



Farewell to Reason

Paul Karl Feyerabend

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Farewell to Reason offers a vigorous challenge to the scientific rationalism that underlies Western ideals of “progress” and “development,” whose damaging social and ecological consequences are now widely recognized.

For all their variety in theme and occasion, the essays in this book share a consistent philosophical purpose. Whether discussing Greek art and thought, vindicating the church’s battle with Galileo, exploring the development of quantum physics or exposing the dogmatism of Karl Popper, Feyerabend defends a relativist and historicist notion of the sciences. The appeal to reason, he insists, is empty, and must be replaced by a notion of science that subordinates it to the needs of citizens and communities.

Provocative, polemical and rigorously argued, *Farewell to Reason* will infuriate Feyerabend’s critics and delight his many admirers.

Farewell to Reason Details

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Kevin K says

This is a hard book for me to rate. On the one hand, when I first read parts of *Farewell to Reason* in the late '90s, I was electrified by it. It opened my mind to a whole new way of looking at the world (Feyerabend's relativism) which I have subscribed to ever since. On the other hand, the book is deeply flawed, and probably 70% of it isn't worth reading. One example: the final essay consists of responses to criticisms of Feyerabend in an obscure German publication. Unfortunately, the reader of *FTR* has no idea what the original critics actually said. So it's a little like coming into a conversation halfway through, where you don't have most of the background. Much of the book suffers from this type of thoughtlessness toward the reader, and large sections on the philosophy of science are both very dated and incomprehensible.

Nevertheless, the first and last essays of *FTR* rate five stars in my opinion. Among today's armies of moral crusaders, it's hard to find a genuine defender of relativism, and Feyerabend is one of the best. What is relativism? It's the idea that there is no moral truth, and that "objectivity," "rationality" and "progress" are phony constructs used primarily by Western people to undermine and destroy the diverse cultures and ways of life which existed in the pre-rational era (or remain pre-rational today). Feyerabend's program (perhaps it would be better to call it an "anti-program") is to allow total pluralism and self-determination where all sorts of societies and belief systems are allowed to flourish – without being browbeaten by intellectual elites, and forced into "rational" straight-jackets like free trade, growth economics, secular humanism, liberalism, Marxism etc.

Feyerabend doesn't hesitate to take on the hard cases either. At one point in *FTR* he defends the Catholic inquisition as being rational within its own terms, and its arguments as impossible to refute based on any "objective" arguments. And he's right! A less dramatic, but similar case would be the controversy in recent years over teaching evolution in public schools. Feyerabend's point of view is that what matters is not the "truth," but quality of life, and the right of human beings to live in ways they find meaningful and satisfying. That is, there is nothing wrong with a community of people deciding, through democratic principles, that they want to live a Biblically structured life, and teach their children Creationism. Of course, this is where the modern inquisition, and the Popes of Objectivity, step in and assert their right to force their "objective" views onto other people's children. And in today's America that seems perfectly normal. But translate this behavior to a society more fashionable than evangelical Christians like, say, Indios living in the Amazon. Do we really need to force their children into schools to learn evolution and other irrelevant garbage that, essentially, is just another missionary White man's religion to be rammed down their throats like Christianity? As Feyerabend eloquently puts it, "The pygmies, for example, or the Mindoro of the Philippines, do not want equal rights – they just want to be left alone."

Stephen J. Gould often said that there is no progress in evolution, and that no species is superior to any other. Species are simply adapted in various degrees to their environment. Feyerabend deploys similar arguments in the field of human culture. Essentially, his point is that no culture is superior to any other, and thus there is no reason for one culture to impose its views or ways of life on another. Yes, we could send the Indio children to school, and teach them evolution – instead of the silly, primitive, religious beliefs which dog their parents – along with all the other trappings of our modern "objective" civilization. But why? Their society is already superbly adapted to their environment, and meets their spiritual needs. Whereas our supposedly advanced society is destroying our environment, and not meeting our spiritual needs!

Farewell to Reason has some brilliant, life-changing material in it (well, at least it had a big impact on my life and thinking), and is well worth reading – just don't be hesitant to skim over the chaff.

Fatih A. says

“Gelenek her ?eyin kral?d?r.”

Mercurio Cadena says

Feyerabend es un requisito en el mundo de la epistemología. Paul nos persuade no sólo de la imposibilidad de un sistema de conocimiento "objetivo" que difumine al resto en una batalla de legitimidad, sino que nos muestra la mezquindad detrás de semejante proyecto.

Rui Coelho says

More political, but also less bright, than *Against the Method*.

Daniel says

Paul Karl Feyerabend ensues to be the sort of out of the ordinary irreverent philosopher, which is plenty of contradictions and triggers his readers' awkwardness, although this present work would rather be classified as a short-tempered and tense juxtaposition of small essays which, in its best, could had a better impact, if its author wouldn't deplete his munitions of straw man representations of science, philosophy and arts. I assume that the very point it makes and, at least, his work, would be of great value would be much more satisfying, if the author would never classify his colleges and readers as academic scroungers; its own work is itself contradictory, since he knocks out everyone who may sustain a different point, and doesn't itself admit criticism, because he is not, as we says, a reasonable writer – instead, it befalls rational and logical comprehension of world, giving up on his fallacious attempts to retreat upon – and not from – others what we actually does, just because he isn't reasonable – this point transforms his own position in a critique to the very intervention and intercultural dialogue, founded in the sign of variety – a multiplicity which, I admit, till the present moment, not only is not guaranteed, owing to the fact it hasn't been accomplished in western and specially European history, but also in nowadays. Even so, this standpoint, being unable to account for debate and consisting in a coarctation of human action and consideration of his acts, would create a meta-historical writer, which tries to keep itself beyond bias – a foregone conclusion he implicitly tries to deny he upholds, indorsing this outlook in his criticisms to Popper and other authors (which I would better appreciate, if there wasn't so many ad hominins! Indeed, this could never be achieved, since all we born in a cultural-biased world vision; in fact, he is trying to make his point, without considering others and obliterating the very culture path he eventually was trying to stand up for. As a result, we can't affirm his ideas for we advise readers that doing anything – even denying his argumentation – from reflection upon his words would be impervious! But since we are citizens and our pollical institutions couldn't stand as democratic, as long we can't adopt our characteristically societal disparity from other ethnicities – the democratic world we envisaged in Greek culture and, as relativistic may agree, wouldn't be superior to any

other nor inferior, and, as a result, it consists in an idiosyncrasy that shall never be eliminated (the obliteration of memories would cause an aberration – the dilapidation and annihilation of our patrimonial fountainheads as humans, the mistreatment to the right for memory, because we must foment diversity and recognize it from our culture, and not as an stranger talking as a prophet, like some stylistic twists in Feyerabend's book. Consequently, the problem is – and Feyerabend adopts a pattern with we couldn't refuse it is the stain of his very own culture, since it considers problems –, therefore, how to foment diversity in world culture backdrop, without a reliance in homogeneous and inhuman methodology (and that is one of the greatest lessons we could learn about the view Paul Feyerabend gives us, although we denies: that is, in the treatment of our very own culture and social organization, we must seek for a methodology which allows diversity and respect to human diversity: and it only could be done if we take the time we need to reflect and try to surpass the intolerable standardization and velocity of our society: instead, we must not neglect science as something, which was to do which our western culture and it is important was well as other cultural traditions, but instead think how the democratization of education could be less dogmatic and more critical; in fact, Paul Feyerabend cannot forget our history and that his knowledge came from a tradition would had been lost, if it didn't pass to us; so if we don't give or foresee to provide education for our children, democratically – reserving it just for a minority as Feyerabend suggests in is argumentative path – in fact, we thinks education couldn't extend his limits to the citizens that born as members of a western tradition (I agree that we can't destroy autochthonous structures, a point which I totally agree with), considering intellectuals and educated people as a minority –, it would eventually create more permeable citizens (that is, people which born in western culture) without tools to think for themselves and – throwing light to this truism – to consider Feyerabend words and its very point – however, the author disrepairs his culture and rather thinks that we must assume that other cultures are superior to our owns (they, in fact, have the same value) and that we must take some practices from them, instead of recognizing that this very solution was the one likewise we criticized (we denies we should share our cultural practises with others, because it would be a imperialist view; I agree we should be aware to the imperialism western tries to adopt, but I don't agree that we should forget our culture; I think that balance is required); so, our schools could be improved, but we should consider that reading, learning, intellectual work, which Paul Feyerabend had done, are taken from the very nature of our culture and we shall never try to forget this. So, nonetheless, my balance is that the indignation with honest efforts and intellectuals – they aren't all of the same stipend, since, as all workers, they could be considered a contribution to our society in general as a rich culture, as the others and, therefore, we shall never forget nothing and, specially, never try to foreshadow our history as a dynamical practice. So, at least, his very disrespectful remarks to all universities are, at best, very disgraceful, due to the fact that the contemporary world would need to conciliate his views, not within a rational system closed upon itself, but rather with critical thought.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in May 2000.

Farewell to Reason is a collection of essays on the subject of relativism. Though they were rewritten for inclusion in this volume, their independent origin still shows in a certain repetitiveness and in disparity of content - some are far more concentrated on a single theme than others (for example, some are criticisms of particular writers).

The essays pick on the same kinds of targets as Feyerabend's book *Against Method*, and attack the idea that science is a unified whole, with a single overriding method. Karl Popper is singled out for criticism, but much of what is said would apply to anyone who contrasts "scientific thinking" with other modes of thought

(this is usually done to dismiss religious ideas).

Most of the criticisms that can be made of *Against Method* are also appropriate here. The rhetorical style of Feyerabend's argument, his use of Galileo as a paradigm of scientific method, and the use of counter examples from areas not always regarded as scientific such as economics are faults common to both. The essay form adds new problems, and some parts do not fit into the whole terribly well (notably the discussion of Aristotle's philosophy of mathematics, though it is interesting in itself). Neither Popper nor Feyerabend seem terribly convincing to me; while it is obvious that not all scientific thought is uniform, most practising scientists have quite similar ideas about what they are trying to do. These differ in details (such as the precise relationship between theory, experiment and whatever may count as underlying reality), but then philosophy does not interest many and certainly there are few who would let it affect their work.

The most interesting new point is part of the essay on Galileo and the church, in which Feyerabend parallels the attitude of Catholic cardinals then and the scientific establishment today. As the money and administrative side of scientific research grow every larger, it is more and more difficult to be a (successful, rather than starving) iconoclast. For science to have a religious orthodoxy of this kind is a bad thing, and we need people like Feyerabend to continually attack its genesis.
