

Was Feyerabend Right in Defending Astrology? A Commentary on Kidd
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I am thankful to Ian Kidd (2016) for his piece in defense of Paul Feyerabend's defense of astrology, even though, as I shall argue in a moment, I think Feyerabend failed precisely on virtue ethical grounds, which is how Kidd wants to rescue the *enfant terrible's* work.

Encountering Feyerabend

First, a couple of preliminaries. I must admit that the first (and second, and third) time I encountered Feyerabend, when I was a practicing scientist, I pretty much had the sort of knee-jerk, negative reaction that Kidd describes in his paper. However, later on in my career I switched full time to philosophy (of science), and have come to grudgingly admit that Feyerabend had a point or two, though he could definitely have expressed them more effectively.

Second, and despite my pushing back against Kidd below, Feyerabend can be credited with identifying a real problem with modern science, which he did not name, but which has only grown substantially since: scientism (Pigliucci 2013, 2015). The infamous episode that triggered Feyerabend's wrath, the publication of a "manifesto" against astrology back in 1975 that was high on authoritative tone and low on arguments was the prelude to what has become a barrage of scientific claims overstepping the epistemic authority of science, pronounced by major public figures (Stephen Hawking, Stephen Weinberg, Lawrence Krauss, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Bill Nye "the science guy," to name just a few) and largely directed at delegitimizing the humanities and establishing a sort of scientific imperialism on all human knowledge and understanding. Despite my disagreements with Kidd and Feyerabend, then, I feel very much on board with their concerns regarding scientism—we just disagree on how most effectively to deal with the menace.

Preliminaries out of the way, let me get down to the main business. In what follows I will argue that Feyerabend failed on virtue ethical grounds, despite Kidd's attempt to use such grounds to defend him from criticism. I will proceed by highlighting key parts of Kidd's paper and commenting in a way that will hopefully further this important debate.

It needs to be recalled that there are different approaches to virtue epistemology (Greco and Turri 2011), and I am particularly sympathetic toward broad treatments that attempt to map intellectual virtues and vices (e.g., Roberts and Wood 2007), discuss epistemic virtues as analog to moral virtues (e.g., Battaly 2010), and explore the concept of "epistemic malevolence" (e.g., Baehr 2010). It is from this larger perspective that I think Feyerabend, while rightly chastising (some) scientists for their epistemic arrogance, himself fell short of virtue: he did not seem to be overly bothered by the lack of integrity on display when one defends—in however qualified a manner—practices that are not only indefensible epistemically, but in some cases positively dangerous, such as certain kinds of so-called "alternative" medicine. Moreover, it seems that it didn't even cross his

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mind that his scorched earth attitude would damage not just his own credibility (which it very clearly did), but that of his whole field of inquiry, philosophy of science. Indeed, current facile rejections of philosophy by prominent scientists, especially physicists, often cite Feyerabend's (unwanted, arguably) intellectual offspring: extreme epistemic relativists and social constructionists, which are taken, mistakenly, to be representative of philosophy in general.

On Astrology and Voodoo

Kidd (2016, 4) states that "Feyerabend explained that he discussed astrology and voodoo, not because he 'believes' in them, but because he had found them to be convenient 'examples of the limits of a scientific approach.'" Except that those are egregiously bad examples. Setting aside the arrogant and unarmed for 1975 manifesto in the *The Humanist* magazine, and at the risk of being accused of adopting the same attitude, both astrology and voodoo have no epistemic value whatsoever. We do have published, peer reviewed, studies on the practice of astrology, for instance (Carson 1985; Kelly 1998), showing that the best professional astrologers fail abysmally at what they claim to do. And we have very sound theoretical arguments to account for why astrology does not work. What else could one reasonably want? So when Kidd (2016, 4) cites Robert Farrell, saying that for him "the defence of astrology is, 'at its strongest, a claim as to the possibility and as yet unfalsified status of schemes of reality incompatible with science'" one cannot but shake one's head: astrology *has* been falsified, over and over; it is incompatible with science because it is not real, regardless of one's "scheme."

We learn (Kidd 2016, 8) that "Feyerabend in fact sketches out an objection, focusing upon the historical degeneration of astrology as a 'research program,'" which would be interesting if applied to approaches that actually have been cast as research programs and have then manifestly become degenerate, like several decades of research in parapsychology (Odling-Smee 2007). But astrology has really never been a research program, and to apply that modern category, framed by modern philosophy of science (Lakatos 1978) with reference to modern science, to a practice that originated when there was no clear distinction between science, magic and religion is strangely anachronistic and concedes far too much to astrology. Moreover, it is somewhat odd to say: "astrology is an excellent example of the way scientists deal with phenomena outside their area of competence. They don't study them, they simply curse them" (Kidd 2016, 10, quoting Feyerabend), since this is patently false. The particular scientists and others signing off the 1975 anti-astrology declaration may have been so guilty, but astrology is most definitely *not* outside the area of competence of science, it has been studied, and it has been found wanting. Seriously so.

As for voodoo, Kidd (2016, 4) adds: "The strongest claim that [Feyerabend] makes, in fact, is that voodoo had a 'firm though still not sufficiently understood material basis,' for instance in psychopharmacology, which is perfectly sensible." Well, it depends on what one means by "sensible." Yes, voodoo practice has, in fact, been explained in terms of both psychology and psychopharmacology (Davis 1988; Desrosiers and St. Fleurose 2002), but that is most definitely *not* what both practitioners and believers claim. They

talk about magic and supernatural entities, and it should not require the adoption of a questionable scientific approach to reject such concepts on both evidential and plausibility grounds.

What was Feyerabend trying to achieve, exactly? “What he was criticising was the negative intellectual attitudes evident in the unfair derogation of astrology by the authors and signatories of the Humanist statement” (Kidd 2016, 9). That is, he had identified an early example of what is nowadays considered scientism (Sorell 1994). But it is the hallmark of a virtuous person to be wise and recognize what sort of approach works best under whatever circumstances one happens to be operating. When Kidd (2016, 5) says “typically a person tries to provoke others for some principled reason, such as trying to get others to take seriously a new idea, or to rethink a deeply-held conviction” and “the use of radical alternatives can afford new and otherwise unavailable forms of empirical and theoretical critique” one simply has to ask what Feyerabend was thinking. Provocation, even (perhaps especially) for principled reasons, rarely works as a psychological technique, especially with an already highly self-important social cast such as that of professional scientists. And radical alternatives are fine if they are credible and constructive, but astrology, voodoo, homeopathy and the like are light-years away from being either.

Kidd (2016, 9-10) makes a good argument that “Feyerabend invariably articulates [his criticism] in terms of what contemporary virtue epistemologists call epistemic vices ... The vice being targeted here, albeit implicitly, is most likely epistemic arrogance.” I am sympathetic, but in reacting the way he did, Feyerabend himself incurred in the vice of epistemic recklessness, and we see the results of his attitude (and that of so many of his followers in academia) today, with rampant denial of climate change, the anti-vaccination movement, AIDS denialism, and so forth. All of which is costing us in the hard currency of actual pain, suffering, and death.

It is, therefore, rather ironic that Feyerabend explicitly stated (Kidd 2016, 11) “I don’t just want to replace maniacs of one kind by maniacs of a different kind—Jews by Christians, dogmatists by sceptics, scientists by Buddhists, I want to put an end to all manias and to the attitudes in people that support manias and make it easy for their prophets to succeed.” Except that such replacement of maniacs by other (arguably worse, in terms of consequences) maniacs is precisely what has happened since skepticism of science has spread to additional quarters of the ivory tower and beyond, exploding in the so-called “science wars” of the 1990s and beyond (Parsons 2003).

Dogmatism and Plausibility

I want to turn now to what seems to me one of the most intriguing aspects of Kidd’s paper, the different positions of Feyerabend and Polanyi. The latter defended the “reflexive” dismissal of pseudoscientific notions (like Velikovksy’s claims in astronomy):

What seemed, to non-scientists, to be reactionary dogmatism was, in fact, a spontaneous evaluation both generated and justified by a tacit sense of plausibility. Polanyi concluded that since that sense is historically informed, collectively supported, and a product of practice and discipline, those scientists were right to trust it (Kidd 2016, 13).

Polanyi was right on target here. Scientists often use the same kind of heuristics we all apply to all sorts of situations where we cannot afford to expend time and resources: we use historically informed background information to at the least provisionally file away a given claim as plausible, implausible, or worth considering further. How many times, exactly, do we have to investigate a claim of UFO sighting, or of a haunted house, and convincingly show that it was yet another meteor or cracking door, before we can be justified—on virtue ethical grounds—in dismissing the *next* such claim? Or, to put it differently, at what point does the burden of proof seriously shift to the other side (Pigliucci and Boudry 2013), so that the ufologist or paranormalist needs to come up with compelling *prima facie* evidence before a professional scientist or skeptic embarks in yet another investigation?

According to Kidd (2016, 13-14), for Feyerabend:

The citizens of democratic societies ought to be able to critically appraise the authoritative institutions that influence their lives. [But] The predominant epistemic authority of those societies—namely, the scientific institution—can only be understood and appraised by those already initiated into it—namely, by scientists. If this worry holds true, then democratic control of science is impossible, a view that Feyerabend attributes to Polanyi ... [he] emphasises that the general public cannot ‘participate in the intellectual milieu’ in which scientific judgements are made because, to do so, they would require initiation into the tacit dimension of science.

This is a real conundrum, and one that Feyerabend is right to point out. Too much trust in the authority of science, especially when applied to areas where it doesn’t belong, can be a danger for society. But Polanyi is absolutely right when he says, effectively, that there is little alternative available. Again, we are seeing now the horrible results of “democratizing” scientifically-informed decisions, like that of vaccinating or not one’s kids. And we will increasingly all suffer from this type of democratization on a global scale, in proportion to just how many people will disbelieve that we are going through dramatic, man-made, climate change.

Moreover, imagine making Feyerabend’s counter-Polanyi argument in other areas of expertise: shall we democratize brain surgery? Car mechanics? Bridge engineering? Our societies are founded on a highly effective division of labor, and consequently rely on expertise. The experts are, by definition, our best bets in their own domain of competence. They are not perfect, and they do make mistakes, but statistically speaking they beat any other alternative. Still, they cannot be given complete freedom of initiative,

especially where the stakes are very high. But the best way to do that is by broadening the conversation, increasing the variety of points of view within science (Longino 1990) as well as adding second-level expertise, for instance, somewhat ironically, that of philosophers.

Some of the best critiques of the excesses of science in recent years have come from philosophers of science (e.g., Kaplan 2000), people who know enough of the science to smell baloney when it's likely to be there, and yet whose interests are not aligned with those of the scientific community. Add to that group those of historians and sociologists of science, who are also well positioned to point out science's own limitations and tendency to overreach, and we have a more vibrant, more diverse conversation going on. That may still not satisfy radicals like Feyerabend, but as his own failure to achieve his stated objectives clearly argues for, it's the best chance we have.

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