

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.

Scientists are, in turn, essentially on par with each other, that is peers, by virtue of their constitutive *growing together within the ward*³ of truth (a trait which we indicate with the word “coalescence”⁴), and hence of their being bound only to the latter. While different from one another, they are *likewise*, or rather “*parwise*”, engaged with the ward of truth, where the adverb “parwise” does not indicate an *equal* degree of engagement, or of insight, but the circumstance of being pledged to this *same* truth; this circumstance by itself puts them on par with each other (or pairs them) in difference, in one word, it *se-parates*⁵ them *in* the truth, while it distinguishes them from those who are not scientists (in that field of knowledge).

Jurisdiction in the field of science must therefore necessarily be founded on judgment among peers: *judgment among peers, and this alone, is, in principle, likely* (and hence credible and acceptable). Conversely, a system of judgment, as long as it relies on peers, enjoys a presumption of likelihood, a fundamental trust on the part of those to be judged.

3. *The word and its inversion: the transmutation of the peer*

The English word *peer* indicates “a person of the same rank”. In its true sense, the peer is “the person who has the right to be judged by other people of his same rank”⁶. This notion therefore applies perfectly to those who, being equal (and thus, as we have said, “separated”) in the ward of truth, have the right to be judged as researchers only by those who, in turn, draw their measure of judgment from the very same cognitive need,⁷ while they must remain untouched by those judgments that draw their criteria from a different source. Such is the element of justice which informs the “freedom of scientific research”.

However, precisely this reference to the original meaning of the peer permits us to discern a difference; indeed, an essential *inversion*. In fact, while the concept of the peer, as we have seen, implies the *right to be judged* by those equal in rank, thus assuming first and foremost a sense of support and *protection*, nevertheless, in systems of research evaluation, this notion refers in the first place to those

³ “Ward” translates the Italian word *scorta* (“escort”); it indicates the “escorting” and acceptance of truth through its mindful preservation along the paths of enquiry that the truth itself bestows. Note that “ward” comes from the root **wer-* “perceive, watch out for, expect”; hence, the ward preserves as the perceptive acceptance of what is in itself acceptable, expectable, likely and true (see above the note on likelihood).

⁴ “Coalescence” (cohesion, the union of diverse parts) is formed from the verb “to coalesce” (from *cum* “with”, “together”, and *alescere* “to grow”), which indicates a close unification, and, in the present case, a gathering into the only stress of the truth; that is, precisely, a growing together within the ward of truth. This coalescence — which is *parity itself* — is the foundation of every authentic collegueship and collegiality among scholars and among researchers, as well as of the “scientific community” as such. The fact that, in the planetary university, collegiality among colleagues is progressively vanishing, and more and more often replaced by the mere association of interests, is primarily due to the lack of coalescence, of genuine parity.

⁵ We hyphenate the word so that one may hear its etymological sense; in “*se-parate*”, the particule “*se*” indicates division. “To *se-parate*” means: to put on par one against the other, to pair while distinguishing.

⁶ See the entry “(il) pari” on www.treccani.it.

⁷ Namely, the need of truth itself to be interrogated and preserved in an attuned and fitting knowledge.

who have the right to judge or, more precisely, to whomsoever is invested with the *mandate* (the role, the function) *to evaluate* his or her peers. Consequently, the peer now appears primarily as the bearer of a requirement of, and will to, *control*.

(Before proceeding with our analysis, we must make a crucial observation. The scientist, while constitutively single in his or her engagement with the truth, remains a single scholar *of*, that is *belonging to*, a likely coalescence wherein this truth is *primarily* safeguarded. The researcher is therefore constituted *as* a single scholar *by virtue of that coalescence*,⁸ and in his attempts remains constitutively entrusted to the heartening and the protection that can only derive from the latter. Thus, the judgment of those whom the scientist recognizes as his peers is, for the single scholar, a guarantee and privilege, as well as a constant recall and heartening to the highest rigor in his dedication to the truth. Now, since coalescence is established precisely in the right to be judged by one's peers, the single scientist is, as such, one "judged by right" — whether or not there happen to be, in actual fact, judges or occasions of judgment. *Without the right to judgment by one's peers, no scientist and no scientific research is likely.* The very source of knowledge plays its game precisely by giving rise to such a right, and therefore to a likely (and thus expectable) coalescence of interrogators. That source safeguards, within the single scholars of this coalescence, its own truth, so that the latter be finally accepted and established within the "larger community". Let us hence affirm the essential: *the right to be judged by one's peers not only acts as a guarantee against any inquisitorial actions, but it is first and foremost constitutive of the very fact of being scientists in coalescence.*⁹)

Returning now to the point, we note that, at first sight, it hardly seems justified to speak of inversion, nor of the consequent turning of protection into control; that is, of being supported into being targeted. In fact, one would say, "in the peer model" each scholar is, depending on the case, the judge and the one being judged, interchangeably; each exerts a function of control over his peers, and each remains protected, as a researcher of the truth, by the fact that there will always and only be a peer to pass judgment.

Nevertheless, the analogy between the "peer in judgment" — the judging peer — and the "peer in evaluation" — the evaluating peer — is merely formal: the *substance* changes, so that the tone and tenor of encouragement and support that resounds in the word "peer" (namely, the sense of being liberated in coalescent singularity) is reshaped into a discouraging accent of threat, or even of aggression (namely, the sense of being profiled through a parametric scan that isolates each scholar into a set of values).

As long as this turning remains covered by the presumption that the peer is still an equal in the ward of truth (the — more or less esteemed and trusted — "colleague in the search for the truth"), that

⁸ Which is why even the most solitary of scholars, *insofar* as he serves the truth, will never cease to *expect* others to engage — in their own and unique manner — in the same quest.

⁹ This coalescence, founded on the right to be judged by one's peers, is mentioned below in the final note of the text.

inversion, and therefore what sustains it — namely, the replacement of protection by control — remain undetected in their own turn.

The system of evaluation obtains and maintains its own likelihood (hence its prima facie acceptability) thanks to the “cover” offered by the undetected transmutation of the peer.

4. Unlikelihood

Let us take up our argument once again, with the aim to clarify.

The insight of the inversion from “the right to be judged” to “the mandate to evaluate” has led to the emergence of the essentially *surreptitious* nature of the likelihood enjoyed by evaluation pivoting around the peer. In fact, this evaluation, in order to ensure its own likelihood, employs the peer as an intermediary, that is, it uses him, so to speak, as a “Trojan horse” and a “mimetic cover,” giving to understand, with an act of deception, that we are *always still* speaking of the truth, *still* of science, *still* of the protection of research and the researcher, *still* of mutual trust between peers and colleagues, and all this to ensure, in the end and *always still*, the freedom of genius and the progress of knowledge.¹⁰

The shape (or the mask) of the peer thus smuggles in a “supply” of truth and trust, by now only presumed, while, as with every deception, it generates stubborn confusions and appearances, and therefore confusedly perceived ambiguities. “To obtain through deception” is precisely the meaning of the Latin word *subreptio*. The likelihood of the system of evaluation dependent on the peer is therefore founded on what we might call, by altering a term already used in philosophy, a *vitium subreptionis*. Because likelihood is achieved by virtue of such vice, it remains without foundation and truth. In other words, it is rather an unlikelihood (and hence, finally unacceptable).

The nature of the fundamental transformation, from which is generated both the said inversion and the change of meaning that sustains it, and thus the surreptitious replacement of the judging peer by the evaluating peer, has already been indicated in a previous analysis:¹¹ it (that nature) is the fall of truth (namely the original drive toward the true) into performative truth, and the fatal degeneration of the latter into mere progressive operativity.¹²

¹⁰ In the case of peer review, as a filter in terms of the publication of a scientific contribution, the heart of the deception is concealed in the very *sense* of publication, of *speaking to the public* — that is, in the fact that within the peer’s calculation, something like “speaking to the public” *no longer takes place*: indeed, the act of “publication” now is nothing more than a control phase within a mute circuit of production. However, the lack of publicity is equivalent to a lack of freedom. As will become clear in the following, the evaluating peer is configured as an *institution of the self-censorship of freedom*.

¹¹ See De Gennaro and Zaccaria (2011), p. 19.

¹² As a consequence of this transformation and degeneration of the truth, the guiding value of “revisions” and of “arbitrating” or “refereeing” carried out by the peer is necessarily *reliability* — to be understood here *not* in the sense of trust and trustworthiness but in the cybernetic sense of *insurance for sustainable operational progress*. This remains true regardless of any genuine intention of improvement (in the sense of the ward of truth) on the side of the peer, as well as of the possible aid (to a genuinely scientific attempt) that his work may mean. It cannot escape the single scientist that, *even while* he offers himself as a judging peer, he is *already engaged*, from the moment of inclusion in the “reference community” (i.e. in the pool of prospective evaluators and evaluatees), to be a provider of cybernetic insurance. In

We now must explicate an important trait of this transformation. In fact, where the truth has become mere operativity, or operational efficacy, man is no longer *claimed* as warden of the truth itself (in its turn understood) as the essence to which he *appeals* in his creative work; he is now, on the contrary, imperiously *required* to be (namely, to operate) *in favor* of the implementation of the increase in performativity constituted as an operational circuit (which by its essence is always in a deficit of power)¹³ — that circuit by which he remains unceasingly *pursued* (traced, hounded, “taken in”, halted, framed, examined, censured, censored) in the unique regard of the performance level he will be able to ensure. *In the relationship between man and truth, the conversion from the claim (to be a warden of truth) to the exaction (of functioning as a facilitator of the empowerment of operativity) enjoins and dictates unnoticeably the inversion of meaning — the transmutation — of the peer.*

The transformation of the meaning of truth causes the latter to be construed now as an offensive against beings as such, insofar as their being is reduced to the being of resources (i.e. values). Consequently, the knowledge in which man roots and moulds his own action — which is, in turn, entirely informed by the overpowering of power — must be enrolled precisely in favor of this offensive.¹⁴ From here descend both the tone and the sense of all “evaluation criteria”, of “productivity indicators” and of “scientific standards”, as well as the “rules” and “times” in which are articulated the procedures to be performed by evaluating peers. These peers, as executors of degenerate performative truth, are now only *peers in enrollment; that is, they are of, and have, an equal role in the task of the enrolling control of equalization (viz. uniformation, standardization) in terms of performativity.*¹⁵

Along with the meaning of the peer, and under the cover of his supposedly remaining “equal *in the ward of truth*”, there occurs a sign change — an inversion causing the mentioned sense of exaction, control and assurance — among all of the traits and constitutive moments which render concrete an authentic scientific coalescence between those who are separated, and in which a genuine parity is substantiated: criticism, dialog, exhortation, solidarity, aid, responsibility.

short, when the peer is preparing to make a “review” or “to referee”, the decision that “only a reliable (i.e. cybernetically ensured) knowledge is scientific (and therefore publishable)” has already occurred.

¹³ See the elucidation of the trait of insufficiency in De Gennaro and Zaccaria (2011), pp. 5-6. While the operational circuit is condemned to eternal insufficiency, the truth is instead sufficient precisely *in* its being wanting (i.e. *while* it is in want of) man’s support.

¹⁴ See De Gennaro and Zaccaria (2011), p. 3.

¹⁵ This sense of equalization can be heard in the German word *Gleichschaltung*, which may be assumed (beyond the historical context from which it originates, and from which it draws its repressive and oppressive meaning) to be a diagnostic term to indicate the tacit technical-operational guideline of the evaluating peer. With regard to the relationship between parity, difference (or scissure) and sameness (viz. self-sameness), one can meditate upon the following thought: “*Je ursprünglicher die Selbigkeit des Selben, um so wesentlicher ist in einer Gleichheit die Verschiedenheit, desto inniger ist die Gleichheit des Gleichen*”: “The more original is the sameness of the same [to be understood here as the self-sameness of truth, i.e. as its firm call directed toward man’s being], the more constitutive, in a parity, is the scissure, and the more intimate is the parity of what is on par; that is, the parity among peers” (Heidegger [2007], p. 250).

On the other hand, who is unaware that in our era suspicion and mistrust, as well as a generalized “presumption of guilt”, namely the sense of an irremediable performative insufficiency with regard to a variegated set of benchmarks, prevail vis-à-vis researchers and scholars as such — and meanwhile, given the institutionalized alienation and compartmentalization of the branches of knowledge, even *among* them? Thus, the individual is indeed perpetually pursued, until (owing to a singular inversion of the “burden of proof”) he provides elements that are useful for justifying the “persistence” of his tenure¹⁶, confirmations of his “scientific quotation” (in the respective “field”), and constantly updated attestations of his “impact” (on the “community” to which he belongs, if not on the whole of “society”) — tests, confirmations and attestations ever more promptly and automatically translated into the most tangible instrument of reward and punishment, and therefore of relative validation on the operativity scale: *money*, to be understood here first and foremost in its intrinsic capacity to take into pay, i.e. to sold.¹⁷ The eye, the word, the gesture of the evaluating peer, speak only this “language”, while they remain alien and mute when they are called to the level of the ward of truth.

Again: who does not perceive, who does not touch with their own hand on a daily basis, reigning within the institutions responsible for the “promotion” and “support” of research, the lack of all trust and all confidence; the indifference and inertia with regard to every exigency of truth (indifference and inertia interrupted only by the prompt intimidatory reaction against the ward of the latter); the peremptory and excessive prevailment of procedural requirements upon the spaces and times necessary for scholarly research?¹⁸

Who, finally, does not sense how the *perennial protection* enjoyed by one who was *once* judged a guardian of the truth, and therefore a peer in judgment, has given way to the obligation of the *unending rush to assurance* that is expiring *hourly*? And does all this not occur precisely while the peer executes the “high stakes” of “reviewing” and “refereeing”, by leveling out and expunging every attempt and every errancy, and completing the “surgical” sterilization of the genius willed by the truth that solded (enlisted) him as an evaluating, “soldiering” peer in the first place?¹⁹

¹⁶ In other words, he is forced to constantly justify the circumstance that something whose supposed *nature* is not to expire, *in fact* doesn't expire.

¹⁷ Sold is an old word for the pay given to those who serve in the army, and who precisely for that reason are called soldiers; hence, the verb sold “take into pay, enlist”. — On the role of money in overpowering, see Zaccaria (2014), pp. 77-82.

¹⁸ These procedures, willed by an ever more widespread control apparatus, now distinctly demonstrate their character of *automated* calculations: lacking within them (or reduced to a purely engineering sort of intelligence and prudence) are the moments entrusted to the judgment of man, who is now merely called to implement a cybernetic device by adapting himself to it.

¹⁹ One may define the evaluating peer as the controller who is provisionally secure within his logistical positioning. With good cause we speak of the “solding truth”, because it is the truth itself, by virtue of its transformation into performativity, which makes the peer into one of its “soldiers”. The “soldier-like” implementation of performativity is a mutation of the ward of truth.

5. Vilification and diagnosis

It is useless to recall that the evaluation procedures dependent on the institution of the peer are imposed, “like it or not”, by the “very nature” of the modern, highly specialized branches of knowledge; by the “dimensions” and “dynamics” of scientific research; by the resulting requirements of “management” and “governance” (efficiency, transparency, objectivity); and this in order to guarantee the maximal result in terms of utility, given the increasingly heavy investments on behalf and on account of society.

In fact, similar warnings have no weight since, by relying on (while being subjected to) the “reality” of “science today”, they come fatally too late. For this “reality” is nothing more than the tardy consequence of the oblivion of scientific knowledge’s original political trait²⁰ — a trait that presupposes the realization that *only if* the ward of truth is awakened, within a political community, can the *essence* of the *polis* regenerate, and thus find support in the fields of knowledge that this same *polis* fosters and nourishes. What likelihood (hence acceptability) can there be to a discourse that wields the argument of the pressing “reality” of “facts”, when it remains mute before the havoc wreaked on the debased and forgotten truth? [See below, Observation 2.]

The explicit act of disdaining, of holding as vile with open disrespect, is “vilification”. The institution of the evaluating peer is founded, in this sense, on the *vilification of the truth*, which is realized precisely through that institution. “To vilify”, here, does not mean “to weigh and estimate, judging and recognizing that something is of little worth”, but rather “to *render* vile, to revile something *by reducing it to an object to be estimated and evaluated*”; in other words, something one would buy and sell at a price. Thus, the transformation of the truth into performativity is sufficient to constitute (a) vilification. Nevertheless, that transformation, and therefore the ensuing vilification, are not caused by man. They belong to the very essence of truth, as its constitutive temptation.²¹ However, this temptation cannot take place without man’s *being* (i.e. his constitutive awareness of the truth) yielding to it and actuating it in various ways. The *primary mode* of this yielding passes through that knowledge by virtue of which man founds the *polis* and, within the *polis*, his own human essence.

We thus arrive at a first diagnosis of the evaluating peer: he is a primary mediator, an executive arm of the self-vilification of truth and of the consequent becoming vile of all meaning.

²⁰ See De Gennaro and Zaccaria (2011), p. 26 and pp. 35-37.

²¹ See De Gennaro and Zaccaria (2011), p. 20. The vilification of truth is understood in a philosophically rigorous sense within the diagnosis of the *will to will* as the founding trait of our era. In this regard, Heidegger writes: “Dem Wesen des Willens zum Willen entspricht im Bezirk der menschlichen Zurichtung der *Fanatismus... Anonymität – Verantwortungslosigkeit* – Entwürdigung des Menschen und Zerstörung seines Haltes; die äußerste Einschränkung aller Willkür im Schein der Ordnung” (Heidegger [2009], p. 116): “The biding of the will to will <as the condition of likelihood of today’s being> is accomplished within the circle of human arranging and regulating by *fanaticism... by anonymity* — by *irresponsibility* — by the avilement of man and the destruction of his firmness; <thus is generated> the extreme unleashing of every arbitrariness in the appearance of order”.

The evaluating peer is the *bearer* of *vilification*, by virtue of which the awareness of truth, transformed into the calculation of *performance*, is spent (namely, spends *itself*) as the value of every value.

The peer is, accordingly, the *carrier* of the *revilement* of the coalescence and the accord of those who are separate — a coalescence and accord which, from being the abode of the ward of truth, degenerate into a market of valorial interests and procedures of assurance.

The peer is, for this very reason, the *inducer* of the *avilement* of the single scholar's scientific existence, forced to translate himself entirely into a *format*, and to extenuate himself in the effort of remaining at the level of “scientific quotation” in its multiform and iridescent operational ganglia.²²

The peer is, finally, the *inflictor* of *vileness* into scientific demeanor, now often reduced to mere pose, and, through the latter, into the political existence of peoples.

Originally the judge of the true, the arbitrator to which is given the decision between what *has being* and what *has none*, the peer has now become the referent (the referee) of the omniparifying (i.e. indifferent to being, and in this sense *arbitrary*) will to will. The peer — by vocation, a guardian of the true against the insidious arrogance of the non-true — is now the implementer of the gesture that equates everything within the comparability of extenuating computation.²³

6. *A phenomenological synthesis*

Regardless of the procedural modalities which regulate the knowledge of each other's names between the controllers and the controlled, the evaluating peer is constitutively *anonymous*, since only he has a true renown and reputation who — being in the first place known by a reference to what is in itself unknown and enigmatic — speaks in the name of the (attempted) truth.²⁴ [See below, Observation 3.]

Regardless of the conscientiousness, integrity, and competence with which he carries out his mandate, the evaluating peer is essentially *irresponsible*, in the sense that he *nullifies responsibility as such*, since the peer acts without ever having, in turn, to answer for the truth of his own operations, while collaborating to orient fellow peers toward the neglect of the truth, through coercion and monitoring within the apparent order of the regime of progressiveness of science.²⁵

Regardless of the professional composure with which he may carry out his own office, he remains, behind the mask of the expert accountant of scientific values, intrinsically *fanatical*, to the extent that

²² The aviling and reviling concern both the evaluator and the evaluatee, the possible judgment of whom (as a genuinely scientific trait) is however equally “infiltrated” with the performing will.

²³ The sense of the incomparable — without which no truly human world can be generated — is in this way annihilated.

²⁴ On anonymity in the academic world see Borghi (2013a) and Borghi (2013b).

²⁵ The order is apparent, first of all, because of the constitutive insufficiency and groundlessness of the evaluation regime, which are masked through a degenerate computational *coordination*. The coordination, as a *format* of order (which, on the other hand, always consists in a measure), is always and only “valid” in the value-moment defined by the overall computation of power of the current phase of evaluation. The cybernetic order is the operational mask of the chaos of contingency.

the pernicious rite which he officiates (indeed the more reviling for the festiveness of knowledge, and the more aviling for its celebrants) is necessarily aimed at the removal of anything that could stand in opposition to the domain of performativity in the system of knowledge.

With a concluding formula, we may say:

The evaluating peer — the peer of today — is the enrolled-enrolling controller of the performative roll; the anonymous-anonymizing militant of the dictatorship of value; the vile-aviling soldier of the vilification of the truth.

He is, in this way, the scientific dissimulation (and as such the “scientist-guarantor” or the “operating scientist”) of the unique will that wills the unconditional regimentation of science in the form of absolute performativity.

The formula must be heard in accordance with steps taken thus far; that is, as a phenomenological synthesis, and therefore *not* as a moral condemnation imposed on a given “category of scholars and experts”.

Who, indeed, are the peers of today? To this question we must respond in the manner of Socrates in the *Politeia*, when, in response to Glaucon’s surprise at the strangeness of the prisoners in the cave, he replies: “They are like us”.

Thus, “peers” are not, first and foremost, “some of us” — perhaps the swiftest to seize the opportunity of “building” a “scientific career” on “evaluative merit” (viz. for “distinguished evaluation service”)²⁶; nor primarily those who, through an ill-advised sense of justice (how, indeed, can there be justice without judgment?), or through a misguided understanding of the duty of “rewarding merit” (there is no true merit in the dictatorship of value), offer, with missionary zeal, to act as “peers-in-chief” in evaluation processes.

Today’s peers, equals in the catastrophe of judgment, are precisely “like us”, and therefore, in an essential sense, *are all of us*. And this is true not only in the moment in which one of them — the likely “unknown *miles* of truth”²⁷ — is unexpectedly called upon to compile a “ranking” among “peers” drawn from the planetary “academic job market”, or to “review”, on behalf and on account of some

²⁶ It is still a widely held opinion (and as such asserted and defended) that peers are, typically, colleagues with the necessary preparation and authoritativeness, so that we might complain of the fact that there are those instead “who evaluate as a full-time job”, those “professional evaluators”, who, clearly inadequate in their scientific profile, construct an entire career precisely by force of “evaluative fatigue duties” (i.e. “corvées of evaluation”, namely non-scientific duties in the field of science, in analogy to non-military duties in the military). In truth, the operating of peers, even where it relates to purely scientific matters, has nothing to do with science: the peer, whether “scientifically worthy” or not, *is*, for what he’s worth, a functionary trained in the control of the parameters of reliability (in an increasingly “militarized” context).

²⁷ The reason for which we don’t speak of an “unknown soldier of truth” should be clear from previous considerations (see a.o. n. 15 and 17 above). *Miles* is related to *mille* (thousand), in which we hear the root *mil-* “to convene, to reunite, to gather”. Contrary to the innumerable (scattered, isolated) “militants” of the anonymous militia of evaluation, the “*militēs* of truth”, mostly unknown to one another (that is, even before they are so to “the others”), are in essence *mille*, i.e. thousand, where the number “thousand” is devoid of any valorial connotation, and therefore beyond evaluative computation. While anonymity is based on the annihilation of names, and consequently of responsibility, unknownness, on the other hand, implies the awaiting of a name in responsibility. [On the concept of number as originally free of valorial imprint, see Zaccaria (2011).]

performance evaluation agency, a “scientific output”. Peers are “like us” — “peers” *are us* — from the moment in which each of us, now made transparent and “legible” for the computation of values through the reduction of one’s knowledge to the format of a “scientific-disciplinary sector”, of one’s attempts to the format of “scientific products”, and of one’s errancy in the truth to the format of a “scientific profile”, simply *is subject* to such practices²⁸ — or rather, is subject to them without raising, not even for an instant, his voice in warning.

²⁸ The reduction to a format can be called “formatation”, which is to be distinguished from the technical operation of formatting. What is described in this article is, on the whole, the formatation of the parity (or peership) between scholars.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

Observation 1.

The community of peers

[See above, p. 1]

In today's academic usage, the peer group is defined by a shared affiliation within a scientific discipline, characterized by certain subject matter and methods of investigation. A community of peers extends out broadly on a planetary scale. It is believed that scientific judgment must remain limited to the community thus defined, since the necessary competence cannot be guaranteed outside its borders.

One may note how parity is already understood here in a purely technical-operational sense; that is, in the sense willed by the will to evaluate. The single scholar *necessarily* falls into a specific "scientific community", namely into an identifiable group of parified scholars; he is *forced* to define himself in terms of his affiliation to that group, to position himself in it as one of its "expressions" and "manifestations".

This obligation responds to the operational requirement that a single scholar should be transparent, legible, monitorable: in a word, *evaluatable* according to a standard — and precisely *with regard* to his degree of parification within the standard itself.

Therefore, the evaluating peer is always the representative of the scientific community thus defined, and, as such, is the controller of parity — that is, now, of the degree of conformity to the indifferent standard, while, as regards his own scientific activity, he is always controlled as well.

The peer, therefore, is not primarily "*my* peer" (i.e. the peer of the scholarly "me"), but rather the one who controls the extent to which I am, in my turn, a peer; *that is*, parified (made uniform as an output producing persona) within the standard.²⁹

Observation 2.

"Utility for life"

[See above, p. 7]

Who could deny that the reality of scientific research, and the conditions in which it takes place, are profoundly changed with respect to the way in which they were structured just a few decades ago? And, consequently, that it is no longer plausible to rely on "the old values" for the administrative management of research, values such as trust and constructive criticism among colleagues, raised in a common commitment to the truth?

²⁹ On the distinction between "I", "you", "he" etc. and "my", "your", "his" etc. "person" see Weil (1957).

Who could deny that today’s “scientific system” requires necessarily forms of top down direction, programming and quality control and assurance, together with the related criteria of implementation, as well as the responsible controllers, assurers and censors, in order to manage what is otherwise destined to remain “uncontrolled”, “arbitrary” and ultimately “vain” research?

Who, in short, could deny that research without “results” that have a somehow measurable “impact” which justifies the resources committed in a particular “sector” or “project” rather than in another, is unacceptable and almost “unethical”?

However, even restricting ourselves to such a (indeed quite miserable) level of awareness, it is necessary to admit that the underlying motivations and the ultimate ends of procedures focusing on the evaluation of peers *remain confined entirely within the circle of operativity*. In other words: *Never do such procedures occur from the starting point of, or in view of, the ontological truth of knowledge, and therefore of its utility for human dwelling*. In fact, none of the concepts and indicators of “utility”, through which are implemented the various methods of research programming and evaluation, appears to be sensitive to the only thing that “counts” and has a “value”, and that therefore, as Nietzsche would say, “ultimately decides”: that is, “utility for life”. (Consider, for example, the so-called *impact factor*, a measure that notoriously fails to display even the faintest soupçon of truth.)

[In Plato’s *Theaetetus* (172c et seqq.) we find a masterly elucidation of the difference between one who is educated in the temporality of philosophy — and therefore in being free — and one who, instead, is trained to the timing of sophism — and therefore to being a slave. It can be shown how, in the passage in question, Plato illustrates the destiny of any quest for the true — or, as he says in that context, for what *is* — in the regime of valorial “peers” and “judges”, who, by confining each clarification to the limits of the *format* that defines the issue under debate, prevent the *agon* from freely unfolding within its relation to the source of knowledge — with the result that the human being’s relationship with the truth, a relationship that the Greeks call *psyche*, remains inert and sterile.]³⁰

A possible objection to our diagnosis could sound like this: these considerations, while perhaps commendable, nevertheless move on “too high” a level, running the risk of missing a decisive point. Indeed, given the fact that, on the planetary scene of scientific research, more and more is published at an always faster rate, a primary aim of peer review is to avoid errors and manifest shortcomings, or the lack of respect for the minimal and shared standards of scientificity, in whatever obtains the final “seal of approval”, thus helping to ensure the reliability of the results which peers acknowledge in order to draw on them for their own research.

³⁰ The question of the “temporality of philosophy” vs. the “timing of sophism” can be traced back to the Greek concept of *scholē* (“leisure, free time”). On this see De Gennaro (2013) (2014) (2019) and Zaccaria (2018).

Here, too, we need to discern: in fact, the objective aid provided by a reviewer who corrects an error once again masks the intrusive hand of performativity. *We all ask our peers to “review” our texts*: not only to avoid errors, but also, and in the first place, to obtain indications concerning possible insufficiencies, suggestions for improvement, etc. However, in peer review, this “reviewing” is now part of the “quality control” applied to a product that, in order for it to be inserted into the circuit of overpowering, and therefore function as a useful resource for the users belonging to a certain catchment area, must survive a stress test of reliability (or cybernetic assurance) by passing through an apposite “performance filter”.

Observation 3.

The anonymous peer review

[See above, p. 9]

3.1 Objectivity. Anonymous review, motivated by the need to ensure the objectivity (viz. impartiality, neutrality) of the evaluation procedure, is in truth a means of performative training: it establishes a “game” whose aim it is that both evaluators and evaluatees interiorize the principle of operativity as a guiding principle, that they regulate themselves by it — a game which, by the way, has already come to its end with the preventive obeisance to the *formats* and standards of reliability and the spontaneous self-modelling that this obeisance implies. From the point of view of *those who write*, this obeisance is motivated by the obligation of productivity, and by the consequent coercion to “publish” (“publish or perish”), while, on the part of *those who read*, it is determined by the need to “list oneself” as an evaluating peer within one’s “community”.

The fact that one aims for removing any residual element of “subjectivity” from this valorial game, precisely while proclaiming one’s desire to ensure the single scholar’s “freedom of judgment”, once again conceals the will to surrogate judgment *as such* with the calculation of performativity. In the moment in which the adaptation to this will, and thus the intimate anonymization of knowledge, have occurred, the anonymous form of the procedure may be abandoned. (While the more experienced will have adapted thanks to the oblivion of “past practices”, the younger ones will have done so by virtue of the oblivion of what they have never been able to witness “in real life”.) In fact, once the single scholar is gone and replaced by the newly born “peer scholar”, the renunciation of anonymity will no longer imply any “risk of frankness”, “of veridicity”, “of truth”.

3.2 Domesticity. The elimination of the “subjective” factor in evaluation processes aims, on the one hand, to eliminate “human error” in a standardized valorial — and therefore, in principle, already automatic — computation; on the other, it aims to expel the true parity among scholars, and this, again, in a surreptitious manner. Indeed, for the single scholar, parity, or *friendship in the (ward of) truth*, is never

a “vested good”, but a condition suffered and maintained through relentless struggle. An essential element of this struggle is constituted by the temptation of domesticity (or *oikeia*, as Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*), which attacks the very same (ward of) truth by informing the friends’ friendship (thus domesticating it). The anonymity of the peer is a mask that, while giving to understand that it wishes to correct the distortions caused by domesticity, instead implements the essential anonymization mentioned above. The deception is insidious: who, in fact, can declare himself free from the temptation of domesticity and the distortions that it involves? Who, therefore, would not have to agree, *in the primary interest of the ward of truth*, to receive support, in his freedom of judgment, by the neutralization of what could impair that freedom? The insidiousness consists in this: the same gesture that offers the “aid” of anonymity, in a sort of game of three-card Monte, *subtracts the truth*, leaving in its place an operational surrogate. In this way, peers are deprived of the one element that (as again Aristotle warns) can genuinely liberate friendship from the vice of domesticity; that is, precisely, the primary orientation toward the truth. Anonymous peer review therefore removes the bases from true parity, while corroding coalescence among scholars.

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