

The deadly dangers of peer review

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The philosopher Michael Rosen robustly questions the use of peer review in philosophy.¹ Of course it is an essential part of science, but philosophy is rather different. He writes: *'If [as he argues] the idea of completeness in philosophical arguments is unattainable, the attempt to be 'rigorous' can lead to a defensive tendency to reduce ambitions and to protect some tiny piece of ground against the possible objections of those closest to oneself in background and outlook (one's natural peer reviewers). What is lost is not just accessibility but also the willingness to call into questions basic assumptions (one's own and others'), which is precisely what, for many of, the point of doing philosophy was in the first place. Much contemporary philosophy takes place in an atmosphere of what can only be called (however historically unfair that label may be) scholasticism.'*²

Hear, hear. There's a philosophical culture of scared, paralysed conservatism. Much philosophical writing is simple reiteration of old ideas with, at best, some tentative suggestions as to how a caveat to an old paper might be slightly redrafted. Philosophical progress is regarded as necessarily incremental rather than revolutionary. There's far too much reverence. Nothing should be unthinkable, but almost everything is. All the philosophical emperors are devoutly assumed to be fully and gorgeously clothed. They're not. Being creative is assumed to be incompatible with rigour. It's not.

The academic zeitgeist makes a lot of philosophical writing boring, unattractive and wholly inaccessible to anyone who isn't a creature and acolyte of the conservative ethos. Potential philosophical iconoclasts go off and do other things. And so the timorous conservatism becomes self-perpetuating. It's a shame.

All that said, there plainly needs to be some sort of academic review before publication. It's not enough for the editor simply to check for readability and grammar – important though those are. But at the moment the wrong criteria are applied. I suggest two overarching criteria:

1. Nerve: is the paper sufficiently audacious?
2. Familiarity with the existing literature: does the author demonstrate sufficient knowledge of the state of the art to indicate that her radical departure from it is intentional?

Audacity is the main criterion that should be used in the determination of the overall mark (see *When it's unethical to be a well-published academic*, above) allocated to the work. Those marks should be collected in a central, publicly accessible database, perhaps called the 'Audacity Index'. No doubt there needs, too, to be some

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mechanism for reviewing the reviewers, and perhaps reviewing the reviewers of the reviewers of the reviewers: the details can be worked out in due course.

That deals with the *substance* of peer review. But some of the mischief of peer review lies not in what is said, but in how it is said. We need a code of conduct for peer reviewers, to which all reviewers agree. My suggested code follows.

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This essay is shared with kind permission of Charles Foster, from *Ethics, Law and the Business of Being Human: Against Nine to Five Philosophy* (Anthem Press, 2025).

REFERENCES

1. *Dignity: Its history and meaning*, Harvard University Press, 2012
2. *Ibid*, p. xiv