

The Fiction of Peer Review

Phenomenology of a Catastrophe^{*}

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1. The peer

The current system of research evaluation — whether it be the evaluation of scholarly work in view of its publication, that of a scientific project in view of its funding, or that of a scholarly profile with a view to hiring or career advancement — remains dependent on the figure of the so-called peer. [See below, Observation 1.]

This is not only true under the operative profile (in the sense of the completion of various evaluation procedures) but also primarily with regard to the *very likelihood* (i.e. the credibility and acceptability) of these procedures, which rests in a substantial way on the likelihood of the peer.¹ In other words: regardless of the fact that systems of evaluation might in some cases appear “good” and “effective”, and therefore “useful”; in other cases, on the contrary, “defective” and “ineffective”, and therefore “harmful” — *the very fact that* a similar system of evaluation is likely (namely credible, and therefore acceptable and accepted), *as such*, is due to the fundamental role which the peer plays within it.

The peer is the guarantor of the likelihood (viz. the credibility and acceptability) of research evaluation.

2. Likelihood

This circumstance, after all, finds its foundation in the very essence of scientific research. Scientific knowledge, in fact, is by its nature *autonomous*: only within itself can it find its own (philosophical) source and its own laws, although (as has been clarified elsewhere)² the single science does not, as such, have access to this source, and therefore cannot interrogate the origin of those laws, let alone institute them.

However, it remains true that *only the scientist truly understands science*. From this circumstance it follows that the field of scientific *thought* is necessarily a sphere of “exclusively internal” jurisdiction: the judgment of scientificity lies with scientists, while no external instance may pass judgment on the scientific soundness of research performed in the sphere of a specific branch of knowledge.

* This is a revised and integrated English version of the second section of part one of De Gennaro and Zaccaria (2011). We thank Bridget Pupillo for providing the translation that served as a basis for the present text.

¹ The adjective “likely” means “having an appearance of truth or fact”; “apparently suitable, able, fitted”; “strong or capable looking”; “giving promise of success or excellence”; “comely, handsome”; “seemly, appropriate”. Consequently, in the present context “likelihood” (which translates the Italian *attendibilità* and the German *Möglichkeit*) does not designate (statistical) probability; rather, it indicates a credibility, reliability, trustworthiness, veritableness, conceivability and reasonableness, as well as an acceptability, attainability and expectability, as only essential truthfulness, fitness, appropriateness, and thus a firm reference to what is constitutive, can grant.

² See De Gennaro and Zaccaria (2011), pp. 12-13.

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