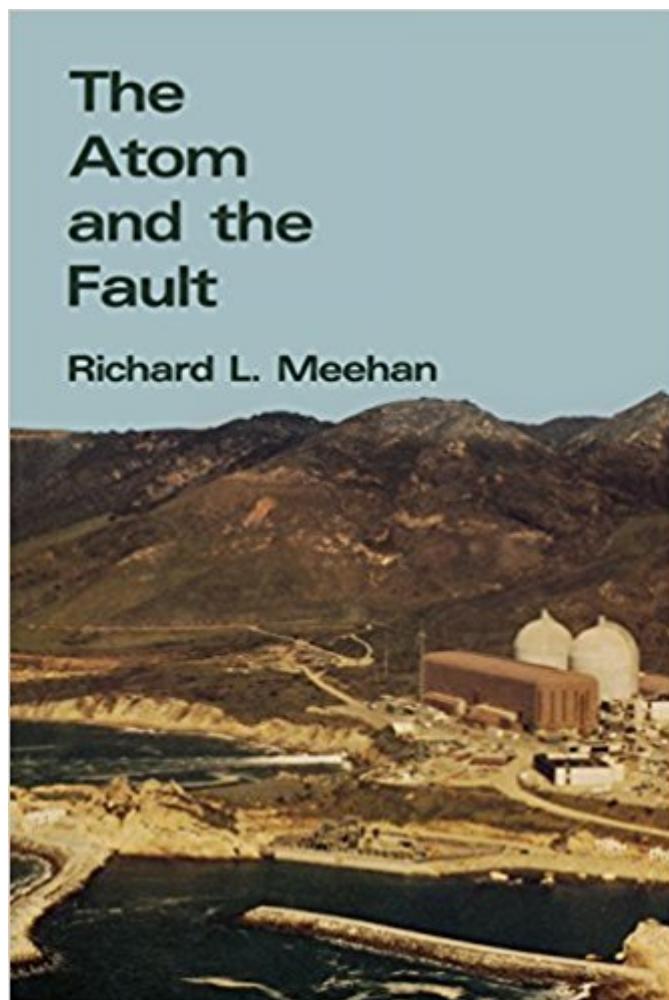


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# The Atom And The Fault: Experts, Earthquakes, And Nuclear Power (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

With wit and thoughtful compassion, Richard Meehan presents one of the most perplexing of contemporary moral predicaments, one that arises in every attempt to assess potentially hazardous technologies. He focuses on the longrunning controversy over suspected earthquake faults near the nation's first corporately owned nuclear test reactor at Vallecitos, California, and uses this account of "the politics of expertise" to probe the nature of scientific truth and its relationship to the determination of public safety. At Vallecitos, Meehan points out, the opinions of the "experts" were radically divided. Where one group saw clear and ominous evidence of an earthquake fault in trenches dug at this showpiece site, others saw only the mark of an ancient landslide. How did these experts arrive at their opinions? Were they simply representing corporate, as opposed to environmentalist, points of view? And how are the public regulatory agencies charged with deciding such issues supposed to balance these seemingly irreconcilable opinions? The Atom and the Fault explores these crucial questions as the issue of the earthquake safety of nuclear power plants continues to grow into a struggle encompassing government regulatory bodies, public utilities, private industry, engineers, geologists, and citizen activists. It paints candid portraits of the principal expert players, clarifies the difficult and often delicate interplay of honesty and loyalties among them, and lucidly explains the technical issues and viewpoints involved. As a professional participant in several environmental controversies in which so-called scientific facts were represented by opposing points of view, Meehan is uniquely qualified to tell this tale. He is a consultant to industry, government agencies, and law firms specializing in forecasting and damage assessment related to earthquakes and land failures, and an adjunct professor in the Values, Technology, Science, and Society program at Stanford University. His first book, *Getting Sued and Other Tales of the Engineering Life* was published by The MIT Press in 1981.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The review titled "Taking turns others don't" is for another book, titled "Getting Sued and Other Tales of the Engineering Life" by Richard L. Meehan MIT Press, 1975

This is a detailed, well presented, superbly argued and absolutely fascinating account of one episode in the continuing interaction between science, technology, the law and the public interest. It once and for all puts to rest the idea that science uses a well defined and unambiguous method and speaks with a single voice. It makes it clear that experts participating in and testifying before a public forum are often outside their domain of expertise and therefore speak as laypersons, not as experts. It shows the need for public standards regulating the use of expert knowledge. Containing vivid portraits of the individuals participating in the debate, it shows how even very abstract considerations are influenced by the character and the temperament of those producing them. Required reading for historians of science and technology, philosophers of science, regulatory commissions and the members of citizens' boards dealing with scientific and technological matters.

--Paul Feyerabend University of California and Federal Institute of Technology

Meehan's book is nine chapters, nine stories beginning with his freshman year at MIT in 1957. He goes in the army, he goes around the world to Thailand, he goes down the world to Chile. I could not stop following him. He really has no extraordinary adventures; what makes the book extraordinary is his power of observing and reflecting on himself and what happens around him. He has a special appeal as a subject since he seems to occasionally go out of control but never out of focus. Maybe his years investigating the stability of land to hold dams and support buildings have benefited his huge literary talents. There is something very special about these stories. The book has a shocking ending where he seems to promise the reader that he is finishing himself off in a lucrative dreariness in Palo Alto, but then if you remember the book's beginning you see that he thrives by taking turns others don't.--Steve Baer Coevolution Quarterly

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