp. 216, 247, 333]. This project was never finished, though happily the manuscripts were retrieved, edited, and published by Eric Oberheim and Helmut Heit (2009 in German, and in English translation in 2016). It seems clear the *general idea* of a historical movement from epistemic richness towards deleterious ‘uniformity’ was in Feyerabend’s mind from 1970 through to his death in 1994.

Given these obstacles, one cannot aspire to offer a serious, definitive interpretation of the ‘conquest of abundance’. The text is incomplete, fragmentary, and too underdeveloped on crucial points. I agree with



the critics who dispute Feyerabend's historical claims [Clark, 2000; Heit, 2016; Preston, 2016]. A sympathetic, appropriately critical verdict on Feyerabend's 'essays in creative history' is Stephen R.L. Clark's:

Inaccurate in detail as they may be, and ambiguous in their implications, they still constitute a deeply serious vehicle for exploring the dilemmas and ambiguities of living... amongst the gargantuan ruins of an earlier civilization which grows ever larger in our imagination as we grow away from it [Clark, 2000, p. 263].

I also think the 'conquest' thesis need not be read as a thesis about European intellectual history. It can be interpreted 'genealogically' – not that Feyerabend seemed keen on Nietzsche or Foucault – as a narrative intended to provoke critical attitudes toward inherited convictions and assumptions [Preston, 1998, p. 431]. As Feyerabend sometimes recognised, the history of Western philosophies of nature is 'too extensive even for a sketchy outline'. At most, one could 'highlight aspects of this development without claiming any completeness' (PN [Feyerabend, 2016, p. 169]). *Conquest* modestly adopted a 'historical and episodic' approach, relating 'selected events and developments' [Feyerabend, 2001, p. 19].

My suggestion: the conquest of abundance can be understood in terms of failures to appreciate and cultivate the richness of human life and experience. Such impoverishment could unfold at the level of a culture or tradition, but also at that of an individual's experience of the world.

Abundance and Ontology

'Abundance' is not defined by Feyerabend, though he does offer several general descriptions of what he has in mind. Here are two:

The world we inhabit is abundant beyond our wildest imagination. There are trees, dreams, sunrises; there are thunderstorms, shadows, rivers; there are wars, fleas, love affairs; there are the lives of people, Gods, entire galaxies. The simplest human action varies from one person and occasion to the next – how else would we recognize our friends only from their gait, posture, voice, and divine their changing moods? [Ibid., p. 3]

The second, from *Farewell to Reason*:

The world we live in contains an abundance of things, events, processes. There are trees, dogs, sunrises; there are clouds, thunderstorms, divorces there is justice, beauty, love; there are the lives of people, gods, cities, of the entire universe. It is impossible to enumerate and to describe in detail all the incidents that happen to an individual in the course of a single boring day [Feyerabend, 1987, p. 104].



Some comments. ‘Abundance’ is explained by this expansive reference to *things*, *events*, and *processes*, that include concrete objects (trees, dogs) and abstract objects (justice, beauty) and living organisms (human and non-human). There are events and processes both regular and irregular and short-term and long-term (a thunderstorm, sunrises). There are the temporally and spatially small (atoms, fleas) and the utterly immense, (‘entire galaxies’). Feyerabend also mentions as other dimensions of abundance: the radical particularity and uniqueness of these phenomena – their ‘limitlessness’ and ‘variability’ and ‘ambiguity’. Even phenomena or domains that seem ‘well-defined’ are interconnected, often in unrealised ways.

Read in these ways, abundance seems like a kind of ontological thesis. The world contains many *kinds* of things (concrete and abstract, objects and events) – a sort of radical ontological pluralism. However, there are other aspects of abundance. Feyerabend mentions, for instance, kinds of epistemic abundance. The world is abundant because it can be experienced, understood and appreciated in different ways. Unfortunately, this point is often expressed in vague language: there is an emphatic warning about the world becoming ‘bland’, ‘colourless’ and experientially diminished. There are complaints about the erosion of the ‘abundant world that affects us in so many ways’ [Feyerabend, 2001, p. 16]. Abundance of this sort refers to our experience of the world, and not to its ontological contents.

The ontological and epistemic dimensions of those remarks on abundance fit well together. Feyerabend’s idea could be that the world is abundant because there are many kinds of things that can be experienced and epistemically engaged with in many different ways. It does not fit other remarks in *Conquest*, though. There are at least two main problems. First: the objects and events mentioned as examples of abundance point to incompatible ontologies. Feyerabend includes ‘gods’, like the Homeric pantheon, alongside the postulates of contemporary physics [Ibid., p. 246]. While one could of course devise a rich ontology that incorporates atoms, gods and other diverse kinds of entities, Feyerabend’s own writings do not provide that account.

There is also the complicated idea of ‘manifest realities’ as ‘responses’ to a ‘material’ which ‘resists’ our epistemic activities in ways that suggest variable ‘pliability’. As one essay of the later period claims:

The material humans face must be approached in the right way. It *offers resistance*; some constructions find no point of attack in it and simply collapse. On the other hand, *this material is more pliable than is commonly assumed*. Moulding it in one way, we get elementary particles; proceeding in another, we get a nature that is alive and full of Gods... Science is certainly not the only source of reliable ontological information [Ibid., p. 145].



It is difficult to interpret these remarks [Brown, 2016; Farrell, 2001; Tambolo, 2014]. John Preston interprets them as a form of social constructionism, which he rejects as implausible [Preston, 1998]. One problem is that, in his later writings, Feyerabend often vacillated between two different kinds of claim. Sometimes, he speaks as if abundance is an ontological thesis about the content of the world, as in the remark just quoted. But at other times, he speaks of abundance in terms of the sorts of entities relevant to human ways of life. Entities are counted as ‘real’, on this view, if they are relevant to human activities.

An excellent case of this second approach is the essay ‘Ethics as a Measure of Scientific Truth’, which was included in *Conquest*. Feyerabend claims that the Gods, demons and other entities are real if they enjoy roles or functions in human life:

For are we really to believe that people who were not guided by a scientific worldview but who still managed to survive and to live moderately happy and fulfilling lives were the victims of an illusion? They noticed, reacted to, and arranged their lives around all sorts of entities, Gods, saints, demons, spiritual elements of matter among them [Feyerabend, 2001, p. 246].

On this view, the question of the objective reality of Gods and other entities is subordinated to one about their social functions. Feyerabend invokes what he calls ‘Aristotle’s Principle’: *real* should be defined in terms of ‘*what plays an important role in the kind of life one wants to lead*’ [Ibid., p. 248]. To make this clear, he explains Aristotle’s Principle honours the idea that ‘a way of life [be] made the measure of reality’ [Ibid.]. Anthropomorphic gods, should, on this principle, be counted as real if they play roles in the life of a social community. The ontological reality of those gods is thus beside the point. In many passages of *Conquest*, Feyerabend speaks as if any entities count as real just as long as they play a pragmatic role – guiding moral life, sustaining social practices, etc. Anyway, it seems questionable that Aristotle’s principle shows fidelity to Aristotle’s actual ideas, but that may be irrelevant.

The later writings often try to reconcile these kinds of ontological and social-constructionist theses. In the essays collected in *Conquest*, Feyerabend sketches an interesting vocabulary – of ‘manifest realities’, which interact with ‘Being’, generating different degrees of ‘resistance’. Of course, these claims were never made into a comprehensive thesis, so we do not know if and how they would have been finally expressed. There is also a further complication: Being – also referred to as ‘Ultimate Reality’ – is also repeatedly described as ‘ineffable’ [Ibid., pp. 214, 233]. *Ineffable* in this sense means that the way the world is, in itself, is permanently and necessarily unknowable. No amount of enquiry could ever yield an account of the way the world is – an idea inspired



by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who is the founder of Christian mysticism [Kidd, 2012]. This emphasis on the ineffability of Being can be rendered in different ways – as a Kantian thesis, or a variety of perspectivism, or as a dramatic way of expressing the epistemically modest principle that our theories could always be improved [Brown, 2016; Giere, 2016].

In what follows I offer a different interpretation of the remarks on ‘abundance’. I focus on the idea of the *conquest* of abundance and use that as a *via negativa* to think about abundance itself. There are two themes that need to be accommodated:

- (1) *the existential theme*: the conquest of abundance compromises the meaningfulness of human life.
- (2) *the critical theme*: the steady entrenchment and ‘dominance’ of kinds of theoretical enquiry is a main engine of the conquest of abundance.

I suggest that *abundance* refers to the richness of our ways of experiencing the world. It is this richness that can be ‘conquered’ if one adopts certain theoretical or abstract conceptions of the world – ones which (in the term I will use) *occlude* this experiential richness.

Abstraction and Abundance

Feyerabend identifies several aspects of the conquest of abundance. Certain abstractions, such as scientific theories and mathematical conceptions, as well as the later development of experimentation come to govern our understanding of the world. Abstractions and experimentation ‘remove’ the particular features and qualities which distinguish things from one another – and that constitute their distinct identity and integrity [Feyerabend, 2001, p. 5]. Generalisations are later added, along with use of further abstracting devices, such as formalisations, abstract modelling and the introduction of *theory*. The deployment of dichotomies, while useful, also further distinguishes the messy richness of phenomena [Ibid., pp. 13, 36]. Certain assumptions also begin to creep in, which are then established by new forms of *argument* [Ibid., pp. 11, 58]. Certain groups of people – ‘intellectuals’, as they are usually labelled by Feyerabend – become invested in these abstractions.

A further stage of abstraction is a new idea – that abstract theories alone describes reality and should be preferred, at least by ‘rational’ people, over the nuance, particularity, and complexity of everyday experience. For Feyerabend, the Presocratics were the key figures here, with Xenophanes and Parmenides as exemplars of emerging ideals of abstraction [Ibid., chs. 2, 3]. Soon after, other developments include potent intellectual classes who accrue social power and their products: enduring



cultures and traditions that impose their own worldviews and visions of life. When these are destructive, Feyerabend labels them ‘monsters’ [Feyerabend, 2001, p. 54].

It should be clear, from this summary, that there are many claims being made by Feyerabend, even if there is also a coherent general thesis. A ‘search for reality’, based on an assumption that reality is ‘hidden’, came to dominate a variety of social groups [Ibid., pp. 5, 11]. This search began for good reasons, but soon took on a life of its own. Simplification, abstraction, and other sorts of epistemic devices are not in themselves bad; if used well, they are vital to human flourishing. Feyerabend, early in *Conquest*, affirms our personal and collective need for kinds of ‘blocking mechanism’ [Ibid., pp. 4–5]. This natural set of mechanisms, however, will tend toward excess. Our simplifications become simplistic and our need for pragmatic generalisations mutates into crude distortions of messy realities. At this point we become vulnerable to a further failing – *forgetting or denying the actual richness of the world*. Feyerabend is aiming his critique at individuals and groups compelled to ‘deny’ – in different ways in different times – that ‘the world was as rich, knowledge as complex, and [our] behaviour as free’ as our everyday experience and life indicates [Ibid., p. 13].

The general story told by Feyerabend is one with resonances in the history of philosophy. He often saw similar themes in earlier figures, such as Kierkegaard, [Kidd, 2011]. Other potential allies, such as Nietzsche, are oddly neglected. Concerns about the existentially deleterious effects of the scientific worldview on life, however, are clearest in C20th European philosophies. Unfortunately, Feyerabend did not engage the leading figures – most obviously Heidegger, whose warnings of the elevation of disengaged spectatorial stances can fit nicely with Feyerabend’s anti-scientism. Or Henri Bergson, for whom ‘analytic’ methods entrench kinds of rigidly mechanistic thinking that engender ‘closed’ societies marked by conformity.

A good candidate who Feyerabend did discuss is Edmund Husserl. In *Crisis of the European Sciences*, he produced a rich historico-cultural critique of ‘post-Galilean’ science. Abstractions and the myopic focus on mathematically quantifiable entities, has narrowed our epistemic imagination. It has also, says Husserl, accelerated tendencies that feed a ‘barbarian hatred of spirit’ [Husserl, 1970]. I find the parallels between the two narratives striking; however, all Feyerabend said was that *Crisis* was ‘remarkable’, that Husserl tended to overgeneralise and failed to appreciate that the historical processes at work ‘started in antiquity’ [Feyerabend, 1987, p. 274; 2001, p. 253].

A comparison of the crisis and conquest narratives would be interesting and put Husserl and Feyerabend into dialogue. I will not attempt that comparison here, and instead want to distinguish more carefully several aspects of the conquest narrative.



There are at least seven worth mentioning:

- (1) tendencies in elite or intellectual communities towards abstract conceptions of the world that diverge ever-further from actual experience;
- (2) theoretical aspirations to provide a single kind of worldview or account of the world, coupled to a sense that plurality expresses an imperfect and transient state of enquiry;
- (3) a generalised, diffuse hostility towards variety across its forms (moral, epistemic, social etc.), accompanied by a judgment of these are signs of error or immaturity;
- (4) the conviction that a transition from a state of variety to one of uniformity is a mark of social and epistemic progress;
- (5) tendencies within society towards uniformity in ways of living and the flattening out of local practices and particularities;
- (6) a concern that individuals and collectives are, increasingly, susceptible to fall for these other tendencies and convictions;
- (7) a concern that all these tendencies are having deleterious existential and cultural effects – a concern voiced in a language of ‘aimlessness’, ‘disorientation’ and ‘hatred of spirit’.

None of these are explicitly stated by Feyerabend; however, each is clear in his accounts of the ‘conquest of abundance’. Moreover, they’re all related to older themes in his work – the defences of ‘epistemological anarchism’, the criticisms of Popper and Kuhn, the admiration for J.S. Mill’s ‘experiments in living’ and so on [Oberheim, 2006; Lloyd, 1996]. However, they also require critical comment.

To start with, each one needs careful qualification. Construed as historical claims, all are far too general, and, taken as they stand, obviously false. This point has been well-made by reviewers of *Conquest of Abundance*, who rightly point out its ironic reliance on generalisations. Is it really true, for instance, that the Western cultural and intellectual traditions exhibit a movement towards increasingly uniformity? No, if anything, one finds immense variegation and endless variety [Clark, 2000; Preston, 2000]. Certain stages of that history do exhibit less diversity than others, for sure, but this will deprive these themes of their force. Second: while the themes may be true for some groups, they will not be true in the wider sense intended by Feyerabend. As an example, consider ancient Greek philosophy: there were tendencies to metaphysical abstractness (Plato), but also more empirical philosophies (Aristotle), plus critical responses to both (Scepticism and Cynicism). As Helmut Heit points out, understanding early Greek thought is one thing; understanding modern scientific culture is another [Heit, 2009, p. 99]. In any period, one sees uncertainty, ambiguity, variety – meaning claims about general tendencies to uniformity are *too* general to be plausible.

A third point is that some of the tendencies could, in some cases, be welcomed, if what is lost are violent traditions, such as fascism.



Philosophies and sciences often manifest invidious values: we are better without them (racist biologies, say). Ironically, Feyerabend did at times make this point. ‘Concerning an Appeal for Philosophy’ is a short, eloquent essay from 1994, included in *Conquest of Abundance*. It warns against overgeneralised claims about the value of philosophy:

Philosophy is not a single Good Thing that is bound to enrich human existence; it is a witches’ brew, containing some rather deadly ingredients. Numerous assaults on life, liberty, and happiness have had strong philosophical backing [Feyerabend, 2001, p. 269].

Feyerabend made this same point about science in his 1976 essay ‘How to Defend Society Against Science’ with its warning there is ‘nothing inherent in science ... that makes it essentially liberating’ [Feyerabend, 1978a, p. 3]. There can be no general claims about something as pluralist as scientific enquiry. If properly directed, scientific knowledge and institutions might serve our social and practical interests. But this does not happen by itself, for it needs intelligent organisation, as pragmatist and feminist philosophies of science have shown.

If these critical points are well-taken, they suggest a downbeat take on the conquest of abundance claims. Claims about a centuries-long process of inexorable cultural and epistemic impoverishment is provocative and dramatic. However, they also achieve their *scope* at the price of their *specificity*. This does not mean the theses should be rejected. If claims are too broad, one could try and narrow them down. The question is what truth there might be to his claims that makes that work worth doing.

In what follows I attempt a reconstruction of claims about a ‘conquest of abundance’. I want to avoid both the ontological and social-constructionist readings of abundance. I also want to avoid the expansive claims about historical tendencies. My suggestion is that one can think about abundance and its conquest at a much more particular level. If this lacks the power or drama of the story Feyerabend wanted to tell, it may at least have the virtue of being more plausible.

Abundance and Theory

The abundance of the world should not be construed in theoretical terms. Abundance *can* be articulated, of course, as a metaphysical or ontological thesis. There is also nothing necessarily wrong with theoretical and abstract conceptions of abundance. Such conceptions can play at least two important roles. First: theoretical conceptions help us pursue our social, epistemic, and practical goals. Second – and more relevant to claims about abundance – theoretical conceptions contribute to the abundance



of the world. The history of human enquiry, at its best, represents a collective exercise in imaginative engagement with the world. However the history of theoretical enquiry is only one aspect of the abundance of the world.

Here is my proposal: abundance is not a feature or fact about the world that can be coolly registered in a series of metaphysical propositions. The ‘abundance’ of the world is revealed through everyday experience and engagement. Theoretical description is secondary to this everyday experience. The abundance of the world is not something that only appears if one adopts some theoretical stance. It is manifest in our everyday ways of experiencing and engaging with the world. Experiencing ‘abundance’ means encountering the world in particular ways – as, for instance, complex, changing, and ‘ambiguous’.

Abundance is an experience of the world. It is the experience of the world as rich, diverse, complex and changing, ‘inexhaustible’ and ‘unrestricted’ [Feyerabend, 2001, pp. 3, 10]. Such abundance is primarily revealed in our everyday engagements with the world – the activities, habitual practices and shared projects that makes up our ‘form of life’. Feyerabend was sensitive to the complexity of everyday life, something credited to his experience in the history and practice of science (and rightly so), but there are other sources, too.

A key inspiration was Wittgenstein’s early influence on Feyerabend. From *Philosophical Investigations* on, a main theme of Wittgenstein’s writings was the rich, sophisticated ‘bustle of life’, language-games, and the ‘forms of life’ of which they are a part. Wittgenstein emphasises the complexity of the ‘whole hurly-burly’ of human life, with its complicated ‘filigree pattern’ [Wittgenstein, 1988, II, §§624ff]. Unfortunately, these remarkable features of our lives are often overlooked, as we are ‘unable to notice something’ if it is ‘always before one’s eyes’ [Wittgenstein, 1958, §129]. We are also attracted to distorting simplifications, and a very powerful ‘craving for generality’ [Wittgenstein, 1972, p. 17]. Worse still, our susceptibility to these ‘cravings’, bewitchments and the seductions of simplification are now entrenched within our form of life, which was an important cause of Wittgenstein’s sense of alienation [Kidd, 2017; Klagge, 2010, p. 24].

Feyerabend agreed with many of Wittgenstein’s concerns. Our zeal for method, for instance, disguises the complexities of actual scientific practice; we seem easily seduced by abstractions which, if imposed, will become ‘monsters’ [Feyerabend, 1993, p. 3; 1987]. While the initial worries concerned our conceptions of science, in the later writings it expanded to our conception of human life itself (e.g. [Feyerabend, 1991, p. 489; 1981b, pp. 8, 24, 22]). A second and neglected source of Feyerabend’s sensitivity to messy realities was work on the *tacit* dimensions of science. The *doyen* of that work, Michael Polanyi, emphasised the foundational role of practical experience – and the occlusion of that role



by a fixation of abstract models. For Polanyi, the ‘articulate contents of science’ are in fact products of practical activities – in laboratories or in the field – which cannot be systematised and are best left as an ‘unspecifiable art’ [Polanyi, 1958, p. 53; Preston, 1997]. Appreciation of the tacit dimensions of science has an important celebratory function: our everyday activity, shared practices and traditions of enquiry are rich in ways that cannot be schematised. What is marvellous is the messiness.

On this view, what is really ‘abundant’ – in the sense of rich, complicated, ever-changing – is *human life*. It is this abundance that one starts to forget when one’s vision narrows. Abundance is revealed in ways of experiencing and engaging with the world, and this includes but is hardly limited to theoretical ‘ways’. In a nice remark, Wittgenstein complained:

While still at school our children get taught that water consists of the gases hydrogen and oxygen, or sugar of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen. Anyone who doesn’t understand is stupid. The most important questions are [thereby] concealed [Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 71].

The ‘most important questions’ concern the place and roles of water in human life – that in which we swim, with which we baptize, which gives life and so on. In effect, many kinds of significance water has in human life are collapsed in favor of a myopic focus on its chemical structure. Wittgenstein was not denying the importance of chemical knowledge: his objection was to the occlusion of a richer senses of what kinds of knowledge and practice *matter*.

I do not know if Feyerabend’s ideas were inspired by these points of Wittgenstein. I have no evidence he read *Culture and Value*, for instance, nor that he kept up an interest in Wittgenstein’s work. Considering the eclectic character of Feyerabend’s thought, there are many possible influences. It is useful, though, to think of Wittgenstein’s concerns with practice, theory, and human life in relation to the conquest of abundance. I am here following the lead of David E. Cooper, whose work draws on Wittgenstein and Feyerabend – among others – to help us understand what might be meant by the ‘conquest of abundance’ [Cooper, 2000; 2002].

Cooper proposes that the ‘conquest of abundance’ should be understood as the *occlusion of experience*: ‘something occludes an experience when it obstructs the having of it or distorts it’ [Ibid., p. 341]. The occlusion of experience, in Feyerabend’s terms, is the conquest of abundance. Many things can occlude our experience of the world as abundant, argues Cooper, including conceptions of the world – worldviews and metaphysical visions, for instance. Such conceptions occlude the experience of the abundance of the world, and thereby ‘conquer’ it, diminishing our sense of the ‘richness of Being’. Our everyday experience reveals the abundance of the world, but we can be tempted to forget, ignore, dismiss



or otherwise impugn this if we fall victim to occluding conceptions. Cooper explains that our existential experience serves as a criterion for appraising conceptions:

Conceptions may be appraised in terms of their conduciveness to experience. They may be too one-sided, partial, or bland to enable an environment or world to be appropriately experienced or received [Cooper, 2002, p. 341].

The ideal is conceptions of the world that affirm our pre-theoretical experience of ‘the rich, colourful, and abundant world that affects us in so many ways’ [Feyerabend, 2001, p. 16]. Our experience of the world as abundance acts as a *measure* of theoretical conceptions, for those which occlude experience of the ‘abundance’ of the world cannot command assent [Cooper, 2002, p. 341].

I propose that the ‘conquest of abundance’ can be understood in terms of the occlusion of experience. In Feyerabend’s language: ‘abstractions’ become part of elaborate theoretical conceptions of the world, which are built of dichotomies and simplifications which are prone, in different ways, to occlude the abundance of the world. The systems of abstractions can take many forms – metaphysical theories, scientific worldviews, and kinds of *Weltbild*. Feyerabend generally targets a set of theoretical conceptions which privilege natural science. Cooper defines theoretical conceptions:

By a theoretical conception of X – of nature, the mind, language, or even the world as a whole – I mean a conception that *privileges* a theoretical account of X. Hence it is not, say, the chemical theory in which water is described as H₂O that is a theoretical conception, but the idea that this description is a privileged one [Ibid., p. 342].

Feyerabend has no objections to scientific theories by themselves, of course. Used well, they serve essential epistemic and practical roles in our form of life. There are many reasons to privilege scientific theories, too, including kinds of scientific realist conviction. Other grounds for privileging could be given, though. What matters, for Feyerabend, is the conviction that natural scientific conceptions of the world could occlude our experience of the abundance of the world. The task of theorists is not to describe our existential experience of the world. If, however, theorists come to dominate our ways of understanding ourselves and our world, a consequence is occlusion of existential experience.



The Occlusion of Experience

I suggested that the conquest of abundance should be understood as the occlusion of experience and that a main driver of this ‘conquest’ is the entrenchment, in our form of life of theoretical conceptions of life and reality. So, how does this occlusion work? There are several possibilities:

(1) theoretical conceptions could *confront* claims of abundance by denying them sense or truth, even aspects of everyday life, such as time or plurality, integral to everyday experience [Feyerabend, 2001, pp. 13, 66]. People who report abundance will be seen as indulging in ‘mere fantasies’, ‘victims of an illusion’ to which more educated people are immune [Ibid., pp. 27, 246].

(2) theoretical conceptions *degrade* experience, if without direct confrontation, they entail kinds of experience cannot be taken at face value. A narrative of abundance, for instance, comes to be explained away or ‘rubbished’ (see [Cooper, 2002, p. 338]). Such narratives can be classified as ‘folk’ and contrasted unfavourably with the specialist knowledge of experts [Feyerabend, 2001, p. 219].

Note the conceptions in question can succeed if they induce uncertainty and suspicion in people about their sense of abundance.

Some other forms of occlusion:

(3) experience of abundance could be dismissed as mere *appearance*, not as a representation of objective, real, or actual features of the world. The standard example in *Conquest* is the basic assumption of the ‘search for reality’ and the dichotomy of a ‘solid, trustworthy’ reality and ‘deceiving appearance’ [Ibid., p. 36].

(4) experience of abundance can be accepted, but treated as an *inferior* and *immature* account of the world. While suitable for everyday life, an epistemically serious account of reality is very different. Our experience of things as good or beautiful or meaningful will not feature in any serious description of the world – they will be ‘reduced to basic theory’ [Ibid., p. 215]. Feyerabend rejects the idea that only an ‘abstract approach tells you what is really going on’ [Feyerabend, 2011, p. 121].

(5) everyday experience captures, at best, only an unfortunately ‘superficial’ aspect of the world [Feyerabend, 2001, p. 268]. Everyday experience reveals only the accidental, contingent or superficial aspects of reality. Sophisticated theory is required to get down to the essential, fundamental aspects of life. Only ‘the pronouncements of experts are knowledge of the purest kind’ ([Ibid., p. 220]). If so, the search for reality can only be *effected* by experts and only be *expressed* in sophisticated theory.



Feyerabend does not distinguish these privileging practices. However, each is implicit in his criticisms of, *inter alia*, a ‘search for reality’, crass dichotomies, the elevation of abstraction over concrete experience, and the derogation of experiential understanding of the sort found in arts, crafts, and everyday practice [Feyerabend, 2001, pp. 13, 258]. The cultural entrenchment of the theoretical conceptions offered by the sciences is not, of course, the only engine of a conquest of abundance. But they are central to the particular form it took in our cultural history. Indeed, Feyerabend’s own critique resembles those of other C20th philosophical critics of scientific modernity.

Two outstanding examples, each cited in Cooper’s own discussion, are Wittgenstein and Heidegger. The ‘dominance and primacy of the *theoretical*’, warned Heidegger, was ‘messing up’ the modern world – and for Wittgenstein, the age of science and technology may signal ‘the beginning of the end for humanity’. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger warned that ‘looking at the world theoretically’ meant one had ‘dimmed it down to [a] uniformity’ [Heidegger, 1962, p. 178]. In his later vocabulary, ‘ways of revealing’ the world closer to everyday experience get ‘driven out’ [Heidegger, 1977, p. 27]. Wittgenstein, too, warned that the ‘cold, grey ash’ of scientific theory smothers the ‘glowing embers’ of life [Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 56]. Our experience, of objects and places as well as people and creatures, is derogated – ‘dimmed down’, ‘driven out’ – in favour of evermore elaborate systems of abstraction. Even if people continued to feel or sense a richer abundance, entrenched epistemic habits lead them to turn away from it. The world is increasingly experienced in terms of instrumental rationality, with the moral, emotional, or aesthetic meanings of things relegated to a trivial, ‘subjective’ status.

The problem here is not science, but a certain way of understanding the scope and status of science, that is generally called *scientism*. Many advocates of these distorted conceptions of science derogate the arts and aesthetic experience [Schroeder, 2017; Tallis, 2011]. A minimal role for art is tolerated, as, say, the scratching of our evolved itch for sensory stimulation. But that’s hardly a fulsome conception of the aesthetic and how it features in human life. Heidegger thought that there cannot be ‘great art’, of a sort that ‘reveals’ the world, in cultures where only science is judged to ‘reveal’ and art has only ‘use-value’ as the source of stimulation or nice ‘sensations’ [Heidegger, 1982, p. 42]. Wittgenstein, in a widely-quoted remark, said ‘people nowadays think ... scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians etc. to give them pleasure’. The idea that artists may ‘have something to teach’ is therefore lost [Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 36].

Feyerabend would sympathize. A constant theme of his work is an appreciation of the arts as companions to the sciences. Aesthetic experiences and practices, for Feyerabend, help us create and explore ‘an open domain of possibilities’ – an abundant world that is experientially rich,



ever-changing, and open to many interpretations. In new forms of representation, other aspects of the richness of reality come into view and so remind us that the world is ‘not exhausted by our descriptions or representations’ [Ambrosio, 2021, p. 32]. There are kinds of abundance not representable or communicable by the sciences – and this was a development of Feyerabend’s earlier ideas, from the 1960s, about the contributions of arts to the sciences: the arts are ‘complementary’ to science, for instance, and ‘needed to fully realise its potential’ [Feyerabend, 1993, p. 267]. By the 1990s, artistic practices assume a grander role, being part of ‘a survey of the possibilities of human existence’ [Feyerabend, 1991, p. 495]. Scientistic tendencies – such as confining meaningful ‘revelation’ of truth about life and the world to the sciences – must be resisted. Reductionism, scientism and other failings are epistemically deficient, but also existentially desiccating, as noted by Robert Farrell:

Feyerabend is highly critical of unified worldviews when they are reductionistic in character: when they achieve unity at the expense of denigrating large sections of reality as not really real; where mind, or culture, or aesthetic experience, or whatever aspects of existence which resist reduction are perceived as illusory and metaphysically second-rate [Farrell, 2003, p. 234].

Ian Hacking made similar claims:

What Feyerabend disliked was any form of intellectual or ideological hegemony [...] Single-mindedness in the pursuit of any goal, including truth and understanding, yields great rewards; but single vision is folly if it makes you think that you see (or even glimpse) the truth, the one and only truth [Hacking, 2000, p. 28].

The entrenchment of theoretical conceptions are main drivers of the conquest of abundance. They are hostile to the richness of our everyday ways of experiencing and engaging with the world; they confront, degrade, or demean the richness and significance the world has for us; those conceptions also disenfranchise kinds of human activity – artistic, for instance – that manifest, celebrate and affirm the abundance of the world. In a form of life dominated by these conceptions, one risks a ‘conquest of abundance’ – a loss, at an individual or collective level, of ‘the abundance of ways in which natural things may figure for us’ as significant and so part of a meaningful life [Cooper, 2002, p. 345].

This interpretation of the conquest of abundance, while consistent with many of Feyerabend’s remarks, also relies on an assumption worth drawing out. I see him as presupposing that our *default* experience is the experience of an abundant world. As he says early on in *Conquest*, ‘the world of all living things already contains the restrictions and the structures that are needed for a meaningful existence’ [Feyerabend, 2001, p. 13]. Likewise, each of us – unless something intervenes – inhabits



a ‘rich, colourful, and abundant world that affects us in so many ways’ [Feyerabend, 2001, p. 16]. Put another way, abundance is not a special virtuoso achievement needing specialist epistemic skills – ones possessed only by intellectuals or specialists [Ibid., pp. 54, 269]. Indeed, there are very good Feyerabendian arguments for bringing lay people into specialist enquiry, such as ‘citizen science’ initiatives [Roe, 2021]. Abundance should be seen as a joint product of the natural richness of the world, and the complexity of human beings. The humanist ethos of Feyerabend’s writings is perhaps at its most vivid in his appreciation of the remarkable richness of human life – even of allegedly ‘ordinary’, mundane lives. Feyerabend once quoted the haunting closing verse of Bertolt Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*:

There are some who are in darkness.
And the others are in light.
And you see the ones in brightness.
Those in darkness drop from sight.

Even an ordinary life is abundant – in cares, concerns, achievements, struggles, grief, little actions, ambition and hope. Living is a process of inheriting, assessing, creating and responding to possibilities – actualising some and negating others. Good human lives will be rich in possibilities. Unfortunately, such possibilities, for an individual or whole cultures, can be eroded and diminished – by warfare, political mismanagement, economic immiseration, bad luck, cruelty, and a crass imposition of theoretical conceptions that corrupt us into narrowminded and cold-hearted creatures. The conquest of abundance therefore encompasses all the *bête noires* of Feyerabend’s later writings – dogmatic habits, cultural imperialism, the erosion of traditional societies, philistinism and scientism and an insouciant indifference to the marvellous richness of human life. John Preston notes Feyerabend’s status as a ‘hero of the anti-technological counter-culture’, which is true, and the interconnections between his moral-political, epistemic, and cultural concerns, if I’m right, go deep [Preston, 2020, p. 6].

The abundance of the world can be conquered in many ways. Philistine assaults on the arts, a cultural homogenisation that flattens the dappled variegation of the social world, the depluralisation of scientific enquiry, the monoscapes created by the devastation of natural environments, dubious ideals of ‘progress’ or ‘development’ and – at a more individual level – deep impulses to hatred, greed, vainglory, and sullen self-enclosedness. What unifies these, I suggest, is their status as vehicles of the conquest of the experiential abundance of the world. As the phenomenologist Dan Hutto explains in his review of *Conquest*:

In the hope of developing a single, uniform account of things, we disregard all that will not fit with it or reduce to it. Although this is often billed



as progress towards the ‘real’, it is in fact nothing but a bias in favour of one way of seeing things over others. It constitutes a self-imposed blindness, which is not only naïve but dangerous and oppressive [Hutto, 2002, p. 366].

Conclusion

This paper made a start on sketching a new, different interpretation of some of the main ideas of *Conquest of Abundance*. I suggested that we should interpret the ‘conquest of abundance’ narrative as a claim about an occlusion of our experience. It is not an historical and epistemological thesis (although it does make historic and epistemological claims). Nor is it an ontological, metaphysical thesis about the contents of reality. The unfinished character of *Conquest* means that we must not be dogmatic in making claims about Feyerabend’s *true* intentions. At best we can offer an *interpretation*, consistent with at least many of his remarks and, also, as faithful as possible to his concerns.

In my reading the ‘conquest of abundance’ refers to a series of perennial tendencies, in both individuals and communities, which in different ways distort our understanding of ourselves and our world. Creativity, imaginativeness and other epistemic capacities can be corrupted or impoverished. If these tendencies are not resisted, we can come to forget or even deny the rich, abundant realities of our experience and life. If this is allowed to continue, the outcomes are morally as well as epistemically disastrous. The scientific institutions we inherited have contributed much to human life, but they brought with them risks, ones that philosophy of science should play a central role in redressing. While philosophers and others voice these worries, they also find powerful expression in film. Charlie Chaplin was prescient in the closing speech of *The Great Dictator*:

We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in. Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical, our cleverness, hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent, and all will be lost.

While Feyerabend was less pessimistic, there was a clear agreement that any impoverishment of human life can lead to the immiseration of human beings and the corruption of the human world.

Other important aspects of the later writings do not feature in my account, like the ‘ineffability of Being’, which are understudied. I think there are connections between abundance, the occlusion of experience, and the ineffability of Being. What is ultimately occluded, within scientific cultures, is a sense of the ineffable, radically mysterious nature of reality [Feyerabend, 2001, pp. 214, 233; Kidd, 2017, §§4–5]. If Being



is ineffable, we cannot, on pain of ‘effing the ineffable, describe it in positive terms, a point made by Hasok Chang:

[A]bundance is not the same thing as ineffability. ‘Being’ or ‘Basic Reality’, whatever that is, is ineffable, indescribable, unknowable. What is abundant is the richness of experience, and all the different ways in which people have known and made sense of experience. The ‘conquest’ of that abundance can only be managed by the human collective in a pluralist way [Chang, 2021, pp. 54–55].

The abundance of the world is the richness of human ways of experiencing and engaging as individuals and as collectives. Conditions of tolerance, pluralism, and an expansive sense of the possibilities for meaningful human life are all integral to Feyerabend’s life, work, and legacy.

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