Feyerabend, Paul K

Austrian-born US philosopher of science, who rejected the attempt by certain philosophers (such as Karl Popper) to find a methodology applicable to all scientific research. His works include Against Method (1975).

Feyerabend argues that successive theories that apparently concern the same subject (for instance the motion of the planets) cannot in principle be subjected to any comparison that would aim at finding the truer explanation. According to this notion of incommensurability, there is no neutral or objective standpoint, and therefore no rational and objective way in which one particular theory can be chosen over another. Instead, scientific progress is claimed to be the result of a range of sociological factors working to promote politically convenient notions of how nature operates. In the best-selling Against Method, he applied an anarchic approach to the study of knowledge and espoused practices, such as the Haitian cult of voodoo, that flew in the face of conventional scientific wisdom.

At 18, Feyerabend joined the wartime German army, and was severely wounded. After the end of World War II, he studied singing and stage management before returning to his native Vienna to take up theoretical physics, history, and philosophy, and gained a doctorate 1951. He was a British Council visiting scholar at the London School of Economics 1952–53, and was again in the UK 1957 as a lecturer at Bristol University. The following year he went to the University of California at Berkeley.

Over the next two decades he published some of his most important and controversial papers, including 'Problems of Empiricism' 1965. His philosophy has been interpreted as 'anything goes', and, while it found favour with leftist youth culture, it aroused much criticism among academic philosophers and the establishment.

quotations

Feyerabend, Paul K

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