Objectivity, abstraction, and the individual: The influence of Søren Kierkegaard on Paul Feyerabend

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the influence of Søren Kierkegaard upon Paul Feyerabend by examining their common criticisms of totalising accounts of human nature. Both complained that philosophical and scientific theories of human nature which were methodologically committed to objectivity and abstraction failed to capture the richness of human experience. Kierkegaard and Feyerabend argued that philosophy and the science were threatening to become obstacles to human development by imposing abstract theories of human nature and reality which denied the complexities of both. In both cases, this took the form of asserting an ‘existential’ criterion for the assessment of philosophical and scientific theories. Kierkegaard also made remarks upon the inappropriateness of applying natural scientific methods to human beings which Feyerabend later expanded and developed in his criticisms of the inability of the ‘scientific worldview’ to accommodate the values necessary to a flourishing human life. I conclude by noting some differences between Kierkegaard and Feyerabend’s positions and by affirming the value of existential criticisms of scientific knowledge.

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1. Introduction

Those who know Paul Feyerabend best as a philosopher of science—as the iconoclastic author of Against Method (1975), say—may find the suggestion that he was influenced by the melancholy Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard unusual. Certainly there appears, at first glance, to be few biographical or philosophical similarities between them. Feyerabend was a charming maverick, a physicist by training who by his own admission only came into philosophy ‘by accident’ and who gained a reputation as the ‘worst enemy of science’ for his criticisms of scientific methodology and rationality. Kierkegaard, by contrast, was an idiosyncratically pious nineteenth century Dane, whose philosophical work was primarily concerned with faith, language, religious belief and ethics.

Certainly Kierkegaard had little to say about typical issues in the philosophy of science, and Feyerabend is not often cited by ethicists or philosophers of religion. Indeed, only three scholars, to my knowledge, have remarked upon Kierkegaard’s influence upon Feyerabend. Arne Naess noted that Feyerabend’s refusal to provide a systematic philosophy is attributable to his reading of the Concluding Unscientific Postscript (1846) (Naess, 1999, p. 64). The second is José Raimundo Maia Neto, who also pointed out that Feyerabend’s 1991 article ‘Concluding Unphilosophical Postscript’ is an obvious allusion to Kierkegaard’s own Postscript, adding that ‘Feyerabend’s indebtedness to this work of Kierkegaard’s is considerable (1993, p. 690, fn. 5). The third is John Preston, who notes that Feyerabend ‘claims Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unphilosophical Postscript ‘as an ancestor of his own views on method’ (Preston, 1996, p. 220, n.9).

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1 For instance, Kierkegaard has not figured within recent efforts to identify a tradition in ‘Continental philosophy of science’. See Gutting (2005). However, Gutting informs me that this was due to space and priority, rather than lack of merit (personal communication). This paper is intended, in part, to indicate and substantiate Kierkegaard’s pertinence to ‘Continental philosophy of science’, especially in its general concern with the proper scope and limits of scientific inquiry. It is also worth noting that ‘science’ did not strictly exist in any of the disciplinary or institutional senses that we understand today—‘natural philosophy’, or certain specialised and then-extant areas of science were what he had in mind.

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Unfortunately, neither Naess, Neto, nor Preston go on to develop their remarks in detail. Despite this scholarly lacuna, and the lack of any apparent relationship, one can find deeper philosophical relationships between the two men, owing primarily to Feyerabend's reading of Kierkegaard. By his own accounts, in his autobiography and correspondence, Feyerabend tells us that he first read Kierkegaard around 1945–46 when he was invalided out of the Second World War. Although he does not mention which of Kierkegaard's many texts he read, his later references make it clear that he was most impressed by the Concluding Unscientific Postscript, which he began to read in the summer of 1969. Feyerabend later discussed the Postscript in Farewell to Reason (1987), which I will discuss later.

Although the explicit references by Feyerabend to Kierkegaard are few, it should be borne in mind that the heavily individualistic character of his style of philosophising is often manifested in reluctance to regularly cite other authors. Usually, Feyerabend would refer to the same authors—often, indeed, to the same quotations and remarks—rather than 'engage with the literature' in the way that postgraduates are now commonly taught to. Moreover, the references that Feyerabend did make to other authors were usually either sharply critical, or positive, with little by way of middle ground. So, the fact that he did refer Kierkegaard, and did so positively, suggests that he thought highly of him. Indeed, in a letter to Imre Lakatos he confesses that he 'greatly admire[d]' Kierkegaard (Feyerabend & Lakatos, 1999, p. 176). In this essay, then, I will examine quite what it was that Feyerabend admired in Kierkegaard and how it influenced his own later philosophy.

I focus upon three interconnected themes. Firstly, there is a common suspicion of 'systematic' philosophy that is a major theme of the Postscript and which finds strong resonances both with Feyerabend's own metaphilosophical beliefs and with his epistemology. Secondly, both share a conception of philosophy as contributing towards expanding the possibilities of human existence, specifically the idea that philosophical ideas can shape the epistemological space within which existential decisions are made. Both Kierkegaard and Feyerabend argued that the rise of the empirical sciences was accompanied by a corresponding delimitation of this epistemic space—for instance, by promoting a narrow materialism, which threatened to exclude the 'realm of spirit' within which the highest human potentialities lay. Thirdly, the hostility towards systematic philosophy and scientific and philosophical naturalism was manifested in an overt hostility towards abstraction, or to abstract concepts and ideas, especially where these assumed priority over the lived experience of concrete individuals. Kierkegaard and Feyerabend warned that the tendency, encouraged by natural science, to celebrate the abstract and 'objective' over the concrete and particular was not only methodologically unsound but also an active threat to scientific and philosophical attempts to comprehend life, mind and 'spirit'.

It may be useful to begin by quoting one of Feyerabend's longer discussions of Kierkegaard and using it to introduce these three themes.

Is it not possible that an objective approach that frowns upon personal connections between the entities examined will harm people, turn them into miserable, unfriendly, self-righteous mechanisms without charm and humour? ‘Is it not possible’, asks Kierkegaard, ‘that my activity as an objective [or a critical-rationalist] observer of nature will weaken by strength as a human being?’ I suspect that the answer to many of these questions is affirmative and I believe that a reform of the sciences that makes them more anarchic and more subjective (in Kierkegaard’s sense) is urgently needed. (Feyerabend, 1993, p. 154)

In this passage Feyerabend is criticising the aspiration of the sciences—and of certain areas of philosophy—towards the sorts of ‘objectivity’ that strive to free themselves of ‘subjective’ personal elements; or what Thomas Nagel describes as ‘the process of gradual detachment … created by leaving behind a more subjective, individual, or even just human perspective behind’. This sort of objectivity is particularly manifested by the sorts of scientism which have ‘infected’ many areas of contemporary philosophy, and which maintain that natural and human phenomena ‘must be understandable by the employment of scientific theories’ (1989, p. 7, 9). Feyerabend subscribes to this, as does Kierkegaard, although both further argue that ‘scientistic’ objectivity is not just philosophically incoherent but also detrimental to human wellbeing, since it radically devalues human capacities for creative self-development. This is why Feyerabend expresses alarm at the devaluation of ‘personal connections’, and why he echoes Kierkegaard’s warning that our ‘activity as an objective observer of nature’ will diminish our capacity to be a ‘human being’. For both thinkers, extending the sort of objectivity appropriate to scientific inquiry to ‘personal … subjective’ human beings is not only epistemically inadvisable but also morally or ‘existentially’ detrimental.

The common thrust of Kierkegaard and Feyerabend’s shared philosophical concerns was that the emergence of totalising accounts of human nature was threatening the full and free development of human beings. The most visible symptoms of this were an increased emphasis upon the abstract and the objective and a consequent neglect of concrete particular in the process. Since the ‘concrete … particular’ which most concerned Kierkegaard and Feyerabend was the individual human being, the trend towards abstractions and objectivity assumed ethical and existential significance. The great danger here, they argued, is not simply an inadequate epistemology, but a tangible threat to the philosophical project of individual understanding of oneself and of the world. On these terms, epistemology is inseparable from ethics, since the forms of knowledge and inquiry available to us help to shape and determine our understanding of the world, which in turn affects and structures our conception of what kinds of life can be meaningfully and intelligibly lived within that world. Frederik Olafson makes this point in his remark that ‘the exercise of our distinctive powers depends in some measure on their being actively cultivated; and their proper cultivation, in turn, requires that they be recognised and conceived in some adequate manner’ (2001, p. xii). Olafson’s specific targets are the more overtly scientistic forms of scientific naturalism but the concern motivating his remarks can be safely generalised to include those totalising theories which would promote diminished conceptions of our ‘distinctive powers’, if only by denying the contributions of other, competing theories. Once again, because epistemological pluralism seems to be necessary for a full exploration and cultivation of human cognitive and creative capacities, these matters cannot help but assume an ethical and existential significance. This point certainly animated Feyerabend’s philosophy until the end of his life—Conquest of Abundance contains the pregnant remark that ‘ethics (in the general sense of a discipline that guides our choices between forms of life) affects ontology’ (2001, p. 247).

This existential criterion for the assessment of knowledge was a persistent feature of Feyerabend’s thought and perhaps predates his acquaintance with Kierkegaard. In his 1961 lectures ‘Knowledge without Foundations’, for instance, one finds Feyerabend remarking that the question ‘which kind of life shall we lead?’ constitutes ‘the most fundamental problem of all epistemology’ (1961/1999, 71). Elsewhere in the same lectures, he reiterates the point that ‘epistemology, or the structure of the knowledge we accept, is grounded
upon an ethical decision’ (1961/1999, 71). These remarks are strikingly reminiscent of Kierkegaard; however, although Feyerabend tells us that he had been reading Kierkegaard since the mid-1940s, he also states that he only read the *Postscript* for the first time in 1969, some eight years after these lectures were delivered. Feyerabend was of course an unreliable witness to his own reading and his own accounts of his intellectual debts are often misleading (see Oberheim, 2006, Ch. 1). It is therefore entirely possible that Feyerabend either gave erroneous or deliberately misleading accounts of his exposure to Kierkegaard. The presence of Kierkegaardian motifs and terminology throughout Feyerabend’s earlier works would seem to validate these suspicions, such as the existential criterion for the assessment of knowledge, concern with the totalising tendencies of science, and an anti-intellectualist hostility towards the pretensions of philosophy to legislate for human life and experience.3

This expansion of an epistemic complaint into an existential concern, whilst understandable for Kierkegaard, is not one often broached by philosophers of science who discuss Feyerabend. However it was a theme of his work from the earliest stages of his career (see especially Feyerabend, 1968, 1970), even if only assumed prominence in his later work into the 1980s and 1990s. A consideration of the influence of Kierkegaard upon Feyerabend, then, will not only serve to identify features of Feyerabend’s philosophical development that current scholarship has missed, but also helps to demonstrate the breadth and depth of his thought.

2. Metaphilosophical values and philosophical style

Both Kierkegaard and Feyerabend were hostile to ‘systematic’ philosophy.4 This is made immediately clear from even a cursory look at their written work, which unlike most of the philosophical literature of their mutual contemporaries is highly distinctive and stylised. Kierkegaard’s writing is characterized by ‘its ease and naturalness, almost like a man talking at your elbow’ (Swenson, 2000, p. 229), and his writing is often praised as the finest in Danish literature.5 He also had a talent for titles, which expressed something of his melancholy personality—*Fear and Trembling*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, and so on. Feyerabend, too, is both noted and notorious for his prose style. It is energetic and punctuated by jokes, *ad hominem* attacks, and anecdotes, offering ‘a saucy challenge to the friends of Reason, a style the reader is certain to find captivating or pretentious according to his tastes’ (Wilson, 1978, p. 108).

These distinctive stylistic and rhetorical features of Kierkegaard and Feyerabend’s writing belies their common commitment to forms of philosophical presentation which address the reader not as an abstract philosopher, but as a living individual human being. The conventions of philosophical writing—whether those of nineteenth century Denmark or twentieth century academia—have tended to strive for formality, detachment, and ‘objectivity’. In *Love’s Knowledge* (1990), Martha Nussbaum identified the underlying metaphilosophical belief in these two periods as that only an ‘abstract theoretical treatise . . . can adequately state certain important truths about the world’ (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 6). The model for this abstract form of prose is, of course, the natural sciences, which has long fashioned Western philosophy. Kierkegaard and Feyerabend are two exceptions to this rule.

Kierkegaard complained that the ‘subjective thinker’, the one who resists the lure of objectivity, ‘is not a scientist-scholar; he is an artist’ (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. VII 304; 351) and so will find more insight in poetry and literature than in academic treatises. Feyerabend, too, complained that philosophical literature had become ‘anaemic’ and ‘desiccated’ by surrendering stylistic choices in favour of standardised academic prose. Kierkegaard and Feyerabend (and, one might add, Nussbaum) all emphasised that modes of philosophical presentation are not ‘mere’ aesthetic or stylistic choices. They all express, intentionally or not, implicit metaphilosophical values—the idea, for instance, that ‘truth’ is to be understood objectively and not as invested in the subjective individual.

The distinctive stylistic forms developed by Kierkegaard and Feyerabend can, then, be understood in two ways. Firstly, they allow their authors to emphasise that the work is the product of a concrete individual and not as the product of an impersonal, objective academic functionary. Feyerabend made this clear in his complaints to Lakatos about the editing of *Against Method* by New Left Books: ‘the style is no longer me . . . and there is no use discussing what is not mine’ (Feyerabend & Lakatos, 1999, p. 292). Feyerabend remarked that ‘Style becomes more and more important for me, and I am never satisfied’, and emphasised ‘I try to write very much like I speak, and I do that intentionally. Therefore I use a lot of colloquialisms and a concrete way of talking’ (Feyerabend and Lakatos, 1992, p. 192, 284).6 Secondly, they emphasise the presence of the author in the text and so seek to connect with the reader at a personal level rather than through the stultified mediation of conventionalised academic prose. Kierkegaard ‘is concerned with communicating a subjective, existential kind of truth’ and so employs literary techniques that are ‘intended to have an effect on the reader’. The effect is that ‘the style of the book as well as its content helps to make the reader aware of her own freedom’ (Carlisle, 2006, p. 26). Similarly, Feyerabend ‘does not merely “write a book” in the conventional sense but . . . literally assails his readers in his attempt to reach them and to engage them’ (Mitroff, 1976, p. 346). The desire to engage with readers on an emotive as well as intellectual level also prompted Feyerabend’s enthusiasm for the theatre as a format for the effective presentation and discussion of philosophical ideas—citing the work of Bertolt Brecht and Eugène Ionescu as particularly good examples (see Feyerabend, 1967a, 1967b).

3. Kierkegaard, Hegel, and ‘the system’

The aim, in both cases, is not to communicate an abstract truth or to articulate a philosophical system but instead to engage with the reader at a personal level in order to provoke them into reflective thought. It becomes clear, then, that both Kierkegaard and Feyerabend were keenly aware of the philosophical importance of the modes of literary presentation they used. This awareness reflected not just their stylistic predilections but also their deeper metaphilosophical values—they chose to present their ideas in forms which would both manifest and amplify them. More signif-
Kierkegaard’s aversion to systematic philosophy is easy to diagnose. When he speaks of ‘the systematician’ he obviously has in mind Hegel. Their relationship is complex, but few would dissent from Paul Ricoeur’s assessment that ‘Kierkegaard decidedly cannot be understood apart from Hegel’, and that ‘[his] thought is not thinkable apart from Hegel’ (Ricoeur, 1981, pp. 335–336). Much of Kierkegaard’s early work was a critical reaction to Hegelianism, at that time a major political and philosophical presence throughout the Prussian state. The main criticism of Hegel and his ‘System’ is that it willfully ‘abstracts’ from the individual, such that ‘the point at issue between Hegel and Kierkegaard is... whether the active self and its interests... can be accounted for in the framework of ‘systematic’ science’ (Hannay, 1982, p. 54). Kierkegaard is insistent that it cannot because the attempt to do so not only introduces insoluble epistemic problems but also threatens the integrity of those individuals. Hegel disguises this threat with the epistemological argument that truth has a unitary character, each single truth existed in relation with other truths, such that no truth and no thing can be understood in isolation from any other. This holism of course implies that individuals have no primacy, and that one must proceed away from the individual and the concrete, into the abstract and objective. Kierkegaard has no truck with this claim, arguing that the dissolution of the individual that Hegel’s systematic approach implies is ethically and epistemologically intolerable. Hegel’s ‘objective view is simply an impossible, self-deceptive abstraction from the particular individual’ which is ‘ultimately incomprehensible with experience and truth as lived by the human subject’ (Stewart, 2007, p. 2). At the heart of this criticism is Kierkegaard’s insistence that individual human beings take priority before even the most grandiose metaphysical and epistemological concerns.

Kierkegaard’s criticisms of Hegel’s systematic philosophy had their roots in existential concern with personal faith. Much of Kierkegaard’s work explores the relation between Christianity and the individual Christian. The issue, he explained, ‘is not about the truth of Christianity’, nor with ‘the indifferent individual’s systematic eagerness to arrange the truths of Christianity in paragraphs’ but rather with ‘the concern of the infinitely interested individual with regard to his own relation to such a doctrine’ (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. VII, 6; 15). As in his other works, Kierkegaard is concerned with the personal nature of faith. Christian religious belief cannot be construed as the objective examination and appraisal of a fixed body of doctrine—that defined by the Church, say—simply because Christianity strives to ‘lead the subject to the ultimate point of his subjectivity’ (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. VII, 43; 57). The detached and impersonal perspective aspired to by objectivity is utterly incompatible with the ‘intense subjectivity’ of a personally experienced religious faith. As Kierkegaard puts it, the subjective individual is impassionedly, infinitely interested in his eternal happiness and is now supposed to be helped by speculative thought, that is, by his own speculating. But in order to speculate, he must take the very opposite path, must abandon and lose himself in objectivity, disappear from himself. (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. VII, 43; 56)

Speculative thought tries to conceive of the individual by dissolving their subjectivities and locating them within a system. Yet for the speculative thinker this process undermines the pursuit of personal happiness, ‘precisely because his task consists in going away from himself more and more and becoming objective and in that way disappearing from himself and becoming the gazing power of objective thought’ (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. VII, 42; 56). The ‘disappearance’ of the individual in the pursuit of the objective lies at the heart of Kierkegaard’s objections to systematic philosophy and the epistemic ideals inherent in it. ‘To be a human being has been abolished, and every speculative thinker confuses himself with humankind’ (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. VII 102; 124).

Our understanding of faith, then, cannot be attained through ‘speculative thought’ since that is premised upon objectivity, or the flight from subjectivity. The speculative thinker tends to regard matters of faith from a distance, as it were, as an experience to be explored and assessed, but never entered into. Kierkegaard argued that this prowling objectivity could never bring the individual to an understanding of their faith, with the consequence that ‘he cannot tie his eternal happiness to speculative thought’ if that happiness includes an objective and ‘rational’ understanding of that faith: ‘speculative thought does not permit the issue to arise at all, and thus all of its response is only a mystification’ (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. VII, 43; 57). An individual who attempts to explore and understand their faith through recourse to speculative philosophy will be disappointed. Religious faith is an intensely subjective experience and any attempt to translate it into the objective stance demanded by speculative philosophy, through rigorous application of abstractions, will do it such violence that the individual will find neither insight nor illumination. Kierkegaard here advances an existential critique of Hegel. The systematic philosophy he proffers as the surest route to truth and understanding will in fact dislocate the individual from their subjectivities and distort the experiences—like religious faith—that they set out to understand.

4. Feyerabend’s pluralism and ‘humanitarian’ philosophy

Feyerabend inherited and extended this existential criticism to systematic philosophy. His denial of his identity as a philosopher (much less a ‘Professor of Philosophy’) is the most visible aspect of this (see Feyerabend, 1994a). During an interview given shortly before his death, Feyerabend maintained his insistence that he only ‘told stories’ and wrote ‘essays which upset people’, that he ‘never gave a systematic account of anything’ and that, in any case the idea of ‘a philosophy’ was ‘much too rigid for my taste’ (Feyerabend, 2000, pp. 162–164ff). There is some degree of rhetorical posturing here, of course, but the very fact of Feyerabend’s emphatic persistence tells us much about his hostilities to systematic philosophy.8

8 The actual nature and extent of Hegel’s influence upon the Prussian state is a matter of debate. For a critical discussion, which concludes that ‘one could not charge Hegel with being a state philosopher of Prussia’ since he was ‘forced into the service of power politics and nationalism’, see Knox, 1996, (quotation from page 61).

9 For a discussion, see McDonald, 2008, § 1.

10 The tendency of intellectuals to ‘confuse’ themselves with humankind also recurs in Feyerabend’s later philosophy. In a series of informal lectures published as Paolino’s Tapes (2001), Feyerabend complains that too often ‘humankind’ is simply defined in terms of the ideas and interests of intellectuals, rather than of the majority of the general population. A pertinent and entertaining excerpt from these lectures is available online at www.pkfeyerabend.org.

11 And, indeed, to academic philosophy, which was ‘barren—and insensitive’. By presenting and conceiving of itself in falsely ‘objective’ forms it failed to ‘enrich the lives of the common people’ and in fact devalued their existence by promoting untenable abstract ideals. Such a distorting philosophical attitude threatened to make people ‘inhuman and unfree, for it will subject them to the unsympathetic, because “objective”, judgement of experts’ (Feyerabend, 2001, p. 271). The humanitarian aspirations of philosophy to explore and illuminate ‘the human condition’ are undermined by its implicit commitment to abstract conceptualisation, technical terminology, and inaccessible presentational formats. Of course, this criticism rests upon particular metaphilosophical values—the Greek understanding of philosophy as an aid to life, for instance—and certainly there are many other rival values available (philosophy as the clarification of language, as the handmaiden to theology, as or as the under-labourer to science, for instance). I do not want to pursue these ideas here.

Would Feyerabend then have taken offence at the title of Eric Oberheim’s recent book Feyerabend’s Philosophy (2006)? Perhaps not. Oberheim argues that ‘Feyerabend’s philosophy’ takes the form of a thoroughgoing philosophical pluralism, an emphasis upon the need for a plurality of competing theories and methods—not a definitive set of theories (Oberheim, 2006, Ch. 8). Oberheim presents this as an epistemological and methodological claim—which it is—but Feyerabend himself also had an existential dimension to it. Feyerabend’s ‘pluralism’ was not simply an epistemological thesis, but a metaphilosophical position expressive of his ‘humanitarian’ convictions. Although there are differences between the earlier and later stages of Feyerabend’s philosophical career these should not obscure the presence of two powerful and continuous themes, namely, the commitment to philosophical pluralism which Oberheim identifies and the ‘existential’ concerns which are explored more widely in this paper.12 During his earlier career, Feyerabend had systematic ambitions that obviously disappeared by the 1970s when he embraced ‘epistemological anarchism’ and began to argue for the value of epistemological and cultural pluralism both to the pursuit of knowledge and to human wellbeing (see Preston, 1997, for an account of Feyerabend’s early philosophy).

It is worth dwelling on this for a moment. Many scholars have noted that Feyerabend credits his pluralistic tendencies to his reading of John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty. Much of the resulting literature has assumed that Feyerabend transposed Mill’s arguments for pluralism into the philosophy of science.13 However, if one looks at Feyerabend’s actual remarks on Mill, it becomes clear that his attraction to Mill’s pluralism is not epistemological but (in Feyerabend’s terms) ‘humanitarian’. Mill introduces his pluralistic methodology ‘both for the advancement of knowledge and for the development of individuality’ (Feyerabend, 1981, p. 65, my emphasis). He went on to elaborate that Millian pluralism is not just intended to offer ‘a solution to epistemological problems’ but, more significantly, ‘to a problem of life: how can we achieve full consciousness; how can we learn what we are capable of doing; how can we increase our freedom so that we are able to decide, rather than adopt by habit, the manner in which we want to use our talents?’ (Feyerabend, 1981b, p. 67).

Feyerabend makes clear that what he most admired in Mill was a pluralism which is not simply epistemological but also humanitarian, which addresses ‘problem[s] of life’ and not ‘epistemological problems’. There is a parallelism between the two sets of problems. The resolution of epistemological problems is, argued Feyerabend, best served with recourse to a diversity of alternate theories and methodologies (this is the ‘methodological anarchism’ defended in Against Method). Similarly, ‘problems of life’, such as how to live happy and contended lives, is best served when individuals can explore and choose from a variety of forms of life. Mill put this beautifully in a famous passage from On Liberty

[It] is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them. It is desirable, in short, that in things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself (Mill, 1998, p. 63)14

This sort of pluralism is of course threatened by a commitment to philosophical systems, which generally tend to assert their own primacy. Epistemic and existential concerns are defined by the system in question, which also dispenses methods for their resolution. Feyerabend implicated science as a premier example of this, as he complained that contemporary ‘problems of life’ are now invariably placed under scientific jurisdiction. This is unfortunate, since the scientific establishment generally puts its own practical and epistemic interests above all else: ‘Today the only question is how science can improve its own resources, no matter what the human effect of its methods and of its results’ (Feyerabend, 1981, p. 67).

Moreover, the epistemic ideals of science—‘objectivity’, ‘pursuit of truth’, and so on—are placed ahead of human concerns: ‘the search for the truth seems to be much more important and it seems occasionally to even outrank the interests of the individual’ (Feyerabend, 1981, p. 68, fn. 6). On this issue, he said, his sympathies were firmly with Mill, and he defined his understanding of ‘human interest’. Feyerabend argued that philosophical problems are important according to the influence their solution would have for ‘the well being of mankind’, which he defined as physical, emotional, spiritual fulfilment and the full development of human faculties (see Preston, 1997, pp. 20–22). ‘I am totally opposed to any attitude which says: “I am out to find the truth, come what may”’. What truth? And why? would be my question (quoted in Høyingen-Huene, 2006, pp. 613–614). This claim that truths gain significance only by their relationship to the beliefs and values of individuals is the point that Kierkegaard expressed in his notorious remark, in Concluding Unscientific Postscript, that ‘truth is subjectivity’.15 This is also why ethics and epistemology cannot be construed as separate. Beliefs and knowledge of reality only assume ethical an existential significance when they can be located in relation to those projects and purposes which guide and structure human life. To consider epistemology in isolation from ethics is only to address half of the problem; as David R. Law explains, ‘Kierkegaard is not interested in constructing a theory of knowledge that accounts for the way we perceive and know reality but is interested in epistemology only in so far as it bears on existential and religious issues’ (Law, 1993, p. 71).16 The important point for Kierkegaard and Feyerabend is that epistemology and ethics must be reconnected if science and philosophy are to fully contribute to human development.

5. Philosophy, science, and human potentiality

This hostility towards epistemic aims and ideals at the expense of human interests was a continuous theme throughout Feyerabend’s work and once that reached increasing prominence towards the end of his career. Feyerabend argued that any unity in science should be afforded not by a methodological or rational uniformity


13 For Mill’s arguments for pluralism see his (1998, Ch. 2).

14 Kierkegaard also considered that ‘human life . . . does not find its fulfillment in thought alone but in a totality of kinds of existence and modes of expression’ (1997, p. 152); however, the pluralism evolved here is always understood by Kierkegaard to gradually subside as one accepts Christianity. It is interesting to note that whereas Kierkegaard and Mill defend pluralism of modes of thought and living as the necessary prelude to acceptance of some final optimal state, only Feyerabend argues that such pluralism should be an end in itself.

15 In his copy of Kierkegaard’s Postscript, Feyerabend highlighted the passage: ‘the problem does not concern the truth of Christianity, but the relation of the individual to Christianity, hence not the systematic eagerness of the indifferent individual, to arrange the truths of Christianity, but the worry of the endlessly interested individual regarding his relation to this doctrine’ (Kierkegaard, 1976, p. 144). My thanks to Arlette Frederik for her help with this translation and to Brigitte Parakennings for providing scans of this and other passages.

16 Feyerabend developed a similar claim in his later work, whereby human beings regard those things as real which play an important role in the kind of life we prefer (‘regard those things as real which play an important role in the kind of life we prefer’) (2001, p. 87, original emphasis). He dubbed this ‘Aristotle’s principle’. See Feyerabend (2001, Ch. 5) for his most sustained discussion of it. Although I do not wish to pursue this point here, it is worth considering Aristotle’s principle against Law’s remark, regarding Kierkegaard, that a human being’s ‘only truly know something when we accept it as real and construct our own personal lives in accordance with it’ (Law, 1993, p. 84).

but by a commitment to a humanitarian ideal. In his paper ‘Science, Freedom, and the Good Life’ he argued that science should aim for ‘the preservation of human happiness, present life, and perhaps also an increase in the powers of human beings to become what they are capable of becoming’ (Feyerabend, 1968, p. 134). This remark might have been taken straight from Kierkegaard, who similarly emphasised the existential aspect of epistemic claims. As Clare Carlisle remarks, Kierkegaard’s central claim is that ‘truth is not merely an epistemological issue (that is, a matter of knowledge), but an ethical issue [which] in this case means being concerned about one’s existence and raising the question of how best to live’ (Carlisle, 2006, p. 68). Feyerabend began to explicitly connect these epistemic and existential criticisms of science two years later in his famous paper ‘Consolations for the Specialist’. Here, Feyerabend criticised Kuhn’s model of science not only because it tended to ‘inhibit the advancement of knowledge’ but also, and perhaps more urgently, to ‘increase the anti-humanitarian tendencies’ characteristic of ‘post-Newtonian science’ (Feyerabend, 1970, p. 197). He also attributes his ideas about the relation of objectivity and ethics to Kierkegaard, according to whom ‘we have a choice: we can start to think objectively, produce results but cease to exist as responsible human beings, or we can eschew results and remain ‘constantly in the process of coming to be’: different forms of life have different philosophies’ (Feyerabend, 1987, p. 154).

Feyerabend propounded a philosophical pluralism which sought to address humanitarian rather than epistemological problems. The aim of pluralism was to maximise the philosophical resources available for those who either wished to address ‘problems of life’ or to aid in their own self-development. Feyerabend clearly signals his metaphilosophical belief in the Greek conception of ethics as a guide to ‘right living’, in which philosophy contributes to the development of ‘well-rounded’ human beings (see Hadot, 1995). In the face of this existential aim, the significance of epistemic ideals such as the ‘pursuit of truth’ or the ‘progress of knowledge’ pale in comparison. Feyerabend also brought this pluralistic and humanistic spirit into his teaching. Recalling his lectures on Aristotle, Plato, Mill, Wittgenstein, and Kierkegaard, he remarked that ‘I don’t study and discuss these authors to embellish a subject, or to construct a system, or to cultivate ideas ... but to provide myself and my listeners with a survey of the possibilities of human existence’ (Feyerabend, 1991, p. 495). His concern was that the definition and arbitration of these ‘possibilities of human existence’ was being unduly constrained by totalising philosophies, for instance those which overzealously imported natural scientific definitions of ‘man’. For both philosophy and science, the danger lay in the seductions of abstraction and objectivity and their instantiation in philosophical systems.

Before turning in the next sections to a consideration of these hostilities, it is worth mentioning one final metaphilosophical point about Kierkegaard and Feyerabend, which should serve to connect their presentational styles with their epistemological and existential criticisms. A key point in Kierkegaard and Feyerabend’s criticisms of abstraction, objective, systematising philosophy is that it tended to debar the general public. A work such as Fear and Trembling is accessible to members of the public who lack specialist training, in a way that, say, Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit most certainly is not. Therefore philosophers should abandon their pretensions to elitist system-building and instead return to presentational forms that are accessible to one and all. Otherwise, they risk isolating themselves from the general populace (Feyerabend, 1998). Feyerabend remarked that philosophers have misled themselves into identifying the abstract and objective with ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’—a Platonic concept—and wilfully moved away from the multitudes of philosophically conscious individuals of the general public who would benefit from (and perhaps need) philosophical tuition.

It is the wish to be great, profound, and philosophical. But what is more important—to be understood by outsiders or to be regarded as a “deep thinker”? Writing in a simple style that general readers can understand is not the same as being superficial. (Feyerabend, 1990, p. 180)

Or, as Kierkegaard rather marvellously put it, ‘it [must] be remembered that philosophising is not speaking fantastically to fantastic beings’ (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. VII 99; 121).

6. Human life and the limits of scientific knowledge

In the previous sections I argued that one can diagnose Kierkegaard and Feyerabend’s metaphilosophical beliefs from an analysis of their presentational styles. These metaphilosophical beliefs were a common hostility towards abstraction, systematicity and objectivity in philosophy. Of course these beliefs took different forms and had different origins, but considering Feyerabend’s reading of Kierkegaard and his the content and nature of his comments upon him, it is certain that his own beliefs were influenced by the Dane. In this section, I develop these metaphilosophical remarks by identifying the normative vision of philosophy they support—one in which science and philosophy maximise, rather than constrict, the self-determination of the individual.

Both Kierkegaard and Feyerabend were concerned with the potential that natural science had to delimit the human understanding of the world. Although the natural sciences made tremendous contributions to our knowledge of the world, both argued that they failed to acknowledge their epistemic boundaries. This is not to say that science should play no part in human life. Kierkegaard himself had argued that ‘[t]he various sciences should be ranked according to the different ways in which they stress Being’, such that one knew which sciences to rely upon at which point in one’s development (1996, 178). However, such rankings of the sciences become impossible when the sciences assume special epistemic authority and when they lape into their totalising tendencies. Scientific and philosophical naturalism is not problematic per se and neither Kierkegaard nor Feyerabend would deny the significance of their contributions to our understanding of human nature and reality: their concern is simply to ensure that particular scientific and philosophical theories do not marginalise or exclude the other intellectual resources available to us. This is why Kierkegaard and Feyerabend both insist upon epistemological pluralism as an essential aid to our efforts to engage with and explore the richness and complexity of human experience. When such pluralism is lost, both the natural world and human beings are reduced to hypostatised material entities, and many of those features of human life—such as emotions, feelings, values, and meaning—become newly anomalous, or ‘unreal’;
this is the theme of Feyerabend’s final book, Conquest of Abundance (1999).  

Kierkegaard, too, complained that the ‘classifying, rubricating’

methods of the natural sciences tended to strip the world of its

subjectivities and particularities: ‘Scientific scholarship orders the

elements of subjectivity within a knowledge about them, and

this knowledge is the highest, and all knowledge is an annulment of,
a removal from existence’ (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. VII 301; 348).

These are not simply epistemological criticisms. The processes of

abstraction revered by the natural sciences soon found their way

into philosophy, culminating in many of the species of twentieth

century philosophical naturalism. MISTAKING the epistic and

practical successes of science for indications of its universal remit,

philosophers began to employ quasi-scientific methods in the anal-

ysis of language and mind.

Although this led to fruitful work, it also tended to encourage

somewhat impoverished views of human life and mind. In particu-

lar, psychology, anthropology and economics, the ‘sciences of

man’, happily began to banish ‘mind’ and ‘spirit’ to the realms of

superstition, in favour of new scientific models of human thought

and behaviour. Feyerabend complained that many of those who

have ‘savoured the banquet of scientific rationalism … found it

wanting’, because it aspires to objectivity and as such ‘lack[es]

important ingredients of a rewarding human life’ (Feyerabend

1999, p. 223 and 2001a, p. 269). On this account, the sciences are

unable to reflect certain important features of ‘the good life’ for hu-

man beings owing to its commitment to an ‘objectivity’ under-

scored by ‘rationalism’ and ‘method’. In an 1846 journal entry,

Kierkegaard offered a similar warning.

Scientific method becomes especially dangerous and pernicious

when it would encroach also upon the sphere of the spirit. Let it

deal with plants and animals and stars in that way; but to deal

with the human spirit in that way is blasphemy, which only

weakens ethical and religious passion … A dreadful sophistry

spreads microscopically and telescopically into huge books,

and yet in the last resort produces nothing, qualitatively under-

stood, though it does, to be sure, cheat men out of the simple,

profund and passionate wonder which gives impetus to the

ethical [the attempt to live a good life]. (quoted in Carlisle,

2006, p. 65)

In this passage Kierkegaard maintains that the application of natu-

ral scientific methods to the human sciences—as Wilhelm Dilthey

would later dub them—ran the risk of producing theories of human

nature that were inadequate at best and distorting at worst. In

particular the methods of the natural sciences were incapable of

comprehending the realm of ‘spirit’—those ethical and existential as-

pects of human experience which were essential to the formation of

a meaningful life. Kierkegaard makes this point clear in his warn-

ing that ‘this scientific gang is especially dangerous and demoralising

when the attempt is made to transfer it into the territory of spirit’

(quoted in Bykhovskij, 1976, p. 57). The reason is that these sciences

aspire to objectivity, whereas such existential concerns are the do-

main of the subjective. Self-understanding may be approached

through the sciences, but it could never be provided by them: ‘every

human being who gives himself heed knows what no science knows,

since he knows who he himself is’ (Kierkegaard, 1951, p. 128).

As Alistair Hannay emphasises, Kierkegaard is not opposed to the

sciences per se, so long as they remain within their proper bound-

ings and do not threaten the integrity of the individual by

claiming the domain of ‘spirit’ as their own (Hannay 2003, p.

218ff). Similarly for David R. Law, Kierkegaard maintained that the

pursuit of abstractions and objectivity ‘may be appropriate in the

scientific realm’ but becomes ‘wholly inappropriate when the

issue is what it means to be a human being’ (Law, 1993, p. 72).

Feyerabend similarly decried the totalising tendency inherent in

the sciences to reduce human psychological and existential

complexity.

We now have a situation where social and psychological theo-

eries of human thought and action have taken the place of [the

individual’s] thought and action itself … Not live human beings,

but abstract models are consulted; not the target population
decides, but the producers of the models. Intellectuals all over the

world take it for granted that their models will be more

intelligent, make better suggestions, have a better grasp of the

reality of humans than these humans themselves (Feyerabend,


For both Kierkegaard and Feyerabend this was a moral as well as an

epistemological problem. It is not simply that ‘abstract models’ and

‘objective theories’ are methodologically unsuited to addressing hu-

man social, psychological and spiritual concerns; the problem is

that the lure and authority given to these abstractions and objectiv-

eties misleads people into looking to them for resolutions of con-

cerns which are central to their happiness (again, conceived in the

fullest sense), but which they are incapable of addressing. Kierke-

gaard identified very well that ‘intellectualism’ had come to com-

mand priority in all questions of life, liberty, and happiness.

Everywhere it is acknowledged as settled that thinking is the

highest; scholarship more and more turns away from a primi-
tive impression of existence; there is nothing to live through,

nothing to experience, everything is finished, and the task of

speculative thought it to rubricate, classify, and methodically

order the various categories of thought. One does not love,

one does not have faith, does not act; but one knows what erotic

love is, what faith is, and the question is only about their place

in the system. (Kierkegaard, 1992, pp. VII, 298–299)

Kierkegaard concluded with the lamentation that ‘there is some-

thing appalling, something bewitched in the extinction by which

the actual life becomes a shadow existence’. The concrete emotional

and spiritual features of our individual lives fail to respond to the

quantifying, ‘rubricating, classifying’ format of the intellectual

(whether the sociologist, or the psychologist, or the philosopher)

and so they are reclassified, downgraded or subjected to batteries

of abstractions—into conceptual systems, predictive models, and

so on—into which their richness and particularities are dissolved,

dissipated or just ignored.

This is what Feyerabend described as the ‘conquest of abun-

dance’, the ways in which science and philosophy ‘reduce the

abundance which surrounds and confuses them’ (Feyerabend,

1995, p. 179). Kierkegaard describes a similar process in the Post-

script. Abstract thought, as symbolised by the ‘scientist-scholar’,
takes a concrete particular and subjects it to an ‘abstract concept’.
In so doing, it distorts the phenomenon in question, denying its

subjective features and disconnecting it from its broader relations

with other phenomena. The resulting knowledge is thus ‘an annul-

ment of, a removal from existence’ (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. VII 301;

348) which is inherently unstable. Of course, the subjectivities and

20 Feyerabend curtly noted that ‘One can of course restrict reality to material processes. That would make important events very unreal indeed’ (2001, p. 207).
21 See Krikorian (1994) and Kim (1998) for naturalistic accounts of the human mind or ‘spirit’ of the sort that Kierkegaard and Feyerabend opposed.
22 Abraham Khan argued that Kierkegaard did not eschew epistemology but ‘was perceptive and astute enough in realising that the kind of epistemology that in our day is sponsored by logical positivism is too narrow and shallow to recognise that there is an aspect of the passional life, an inwardness, which is integral to human knowledge’ (1985, p. 103).

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interrelations of that abstracted phenomenon still persist outside of the abstraction and continue to affect it. The result is that ‘abstract thinking cannot maintain itself against existence’ and becomes ‘a phantasm that disappears before the actuality of existence’ (VII 301; 347). The process of epistemic abstraction attempts to trim subjective experiences and phenomena of their messiness, smoothing their rough edges and recasting their features and properties by systematising them. However, these abstractions and systematisations can only be sustained by a consistent denial of the complexities of the phenomena in question—and it is the fact that in many cases these phenomena are human beings that prompted Kierkegaard and Feyerabend develop their existential criticisms.

7. Philosophy, science, and the primacy of the individual

Kierkegaard and Feyerabend made clear that their oppositions to totalling scientific and philosophical theories were not primarily epistemological, but were directed against the narrow definitions of the individual human beings that they promoted. Contemporary examples of these impoverished theories of human nature might include the reductive models of human beings promoted by evolutionary psychologists and economic theorists (see Dupré, 2001). The human beings described by these models may seem very alien to those who hope that we can be something more than evolutionarily-programmed ‘rational calculators’, especially since such models often tend to demote aspects of human experience—like beauty, love, and emotion—by reductively identifying them with brain states, biological functions, or whatever. Although Kierkegaard and Feyerabend do not of course discuss such contemporary examples, they would surely recognise them as sophisticated forms of the distorting attempts to capture ‘spirit’ that they feared. However, the general intellectual authority given to such psychological and economic models ensures that, through their uptake into education and politics, they have come to assume considerable influence over individual human beings. As such, they have tangible implications for the self-understanding and development of individuals. With shades of Mill, Feyerabend warned that science describes a life which is ‘safe, rational’, secure but which when seen ‘from an as-yet-undiscovered form of life, may be but a grandiose exercise in futility’. Consideration of alternative traditions (indigenous cultures, say) might prompt an awareness or adoption of alternative forms of life. Feyerabend describes this as the ‘existential dimension’ of research and points his reader to Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript (Feyerabend, 1999, p. 211).

This is the focus of Kierkegaard and Feyerabend’s criticisms. They argued that the self-development of individual human beings was of primary importance and that it was threatened by systematising philosophies and naturalised sciences which forsook subjectivity by pursuing objectivity. This is not to imply that there is seamless agreement between them, however. There is an important point of disagreement between Kierkegaard and Feyerabend, although it is not one that Feyerabend himself mentions. Feyerabend’s pluralism is of the Millian sort, celebrating a diversity of ideas, lifestyles and so on as a necessary precondition for the sort of free and open choice that, both maintain, individual development and contentment requires. Kierkegaard, too, declares, in strikingly Millian terms, that ‘human life… does not find its fulfillment in thought alone but in a totality of kinds of existence and modes of expression’. However, he later remarks that these ‘kinds’ and ‘modes’ must stay within their bounds: ‘My task has always been… [concerned… with an impudent science, an impudent cultures, etc. which wants to go further than Christianity’ (1996, p. 152, 442). This concern with ‘impudence’ is, of course, a consequence of Kierkegaard’s insistence that an individual’s development must converge upon Christianity. As such, he had no enthusiasm for pluralism as an end in itself, insisting instead that human potential finds its ultimate realisation only when one embraces the Christian faith. As Louis Pojman puts it, Kierkegaard maintained that ‘Christianity is the only reasonable world view for a rational person to accept and integrate into his existence’ (1984, p. x).

This represents an important difference between Kierkegaard and Feyerabend. Both emphasise the need to ‘liberate’ individuals from the confines of dogmatic scientific or philosophical systems, and moreover both see an advocacy of pluralism as part and parcel of this emancipator programme. However, for Kierkegaard this liberation can only be a prelude to one’s eventual embrace of Christianity: on his terms, human beings can and should experiment with multiple ‘modes of expression’—presumably akin to Mill’s ‘experiments in living’—so long as it is acknowledged that Christian faith is the intended outcome. Feyerabend has a perhaps more consistent pluralism, since he maintained that this liberating pluralism must not be accompanied by any such normative imperative to this or that sort of faith, lifestyle, or ‘form of life’. So, although both Kierkegaard and Feyerabend wish to encourage individual self-development by creating a pluralistic epistemic and existential space within which to think and act, for Kierkegaard this emancipation should (indeed, can only) conclude with Christianity. Feyerabend, by contrast, refuses to make any such normative assertions.

8. Values, ethics, and human life

There is a further sense in which such totalling theories fail to encourage the development of human beings and that is the impoverished view of the world that it proffers. Kierkegaard and Feyerabend both raised the charge that the ‘scientific worldview’ failed to accommodate or support human existential needs. This was to become a central theme of Feyerabend’s later work, and he often quoted Jacques Monod’s description of it as ‘[c]old and austere… imposing an ascetic renunciation of all other spiritual fare’ and so dooming its adherents to ‘an anxious question in a frozen universe of solitude’ (Monod 1972, p. 169; quoted in Feyerabend 1991, p. 131; 2001, p. 163). Scientific naturalism, Monod’s specific target, fails to accommodate both the values and entities necessary for human flourishing in its fullest sense—namely, the sort of moral, spiritual and teleological values essential for the wellbeing of human beings. So when Feyerabend complains that the world was ‘once full of gods’ but then became ‘a drab material world’ at the hands of the materialism and naturalisation represented by the sciences, he is making an ethical rather than ontological point (1987, p. 89).

The entities prescribed by a scientific ontology generally fail to reflect the full scope of human existential orientation—fulfilling practical and cognitive values, say, but not spiritual or teleological ones. Kierkegaard made the same criticism, stating his ‘main objection’ to the natural sciences as being that it is ‘unthinkable’ that human beings who have ‘infinitely reflected’ on themselves could ‘choose physical science (with its empirical material) as a task

23 See also (Feyerabend 1987, p. 29f). See also the remarks on ‘Aristotle’s principle’ in footnote fifteen.
24 Feyerabend is ambiguous in his references to ‘the scientific worldview’. Certainly by the 1980s, Feyerabend does not believe that the ‘scientific worldview’ exists, on the grounds that the various sciences do not share common methodologies, theories, or ontologies: ‘the assumption of a single coherent worldview that underlies all of science is either a metaphysical hypothesis trying to anticipate a future unity, or a pedagogical fake; or it is an attempt to show, by a judicious up- and downgrading of disciplines, that a synthesis has already been achieved’ (2001, p. 154). See Feyerabend (1994b) for his most sustained treatment of the ‘scientific worldview’.
for his striving’, since it offered them no higher ideals or aspirations which could meaningfully guide human conduct (1996, p. 242). As one writer puts it, the world described by the natural sciences is, for many people, ‘a flat or thin one—insufficiently rich, at least, for knowledge of it to provide guidance to life’, since it ‘portray[s] a world stripped of those ingredients—purpose and beauty, for example—which could serve to guide our activities’ (Cooper, 2002, p. 53).

John Dupré echoed this point in a recent paper on the value-freedom of the sciences, arguing that physics may be considered value-free in the ‘banal’ sense that ‘most of physics simply doesn’t matter to us’: ‘the statement “electrons have negative charge” is value free’ in a quite banal sense: It has no bearing on anything we care about’ because ‘[t]he only human interests they touch (and these they may indeed touch deeply) are cognitive ones, and so the only values that they implicate are cognitive values’ (2007, pp. 31–32). The solution to this is then, as Feyerabend proposed in a 1969 letter to Imre Lakatos, to re-invest the sciences with the sort of non-cognitive values that were and are manifested in non-scientific worldviews: we ‘should … change [our] physical surroundings … by the invention of cosmologies which are peopled by all sorts of spirits’ (where ‘spirits’, of course, is shorthand for ‘values’, rather than an ontological reference to actual ethereal beings). Immediately following this remark, Feyerabend notes that by abandoning objective ontological interests and instead making individual wellbeing the focus of his philosophical interests, he has ‘left Hegel, and … now arrived at Kierkegaard’ (Feyerabend & Lakatos, 1999, p. 176).

9. Conclusions

The common thrust of Kierkegaard and Feyerabend’s shared philosophical concerns was that the abstractions and ‘objectivity’ of totalling scientific and philosophical theories are resulting in impoverished views of human beings. Such impoverishment threatened to diminish individual conceptions of human potentialities and relied upon an unacceptable separation of ethics and epistemology. Kierkegaard and Feyerabend responded by affirming accounts of human flourishing which neglected important aspects of a fully developed individual. This invited an existential criticism of scientific and philosophical theories which extends beyond an objection to their epistemologies. Feyerabend shared with Kierkegaard the awareness that individuals seeking to develop and understand themselves turn to the scientific and philosophical options available to them—whether Hegel for nineteenth century Danes, or modern science for twentieth century Westerners. As such there is an ethical and existential imperative for those options to reflect adequately the diversity and complexity of human beings. However the sciences and philosophies often or invariably fail to do this. They dissolve the subjective experiences of individuals in favour of abstracted psychological models and collapse the complex moral and aesthetic aspects of our ‘life world’ in favour of diminished conceptions of human beings and of the reality with which they engage.

Kierkegaard and Feyerabend both refused to be complicit in this diminishment. By deliberately adopting distinctly personal presentational formats they resisted the denial of subjectivity inherent in systematic philosophy. They also criticised, on epistemological and existential grounds, abstraction and ‘objectivity’. Although their specific targets were different, their common aim was to show that science and philosophy should aim to contribute to human well-being and the realisation of individual potential, but that this aim was being undermined by their common commitment to abstract concepts and an illusory ideal of objectivity. In this they were arguably successful; both Kierkegaard and Feyerabend are persuasive in their criticisms of the poverty of systematic philosophy and totalling theories, and in their paeans to the complexity and richness of human existence. However, one question remains which both men raised, and with which I will close. I will let Feyerabend pose it: ‘How is it that views that reduce abundance and devalue human existence can become so powerful? What are the processes that give them strength and make them plausible? How can we deal with this plausibility? … How did it happen that the rich, colourful, and abundant world that affects us in so many ways was divided into two large domains [subjective and objective], the one still containing some life while the other lacks almost all the properties and events that make our existence important?’ (Feyerabend, 2001a, p. 16).

Feyerabend (2001, 2009) developed an intellectual history of Western science and philosophy to try to answer this question, whereas Kierkegaard did not, but these are issues for another time, and their discussions of objectivity, abstraction and the individual are arguably none the worse for it.25

References


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