

Sola Experientia? Feyerabend's Argument Against Empiricism
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In "Classical Empiricism" (Papers, vol 2, Ch 2) Feyerabend adapts an argument from a Jesuit at La Flèche in the 17th century [with source re: François Véron S.J.] to refute a certain brand of empiricism.

The main point of the argument is to depict 'classical' (i.e. modern) empiricism as a foundationalist view in epistemology, and then to establish the logical vacuity of any such foundationalist view. Novel are the alignment with (Protestant) fundamentalism, and also the explanation of why such a view can be 'psychologically' effective because of, rather than despite, its vacuity. That explanation certainly imputes false consciousness, or at the very least deep confusion, to adherents of such views.

1. Exposition The Jesuit argument is directed against the *Sola Scriptura* rule of faith, which Feyerabend likens to the empiricist's rule for right reason: *Sola Experientia*, as it were. The argument has three parts.

- First, how are we to identify what counts as experience? We cannot draw on experience for our beliefs unless we can separate out genuine deliverances of experience from e.g. dreams and illusions. That question cannot be answered by appeal to experience. For analogy, we realize we can't very well expect to go to Scripture to answer our questions about what is to belong to the canon, what is genuine scripture and what are apocrypha.
- Secondly, this rule of faith does not give us the wherewithal to interpret experience, or to understand it. My experience is what happened to me, that I am aware of; but what exactly did happen to me? Any reply will be a response of mine (or of yours) to what happened to me, and will interpret. Normally, this response will be framed spontaneously in the language I have inherited or learned at my mother's knee, but other descriptions will rival my description. For example, I report that I was angry, that I saw a person or a cat moving quickly around the corner, that I felt 'phlogiston' escaping. Experience by itself cannot adjudicate between the rival descriptions that I was fearful, that I saw a devil or witch, that I felt rapid oxydation. The touchstone we use in practice is described and interpreted experience -- and that touchstone can therefore not be the sole court of appeal when rival descriptions or interpretations are differed.
- Thirdly, given solely this rule of faith, we cannot adjudicate putative consequences drawn from experience. Experience alone, on anyone's interpretation, gives us directly only a small part of our opinion. The remainder goes beyond what it gave us, and logically speaking there are many ways of doing so. But experience by itself cannot tell us what are better or worse ways of going beyond experience.

I think we can object to these points in various ways, most especially by noting that it is in further experience that expectations based on our current identifications, interpretations, and

extrapolations are fulfilled or disappointed. But the counter will be: yes, but only in further, later identified and interpreted experience. The practice may come to a bad end, as we suffer more and more disappointment. But then we can change the identification, interpretation, and extrapolation we practice, without going against our rule of faith, since it really gave no guidance on that practice in the first place. Hence those changes will be disguised and hidden by the insistent iteration -- in the very same words -- of that rule of faith, thereby producing a deceptive air of constancy.

Indeed, it is because of its logical vacuity that the rule lends itself to this -- says Feyerabend -- and that is why it is psychologically effective.

2. Analysis Feyerabend's argument applies to any form of foundationalism in epistemology. Suppose we say that experience is our only source. We will then need to answer three questions.

- Firstly, how do we identify what counts as experience? (What is canonical and what is apocryphal?)
- Secondly, how do we interpret experience once identified? (You might say that it is like reading a newspaper, no interpretation is needed -- but that is a view not even tenable for newspaper writing, which relies heavily on shared belief, and understanding in its readers.)
- Thirdly, how do we draw consequences from experience?

None of these three questions can be answered solely by appeal to experience. Without answers, and with the injunction to withhold belief from any answers not founded on experience, we have in effect nothing at all. In practice this is an invitation to rely on pre-given, assumed or presupposed identifications (the canon), interpretation (the tradition), and cherished conclusions (which are then said to be drawn). That reliance can only be uncritical, for it cannot be criticized on the basis of experience, and no other basis for criticism is allowed.

It may be objected that any identification, interpretation, and rules of right reason which are chosen will still be subject to the harsh test of further experience. Predictions made on this basis may be contradicted by later experience if it is identified, interpreted, and extrapolated in the same way. That is correct. But now the vacuity of the sola experientia rule shows its genuine advantages. No tacit or spontaneous change in interpretation can be effectively criticized -- or perhaps even recognized as such -- exactly because experience places no constraint on the interpretation of experience, and no other constraint is accepted as binding or even legitimate.

For example, we can certainly point out that today we classify all sightings of ghosts, intercourse with demons, and perceived effects of witchcraft very differently from those who reported them. We do not accept the criticism that we fail to hold our interpretation of experience steady and constant. For it is clear that these early reports involved interpretation by the witnesses, and their experience, whatever it was, could not have made that interpretation rationally compelling.

So on the one hand, the slogan of *Sola Experientia* can be brandished to keep accepted interpretations in line with previous practice, but on the other hand, it can equally well be used to disarm any critique of changes in interpretations.

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