



How to tame your Feyerabend

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Paul K. Feyerabend (1924–1994) was an iconoclast: part gadfly, part rhinoceros. He developed ideas that are now entire research programs in philosophy of science. Despite this, he is often remembered as a trickster or cynic, rather than as a significant intellectual ancestor. The past three decades have seen a substantial revival of interest in his work, however, and *Interpreting Feyerabend* is a milestone in that process of rediscovery. This is well-timed, as 2024 will witness an entire year of events to celebrate Feyerabend's 100th birthday, including conferences, publications, and art exhibits (<https://www.pkfeyerabend.org/en/pkf-centennial/>).

Interpreting Feyerabend opens with an introduction by Jamie Shaw and Karim Bschir that expertly outlines the relevant historical context with a level of detail, clarity, and ease that was impossible even a decade ago. The introduction is followed by 11 chapters, whose diversity builds on Feyerabend's own broad interests. Topics include representation in science and art (Chiara Ambrosio), realism (Hasok Chang), theory change (Hakob Barseghyan), pluralism (K. Brad Wray), voluntarism (Martin Kusch), the mind–body problem (Jamie Shaw), quantum mechanics (Daniel Kubly), 'reasonableness' in general relativity (J. B. Manchak), scientism (Ian James Kidd), expertise (Matthew J. Brown), and citizen science (Sarah M. Roe). The book will be important for those interested in Feyerabend, the history of the philosophy of science, or any of the above topics. Each contribution is significant. Due to considerations of space, I limit my reflections here to a selection of chapters, organized around three reoccurring themes: pluralism, metaphilosophy, and ethics.

Several chapters consider Feyerabend's pluralism. Chiara Ambrosio's looks at stylistic pluralism in representation. Hasok Chang's chapter reconstructs Feyerabend

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as a pragmatist-pluralist realist. K. Brad Wray focuses on Feyerabend's theoretical pluralism and the value of false theories. And Martin Kusch argues that Feyerabend's epistemological anarchism counts as a 'stance' in Bas van Fraassen's sense. I'll focus on Ambrosio's chapter.

We might think that progress in art and science consists in creating increasingly accurate representations of the world. Drawing on the work of art historians, Feyerabend argued that such a position assumes an objective reality capable of being represented perfectly and exhaustively. For Feyerabend, reality is not like that. It is *abundant*. Still, that does not mean that we should give up on trying to represent the world: We simply need another way to understand the nature of representation. Ambrosio argues that the solution contained in Feyerabend's later work is that when scientists and artists aim to imitate reality, they do so in a *theatrical* way. That is, their representations are *staged, for an audience*, and most importantly, *they contain the target system*. On this view, representational accuracy must be judged as obtaining *within* the performance, not between the performance and something outside it. And this judgment must take into account *form* (style), *content*, and *audience*. As Ambrosio points out, it would be worth putting this view into discussion with Feyerabend's philosophy of theatre. I think it could also inform existing accounts of scientific representation. Among other things, Ambrosio's chapter is a powerful reminder that the arts (and by extension, the humanities) contain an ever-expanding set of rich and useful perspectives, forms, and styles that remain largely untapped in science and philosophy, and it would be beneficial if more philosophers of science followed Feyerabend's lead in taking them seriously.

Ambrosio's presentation of Feyerabend pairs well with Hasok Chang's chapter, which explores the pluralist and pragmatist nature of Feyerabend's realism. According to Chang's understanding of Feyerabend, reality is what good theories describe (49), and good theories are those that help us live meaningful lives. Of course, there are reasons to dispute the claim that Feyerabend was a realist (or an anti-realist, or a voluntarist...), and these are explored in the chapters by K. Brad Wray and Martin Kusch, both of which highlight aspects of Feyerabend's pluralism that are not congenial to the traditional realist. From all these chapters, it is clear that struggling with Feyerabend's struggle with realism is still a productive thing to do.

Moving on, several authors draw attention to Feyerabend's metaphilosophy. One is Daniel Kuby, who reconstructs Feyerabend's changing views on the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics. Under the influence of Karl Popper, Feyerabend criticized this interpretation for its perceived instrumentalism. But through close historical study and discussions with physicists, Feyerabend began to see that Bohr (the leader of this movement) was not a naïve instrumentalist. In fact, Bohr's instrumentalism was the result of good physical arguments based on good physical evidence. Surely, this is acceptable behavior for a physicist. Feyerabend was forced to conclude that philosophers should not command scientists to be realists, as he had once done. Whether realism or instrumentalism is best for physics depends on the physics. And this motivated Feyerabend to further reject any universal methodological principles devised by philosophers meant to govern scientific practice. While Feyerabend's methodological pluralism is well-known, it is fascinating to see

how it originated in a clash between a philosophical “ism” and facts about scientific practice.

Kuby draws explicit attention to the way that Feyerabend’s metaphilosophy evolved in tandem with his views on quantum mechanics. He shows how Feyerabend struggled with a number of metaphilosophical questions that are still important today: When should philosophers use historical, armchair, and sociological methods? How important is it to account for the ‘canon’ of case studies that philosophers of science inherit? What forms of evidence about scientific practice should philosophers take into account? How can that evidence justify normative claims? What kinds of normative claims can empirical data justify? Kuby reconstructs Feyerabend’s changing and nuanced views on these questions, in a way that could be useful for the discussion about the role of empirical data in philosophy of science today.

Jamie Shaw’s chapter also illuminates metaphilosophical questions that arose for Feyerabend, especially axiological ones about the foundations of epistemology. Shaw reconstructs Feyerabend’s argument against philosophers who try to settle questions like the mind–body problem using notions like ‘naturalness.’ This term, Feyerabend claims, merely celebrates ingrained habits of speaking and thinking. Instead, the mind–body problem should be decided by evaluating competing scientific theories. Feyerabend provides two different ways of doing this, corresponding to two different stages in his thought. The early Feyerabend claimed (under Popper’s influence) that what makes one theory better than another is greater empirical testability. But the later Feyerabend argued that there could be two equally empirically testable (even equally empirically adequate) theories which still varied in terms of their *existential* import. That is, one theory could be better in the sense that it helps us to lead more meaningful lives, which matters because making life meaningful should also be a goal of science. So, we can use this as a way of evaluating competing theories. For example, perhaps, a materialist world is not as good as a non-materialist world, existentially speaking. Ethics, in the broad sense of a discipline that guides choices about how to live, does not determine ontology on its own. Wishful thinking is not acceptable in science. But, as Shaw points out, for Feyerabend, ethics must be in productive dialogue with science, even concerning what the world is like.

While the importance of ethics in philosophy of science is now widely accepted, Feyerabend’s position was more radical than many positions are today, since he places ethics right at the heart of our enterprise. As philosophers of science are becoming increasingly interested in methods and metaphilosophy, as well as developing accounts that can interface productively with society and politics, Feyerabend’s metaphilosophical positions are worth revisiting.

Finally, several chapters attempt to extract, clarify, and criticize Feyerabend’s broadly ethical views about science. Ian James Kidd analyzes Feyerabend’s views on scientism and its dangers. Matthew J. Brown considers Feyerabend and expertise, and Sarah M. Roe considers what Feyerabend’s position on modern citizen science initiatives might have been.

Expanding on one of these chapters in a bit more depth, Brown highlights an important tension in Feyerabend that is still relevant today. On the one hand, a consequence of Feyerabend’s anarchism is that people should be as free as possible.

Scientists, therefore, should not act as expert authorities who tell people what to believe and do. On the other hand, as an early supporter of the idea that science is (and should be) ‘laden’ with non-epistemic values (to use today’s terminology), Feyerabend would likely recognize that scientists in fact enjoy a position of power which they should use to support human flourishing. In effect, scientists must at once be, and not be, expert authorities. Brown sketches his own way out of this tension: reduce some of science’s current authority, so that citizens have more control over their own lives. At the same time, keep the autonomy of scientists in check by making science more of a collaboration between scientists, policymakers, stakeholder representatives, and those with local knowledge. In such an arrangement, the authority and autonomy of scientists would be balanced in a way that would also increase the autonomy of non-scientists.

One important job of the philosopher, for Feyerabend, is to examine underlying myths, as these implicitly define what counts as ‘expected,’ ‘normal,’ and, most worryingly, ‘rational.’ Feyerabend is now part of the founding myth of philosophy of science. It is therefore our philosophical duty to revisit his views, defend what we like, reject what we do not, and craft new myths that give meaning to our work. This book goes a long way in that direction, and Feyerabend himself would be happy to know that none of the chapters commit the cardinal sin of hero worship. All of them go beyond where Feyerabend left off, which is appropriate for a book with this subtitle. *Interpreting Feyerabend: Critical Essays* is an excellent collection that has already begun to reshape our understanding of Feyerabend’s contributions to philosophy, and it will continue to do so for years to come.

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