

F FEYERABEND'S EPISTEMOLOGY OF MYSTERY AND METAPHYSICS

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This paper explores Paul Feyerabend's epistemology of mystery, tracing its evolution from his earlier epistemological anarchism to its culmination in a metaphysics that emphasises the ineffability of ultimate reality. Feyerabend's critique of scientific materialism, rooted in his rejection of rigid methodological rules, highlights the historical interplay of rational and irrational elements in scientific progress. Drawing on Aristotle's conception of metaphysics as free and divine, the paper examines the dynamic relationship between Being and knowing in dialogue with Feyerabend's pluralistic approach. Our analysis shows Feyerabend's insistence on the contingent and narrative nature of human knowledge aligning with the Greek recognition of ineffability while diverging in its rejection of metaphysical absolutism. Feyerabend's later metaphysics embraces change, multiplicity, and the interconnectedness of human practices and Being, challenging the reductionism of scientific realism. Feyerabend's 'manifest reality' shaped by cultural and historical conditions likely betrays the influence of Frege's formal systems on his thought, exemplified in his critique of Parmenides' monism. The study further discusses Feyerabend's dynamic metaphysics in light of Pseudo-Dionysius's influence, emphasising ultimate reality as unknowable yet responsive to human engagement. By juxtaposing these perspectives, a renewed engagement with metaphysics in contemporary philosophy is warranted. Such a renewed focus highlights metaphysics' role in challenging epistemological constraints, fostering an understanding of reality that integrates ontology and epistemology. Ultimately, the paper positions Feyerabend's work as a bridge between classical metaphysics and modern philosophical inquiry, challenging the dominance of reductionist frameworks and advocating for a pluralistic, narrative-rich approach to science and epistemology.

Keywords: Epistemology of Mystery, Metaphysics, Feyerabend, Aristotle, Ineffability, Scientific Realism

Э ЭПИСТЕМОЛОГИЯ ТАЙНЫ И МЕТАФИЗИКА ПОЛА ФЕЙЕРАБЕНДА

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В статье исследуется эпистемология тайны Пола Фейерабенда, прослеживается ее эволюция от раннего эпистемологического анархизма до кульминации в метафизике, подчеркивающей невыразимость предельной реальности. Критика Фейерабендом научного материализма, основанная на его отказе от жестких методологических правил, подчеркивает историческое взаимодействие рациональных и иррациональных элементов в научном прогрессе. Опираясь на концепцию метафизики Аристотеля как свободной и божественной, автор рассматривает динамические отношения между Бытием



и познанием в диалоге с плюралистическим подходом Фейерабенда. Анализ показывает, что настойчивость Фейерабенда в отношении условной и нарративной природы человеческого знания согласуется с греческим признанием невыразимости, но расходится в отрицании метафизического абсолютизма. Поздняя метафизика Фейерабенда охватывает изменение, множественность и взаимосвязанность человеческих практик и Бытия, бросая вызов редукционизму научного реализма. «Явная реальность» Фейерабенда, вероятно, выдает влияние на него идей Фреге, что проявляется в его критике монизма Парменида. В статье также рассматривается динамическая метафизика Фейерабенда в свете влияния Псевдо-Дионисия – идея непознаваемости предельной реальности, которая тем не менее отзывчива к человеческому взаимодействию. Сопоставление этих перспектив обосновывает необходимость нового обращения к метафизике в современной философии. В этом фокусе акцентируется роль метафизики в преодолении эпистемологических ограничений, что способствует такому пониманию реальности, которое интегрирует онтологию и эпистемологию. В целом работа Фейерабенда рассматривается как мост между классической метафизикой и современным философским исследованием, что позволяет бросить вызов доминированию редукционистских концепций и отстаивать плюралистический, нарративный подход к науке и эпистемологии.

Ключевые слова: эпистемология тайны, метафизика, Фейерабэнд, Аристотель, невыразимость, научный реализм

Introduction

The conceptual foundations of Feyerabend's epistemology are both intriguing and highly significant within the context of twentieth-century philosophy of science. Feyerabend's isolation from the philosophy of science community is well-documented, but it can be traced back in part, to a pivotal encounter with a healer who treated the chronic pain he suffered from injuries sustained during World War II. This experience, which brought significant relief after years of unsuccessful reliance on orthodox medicine, prompted Feyerabend to critically reassess the limitations and the trust he had previously placed in conventional science [Feyerabend, 1995, p. 135–136]. The injuries Feyerabend sustained during his wartime experiences undoubtedly shaped his later scepticism toward authority and structured systems, ultimately culminating in his equally vilified and venerated *Against Method*. Without further ado then, this paper examines Feyerabend's critique of scientific materialism in the context of his evolving epistemology of mystery. The aim is to show metaphysics' relevance in contemporary philosophical discourse. Central to Feyerabend's epiphany is that Being is not fully comprehensible by any single framework, whether scientific, metaphysical, or cultural. By drawing on Aristotle's concept of the 'first science' (metaphysics) as both free and divine,



we illustrate how Greek metaphysics sought to uncover Being in its totality, revealing the ultimate truths of reality through the synergy between ontology and epistemology. We consider how the Greek approach compares and contrasts with Feyerabend's perspective. Essentially, we discuss the Austrian philosopher's position that Greek metaphysics was not just a quest for truth but another narrative within the tapestry of human intellectual history.

The paper aims to illustrate the relationship between metaphysics and epistemology as a foundational concern in philosophical discourse dating back to Aristotle and Parmenides. By analysing these two figures discussed by Feyerabend, focusing primarily on Parmenides' inseparability of thinking and Being, we examine the historical consequences for modern epistemology. While Feyerabend critiques the dogmatism and rigidity of universal scientific truths, his rejection of strict rationalism aligns with the Greek recognition of ineffability as the foundation of knowledge. However, Feyerabend's emphasis on contingency and the plurality of human understanding diverges from the Greeks' approach, which placed ineffability at the core of their metaphysics by order of mandate. In other words, the *modus operandi* for Greek metaphysics was an orientation towards the ineffable that Feyerabend considered incomprehensible. To explain this divergence, we observe the influence of Gottlob Frege's first-order logic on Feyerabend and its impact on his interpretation of Parmenides. While we do not claim Frege's direct influence on Feyerabend, we demonstrate that consistent with Feyerabend's own understanding, the Austrian philosopher represents another link in the historical chain shaped by innovations in first-order logic, which ultimately influenced the conceptual framework of his metaphysics. We then highlight how Parmenides' conflation of epistemic and ontic truths reveals the shortcomings of rigid logical frameworks – a perspective largely overlooked in twentieth-century thought and one that likely shaped Feyerabend's ideas. In sum, by turning to Feyerabend's contributions, this paper hopes to rekindle the importance of metaphysics in contemporary thought, drawing from the enduring insights of Greek metaphysics while considering perspectives from modern epistemology.

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The central theme of 'epistemological anarchism' in *Against Method* showcases Feyerabend's rejection of universally applicable methodological rules. This rejection applies to various epistemological approaches, whether logical empiricism, Popper's falsification, or the monistic phase model of Kuhn's scientific revolutions. Epistemological anarchism, which Feyerabend exclaimed, was the logical outcome of his applying John Stuart Mill's liberal principle *On Liberty* to scientific methodology. Feyerabend's theory first appeared in his 1970 essay version of *Against*



Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge. Already in this essay, Feyerabend challenged any idea of a universal scientific method and contended that no universal methodological rules govern science or its development. The complexity of the development of science throughout history is a testament to the fact that no general methodology has persisted, hence the famous axiom: "This is shown both by an examination of historical episodes and by an abstract analysis of the relation between idea and action. The only principle that does not inhibit progress is: anything goes" [Feyerabend, 1993, p. 14].

One of the central figures of Feyerabend's history is Aristotle, who he considered developing a highly integrated system of natural laws based on empirical observations. To Feyerabend, the significant event in Greek philosophy is Aristotle's assertion that the cosmos must align with human perception to establish a reliable foundation for knowledge. Thus, the fundamental prerequisite of knowledge acquisition, essential to Aristotle's theory of motion, is the inescapable ground of experience. However, as Feyerabend noted, this commitment to an epistemic foundation shifts in the post-Copernican era, with the emergence of "large-scale processes involving vast cosmic masses that leave no trace in our experience," significantly transforming our understanding of knowledge and the sciences [Ibid., p. 110]. Thus, Feyerabend is quick to point the 'backward movement' toward simpler, less empirically dependent theories at work in Copernicus and later scientists. In the shift from the geocentric to the heliocentric model, Feyerabend nonetheless identified a more 'metaphysical' development in science, one that marked an earlier stage where theories relied less on empirical arguments and more on provisional and unconventional methods.

This shift often involved 'irrational means' such as emotional appeal, *ad hoc* hypotheses, cultural shifts, and rhetorical strategies. These approaches were not a rejection of rationality but necessary for sustaining revolutionary ideas until the auxiliary sciences, empirical evidence, and arguments could eventually transform them into sound knowledge. In essence, although science appears to progress linearly toward greater rationality, Feyerabend argued that this progression is, in actuality, arbitrary. Feyerabend went even further to make the key assertion that deviating from reason in favour of what might seem irrational appears, paradoxically, essential for advancing science. In other words, an 'irrational phase' is necessary for the development of science, as it allows for revolutionary advancements and the emergence of transformative ideas. The historical challenges to Aristotle's grounding of reason and certainty in empiricism proved this. Theories strictly bound to empiricism risk hindering scientific progress by rejecting ideas that lack immediate empirical evidence. The Copernican revolution is an excellent example, as Copernicus' revolutionary heliocentric theory developed in opposition to much of the observational evidence of the time and relied heavily



on ‘non-empirical’ support, such as *ad hoc* hypotheses and rhetorical appeal, especially during its formative stages [Feyerabend, 1993, p. 114–118].

Herein lies Feyerabend’s epistemological anarchism: scientific progress entails a complex interplay of rational and irrational elements, which must be recognised as inherent to the natural course of science. Strict adherence to reason and empirical validation at all stages has historically stifled innovation and obstructed the development of revolutionary ideas. The epistemological dimension is fundamental to Feyerabend’s anarchism: science should be adaptive and flexible rather than constrained by strict epistemic frameworks that risk becoming dogmatic. There must be unrestricted pluralism, encouraging all methods, ideas, and approaches without privileging any underlying value system. Essentially, every theory developed exists (and persists) in opposition to other potential ideas, each of which may hold some value and contribute to the progress of knowledge. Feyerabend later responded to misinterpretations of his epistemological anarchism as an axiom, stating that ‘anything goes’ “is not a ‘principle’ I advocate; it is a ‘principle’ imposed on a rationalist who values principles yet takes history seriously” [Feyerabend, 1987, p. 284].

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Feyerabend’s view of history is closely tied to his understanding of metaphysics, which he initially critiqued for its reductionist approach. For Feyerabend, scientific laws and theories come to define or “absorb” the entities owing to this metaphysical heritage. For instance, in celestial mechanics, this reductionism reduces Jupiter to nothing more than its mass, velocity, and location. Such laws of nature are abstractions akin to how Aristotle regarded mathematics, functional but incapable of capturing the richer, more complex aspects of the entities they describe; “abstractions are incapable of ‘annihilating’ anything” [Ibid., p. 123]. These abstractive and reductive tendencies nonetheless tend to develop a comprehensive system of laws and theories:

Now this assumption is not a result of research but of a metaphysics that separates Nature and Humanity, making the first stem, lawful and inaccessible and the second wilful, fickle and affected by the slightest disturbance. The metaphysics ceased to be popular long ago – but its epistemological shadow is still with us in the form of various versions of (scientific) realism. The shadow can be criticised by pointing out that connecting reality with lawfulness means defining it in a rather arbitrary manner. Moody gods, shy birds, people who are easily bored would be unreal, while mass hallucinations and systematic errors would become real [Ibid., p. 124].

Reductivism inherently assigns a ‘history’ to the universe, portraying the emergence of intrinsic scientific laws as part of an unchanging



essence that shapes this history. This historicity reveals the epistemological bias rooted in metaphysics, as science persistently links reality to purportedly immutable laws governing its behaviour.

Thus, forms of scientific realism that affirm the reality of certain features while dismissing others undermine the coherence of the whole, perpetuating conflicts with other theories that claim to be based on evidence. The typical response to resolving such conflicts is through 'approximation,' which is valid in some instances, such as the relationship between classical mechanics and general relativity, yet incomplete in others, such as the connection between quantum theory and chemistry [Feyerabend, 1987, p. 124]. Approximation thusly calls attention to the evolving relationship between science and reality; the latter is never 'fixed' by science; it is instead continually redefined to align with the prevailing theories of the time. Feyerabend even extends this perspective to fundamental scientific laws, arguing that they are neither universally nor eternally applicable. Instead, these laws emerge concurrent with the world's development, i.e., the evidence we gather shapes our belief in the necessity of certain laws for life and consciousness.

This belief, Feyerabend suggests, is yet another demonstration of the epistemic shadow cast by metaphysics – accentuating the universal validity of such laws. Ultimately, for Feyerabend, while successful within specific historical and cultural contexts, scientific laws are neither universally nor eternally valid but are a product of humanity's social and intellectual conditions. That laws exist independently of human thought is illusory, for changes in our technologies, ways of thinking, or mathematics consistently render them inapplicable or irrelevant. Feyerabend carries this over to the realists who consider scientific objects, like quarks, as more inherently 'real' than the gods of ancient cultures; both are products of specific historical and cultural frameworks. It is precisely this insight that led Feyerabend to develop his idea of epistemological mystery: a non-static ultimate reality defined by the dynamic interplay between human activity and the world, continuously shaping and being shaped by each other. In effect, the original 'anarchy' transformed into mystery later in Feyerabend's thought, not about fostering chaos in science but championing humanitarian pluralism over a monopolistic perspective.

Feyerabend's humanitarianism is about resisting dogmatism and recognising the evolving, multifaceted nature of science and reality, as he wrote in the introduction to the Chinese edition of his *Against Method*: "My main motive in writing the book was humanitarian, not intellectual" [Feyerabend, 1993, p. 3]. Revealing scientific practices' historical, cultural and social foundations frees research from constrained frameworks toward greater creativity and adaptability. This historical uncovering aligns with Feyerabend's epistemology that challenges the grounds of scientific materialism, universalism, and reductionism in metaphysical realism. Feyerabend specifically targets science's inclination to seek a determinate



structure of the universe, reducing higher-order phenomena to fundamental physical components – a tendency he traced back to its metaphysical roots in the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato. Therefore, Feyerabend's epistemological mystery is a liberation of metaphysics itself from its tendency to monopolise the truth of being. In other words, Feyerabend's stance was more nuanced: rather than opposing metaphysics outright, he considered science and metaphysics inherently interconnected. So, by identifying significant gaps in scientific knowledge, the 'unity of science' is recognised as another metaphysical hypothesis rather than an established fact. As Feyerabend explained, "Calling the unity of science a metaphysical hypothesis is not an objection against it – a science without metaphysics could not possibly bear fruit. This is shown by many instances of scientific practice" [Feyerabend, 1991, p. 95]. Again, Feyerabend's angle here aligns with the broader view that revealing scientific practices' historical, cultural and social foundations enables more creative and adaptable approaches to research.

No scientific theory is ever entirely perfect or complete; they often emerge with substantial logical, empirical, or mathematical discrepancies. To address these challenges, scientists frequently resort to metaphysical thinking. Without these metaphysical assumptions, therefore, that all scientific findings can be unified into a single, objective portrayal of a reality independent of research becomes far from self-evident. Hence, in his rejection of a unified metaphysics, Feyerabend asserted that ultimate reality is unknowable. Feyerabend reasoned that ultimate reality's unknowability stems mainly from the fundamental distinction between being and manifest reality. In essence, being, as the ultimate unknowable reality, responds differently depending on the approach, making it never fully comprehensible; it remains inherently dynamic and open-ended. Feyerabend's 'manifest reality,' however, emerges through specific interactions between human practices and Being. Science, through its use of mathematics and instrumentation, unveils a material universe: "Many defenders of science identify this universe, this 'manifest reality,' as I shall call it, with Being itself. This is a mistake [...] Being itself is unknowable..." yet the same applies to mythology and religion: "All we can say is that Being can become spiritual, and extremely material" [Ibid., p. 96].

Feyerabend considered the world to be infinitely complex, perpetually evading reductionist interpretations. Alongside this 'Abundance Thesis,' Feyerabend introduced 'Aristotle's Principle' (or the Existential Criterion of Reality) to further challenge the traditional dichotomy between deceptive appearances and an ultimate, hidden truth. Reality is here defined by what influences our valued practices, shapes our way of life, and reflects what we care about and identify with [Brown 2015, p. 4–10]. The 'Aristotle's Principle' theory harks back to Feyerabend's reading of the Parmenidean ontology, which we will address momentarily.



All the aforementioned theses, along with his 'Ineffability' and 'Areopagite' Theses, collectively illustrate the metaphysics Feyerabend developed late in life. In sum, ultimate reality is fundamentally unknowable, but the Areopagite Thesis denotes ultimate reality nonetheless responsive to human approaches, giving rise to 'manifest realities' shaped by our practices. Scholars have identified this as a clear influence of the fifth- to sixth-century Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite [Kidd, 2012; Kidd, 2013; Rhodes, 2012; Brown, 2015]. Feyerabend himself admits as much, stating that he takes nature's complexity to be concordant with Pseudo-Dionysius' names of God; Pseudo-Dionysius' God responds in varied, comprehensible ways depending on approach, reflecting an ineffable ultimate reality [Feyerabend, 1999, p. 195–196].

Evidently, Feyerabend sought to present dynamic metaphysics as an alternative to the rigid structures of metaphysical realism – adapting to the ever-changing nature of reality rather than crystallising into dogmatic assertions. This dynamism takes us to the heart of Feyerabend's metaphysics – shaped by his Pseudo-Dionysian influence – is his epistemology of mystery, which evolved from his original epistemic anarchy:

Even the discovery of an immanent structure changes the scene, for the events-as-they-are and the events-known-to-have-the-structure do not affect people in the same way. There is no escape: understanding a subject means transforming it, lifting it out of a natural habitat and inserting it into a model or a theory or a poetic account of it [Ibid., 1999, p. 12].

Feyerabend's metaphysics of change is, by all intents and purposes, a counter position to Parmenides' metaphysics, particularly the Eleatic notion that true being cannot involve becoming or change, which is consequently relegated to non-being.

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We have hitherto established that Feyerabend counterposited change, multiplicity, and flux as the fundamental characteristics of reality in opposition to Parmenides' monism. However, consistent with his denial of universal truths, Feyerabend acknowledged that Parmenides' position could not be refuted by simply pointing to contrary facts – for Parmenidean metaphysics was deeply rooted in the values and assumptions of its adherents. To provide an alternative to Parmenides' metaphysics, one must demonstrate that change holds equal foundational significance to being within the worldview of Parmenides' audience, a task Feyerabend saw Aristotle accomplish [Ibid., p. 170]. In this way, metaphysics retained its storytelling features interwoven with myths, religions, and scientific theories, all existing in perpetual flux as the core of Feyerabend's epistemology of mystery. Expanding on this myth-making enterprise, Feyerabend sought to demonstrate that the Eleatic emphasis



on unity and immutability distorts our understanding of reality, as change is the very essence of being. As part of his metaphysics, Feyerabend's epistemology of mystery expanded to include several key definitions, as highlighted in Terpstra's preface to *Conquest of Abundance*, Feyerabend's final work, published posthumously. As editor, Terpstra compiled Feyerabend's unpublished manuscripts, essays, and notes into a cohesive and well-structured volume [Feyerabend, 1999, p. xv–xviii].

In these manuscripts, the centrepiece of Feyerabend's metaphysics is the refusal of crude dichotomies like reality/illusion or knowledge/opinion for failing to capture the subtleties of diverse human experiences and ontologies shaped by language and stereotypes, which create order but limit understanding. Feyerabend insisted instead that being's ambiguity enables reinterpretation and change, while abstract theories and logic rely on stabilised meanings, oversimplifying and failing to capture ultimate reality. As Feyerabend wrote, the perpetually ongoing process of creating order "makes manifest what has been hidden before, activates its inherent ambiguity, and uses it to effect change" [Ibid., p. 113]. In other words, ultimate reality, unknowable in its entirety, expresses itself through manifest reality, allowing human beings to engage with its mystery indirectly. Knowledge is not an end but something that "points beyond itself," revealing glimpses of greater mysteries and fostering an attitude of humility and awe [Ibid., p. 196].

Feyerabend's epistemology of reality's ineffability thus reveals an infinite richness of being that abstract reasoning can never entirely encompass. Ambiguity is not an obstacle but an essential reality feature: "Without ambiguity, no change, ever," hence the uncertain and undefined aspects of being remain vital for its dynamism and evolution [Ibid., p. viii]. This epistemic mystery clearly showed Feyerabend that the Parmenidean distinction between 'what is' and 'what is not' cannot serve as the ultimate marker of reality; the infinite complexity of manifest reality can only point to its ultimate ineffability. Feyerabend's critique of Parmenides' proem is based on two main reasons: first, the premises of Parmenides' argument already contain its conclusion – the denial of change and subdivision is embedded from the outset. Second, the premise *estin* (it is) lacks logical support and relies on an external agency beyond logic for its justification. These reasons likely reflect Feyerabend's historical position following the development of first-order logic, which we will examine shortly.

These critiques bring to our attention that the dynamic nature of reality cannot be fully accounted for within Parmenides' framework, as it does not arise organically but through external judgment [Ibid., p. 86–88]. Parmenides' starting position is thus analogous to Hesiod's *chaos* and Anaximander's *apeiron*, both serving as theogonies rather than strictly logical premises. Furthermore, all three share the feature of divine inspiration in the acquisition of truth. Feyerabend was willing to concede



Parmenides' awareness of the incompleteness of his logical model. Hence, Feyerabend suggested Parmenides preferred a proem to explore cosmological truths, effectively bridging the gap between narrative traditions and philosophical inquiry. However, this conflation of narratives with philosophy reflects the soteriological dimension of Parmenides' proem, which may have been lost on Feyerabend and modern interpreters more generally. Consistent with Feyerabend's rejection of universal truth, we observe Simplicius' reinterpretation of Aristotle's critique of Parmenides. The sixth-century Neoplatonist philosopher saw that Aristotle mistakenly attributed the properties of unchanging being to the natural world.

For Simplicius, Aristotle's misunderstanding amounts to his conflating intelligible and perceptible realities, whereas Parmenides intentionally separated the two via *aletheia* from *doxa*. By aligning Parmenides' duality with Plato's theory of forms, Simplicius contended that Parmenides had deliberately prefigured this distinction between the eternal, intelligible forms and the transient, sensory world of appearances [*In Cael* 3.1: 552–560.10]. Simplicius' reading brings Parmenides' role as a precursor to the soteriological dimension of Platonic metaphysics to the fore. To explicate his position further, Simplicius drew parallels between an unchanging reality and that of the primordial chaos of Hesiod and Heraclitus' ever-changing nature as demonstrative of 'only one thing' which 'does not come to be' [*In Cael* 3.1: 556.10–15]. Simplicius' critique of Aristotle's interpretation of Parmenides this way aligns with Feyerabend's view that the ever-changing nature of manifest reality inherently points to the ineffability of ultimate reality.

Simplicius, however, went further than Feyerabend would allow, making ultimate reality accessible through the Platonic forms, that "there is nothing else in reality apart from the substance of perceptible things" and that a person 'will have no place to turn his mind' without hypothesising the existence of eternal forms [*In Cael* 3.1: 557.1–10]. In other words, metaphysics must show that reality's elusive and ever-changing nature infers the necessity of a transcendent, unchanging reality, albeit only non-discursively. This core feature of Neoplatonic metaphysics has deep roots in the original Eleatic tradition, tracing back to interpretations of Plato's dialogues, perhaps most prominently the *Parmenides* and *Sophist*. Effectively, 'understanding' does not arise from the successes of logic or discursive reasoning; Parmenides harboured no illusion that reality could be fully encapsulated. On the contrary, understanding arises from the *failure* of logic to completely grasp reality. This failure unveils the ineffable nature of reality, opening the path to the soteriological domain of metaphysics.



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Parmenides' radical ontology is a binary that defines rational inquiry's limits with utmost clarity but not without a purpose. Parmenides' ontology is concisely expressed in fragment two, which I cite in full:

Come, I shall tell you, and do you listen and convey the story [*mythos*],
What routes of inquiry alone there are for thinking [*haíper hodoi mounai dizēsíós eisi noēsai*]: The one – that [it] is [*estin*], and that [it] cannot not be [*mē einai*], Is the path of Persuasion [*Peithous*] [for it attends upon truth [*alētheia*]; The other – that [it] is not [*ouk estin*] and that [it] needs must not be, That I point out to you to be a path wholly unlearnable [*panapeutheos*], For you could not know what-is-not [*to mē eon*] for that is not feasible [*ou gar anuston*], Nor could you point it out [*oute phrásais*] [Fr. 2]¹.

Two key features require immediate attention upon close examination of the fragment. The first is Parmenides' 'only path' to thinking (*noēsai*), derived from the Greek verb *noéō* (to perceive with the mind) – etymologically connected to *noesis*, later crucial for the Platonists. While for Plato, i.e., the 'divided line' of the *Republic* [509d], *noesis* represents the highest form of understanding, distinct from sensory perception or opinion (*doxa*), Parmenides' *noēsai* is more subtle in his use, identifying it with the 'Persuasion' (*Peithous*) attending upon truth (*alētheia*). The association nonetheless suggests a process that requires a struggle to attain conviction in the pursuit of truth. This struggle involves overcoming the view that becoming – specifically its transient nature prevents truth from revealing itself as 'what is.'

The second crucial feature is the 'unlearnable' (*panapeutheos*) nature of 'it is not' (*ouk estin*). According to Parmenides, one cannot know what-is-not (*to mē eon*), i.e., non-being, because it is inherently 'not feasible' (*ou anuston*) to grasp or achieve an understanding of non-being: one cannot even 'point out' (*oute phrásais*) or articulate that which has 'no being.' The term *phrásais*, derived from the verb *phrazō* – to 'declare' or 'explain' – directly implies that *what-is-not* cannot be explicated in thought, for it has no 'thing' to declare. Therefore, there can be no ontology in Parmenides due to its intellectual and epistemic inexpressibility. A meontology is taken up by Plato later in the *Sophist* [255e–257b] as 'other than being' and by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* [22.1022b.21–25] as *sterēsis* – not as absolute non-existence but the absence of a specific quality in a subject². Of course, this is not to mention Pseudo-Dionysius,

¹ Citation is from David Gallop's translation, see [Gallop, 1984, p. 54–55].

² The *Sophist* in fact considers radical conclusions for the 'unchanging,' which lies beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore. However, to briefly comment, in the *Sophist* [248e–249a], the 'visitor' describes 'that which wholly is' (*tō pantelōs onti*) as transcending both life and thought, remaining changeless, solemn, and holy, yet



who developed his inquiry into the 'beyond-being' (*hyperousios*) to posit God's transcendence beyond the limits of being and human comprehension [DN 588b].

In any case, the two features of Parmenides' expression establish the ontological primacy of thinking by conflating epistemic with ontic truths under the banner of *alētheia*. The irreconcilability of *ouk estin* with *noēsai* shows that reality is not fully comprehensible, for it lacks permanence – a striking parallel to Buddhist thought³. Parmenides is effectively portraying a struggle to align thinking (*noein*) and being (*einai*) (much in consonance with other traditions) by instituting their inseparable connection in the pursuit of truth: "for the same thing is there for thinking and for being" [Fr. 3]. The intentional conflation serves a clear purpose: to outline the contours of theoretical cognition and thereby deduce the non-discursive unity of thinking-being (*noein einai*) as truth (*alētheia*). Therefore, Feyerabend's insight that ultimate reality is ineffable and revealed only through its contextual manifestations is but a starting point for Parmenidean metaphysics.

The impetus for the soteriology of Parmenides' metaphysics emerges from the clear-defined limitations of his binary ontology. Feyerabend perhaps underappreciated this nuance, given his historical context as a post-Fregean twentieth-century philosopher *Begriffsschrift*. Frege's *Begriffsschrift*, which superseded Aristotle's classical logic, celebrated for its advancement of modern predicate logic and the formalisation of quantifiers was, as Frege himself declared – aimed at achieving 'perspicuity' and 'expediency' in logical form through the use of a single, consistent mode of inference [Frege, 1879, p. 17]. But this explicit clarity of logic came at a price, presenting challenges in capturing the qualitative interplay between aspects, such as the 'unity of contraries,' which allows opposites to coexist by addressing different dimensions of reality. This principle is foundational to metaphysics, its use spanning across great thinkers of Classical Greece through late Antiquity, and more recently becoming

'devoid of mind' (*noun ouk echon*). In other words, that 'which is' in the Parmenidean sense transcends not only corporeal change but thought itself; only in this way can something be regarded as truly changeless. Plotinus later incorporates this perspective in his conception of the Good, portraying it as preceding and being more fundamental than thought itself, a direct challenge to Aristotle's first and most noble 'thinking on thinking' [Enn. 5 [24] § 5.6.5: 5–8; cf. Met 9.1074b25–35].

³ The two major schools of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, the Middle Way (Mādhyamaka) and the Mind-Only (Yogācāra), align with Parmenides' deconstruction of the permanence of reality. Despite their differences, they converge on the ineffable nature of reality. Nāgārjuna of the Mādhyamaka school dismantles binary concepts to reveal emptiness (*śūnyatā*), culminating in that-ness (*tathatā*), while the Mind-Only representative in Vasubandhu approaches reality through stages of consciousness: false appearances, the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), and ultimate reality (*tathatā*), accessible only to Buddhas.



a central tenet in Charles Hartshorne's Neoclassical metaphysics [Hartshorne, 2011, p. 2]⁴.

While Frege's system can formally represent the coexistence of opposites, e.g., by introducing variables such as 'aspect A' and 'aspect B' ([S is P in aspect A] $\wedge$ [S is $\sim$ P in aspect B]), it often misses the insights of classical metaphysics. For instance, Frege could state that a statue is 'beautiful' (aspect A) but 'not beautiful in its lack of life' (aspect B). However, this overlooks Plotinus' metaphysics of the relationship between matter and form: the statue is neither merely bronze nor shape but the unified reality arising from their coalescence [Enn. 2 [25] § 2.5.2:1–14]. In other words, beauty is neither found in isolated parts nor merely ascribed as a predicate to a subject; rather, it emerges from their integration into a higher, unified whole. Frege, however, sought to reduce such complexity and prevent the unnecessary proliferation of distinct types of inference, noting that "there would be no reason to stop at the Aristotelian modes of inference; instead, one could continue to add new ones indefinitely" [Frege 1879, 17]. This approach treats the two aspects of a system as independent at the cost of the dialectical interplay that transcends formal representation. When applying Frege's perspective to Parmenides' system, the qualitative interplay between being and non-being is reduced to separate qualifiers, thereby discounting the epistemic and ontic distinctions integral to Parmenides' metaphysical context.

Frege was aware of such formal limitations, particularly in addressing qualitative or psychological elements of reasoning: "With this restriction to a single mode of inference, however, we do not intend in any way to state a psychological proposition; we wish only to decide a question of form in the most expedient way" [Ibid.]. In other words, Frege deliberately abstracts from these complexities to establish a rigorous and systematic

⁴ Hartshorne sought to revitalise metaphysics through his 'neoclassical metaphysics,' defining reality as a dynamic process of becoming in which all beings, including God, are shaped by relationships, change, and the interplay of opposites. By prioritising evolution over static being, Hartshorne's metaphysics is grounded in three additional guiding principles that complement the unity of contraries: positive affirmation, which emphasises that metaphysical truth is fundamentally positive, affirming universal and necessary truths rather than relying on negation; a balanced synthesis, which seeks a middle ground to avoid extremes, blending monistic and pluralistic elements; and the principle of contrast, which holds that meaning arises through opposites, as concepts like necessity are defined in relation to contingency [Hartshorne, 2011, p. 1–2]. While numerous parallels exist between Hartshorne and Feyerabend worthy of further investigation, space permits only a brief observation: Hartshorne's process philosophy reflects Feyerabend's view of the derivative nature of metaphysics, namely, that ultimate reality is ineffable yet infinitely explicable. Furthermore, Hartshorne's process philosophy posits that all possible values are "inexhaustible by any actualisation," including God. At the same time, the boundaries of Hartshorne's metaphysical truths remain derivable only from within – a perspective that resonates with Feyerabend's outlook and is worthy of further investigation [Ibid., p. 8].



framework for inference. However, with greater exactitude and expediency comes overamplification of reductivism, leaving no space to account for altered states of awareness – such as Parmenides' journey with the Goddess, carried by “the mares that carry me as far as impulse (*thymos*) might reach” [Fr. 1:1–2]. The Aristotelian form accommodates such interplay between being and non-being by allowing for contextual and qualitative distinctions within its logical structure, preserving the unifying tension between the two⁵. Classical logic accommodates being and non-being through potentiality and actuality, a flexibility that the rigid formalism of first-order logic may lack.

Proclus leverages this logic throughout his *Elements of Theology*, particularly in *methexis*, for example in the second proposition: “All that participates in unity is both one [*esti hen*] and not-one [*oukh hen*]” [*El. Th.* 2]⁶. First order logic, which influenced later developments in modal logic by figures like C.I. Lewis and Rudolf Carnap, introduced renewed challenges in interpreting Parmenides' strict ontological binary. When framed in modal terms, Parmenides seems to exclude the possibility of intermediaries (states of awareness) between being and non-being, resulting in what some describe as a modal collapse [Lewis, 2009; Hansen, 2011]. This fallacy arises from conflating existence with necessity, whereby ‘what-is’ must necessarily exist – omitting the distinction

⁵ It is important to mention Al-Farabi's (870–950) place between Aristotle and Frege in diversifying logic's capacity to engage with metaphysical truths, extending its application beyond formal reasoning to include universal principles and their connection to particular contexts. Al-Farabi is celebrated for revising and clarifying the Aristotelian *Organon*, perhaps chiefly recognised for grounding reasoning in premises commonly accepted within their historical and contextual frameworks, and enabling logic to mediate between universal principles and specific contexts. This flexibility allows for practical applications in political discourse, education, and governance while also addressing metaphysical concerns, such as the relationship between universals and particulars and the nature of truth and existence. For example, in his *Book of Dialectic* (*Kitāb al-Jadal*), Al-Farabi constructs contextually relevant arguments that accommodate disagreement, synthesis, and metaphysical inquiry by reinterpreting Aristotle's *Topics* [Al-Farabi, 2019]. While dialectic and logic provide accurate accounts of reasoning through premises, Al-Farabi understood metaphysics as the pursuit of a deeper understanding of the ultimate principles that govern unity and diversity, extending beyond the practical applications of logic [Ibid. p. 97].

⁶ In Proclus' metaphysics, Proposition Two aims to show that every manifold is both one and not-one owing to its unity being a product of ‘participation’ rather than a pure, inherent quality. This participatory unity implies that a manifold is unified by undergoing a process (*peponthen*) that links it to a transcendent unity, which itself is unqualified and indivisible – a “bare one” (*monon hen*). Without this transcendent unity, the manifold would either collapse into infinite fragmentation or cease to exist entirely. Hence, Proclus – *Chef de la Sagesse* of metaphysics – reasoned that a transcendent unity is necessary as the grounding principle that prevents incoherence, ensuring the manifold's existence and coherence through participation [*El. Th.* 2].



between contingent existence (what can exist) and necessary existence (what must exist). The problem with the modal rendition of Parmenides' logic lies in its circular reasoning, resulting in a logical loop: it assumes the necessity of being $[\Box E[x]]$ and the impossibility of non-being $[\neg \Diamond \neg E[x]]$, creating an equivocation $[E[x] \iff \Box E[x]]$ that presupposes the very conclusion it seeks to prove without accounting for contingency. Consequently, non-being is necessarily excluded $[\Box \neg E[x]]$ since the mere possibility of non-being $[\Diamond \neg E[x]]$ is equated with its actuality $[\Diamond \neg E[x] \rightarrow \neg E[x] \Diamond \neg E[x] \rightarrow \neg E[x]]$.

So, in the fifth century BCE, Parmenides deliberately orchestrated an epistemological and ontological union to overcome rigid conceptual frameworks. While Feyerabend naturally drew on Aristotle's critique of Parmenides – given their near contemporaneity – to support his ineffability thesis, Aristotle was more consistent with the Parmenides than Feyerabend may have realised. Aristotle acknowledged the timeless nature of truth handed down by Ancient traditions in the form of myths, which held that the first principles (*archai*) were considered gods for a reason. Aristotle saw a link between the divine and the natural world, asserting that the “divine encloses [*periechei*] the whole of nature [*holēn physin*]” – thus viewing the “inspired utterance” [*theiōs an eiresthai*] as a preserved relic of ancient wisdom [*Met.* 8.1074b1–14]. Inspiration is an essential prerequisite for understanding the embeddedness of the divine within the nature of reality. Aristotle's discussion here leads to his famous formulation of divine thought as ‘thinking on thinking’ (*noēsis noēseōs noēsis*) mentioned earlier, where essence and activity unite in eternal self-contemplation.

Aristotle distinguished divine thought from mere epistemology since the latter is tied to external, composite objects and operates in time, rendering it fragmented and imperfect. Divine thought, by contrast, is unified with its object, namely, itself. It is immaterial, indivisible, and eternally unchanging, a perfect alignment of thought and object that makes it the highest form of existence, embodying both the act of thinking and the good it contemplates [*Met.* 8.1074b35–1075a10]. While much more can be said about this, it suffices to say that metaphysics for both Aristotle and Parmenides was far more than a storytelling enterprise, as Feyerabend might suggest. The core premise of Greek metaphysics is embodied in the term ‘meta’ ‘physics’ – that which transcends conceptual reasoning, albeit grasping this involves advancing a non-discursive mode of thinking. For this reason, the Second Aristotle insisted metaphysics lies beyond logic and dialectic: “the completely perfect account regarding them, that is found in metaphysics” [Al-Farabi, 2019, p. 97]. In Feyerabend's work, too, we see this contention in his description of the ineffability of reality: the inaccessibility of a singular, unified entity such as God, which is unknowable beyond metaphor and analogy.



The distinction with Feyerabend, however, is that he did not accommodate non-discursivity, meaning metaphysics in the classical sense is unachievable. For Feyerabend, all that can be said is that Being itself remains beyond full human comprehension [Feyerabend, 1999, p. 211–213]. Feyerabend's metaphysics is not static but directed away from the ineffability of reality; all reasoning must proceed with this unknowability in mind. Feyerabend argued that while rationality contributed to science's early development, its evolution toward fragmentation demonstrates that scientific methods are not inherently superior ways of discovering truth. Rather than asserting exclusive claims to knowledge, science should recognise that Being itself cannot be fully comprehended by any single system, whether scientific, cultural, or religious. As Feyerabend observes, "we have evidence how Being reacts when approached in different ways, but Being itself and the conditions of its acting in a certain way remain forever shrouded in darkness" [Ibid., p. 213]. While ancient Greeks shared Feyerabend's recognition of ineffability as knowledge's foundation, they distinctively developed metaphysical methods to grasp this very ineffability of reality.

To draw inspiration from Aristotle, unlike sciences preoccupied with practical ends, the 'first science' (metaphysics) is 'free' (*eleutheros*), existing for its own sake and independent of any necessity. Aristotle himself never used the term 'metaphysics' to describe what we now call first philosophy. The word metaphysics (*ta meta ta physika*) is attributed to the editors and compilers of Aristotle's works, particularly Andronicus of Rhodes around 60 BCE, who organised and titled the surviving texts several centuries after Aristotle's death. In any case, metaphysics developed purely for pursuing understanding, the highest form of knowledge seeking the ultimate truths about reality, as Aristotle bequeathed us, 'the most divine and most honourable' for its engagement with the highest and most universal principles. These principles are tied to the nature of the divine, "for God is thought to be among the causes of all things and to be a first principle, and such a science either God alone can have, or God above all others" [Met. 2.983a7–10]. Metaphysics transcends epistemological investigation of objects, serving as an ontological exploration of divine nature in its most complete and perfect form. In this way, we can understand Parmenides' saying that only 'what is' can be fully comprehended, thereby enabling genuine knowledge.

Conclusion

Feyerabend's critique of science and its limitations is unprecedented in its exhibition of the intrinsic tension between human understanding and the ineffability of ultimate reality. Initially, Feyerabend formulated



the epistemology of anarchy to capture the recurring ‘irrational’ elements positively influencing scientific progress. Over time, this evolved into the epistemology of mystery, centred on the impossibility of fully comprehending Being through any single system – scientific or cultural. Notably, this gave Feyerabend an increasing propensity toward a greater focus on metaphysics in his later years, as evidenced by his choice of philosophical interlocutors. Feyerabend’s evolving engagement with metaphysics coincided with his critique of strict rationalism and his embrace of pluralism. Progress in science or knowledge, Feyerabend tells us, does not rely solely on rigid methodologies or absolute truths. Instead, we must recognise the importance of a dynamic interplay between rational and irrational elements; knowledge development involves unconventional and provisional methods more often than we care to admit. While Feyerabend shares the Greek recognition of conceptual reasoning’s limits, his reluctance to engage with ineffability through metaphysics warrants reexamining classical metaphysics.

While praiseworthy for highlighting Aristotle and Parmenides as key figures in Greek metaphysics, the deeper vision of metaphysics as an ontological engagement with ultimate truth requires more work. As conjectured in this paper, a figure of twentieth-century logical developments, Feyerabend was inclined to see metaphysical concepts as relics of ancient thinking, albeit securing a place in humanity’s intellectual evolution. Ultimately, this paper aims to show that Aristotle’s ‘first science’ as both divine and free, which exemplifies the Greek commitment to understanding reality’s fundamental principles, remains relevant for twentieth-century philosophical reflection. That thinking was divine – perfect, unchanging, and unified – was upheld as the pinnacle of knowledge until the Enlightenment era, when figures like Descartes and Kant, the so-called *Alleszer-malmer* of metaphysics, reshaped its trajectory. Since then, Parmenides’ conflation of thinking and being, aimed at moving metaphysics beyond discursive reasoning toward a direct engagement with truth, has mainly been devalued in terms of its substance in contemporary metaphysical discourse.

But there are encouraging signs of a renewed engagement with metaphysics, Feyerabend’s epistemological anarchism being but one example. While Feyerabend critiqued traditional metaphysics, he nonetheless acknowledged its significance and, somewhat paradoxically, may have contributed to its revival. The idea that metaphysics must be freed from dogmatism to remain relevant in an ever-changing reality deserves further exploration. To pursue this seriously, we must follow Aristotle’s understanding that metaphysics is inherently free and absolutely insubordinate, despite Feyerabend’s objections. Feyerabend’s insights nonetheless resonate with the Greek recognition of the ineffable at salient points, even as his critique of their methodologies adds another layer to the storytelling fabric of the human intellectual spirit. Ultimately, both Feyerabend and



the Greeks recognised the contingent nature of thought. However, the Greek tradition offers something largely absent in the modern era: the belief that true knowledge arises from the unity of being and knowing, extending beyond the limits of epistemological analysis.

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