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# Against Method



## Synopsis

Paul Feyerabend's globally acclaimed work, which sparked and continues to stimulate fierce debate, examines the deficiencies of many widespread ideas about scientific progress and the nature of knowledge. Feyerabend argues that scientific advances can only be understood in a historical context. He looks at the way the philosophy of science has consistently overemphasized practice over method, and considers the possibility that anarchism could replace rationalism in the theory of knowledge. This updated edition of the classic text includes a new introduction by Ian Hacking, one of the most important contemporary philosophers of science. Hacking reflects on both Feyerabend's life and personality as well as the broader significance of the book for current discussions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A devastating attack on the claims of philosophy to legislate for scientific practice." —New Society "A brilliant polemic." —New Scientist "Since it was first published in 1975, *Against Method* has followed Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* and Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* into becoming a classic text in the debate about scientific methodology and scientific reasoning." —The Philosopher "A powerful critique." —London Review of Books "Against Method is more than a book: it is an event." —Archives de Philosophie

Paul Feyerabend was Professor of Philosophy at UC Berkeley, and Professor of the Philosophy of Science at the Federal Institute of Technology at Zurich. He died in 1994. His books include *Philosophical Papers*, *Farewell to Reason*, and *Against Method*. Ian Hacking is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *Historical Ontology*, *Scientific Revolutions*, and *The Emergence of Probability*.

A great book - probably more timely and necessary and insightful in 2016 than when written. Feyerabend was and is obviously a "feather-rustler" of the scientific establishment - for which I am grateful to him. I have spent a lot of years being suspicious of the pious, arrogant, self-serving, omnipotent attitude of some/much of science and scientists. I have become painfully aware of how many grand proclamations and expectations have been foisted onto humanity, especially the under-privileged, under-developed, and unwitting - only to have history show them way short of the mark and actually doing great harm to lesser populations and our Planet. For the 1st time for me, Feyerabend lays bare the follies of the scientific method, the damage it does, and the new, creative ideas it attempts to squash in the name of method - really, though, in the name of power, control, and arrogant hierarchies. I've felt that most new, good, ground-breaking science has come in spite of the method - from outliers, amateurs, radicals and radical approaches. He is right on - very focusing for me. And, with science in need of a new view of science, of people, of the planet, and a new approach - his is a refreshing and necessary effort if we are to move ahead into the real world of diversity, equality, and quality, esp. with Natural Systems, complex situations, and chaos - which is where the big problems facing us lie. Bravo for brave new ideas against an establishment long over-due for a "reset" and which would allow brave new proposals leading to world-changing and world-view changing results. Bravo Dick Pierce

This book is one side of a two-sided debate begun (but not finished because Lakatos' death intervened) between Paul Feyerabend and Imre Lakatos, on the meaning, understanding and the proper role of "scientific practice" as opposed to use of the "scientific method," per se. And here we are referring to the scientific method as best expressed and defended by the likes of Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn, among others. The author argues, quite persuasively (provided one grants his narrow premises a wider hearing), that most successful scientific inquiries have never proceeded strictly according to the rational method at all, but instead depend mostly on an unholy mixture of subterfuge, rhetoric and propaganda -- that is, that their success lay in the realm of politics and

social science rather than wholly in the realm of the scientific method per se. Here the author examines in detail the arguments used by Galileo in defending the Copernican revolution. He uses this ancient example to make his crowning point that anarchism is a superior method of inquiry to that of rationality (at least as it has been practiced so far). The alternative offered by Feyerabend is "intellectual anarchism" as a replacement for self-imposed (and lazily practiced and blind) rationality. It is in the former, rather than in the latter, that creativity and the wishes of the scientist is stressed rather than the (implicit) authority of science. The best part of the book is that the key aspects of the substance is outlined in an "Analytical Index" provided both as introduction and as epigrams to the corresponding chapters. Whether one agrees with Feyerabend or not, no one can say that he did not make his arguments crystal clear. And for that alone the book deserves five stars. My own view is that the author does indeed have a narrow point that slices through an important metaphysical space that can be (but is not always) determinative in the scientific pursuit. It is true that science when judged as an abstract undertaking between "idea" and "action" is essentially an anarchism enterprise. How we organize our minds and our society to "do science" is indeed important and arguably is always an important consideration. However bad thinking habits, blindness to social influences, bad sociology, and even chauvinistic epistemology, while an integral part of the meta-game of science, or even of the practice of science, are not strictly speaking an integral part of and certainly not always a fatal part of the scientific process itself. I believe that Feyerabend's argument is basically a narrow exorcism against existing chauvinistic practices in science, the defense of which and the raising of awareness, in retrospect is a good thing. But normal consideration of such concerns lay within, and operate within, an entirely separate epistemological realm. Just as he argues for a continuing distinction being made between the "context of discovery" and the "context of justification," an equally valid argument can be made that there exists such things as variables exogenous to the thinking process itself (even if at a higher or different metaphysical level) that cannot be completely controlled except only in "imaginary idealized environments," (the one that is everywhere implicit in Feyerabend's argument), not in the real world of human societies. The idea that if this latter realm is policed at all, it is prima facie evidence of its epistemological weakness (even in the very few cases where indeed it is true) is a very, very narrow argument to make. Within what societal context, may I ask, is the epistemological anarchy supposed to take place? T.S. Kuhn in my view has made the more mature observations and arguments in this regard by suggesting that simply "being aware" of these concerns is itself enough for policing them. Kuhn, of course errs in the other direction. To the extent this debate can be decided at all, the answers must lie somewhere in between. I sure wish I could have heard professor Lakatos' side of

this debate. Five stars.

Feyerabend is pretty good at updating books from beyond the mortal veil. Nonetheless, I am reading an older copy. It is really awesome. I agree with most other reviews. I do agree that it is stronger in urging "scientists" to be less rigid with method, and that the polemic has less focus on declaring how an anarchistic science should be favored over other strategies for gaining knowledge, such as superstition, rumor, tradition, new age insights, and so on. Myself, this is helpful as I see medical / biological / health care research desperately grabbing for methodological security from the "gold standard" of the RCT, the peer-reviewed journal, the imprimatur of the "expert as in climate science lately, and so on, while ignoring and even detracting from more fruitful pursuits. Lately, commentators have gently noted this, and have gently urged more exploration of "pragmatic trials," subset analysis, post-hoc explorational analysis, and so on. But it is valuable to have the Feyerabend viewpoint put forth strongly. Normally, I dislike reading various "critical," or "structural," or marxist evaluations of various topics, but it works here - back on Hegel's home turf of epistemology.

This book does precisely what it says it will do - challenge the scientific method's claim as The Epistemology. The body of the work is a detailed historical case study which he uses to make a historicist argument against the current scientific method, and the argument is both interesting to follow and rigorous. The Appendices are more impressive in my opinion, although noticeably more difficult. In there Feyerabend creates a larger system of argument and attempts to attack the scientific method not only empirically, but also theoretically. The last chapter is of course a completely different species, and in my opinion fundamentally elevates the work. Read it for yourself to find out.

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