

LETTERS

The 'Journal Scout'

I propose a partial reform of the existing scientific publishing process. My proposal aims to improve the techniques for manuscript processing and to stimulate competition among academic journals for exceptional articles.

Despite its seeming widespread acceptance, the peer-review system is constantly under fire and criticism. Critics argue that it is excessively costly and time-consuming. The system is vulnerable to misconduct, plagiarism, and breach of confidentiality. Some of the most cited papers in the history of science, now widely accepted, were previously rejected by referees. At least eight articles that would eventually earn the Nobel Prize for their authors were initially rejected outright by reviewers (J.M. Campanario, *Science Communication*, 16:304-25, 1995). Although refereeing involves only a few hours, the whole process delays publication excessively. Indeed, the lag in some competitive fields is considered unacceptable (R. Roy, *The Scientist*, Sept. 6, 1993, page 11).

Under the current system, authors compete for space in high-prestige journals. Most other lesser journals passively await manuscripts, and many gladly accept mediocre manuscripts in order to stay in business. The situation favors leading journals, since they receive most of the high-impact papers. Reforms have been suggested to overcome the aforementioned shortcomings (D.V. Cicchetti, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 14:119-86, 1991). Unfortunately, none of the suggested reforms involves fundamental changes in the peer-review system. For example, computer networks speed up the editorial process but do not permit journals to compete for good manuscripts in real time.

I suggest the creation of a central facility, or metajournal, organized by discipline or specialty, similar to Internet USENETs. Authors would submit an abstract or a full manuscript to the metajournal. Journal editorial boards would routinely scan the

metajournal to locate potentially innovative manuscripts. Editors would then contact authors about publishing the articles. If more than one offer is made, the author would choose the journal in which to publish. The task of shopping around could be eliminated and left totally in the hands of interested journals.

The new system would inspire a new role in science: the journal scout or journal agent, who would seek out manuscripts for journals. Journal scouts should be real experts in their fields and should be able to convince editors that candidate papers are worthy of publication. Thus, journal scouts would act as literary agents. Successful performance in locating good manuscripts might even be taken into account for tenure and promotion, just as being appointed as a referee today is considered meritorious.

With many journal scouts looking for good manuscripts, the chance that a significant publication with unorthodox but innovative ideas would be delayed by a single biased referee would be minimized. In many cases, authors might wish to publish in less prestigious journals that would agree to prompt publication. This would eventually boost the impact of these journals.

The best safeguard against plagiarism or theft of ideas is open discussion in the metajournal for scrutiny by journal agents. In addition, any scientist could volunteer to serve as a freelance referee, and all comments would be made available to authors. The metajournal could easily coexist with the "normal" scientific publishing system in which authors send their manuscripts to traditional journals.

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Bernard Fisher's Study

Regarding the article "Observers Say Fisher Case Highlights Flaws In System" (S. Benowitz, *The Scientist*, March 31, 1997, page 1): My late wife, Ruth Chessin, was a participant in the breast cancer study, under her former name, Mrs. Louis (Ruth) Marcus. She had the greatest confidence in Bernard Fisher. Part of her distress in reading about his problem may have contributed, in part, to her dying—a victim of lung cancer, whereas earlier she had had breast cancer.

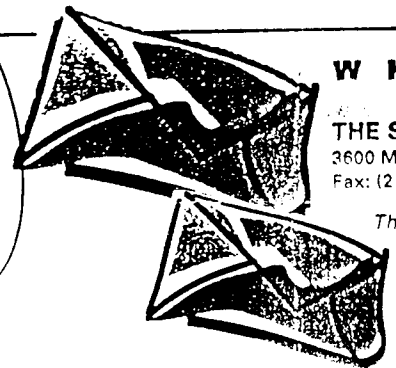
I came across your article quite by accident. I wish to let Dr. Fisher know that he was on her mind throughout more than 20 years of participation. That he was finally successful in defending his name is a source of satisfaction for me.

Thank you for the full story.

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Collective Dose Fallacy

I have spent more than 45 years working in a variety of areas in nuclear science and technology, with a number of them in radiation protection. It was a pleasure to read Theodore Rockwell's article (Opinion, *The Scientist*, March 3, 1997, page 9). It is high time for the scientific community to look at the data supporting the Linear No-Threshold model (of which there are none) and the data supporting a threshold model (of which there are a great number).



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with the time line. The moment of transition to the spiritual cannot be the object of this kind of observation, which nevertheless can discover at the experimental level a series of very valuable signs indicating what is specific to the human being. But the experience of metaphysical knowledge, of self-awareness and self-reflection, of moral conscience, freedom, or again, of aesthetic and religious experience, falls within the competence of philosophical analysis and reflection, while theology brings out its ultimate meaning according to the Creator's plans.

A Call To Enter Eternal Life

7. In conclusion, I would like to call to mind a Gospel truth which can shed a higher light on the horizon of your research into the origins and unfolding of living matter. The Bible in fact bears an extraordinary message of life. It gives us a wise vision of life inasmuch as it describes the loftiest forms of existence. This vision guided me in the Encyclical which I dedicated to respect for human life, and which I called precisely *Evangelium vitae*.

It is significant that in St. John's Gospel

life refers to the divine light which Christ communicates to us. We are called to enter into eternal life, that is to say, into the eternity of divine beatitude.

To warn us against the serious temptations threatening us, our Lord quotes the great saying of Deuteronomy: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Dt 8:3; cf. Mt 4:4).

Even more, "life" is one of the most beautiful titles which the Bible attributes to

A Pagan Responds To The Pope

BY DAVID S. THALER

Approximately three decades ago, a previous pope proclaimed that Jews were no longer to be held responsible for the death of Christ. A friend of mine, Israel Kaplan, then sent the pope a telegram that read, in toto, "Gee thanks." This is one reaction and will be the sole reaction of many scientists to the current pope's letter concerning biological evolution. There are other perspectives.

The pope's recent letter to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences shows a sophistication in speaking of "theories" of biological evolution. It acknowledges that these theories concern mechanistic explanations and that the intrinsic

consciousness in terms of biology is, apparently, still heresy.

To paraphrase bluntly, the pope seems to be saying, "Okay, science, you can have the

body, but don't forget that we've got your immortal soul by the short hairs." Furthermore, the pope seems to say that although the soul and the body are separable, the soul and the intellect are inextricably intertwined. He continues, "theories of evolution which... consider the mind as emerging from the forces of living matter, or as a mere epiphenomenon of this matter, are incompatible with the truth about man. Nor are they able to ground the dignity of the person."

Depending on how things play out, the next Galileo may be a neurobiologist, or we may anticipate future theological retrenchments on the relationship of mind, brain, and soul.

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