

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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)<sup>2</sup> 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.

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\* 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> See De Gennaro and Zaccaria (2011), pp. 12-13.

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