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Critical Reflection

In this essay, I will be examining Paul Feyerabend and Bruno Latour's philosophy of science to illustrate the relationship between science and truth. I hope to explore this relationship from the explicit perspective of each of their philosophies but also from their deeply rooted assumptions – does science have special access to knowledge? Is there such thing as objective truth? Is science even important at all?

Paul Feyerabend could be described by many people as an unorthodox critic of science – possibly even an opposer. However, an opposer of science he is not. Feyerabend advocates for intellectual freedom and human creativity which western scientific tradition, or “Western Thought,” seems to diminish (Feyerabend 2). We can say he is an opposer of western science.

In *How to Defend Society Against Science*, Feyerabend writes with the underlying assumption that evidently science holds a special place in Western Thought. People view his thoughts negatively as seen at the Conference for the Defense of Culture where his ideas were labeled “dangerous” and “ill considered” (Feyerabend 1). To experience cognitive dissonance and speak out against an individual's ideas may indicate a particular importance of the topic at hand. Furthermore, Feyerabend brings light to the issue that science greatly influences politics and calls for the “separation between state and science” alluding to Western Thought of the relationship between state and church (Feyerabend 9). To have the power to influence governing bodies, science may be important. This is all to say that Feyerabend acknowledges the

importance and influence of science in Western Thought which is, however, the biggest issue with science.

Bruno Latour, opposing Feyerabend, can be seen as an advocate for western science. More specifically, an advocate for the scientific process. Latour highlights the importance of scientific literature and its impact on the scientific process, other scientists, and readers. Scientific literature has never been studied as a form of rhetoric. To Latour, it is important to study science from this perspective because scientific literature is a large part of the scientific process.

Latour also acknowledges science's pedestal in western society. He acknowledges the importance of science so much so that he needed to observe it for himself and see "science in action." To understand science fully, Latour thinks that one needs to go behind the scenes of the scientific process and witness the development of facts. Once a scientific process reaches a point of scientific fact, the entire process up to that point is, as he calls, "black boxed" (Latour 2). The human aspect is removed, and the findings are labeled as scientific facts. This process of looking into the process that resulted in the scientific fact is called opening, or uncovering, the black box.

Feyerabend and Latour's acknowledgement regarding the importance of science in western society is vital to my discussion because it sets a common foundation to build upon. Both thinkers acknowledge science to be important either through underlying assumptions or actions. However, now that science is acknowledged, is this pedestalization of science in western society necessarily good?

To Feyerabend, science should not have the status that it currently holds in western society – it is nothing more than an ideology. This assertion about science comes with greater implications pertaining to the nature of science and even truth. In western society, science is

important because it produces “truth” which is inherently irrefutable. However, Feyerabend is now telling us that science is just an ideology. In other words, science has no special access to knowledge; therefore, it has no ability to develop the western characterization of “truth.” It is merely a belief that is not being challenged and this is not good. In reality, indisputable beliefs are dangerous because of its autocratic nature.

On the other hand, Latour doesn’t explicitly say if the pedestalization of science in western society is necessarily good or bad. However, through his actions, we can see that he does find the scientific process to be fascinating and interesting. Like it was mentioned before, Latour spent a lot of time observing the scientific process and uncovering the black box. During this observation, Latour shows a lot of appreciation for science which we can extrapolate from the absence of critique and the time he spent observing the scientific process. He is purely describing and examining the scientific process to understand it in a way different from the way we already know.

At this point, it seems like Feyerabend and Latour’s perspectives on science are polar opposites. One thinker reduces science to nothing more than an ideology and the other aims to learn everything they can about the scientific process. However, both thinkers do have one aspect in common – their perceptions of objective truth.

Feyerabend is an epistemological anarchist which is a position that I appreciate. Being an epistemological anarchist, Feyerabend subscribes to the idea that any belief is as good as the other. He claims that knowledge is all the same in that nothing is objective and there is no methodological approach to gaining knowledge. I obtained a fondness for this view from the ancient thinkers, particularly Protagoras. He coined the phrase, “man is the measure,” which, in

the most basic manner, means not only is all knowledge not objective, but that all knowledge is subjective. Truth, for Feyerabend, is whatever one chooses to believe.

In hindsight, Latour has an approach to knowledge similar to that of Feyerabend. Science works to describe the world in the best way possible; however, there is no objective, all-encompassing, knowledge produced by science. Latour explicitly avoids using the word “truth” and instead talks about scientific facts. These scientific facts are products of refutation, black boxing, consensus, scientific literature, and so on. Truth, for Latour, is whatever one chooses to believe. Science, however, is special because it is masterful at persuasion and swaying belief.

The difference between Feyerabend and Latour goes to ascertain both of their perspectives on truth. They are each entitled to their own beliefs about science and its relationship to truth – whether it is just an ideology or a sociological construction. Through both Feyerabend and Latour’s philosophies and underlying assumptions, I touched on topics including science’s access to knowledge, objective truth and the importance of science.