

Peer Review: A Theory In Search of Best Practice?
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Abstract: Peer review serves both an epistemic and a moral function, which are quite distinct but easily confused in ways that mystify its significance in science. Epistemically, peer review ‘validates’ in the sense of granting a license to a scientist to draw on a discipline’s body of knowledge to advance her own knowledge claims. Ethically, peer review signals to the larger public the discipline’s trust that the scientist did what she claims to have done. Thus, fraud is seen as the biggest offence against the peer review process. Nevertheless, the history of science reveals that fraud has a complicated – sometimes quite positive – relationship to the advancement of knowledge. There is an equally complicated relationship between the classical sociological model of peer review – namely, the self-organizing Royal Society – and the advancement of knowledge. In particular, this model works best for retrospective than prospective epistemic judgements. It is easier to tell whether new research carries on than breaks with old research effectively. Not surprisingly, journalists (and suspicious scientists) see groupthink lying behind peer review judgements. Interestingly, commercial publishers – always in the lookout for new markets – are generally motivated to find new domains of knowledge that break peer review monopolies. In the end, peer review works very well as a definer of a discipline’s mainstream and frontier – but less so as a medium for disposing of particular pieces of research.

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