

## ‘Scientism’, the art of hypocrisy

‘Scientism’ here denotes the social enterprise exploiting ‘science’ as its *raison-d’etre*. This includes all the institutional paraphernalia that is built up around organizing, funding, and carrying out scientific research and education. The essential currency of this enterprise is provided in the first instance by the scientific societies via their journals. The pecking order within this social structure is determined by the individual participant’s success at accumulating a bibliography of publications in these journals.

‘Understanding’ scientism is then to understand the politics of getting published in these journals.

For the sake of clear thinking, one must of course also mention the socially parasitic activities grafted onto scientism by fault of the normal, unavoidable human proclivities; i.e., peacocks and goldbrickers. The former are those with spectacularly (mostly only relatively so) persuasive social skills who manage to insinuate themselves into high positions one way or another in spite of no real skill at the mainline activity of their enterprises. The latter are those commercially talented mercenaries who have no real interest in the substance, but exploit various needs of others, either within or without the organization, to do business—to take profit or other personal advantage. These phenomena, which are present in all human groupings from street gangs to religious orders, seem unavoidable. Science too, can not escape their grasp; but their impact, whatever it be—not always negative—is not the subject of this essay.

The point addressed here is: how conscientiously are the organs of scientism fulfilling the ideals of science?

Scientism’s illuminaires, in particular those ‘talking heads’ that seem to always to pop up to speak for all ‘science’, praise what they call the ‘scientific method’ for being the best means of discovering ‘truth’. They never fail to mention that science is self correcting, that errors are exposed in the laboratory and on that basis incorrect theories are altered so as to fit the facts. Of course, when compared with wishful thinking and revelation, one is more likely to get the right answers if some empirical angle is mixed in. At least in the long run.

However, the much vaunted scientific method only works if it is used. In ‘big science’ as practiced nowadays, it is, whenever convenient, not used! Especially where it could disadvantage ensconced insiders.

Social scientists have long ago discovered that prejudices and fancies overwhelm the whole process unless rules are

enforced to make this less likely. Namely, they found that the data taking process must be “double blind,” neither the experimenter or experimentee can know for sure for what’s happening, because if they do know, the ‘placebo effect’ will undermine objectivity, as one or the other party will strive to fulfill some favored expectation, especially when it is not in fact coming to pass naturally.

For physical sciences, this factor is less crucial, as the objects of study, electrons say, have no dog in the fight. That is, in the laboratory, this refinement is not essential. But, once out of the lab, it is another story! The social-science aspect of physics scientism is in the evaluation and selection process for publication. By the ethic of the enterprise, this selection process, as a more or less exact parallel to data taking in experiments on people, absolutely must be double blind. Of course, it is not! None of the journals for the large “scientific” societies, not to mention commercial journals, e.g., *Nature* (in spite of being a for-profit enterprise, responsible to its investors, not to professional ideals, it is baffling that it has somehow garnered the reputation of being a “leading scientific journal”), practice the elementary tactics needed to achieve objectivity.

The peer review process as practiced is exactly that, the ‘peer’ is reviewed, not the paper! The researcher’s reputation, especially his institution, is the central feature all too often taken into account. This situation is particularly acute in view of the utter simplicity with which double blind peer review could be executed. But this suggestion, a very old one in fact, is rejected by the establishment vehemently. Reviewers, without the pecking order clues provided by author’s name and institution, would all too often come to a decision that editors could not accept politically. The ensconced powers that be find their reputations on the line and react with self serving outrage!

This particular defective custom played no small role in recent scandals. The peer review process failed to identify fraudulent data and manufactured results; the reviewers, supposedly experts in the subject, failed to exercise exactly that sort of scepticism that they surely would have if they were uncowed by the status of the experimenter and his institution.

This level of hypocrisy is pervasive in scientism. It has corrupted the enterprise fundamentally, and in part explains the fall in respect for science that contributes to an upturn in irrationality in society at large.