PAUL FEYERABEND'S HUMANISTIC ORIENTATION OF SCIENCE AND ITS REFLECTION IN YORUBA PROVERBS: A HERMENEUT'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Researches, be it scientific, sociological or humanistic have been caught in the confusion of what method to employ to maximize productivity. This has sometimes led to prolonged researches or less productivity. Whereas many philosophers of science postulated methods for carrying out scientific researches – Popper's Critical Rationalism, Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Research, Lakatos' Research - Paul Feyerabend believed that scientists should have the freedom to choose whatever method in carrying out researches other than following some structured methods or laid down principles. In line with this, A Yoruba adage says that "Ogbon le ya inu asiwere sun" (which literally translates as one can get a vital idea from a mentally challenged person, which implies that knowledge can accidentally be gotten from anywhere or any person). There are many proverbs and sayings like this that support an anarchist approach to knowledge acquisition in yoruba traditional epistemology. Through a hermeneutic analysis, this paper argues that though researchers may need to follow methods, it is the case (agreeing with Feyerabend) that dogmatic adherence to a particular method may debar a researcher from making progress.

Keywords: Anything goes, researchers, Yoruba proverbs, Feyerabend

Introduction

Paul Feyerabend was one of the most controversial scholars in the field of scientific epistemology. He advocated for 'epistemological anarchism', which he expounded in his classical book *Against Method,* where he fiercely criticized critical rationalism, as represented by Karl Popper; though he claimed he regretted ever writing it (Feyerabend, 1995 : 147). Feyerabend opined that there seemed to be no strict rules which are always employed by scientists in their researches. He objected to any single prescriptive scientific method on the ground that any such method would limit the activities of scientists, and hence restrict scientific progress. For instance, Karl Popper postulated a methodology of science whereby hypotheses undergo severe testing processes, where failed samples are falsified and passed ones are corroborated. Against this, Feyerabend argued for the need to avoid blind followership of theories. Though there is no known Yoruba scholar that defended an anarchist approach as Feyeraband but Proverbs are used by the Yoruba to express their thoughts in terms of scientific values, moral norms, cultural values, conveying order, influencing and educating people on societal norms (Ademowo & Balogun, 2014: 150).

In some Yoruba wise sayings, strict adherence to methodologies can hinder progress, which is why one adage enjoins individuals not to discountenance the possibility of knowledge from a mentally challenged person (Ọgbọ́n le ya inú aṢ̀were sun). Though Feyerabend has been heavily criticized for allegedly propagating

ideas related to anarchy, astrology, nihilism, and even violence, and has thus been labelled the "worst enemy of science", I will show in what follows that his postulations are worth emulating in order to avoid retributive progress in knowledge acquisition.

I start the work by making a thorough insight into Feyerabend's thoughts and principles which might provide interesting insights, discussions, and even research guidelines for up-and-coming scientists. A section will be dedicated to the Yoruba proverbs and sayings that support epistemological anarchism together with some criticisms. I ended it by providing a short conclusion which includes suggestion regarding methodology in all endeavours, be it science or not.

Against Method: An Anarchist's Approach to Scientific Inquiry.

Feyerabend said that he “stumbled into drama” (Feyerabend, 1995 : 26) by accident, and he became something of a ham actor in the process. This accident then led him to accept philosophy texts among the bundles of books he had collected for the plays and novels they contained. It was the dramatic possibilities of reasoning and the power arguments seem to exert over people's philosophy that fascinated him (Feyerabend, 1995:27). Though he said he had interest in both the technical and the general aspects of physics and astronomy, but that he was unable to draw a line of distinction between them. For him, Mach Eddington's Mechanics and Theory of

Heat, and Hugo Dingler's Foundations of Geometry were theories propounded while these scientists moved freely from one end of their subject to the other without reliance on known methods. He had observed this when he read Mach very carefully and made many notes. (Feyarabend, 1995 : 30).

Feyerabend seemed to have been greatly influenced by Karl Popper for he said that he admired Popper's freedom of manners, his cheek, his disrespectful attitude towards the German philosophers, his sense of humour and his ability to use language judiciously. He sees Popper as having a free mind, joyfully putting forth his ideas and unconcerned about the reaction of the professionals. (Feyerabend, 1978: 115)

Falsificationism, inductionism, scientific revolution based on paradigm shifts, scientific research programme, and what have you, are all faced with critiques in the hands of philosophers and scientists alike. Feyerabend exposed the full implications of the failures inherent in the methodologies (Chalders, 1999:150). He argues against Popper's notion of science where he (Popper), claims that there is nothing more rational than the method of critical discourse, which is the method of science (Popper, 1972:69). Feyerabend refutes this claim on the belief that the idea of a method that is indubitable and absolute in scientific researches, when one goes that the memory lane on the progress made in historical researches. Although there may be rules guiding scientific research but whether

they were avoided by the researchers matter not, for their avoidance is necessary for possible progress. In the history and philosophy of science, events and developments, such as the invention of atomism by Democritus, the observation made by Nicholas Copernicus on the heliocentric nature of the universe as against the false geocentric orientation of the earth that led to the Copernican Revolution. For Feyeraband, Kinetic theory and quantum mechanics were possible because some of the thinkers avoided the rules (Feyerabend, 1993: 14). For instance, Galileo's time, optical theory was unable to account for phenomena that were observable through telescopes. So, astronomers who used telescopic observation had to use ad-hoc rules until they could justify their assumptions by means of optical theory (Feyerabend, 1975).

Popper has argued for the demarcation between science and pseudo-science but Feyerabend seems to have a problem with this. He claims that he desists scientists from dealing with issues which they take for granted because they do not study them but they simply reject them and insinuate that their rejections are based on strong and straightforward arguments. (Feyerabend, 1991:74-75). Imre Lakatos supports this view when he said that if we decide to pursue the Popperian criterion of demarcating science from non-science (and of course, metaphysics), then we might certainly end up in complete scepticism, since this approach will render all science as practiced irrational metaphysics which ought to be discarded. Thus such demarcation is nothing but dogmatic falsificationism (Lakatos

& Musgrave, 1970:102). But it is undoubtedly true that Popper's ideology is very applicable in both the scientific world as well as the society at large, moreover, science has to do with proving observable facts.

Feyerabend therefore, puts forward an orientation in which science is essentially an anarchic enterprise whereby theoretical anarchism is more humanitarian and more likely to encourage progress than its law-and-order alternatives (Feyerabend, 1975)

According to him, new theories came to be accepted not because of their accord with scientific method, but because their supporters made use of any trick – rational or rhetorical – in order to advance their cause. Without a fixed ideology, or introduction of religious tendencies, the only approach that does not restrict progress is *"anything goes*" which is not in itself a principle, but the terrified exclamation of a rationalist who has taken a thorough look at history (Feyerabend, 1975).

He objects to any dogmatic attitudes and epistemological rules that govern cognitive processes and instead he suggests an open attitude towards any kind of epistemological foundation that might work - anything goes. Feyerabend believes that it is impossible to view the progress of science in terms of one set of methodological rule that is always used by scientists; such a scientific method would inhibit scientific progress. Instead of carrying out research based on some

acclaimed universal and static rules, he believes that science progresses (as put forward by history) by ad-hoc postulations that avoid the rules, hence, *'anything goes'* (formally known as *epistemological anarchism).*

To him, there are many other ways which can 'go' other than the ways of pure science, for some non-numerical and innumerable methods of other pseudo sciences – say religion and humanities can. This goes against any dogmatic reliance on methodological rules since their universality is not well grounded. To this end, rules ought to be avoided, otherwise, it would lead to limitations in scientific progress.

To backup his claim good science does not necessarily operate on a static and universal rule, he made references to some of the scientists of old who were known for the progresses they made (e.g. the Copernican revolution and Galileo's telescope), and showed that all common prescriptive rules of science are violated in such circumstances. According to him, had scholars and scientists of old relied on rules and methodologies, they might not have come up with their brilliant inventions and scientific revolution would probably not have taken place. For instance, great scholars and inventors like Hans Lippershay, Newton, Einstein, Thales, Pythagoras, and Galileo stumbled on their inventions and postulations by try and error and series of observations. The progress made in science was possible because scientists either did not follow rules or they stumble on their

results. The successful participation in a process of revolution is possible only for a ruthless opportunist who does not follow any particular philosophy and who adopts whatever procedure seems to fit the occasion (Feyerabend, 1993: 9-10).

When he was fiercely criticized for supporting violence through his teachings of anarchism, he decided to be termed a dadaist instead of anarchist since the later does not care for human lives and happiness. Describing dadaism, Feyerabend holds that a Dadaist is utterly unimpressed by any serious enterprise (like science) and he smells a rat whenever people stop smiling, and assume that attitude and those facial expressions which indicate that something important is to be said (Feyerabend, 1975:21).

Feyerabend, Science and the Society

Feyerabend attached his sociopolitical thoughts to his idea of epistemological anarchism whereby he considered a humanistic way of running the society where freedom is ascertained and development is feasible due the freedom of people to choose whatever sociopolitical methods that can best aid societal growth and development. Since following rules strictly will lead to dogmatism, Feyerabend believed that this act will rather enslave the people than liberate them (which is supposed to be the essence of science).

This doctrine of epistemological anarchism is considered his major

contribution to scientific inquiry as well as its practicability in politics and society. His belief is the infeasible nature of a universally accepted scientific method, therefore, science has to be stripped of its high status in the occidental society. Science has no superiority over religion and all other aspects of the human society because scientists cannot lay claim to a generalized theory in researches, hence, no justification for placing it above other aspects of life. Little wonder why science is almost venerated above humanism and religion. He frowned at the imperialistic attitudes of scientists towards psychology, astrology and complementary medicine. In his opinion, societies are pluralistic, hence, the need to refrain from giving too much attention on science at the expense of other traditions, just as it is protected from other ideologies (religion, most especially).

He opines that there is no scientific worldview, just as one cannot lay claim to a uniform enterprise called science, other than the theoretical frameworks of metaphysicians, school masters, and scientists who are blinded by the achievements of their own particular niche. To him, there is hardly any objective principle that could direct one away from the supermarket 'religion' or the supermarket 'art' toward the more modern, and much more expensive supermarket 'science'(Feyerabend, 1987 : 316).

Feyerabend probably attacked science not because he actually believed it was no more valid than astrology or religion, but because

he recognized -- and was horrified by -- science's vast superiority to other modes of knowledge. He objected science from a humanitarian perspective, not necessarily from an epistemological point of view because he thought that science, due its technology power all over the world could lead to some form of tyranny and quest for world power which may hinder other institutions from growing (Feyerabend, 1978:). He opines that the high status accorded science in our society, and the superiority it has over voodooism and black magic are unjustifiable. Regarding science as a higher enterprise is dangerous and can be likened to the struggle faced by Galileo with the Church in the seventeenth century (Chalders, 1999:154). Feyerabend thus envisioned a free society where all traditions have equal rights and equal access to the centres of power (Feyerabend, 1978:9).

It should be noted however that although Feyerabend's anti methodology thesis might sound a bit crazy, at the same time, it sounds just about right. If all the standards of rationality come up with a common truth, then one would have no choice but to say that truth is objectively true. But then we cannot expect all standards to lead us in the right direction. I do not think that is a problem; it merely suggests that whatever is objectively true can be compared with a "bad cousin" of sorts, born by those faulty standards.

Also, Feyerabend's view of science is considered radical but somewhat interesting. However, one obvious problem with his anti

method campaign is that the comparison of science with voodooism, black magic and religion does not hold sway. As a matter of experimental evidence to the contrary, scientists do change their story – unlike the tenets of religion. Any scientific theory that is in conflict with observation will go into oblivion. Gellner thus criticized Feyerabend for propagating violence, he cited some paragraphs of *Against Method* where Feyerabend describes different aspects of anarchism (Gellner, 1975:335).

Further, Feyerabend values Galileo's astrology and believes that Galileo did not follow any rule. However, Galileo used the observation of falling mangoes to arrive at his conclusion. He noted that at every point of a falling mango, it falls at different speed due to difference in weight. From research findings, I am not sure the methodologies Feyerabend opposes were formulated before the time of Galileo. I think that what we now consider the scientific methods were developed after Galileo, and the invention of instruments such as the telescope had led to the evolution of the sophisticated methods of hypothesis and experiment we call the scientific method today.

However, I believe that where one gets a conflict between two equally valid views, then the value of choosing the "correct one" tends towards zero compared to the cost of debating it. So one would just allow one of them to win whilst keeping the other on the books (if it was required to be clearly chosen), but then, even with equal truth value views, I still imagine that the two possibilities would fall

out of equality as research into one outstripped the other (i.e my own worldview may be more complete). Moreover, John Law has advised that it is not the case that following methods is bad, it is however the case that one needs to think carefully and should desist from blindly adopting widespread methods and theories (Law, 2004:166).

Feyerabend also opined that he did not intend to replace one set of general rules by another such set but that he only intends, rather, to convince anyone that wishes to engage in scientific research that all methodologies, even the most obvious ones, have their limits (Feyerabend, 2001:212).

Western science and its methodologies have made many advances in terms of technology power, however, science is not just a single enterprise, as there can be several kinds of science like African science, Chinese science and so on. Amateur scientists from various sociopolitical backgrounds can approach their worldviews in different ways from what upholds in the occidental world. For instance, there is an African science that can explain how rain can be made to fall or how a heavy rain can be stopped, but this is often termed voodooism or magic plainly because the area has not been explored by scientists due the thorough nature of the algorithms involved. Science in the Western world is considered superior to others around the world because of their Imperial nature, such that any scientific discovery that does not correspond to that of their

orientation is considered pseudoscientific adventures. For instance, among the Yoruba, there are many wise sayings and worldviews that come in handy to the people in their endeavours.

Some Illustrations of Yoruba Proverbs on Anti-methodological Thought

Proverbs are often taken as essential among the Yoruba people. It comes in many fascinating forms – warning, corrective, expressions of socio-pragmatic perspective, abusive and sometimes, eulogistic (Odoba, 2014: 44). It is a viable tool for transmitting the wise sayings and knowledge of old from one generation to another (Bolaji & Kehinde, 2017: 1). Many proverbs show that overreliance and strict adherence to methods can debar progress. The proverbs I analysed in this paper are those that enjoin individuals to seek knowledge always and in whatever form and progress without prejudice and with prompt attention.

Any kind of knowledge acquisition, be it scientific or not is bound to be carried out in such a way that the evidence available can either prove or disprove the hypotheses. And due to the dynamic nature of man and his immediate environment, methodologies are meant to be reviewed from time to time. If this is the case, then the argument that one needs to follow laid down principles in researches especially as it has to do with severe testing of hypotheses may seem untenable. To buttress this point, a Yoruba saying has it that:

Ti a ba ji ni kutukutu,

Ogbon ni ki a koko ji wa
Ki a ma ji ni kutukutu pile were
Nitori pe, ogbon odun oni,
Were emii

Every morning
We need to seek new knowledge
Other than wake up and become nuisances
Because the knowledge of today may be irrelevant tomorrow.

The underpinning assumption of the above saying is to gratify the dispensable nature of previous knowledge and its intending methods, be it scientific or not.

To start with, *Ọnà kan o woja* (Many roads lead to a market) knocks the inconsistent nature of laws and theories in scientific inquiries. Invariably, the insistence on the consistency of old and new theories renders an unreasonable advantage to the older theory. It supposes that other than wasting too much time on severe testing, one can adopt other easier methods which can aid progress say for instance, Glymour's bootstrap probabilistic method or Bayesian confirmation method or a combination of methods or even a try by error. This proverb gives researchers the room to adopt compound methods in carrying out their researches without losing focus on their end results.

Moreover, a proverb explains why overreliance on principles and severe testing can lead to less productivity. *Igi yii o da, a yo ninu ina, toun o da, a yo ninu ina, ojo wo ni obe fe jinaỌ*(This firewood is not good, we remove it from fire, that one is also bad, we remove it from fire, when exactly will the soup be properly cookedỌ). This proverb advises individuals to desist from wasting time on researches in the name of falsification.z

Bi òní Ọ̀ rí, Ọ̀la o rí béè ni babalawo Ọ̀ n díf á Ọ̀ Ọ̀ rún (what upholds today may not be tenable tomorrow, hence the need for a Babalawo to consult his oracle every five days) is another proverb that goes in line with Feyerabend's logical point that the compatibility of a new theory with a defunct older theory may not make the new theory more valid than other alternative ones. Knowledge is revolutionary, hence, the necessity of not solely relying on a given method.

Conclusion

Science aims at finding satisfactory explanation of phenomenon. I believe that virtually all knowledge is theory-laden, including the concepts employed for explanatory purposes, it becomes quite problematic to discuss explanation in a satisfactory way. In explaining a phenomenon, some arbitrariness will be introduced at some point to resolve the dilemma. Without such arbitrariness, anarchism is inevitable. This is probably why Feyerabend resorted to epistemological anarchism. I believe that he probably did not want to fall into the same category with philosophers of science who have

been criticized for propounding one scientific method or the other, since he might be shying away from giving explanations on the workability of his method.

As shown in the previous section, some Yoruba proverbs have been hermeneutically analysed to prove that one may need to adopt whatever method one deems viable when carrying out researches or even in the society. It should be noted that one certainly might need to follow some rules, but what rule(s) did the scientists of old employed when carrying out their researchesỌThis goes to show that rules or methodologies may debar one from using one's rationale since one would have been limited to a certain methodology without questioning its probable inherent problems.

Feyerabend has made a good point by suggesting any methodology that works and some Yoruba proverbs have also supported this idea. However, there is a Yoruba proverb that says that *af'ogbon ologbon sogbon, ni kii je ki a pe agba ni were* (heeding another person's advice is the reason why old men are not called insane). The proverb suggests that even though an old person is supposedly a wise person, s/he does not nullify an idea coming from another person be it young or old, without thorough assessment of such opinion. Invariably, monopolizing scientific method through the suggestion of a strict approach can impede rapid scientific progress. Researchers ought to be open-minded in their quest for knowledge. Individual scientists and epistemologists can adopt try by error approach in their search

for knowledge. This implies that it is not necessarily any laid down principle that can guarantee knowledge. This is why the Yoruba proverb, *ona kan o w'oja* remains tenable.

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