

Editorial

Don't Call Me Stupid

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"A Fish Called Wanda" is one of the funniest movies ever made. In it, Kevin Kline plays Otto West, an anglophobic American criminal, a role that got him an Academy Award as the Best Supporting Actor. Otto is all in favor of solving problems the practical way without too much thinking beforehand. Nevertheless, he boasts about reading philosophy and gets furious if somebody implies he might be stupid. Thus, his "Don't call me stupid!" becomes one of the catchphrases in the movie, usually triggering cataclysmic and hilarious events.

You can imagine my surprise when I came upon an essay titled "The importance of stupidity in scientific research."¹ In this brilliant piece, Martin A. Schwartz elaborates on the concept of "productive stupidity," meaning "being ignorant by choice." If one would not be ignorant about a problem, one would never try to find a solution—which is what science is all about. He finishes like this: "The more comfortable we become with being stupid, the deeper we will wade into the unknown and the more likely we are to make big discoveries." With the article being Open Access, I can encourage everyone to read it, as well as its follow-up 7 years later on the importance of indifference²—which gives food for thought for yet another editorial on scientific publishing.

Back to stupidity or, rather, ignorance. "Scio ut nescio" ("I know that I don't know"), the snappy Latin version of the Greek phrase coined by Platon in Sokrates' Apology 399 BC, became a famous dictum neatly expressing the philosopher's train of thought: it is important to realize that true human wisdom is characterized by being aware of one's ignorance regarding the necessity to acknowledge the universal good.

Platon wants us to believe that Sokrates was conscious that he, regarding himself as a mere human, lacked any wisdom beyond doubt—an attribute reserved for the Delphian god Apollon. The acknowledgment of this awareness of one's relative ignorance is considered his true philosophic achievement. Accordingly, Karl Popper regarded the wisdom of Sokrates to be less of a positive knowledge but rather a state of awareness.

Presenting this to the court as an apology that he had neither committed blasphemy nor corrupted the youth did not work out in the end, and Sokrates was sentenced to death. Maybe the 281 of the 501 heliasts (jurors) who did not accept his argument and considered him guilty included a fair amount of Ottos.

For us as scientists, the message must be clear: stay modest and accept that "one of the beautiful things about science is that it allows us to bumble along, getting it wrong time after time, and feel perfectly fine as long as we learn something each time."¹ You cannot say it any nicer than this.

As for Otto, Wanda had a different perception: "To call you stupid would be an insult to stupid people. I've known sheep that could outwit you. I've worn dresses with higher IQs!"³

References

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- 3 IMDB. A Fish Called Otto. Accessed December 1, 2023 at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095159/quotes/>

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