Cranks, Pluralists, and Epistemic Vices

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A debate that began about how best to understand Feyerabend’s motivations for his ‘defenses’ of astrology has, thanks to Massimo Pigliucci (2017) and Jamie Shaw (2017), developed into a larger reflection on pluralism. Along the way, our exchange explored the authority of science, demarcation problems, and, in its most recent stages, the status and rationality of science. In his contribution to this exchange, Shaw give an overview of the main principles of Feyerabend’s pluralism, namely, the commitments to proliferation and tenacity. Together, they function methodologically to urge scientists to develop theories that are inconsistent with established points of view, and then to defend those alternatives, even in the face of criticisms and obstacles (see Oberheim 2006).

Understanding Pluralism

The general style of argument for pluralism, developed by Feyerabend during the 1960s, merits two comments. The first is that, as Feyerabend himself constantly affirmed, the pluralistic nature of scientific enquiry is perfectly obvious to anyone with acquaintance with its history or practice. In his writings, the methodologists to admire are not philosophers of science, isolated in their studies from the laboratory workbench; rather, they are those reflective scientists, like Einstein, Mach, and the other heroes, whose epistemic authority on matters of methodology is rooted in their practical experience. So, when Pigliucci remarks that Feyerabend was complaining about nothing, since pluralism has always been a hallmark of scientific theorizing, he’s quite right—for one deep complaint of Against Method was a lack of pluralism in philosophical models of science, not in science itself.

The second comment on Feyerabend’s arguments for pluralism is that, in his hands, they were unsystematically developed—as one should expect, of someone hostile to theoretical pretensions. What one finds throughout his work, instead, are experiments with different types of argument for pluralism, adapted to changing concerns and interests. A job for later scholars, most obviously Eric Oberheim (2006) and Hasok Chang (2012, chapter 5), was therefore to give a more systematic treatment of ‘Feyerabendian’ arguments for pluralism—ones informed by, but not articulated in, the writings of, everyone’s favorite epistemological anarchist. Chang, for instance, divides pro-pluralist arguments in terms of those with ‘benefits of tolerance’ and ‘benefits of interaction’, locating instances of both mixed up in Feyerabend’s writings.

At this point, though, we run into the worries that motivate Pigliucci; namely, that these forms of sensible pluralisms are apt to degenerate, at least in Feyerabend’s hands, into grossly permissive forms of the ‘anything goes!’ variety. Closely attending to the history of science can, it’s true, give us enough cautionary tales to keep open a space for alternative theories—no one doubts that. But what’s not reasonable, argues Pigliucci, is for Feyerabend to think that astrology, or demonology, or homeopathy, are alternative “theories” that ought to be included in the modern pluralist portfolio’ (2017, 2). An appeal for pluralism should not degenerate into an abuse of pluralism, and the million-dollar question is how to mark the point of that shift in a principled way. Unfortunately, Feyerabend does not offer a crisp answer to that question. But, I think, there is no need for one in the case of astrology.
In my original article (Kidd 2016a), I argued that the defenses of astrology were not motivated by a sense of astrology’s epistemic value—so, on my reading, there’s no call for inclusion of astrology and the rest in our ‘pluralist portfolio’. There was no question of including astrology within the modern scientific imagination as a first-order epistemic resource, able to inform contemporary enquiries. That being so, there’s no need to demarcate inclusion worries. Indeed, what one sees in Feyerabend’s essay, ‘The Strange Case of Astrology’, is not really a defense of astrology at all, but rather of the epistemic virtues that are integral to the character of scientists *qua* epistemic authorities. Astrology was discussed since it was attacked, by a group of scientists, who failed to provide easily-available arguments against it, and who instead relied on dogmatic assertion, arrogant rhetoric, and appeals to authority. It was this bad epistemic behavior that really motivated Feyerabend, rather than any sense on his part that astrology belongs in our pluralist portfolio. I suggested that Feyerabend’s purposes in defending astrology can be profitably understood as an appeal to epistemic virtues and vices—that was he was really concerned with are the virtues of the mind scientists ought to evince, and the danger to their authority if they evince the related vices of the mind (see Battaly 2014, Cassam 2016).

**Epistemic Virtues and Vices**

I want to suggest that, at this point in our debate, another role for epistemic vices comes into view. Pigliucci rightly remarks that ‘a constant danger for pluralism of any sort is that it risks becoming a fairly lazy intellectual position, where anything goes because one is not willing to do the hard work of narrowing down its scope’ (2017, 1). Two points should be made here. The first is that pluralism can admit of epistemically vicious forms, licensing failures to do the sorts of epistemic work that effective enquiry requires—if ‘anything goes’, one can suspend the hard work of investigating and evaluating those things, and shrug off the responsibility to remove those that aren’t. Although pluralism may enjoy benefits of tolerance and interaction, as Chang calls them, it can also pose costs—disorientation, confusion, and incapacitation, say. It is not always virtuous to be pluralistic, a point that Feyerabend often neglects.

A second point is that Feyerabend, at least as I read him, tends to only see pluralism as virtuous. Throughout his writings, the underlying sense is that being pluralistic is edifying, an expression of—and means to exercise—admirable qualities, like humility, imaginativeness, and open-mindedness. An epistemic anarchist, after all, enjoys an openness unavailable to the poor Kuhnian normal scientist, stifled by their self-imposed dogmatism—a virtue-epistemic aspect of Feyerabend’s famous essay, ‘Consolations for the Specialist’ (1970), that has gone unnoticed. Indeed, note that Feyerabend’s two pluralist principles can both function as virtues of enquirers, as well as norms of enquiry: tenacity can be an epistemic virtue, a disposition close to the virtue of epistemic perseverance (Battaly forthcoming), and proliferation might not itself be an epistemic virtue, but surely requires the exercise of several, including creativity and diligence. Indeed, Feyerabend constantly praises qualities like creativity, imaginativeness, and tolerance while also castigating vices like arrogance and dogmatism.
I want to suggest that we take seriously the idea that certain epistemic stances can be epistemically virtuous or vicious. Clearly, the stance of those scientists who attacked astrology was epistemically vicious, specifically, arrogant and dogmatic, as I argued in my original paper. I think that certain pluralistic stances can be vicious, too, such as the overly permissive sorts that Pigliucci criticizes. But other pluralist stances can be virtuous, encouraging tolerance and imaginativeness and other admirable qualities, perhaps as in Chang’s account. The claim is not that a stance can have epistemic virtues or vices in the full-blooded ways that human agents do, only that stances can have the essential components of those virtues and vices. I have given a methodology for appraising stances in virtue-and-vice-epistemic terms elsewhere and offered a set of examples (Kidd 2016b, Kidd forthcoming a). In one of these, I argue that many forms of scientism, construed as a stance, is epistemically vicious (Kidd forthcoming b). Investigating the the various stances emerging in this debate in vice-epistemic terms would be a worthy project. Perhaps what is really wrong with doctrinaire scientism, flaccid pluralism, and uncritical zeal for pseudoscientific sentiment is that all of these are, deep down, epistemically vicious.

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References