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Editorial

Make a Stand(ard) for *Sci*ence

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Prelude: During the global Corona pandemic, the validity of science has been challenged by sections of the public, often for political gains. Here, science and scientists have become associated with relativity and unreliability, and in extreme cases, with false data and acting as accomplices in wider conspiracies. Is science really relative and therefore subject to opinion? Is there alternative science similar to alternative political parties, from which one may pick and choose or upon which one might vote by majority? Can anyone claim to do science? Or is the science of the day a form of art for the few, an exclusive club of trained experts, producing accurate and precise data which leaves no room for possible heretics? These questions address the basics of our understanding of modern science and the answers are likely to shape the science itself as well as its public perception in the 21st century. Interestingly, the answers are not found in the laboratory, as these are philosophical questions best reflected upon from an epistemological perspective, i.e., questions directly linked to scientific knowledge and method. Briefly dwelling on the latter is the general theme of this editorial. We would also like to take this chance to spread the word that *Sci* is now indexed in Scopus and ready to launch the "*what's it about?*" initiative, in which authors provide a concise summary of their contributions rendered towards non-specialists and the more general public. As a proof of concept, we present to you the summaries of the valuable contributions to the Special Issue "Feature Papers 2021 Editors Collection" directly from the authors.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic which ravaged the globe is not only a challenge for medicine. Indeed, the pandemic and the measures taken to contain and deal with it also have wider implications ranging from social and economic turmoil to political upheaval. For scientists, one aspect of the pandemic is especially surprising and telling. After an initial love affair of the public with the medical and scientific profession, including pictures of Italians singing from their balconies to thank doctors and nurses, and eager anticipation of the first vaccines to arrive on the market, the honeymoon was soon over. Today, in Europe and elsewhere, we are confronted with disturbing scenes of violent demonstrations against vaccination and other public health measures.

Intriguingly, whilst such demonstrations are frequently organized by political fringe groups, they are fueled by a wider scepticism against science and scientists in general. Although this may take many of us scientists by surprise, there is a public perception that science can be unreliable, is full of mistakes, is relative, is simply a collection of opinions, and even worse, is a collection of opinions held by *academi(a)cs* who are paid by companies from the pharmaceutical industry. The argument that science is not perfect and has erred is then used to claim that it is simply erroneous, tainted with false and fake data, and generally not to be trusted. In contrast, they demand, one should aim for and foster an open, transparent, and inclusive science for everyone, for alternatives, choices, and democratic votes in and about science and its results. Indeed, should not science in a democratic society not also be democratic and open to alternatives?

So what is going on? These questions touch on the foundations of modern science and the answers to them are likely to shape science and our understanding thereof in the

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years to come. In this Editor's Collection, we address this burning issue, which profoundly affects each and every one of us. Firstly, we discuss some of these issues of relativity and alternative science from the point of view of epistemology, as indeed such questions cannot be answered by the tools we have at our disposal in the laboratory. This is followed by a showcase of exquisite contributions by our members of the Editorial Board, providing fine examples of how science truly operates and works. This manuscript is also a celebration of the effort of the authors, reviewers, editors, and colleagues at the editorial office which allowed *Sci* to be now indexed in Scopus.

2. The Sleeping Beauty

Let us get right to it. What is going on outside the academic ivory tower, on the streets and marketplaces of Europe, and around the globe? Before we dismiss the increasing number of supporters of so-called "*conspiracy theories*" (sic) or "*conspiracy mentality*" we may need to shoulder some blame. Over the years, our engagement with the wider public has been fairly distant, perhaps even arrogant. The wider public does not read our *Nature* papers, and the occasional *Café Scientifique* to teach ordinary folks about the marvels of our *trade* has not been enough to infuse a deeper sense of what *science* is about and what its real value(s) to society is.

We are now paying the price, a little helpless with our courses on didactics and our curricula on how to show schoolchildren how to build solar cells from birch tree leaves. It does not help that many natural scientists have belittled and often alienated our colleagues from across the aisle, from such disciplines as psychology, sociology, or philosophy, as those disciplines are actually well-equipped to assist us in answering some of the questions regarding what the heck science is about, questions we are now forced to answer under pressure from the street. Science itself has been a sleeping beauty, but now we are rudely awakened by sectors of a society eager to make their stand, a stand for popular and alternative science which, in their eyes, should be free of any political and economical entanglement.

3. Is Science Democratic?

Let us, therefore, take the criticism from the street for a second from the horse's mouth, bringing epistemology to the rescue. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge and its foundations. It deals with questions like "What do we know?" and "How do we know that we know?". In science, epistemology provides a definition for knowledge and therefore sets standards for the scientific method for acquiring such knowledge. Discussions in this field inform metaphysical and ethical debates about the evolution, direction, and goals of science. Yet, as scientific knowledge is generally empirical and grounded in experiment and observation, it remains amenable to the senses.

The claim on the street is that science has made many errors in the past and is therefore highly unreliable, relative, and full of mistakes, as well as being potentially biased towards personal and economic gains. Some also argue that science is undemocratic as it is practiced behind closed doors and is conducted by an unelected and, in some ways, uncontrolled few. In a democratic society, so goes the claim, scientists are not above the law and there should be a people's science and alternatives, choices just like in politics, where one can follow the Republicans or Democrats, the Conservatives or Liberals.

These comments are not entirely unfounded, and indeed the history of science showcases numerous examples of failed (pseudo-)science, such as alchemy and Lysenkoism by Soviet scientists from the 1950s who relied on Marxist dialectics. Yet the demand for and implementation of citizen science where anyone can be a scientist for a day is perhaps a possible inclusive and democratic path. Such public participations and initiatives are laudable as they bridge the widening gap between very specialized sciences and the public and therefore bring the players together, unlock science, and facilitate an understanding of science to the general population.

Nonetheless, the question of how one monolithic science can drive a pluralistic society is hardly surprising, as diversity does not stop at the door of the laboratory or lecture hall, and we need to find answers.

4. A Homage to Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996)

Our Editorial for the Feature Paper's collection of 2021, in the second year of the Corona pandemic, therefore stands under the motto "*Make a Stand for Science*". Although we cannot discuss the question of what science is really about on one page, let us say the following:

The epistemological view on science indeed can be quite colorful and controversial. As naturalists, we can consider science as a picture of reality and try to dig and inch closer and closer to this true picture of nature which is hidden under a pile of rubble just like Pompeji after the outbreak of the Vesuvius. In contrast, as constructivists and quietists, we refrain from casting absolute judgments on nature, instead engaging in theoretical and empirical construction. Here, one may consider science as a human endeavor of constructing anthropocentric knowledge about the physical "out there" which, in essence, does not matter and is only felt if and when it resists us and stands in the way of achieving certain goals; science is perceived as a problem-solving exercise viewing nature at its endless levels of complexity as a vast landscape of tools and obstacles. According to this view, the same problem, or rather, research question, can and should be addressed from and with different or even competing solutions, i.e., research programs and traditions. Furthermore, we may also consider science as an anarchy of "anything goes" like the famous philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend (1924–1994) and simply relish its fruits, or view science as a horse race of different theories and entire research programs. In any case, and regardless of which stand we take, we find ourselves in the curious situation that in each scientific discipline, one team is dominating the race and there is no alternative science occupying the same place at the same moment.

Nonetheless, science is not static—it is rather changing every second. It produces knowledge that may or may not be useful, regardless if we inch closer to the hidden picture of reality or if we construct another floor in our building. Additionally, yes, of course we may dig at the wrong place or construct a building that may collapse or needs to be demolished after a couple of years. Nonetheless, together and today, we are digging at the same site or stonewalling at the same building.

In these regards, let us now get out our chisels and mortar boards and present our readers with examples of excellent, present-day science, in the hope that these contributions serve as a roadshow of what science can and cannot achieve for the good of society. At the same time, we would like to take this chance to answer some of the criticism "from the street" regarding transparency, thus announcing and launching the simple language "*what's it about*?" initiative. "*What's it about*?" is a scheme in which authors provide a concise abstract/summary of their scientific manuscript in simple and accessible language to non-specialists and the general public. Similar approaches have been advocated also elsewhere [1,2]. We believe that such an initiative would remove some of the ambiguities related to technical and specialized language of the broad spectrum of scientific disciplines covered in *Sci* (ISSN 2413-4155) and render their content more inclusive in terms of audience. The ultimate objectives are to provide the public with sound and approachable *knowledge* away from misunderstanding and misinformation as well as to foster a collaborative academic atmosphere among scientists from different disciplines.

5. In Simple Language

We now present you with the "*what's it about*?" summaries from our Special Issue, Feature Papers 2021 Editors Collection, provided directly by the respective authors.

Auten et al., a team of specialists on the movement of the human body (kinesiology), wrote "Over recent years, various methods have been investigated to reduce the effects of fatigue on sporting performance. One such technique, transcranial direct current stim-

ulation (tDCS), applies very light electrical current to the head to try and improve the activation of different brain areas. We investigated if tDCS could delay fatigue and improve cycling time trial performance and brain activation but found that it had no impact on cycling performance or brain activity [3]".

Prof. Dr. Ziad Zahgir from the Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada wrote, "With the severe climate change, engineers focus on a means to store and harvest energy efficiently. On the other hand, electrical vehicle production requires energy storage. Flow channels have been proposed as a mean to cool hot surfaces. Metal foam has been introduced as a mean to enhance heat extraction. However, this foam creates a severe pressure drop. The present paper introduced a thin, porous layer approach attached at channels walls to extract heat by maintaining a reasonable pressure drop. Thus, the link between Science and Engineering applications [4]".

Chalmpes et al. from the Departments of Material Sciences and Engineering and Physics at the University of Ioannina, Ioannina, Greece wrote, "Hypergolic materials synthesis is a new preparative technique in materials science that allows a wide range of carbon or inorganic solids with useful properties to be obtained in a single step. Solely based on hypergolic reactions that lift off rockets to space, the method not only allows the fast and spontaneous synthesis of several nanomaterials at ambient conditions but also releases a sizable amount of energy that can be directly converted into useful work, such as chemical, mechanical, photovoltaic, thermoelectric or heating fluids. The present work particularly focuses on the hypergolic synthesis of titania, a commercial white pigment widely used in paints, sunscreens, skywritting, correction fluids, tattoos and hydrophobic or self-cleaning coating technologies. So, next time you watch a space shuttle launch on television, the white smoke filling the air might be titania [5]".

Koutsoyiannis et al., experts on water resources and environmental engineering, from the School of Civil Engineering, National Technical University of Athens, Athens, Greece summarized, "Introduced in the 1940s, stochastic (or Monte-Carlo) simulation is a powerful method to numerically tackle demanding problems that cannot be solved analytically. It is the method of choice for problems involving uncertainty, but it also works in problems that are purely deterministic (e.g., solution of integrodifferential equations in high-dimensional spaces). Typical stochastic simulation methods are oriented toward processes with Gaussian distribution and short-range dependence. However, most geophysical and human-related processes are characterized by non-Gaussian distributions with long-range dependence. The paper by Koutsoyiannis and Dimitriadis (2021) presents a new generic and parsimonious methodology for genuine simulation from any distribution and dependence. To this aim it presents a generalized method approximating any distribution, based on the concept of cumulants, which is a more powerful tool than the more commonly used statistical moments. Further, it reproduces time dependence with a generalized, time symmetric or asymmetric, moving-average scheme. Several applications of the method to mathematical, geophysical and engineering problems confirm the good performance of the method [6]".

Zambas-Adams et al. from the Centre for Research in Biosciences, Department of Applied Sciences, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Bristol, UK wrote, "Drugs, both legal and illicit are widely used. In recent years, attention has focused on the understanding their possible environmental and occupational exposures. Our review focuses on the levels that have been reported in air and the techniques that have been used to determine them. Occupationally, in workplaces such as hospitals, low air concentrations of many anaesthetic drugs are reported. However, in many situations modern air extraction systems have been shown to overcome these issues. Trace levels of drugs such as cocaine can be found in the air of many cities. The odour associated with the consumption and use of many drugs is more related to other constituents rather than the active ingredient itself. The levels of drugs in air have been shown to reflect reported drug usage and the levels found in other environmental media. The monitoring of the levels of drugs in air can hence give important insights [7]".

Reynolds et al. from the Department of Mathematics and Statistics, York University, Toronto, Canada wrote, "We show how to obtain definite integrals and their accompanying infinite sums using contour integration, which can be written as a special function. We provide a proof for the basic equation as well as several examples of how to apply the method. The advantage of utilizing special functions is that they have analytic continuation, which extends the range of definite integral parameters over which the formula is valid [8]".

Anders Andrae from Looking Ahead Science, Solna, Sweden, wrote, "Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) is an interesting analytical method for estimating different environmental impacts associated with technical systems. Life Cycle Impact Assessment (LCIA) is one of the steps in LCA. However, certain so called LCIA categories (e.g., biodiversity, toxicity, resource depletion, respiratory inorganics, carbon, water) need to constantly be developed with knowledge from other research fields than LCA. This is important if LCA is to support policy making. This article attempts to use results and properties for water vapor to improve the global warming potential indicator especially for high-altitude emissions. To avoid some confusion in normalization and beyond for the tricky respiratory inorganics category, the article also suggests that each specific particulate matter emission should have its own impact category starting with PM2.5 [9]".

Mosolygó and Laczi et al. from University of Szeged, answered, "From gene expression studies to identifying microbes, quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR) is widely used in medical diagnostics. The method is essential in the diagnosis of SARS-CoV-2, however many people are averse to believe in the modern diagnostic methods. The reason could be the lack of knowledge and the misunderstanding of the principles of qPCR. This situation motivated us to design a simple laboratory practical class, in which students have opportunities to understand the underlying principles of qPCR and its advantages in microbiological diagnosis. We strongly believe that health education and reliable scientific knowledge can help to increase health consciousness in young people [10]".

Singh et al., a team of experts who joined forces from Germany and India, wrote, "the review entitled "Apoptosis and Pharmacological Therapies for Targeting Thereof for Cancer Therapeutics" summarizes recent findings on signaling pathways and mechanisms contributing to cellular apoptosis. Apoptosis is rather crucial because it balances both cell survival and cell death and defects in apoptotic pathways may lead to autoimmune diseases and cancer. The article highlights the fact that both targeting of intrinsic and extrinsic pathways of apoptosis by drugs that restore cellular sensitivity towards apoptosis offers several potential new strategies to treat or manage different cancer types. In this respect, drugs interfering with the function of specific proteins or epigenetic factors have already shown promising results in diverse clinical studies [11]".

Difonzo et al., a group of researchers from Université Paris Cité, wrote, "The use of nanomedicine has potential to enhance the MRI outcomes and safety during pregnancy. This review paper details first the current indication for an MRI during the pregnancy and the related safety of this procedure. Then, the reported nanostructured contrast agent for MRI were listed discussed. Finally, based on literature analysis and the authors' experience in nanomedicine, nanostructured contrast agents were suggested as a safer alternative for MRI during pregnancy [12]".

Rosenthal et al. from the Department of Biochemical and Chemical Engineering, TU Dortmund University, wrote, "Simple, so-called makerspace technologies are increasingly being explored as alternatives to photolithographic methods that allows anyone to fabricate microfluidic structures. We have tested simple fabrication methods for a PDMS-based microfluidic device that can be used as a bioreactor for enzymes immobilized on particles. Different mold fabrication methods, namely laser cutting, fused layer 3D printing, stereolithographic 3D printing, and CNC milling, were validated in terms of machine accuracy and tightness. CNC milling was found to be the most reliable method for manufacturing molds and was subsequently optimized in terms of manufacturing settings and post-processing by polishing. The obtained PDMS-based microfluidic chips were success-

fully tested for their potential applicability as (bio)reactors with enzyme immobilization carrier beads [13]".

Hamdi et al., a team of experts from Germany, Morocco and the UK, summarized, "The topic of antibacterial resistance is indeed a compelling threat to public health. We address this issue through the synthesis of a novel cobalt phosphite porous compound and evaluate its biological activity against different micro-organisms. The compound synthesized belong to crystalline metal-organic frameworks (MOFs), which are porous materials with promising physicochemical properties and applications. The authors communicate their synthetic pathway and report the structural physicochemical characteristics and biological activity of their compound [14]".

Together, these publications demonstrate how good scientific investigations conducted at the highest international scientific standard can provide new and exciting insights into aspects of nature, history, and society. They also show that science develops and produces new knowledge with every manuscript published. Then again, the value of this knowledge is not judged by us scientists, as this is a matter for the users. Thomas Kuhn in his landmark publication from 1962, "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" [15] has described this rather nicely and has also left ample room for puzzle solving and also new and perhaps heretic discoveries which may fuel science and on occasion scientific revolutions as witnessed in the history of many sciences and also, quite recently, in astronomy. So yes, science is not perfect and also not hostile to alternative theories, as long as these theories are, well, scientific, and can be tested objectively with the scientific tools and methods accepted by the scientific community of the day.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is up to scientists to include the public and address these burning issues, which have come to the forefront of discourse during the pandemic, especially in response to vaccination. We need to be humble and engage, not only on the streets but in the marketplaces around us, seeking dialogue with others on an equal footing. We also need to take a more critical look at ourselves and our obsession with *Nature* papers and grants, and cherish the real value of our art, which is to benefit mankind. We need to explain this openly and perhaps in simpler language; for this, we also need to include our colleagues from disciplines such as philosophy or sociology. We need to bring these colleagues in from the cold before the debate about us becomes exceedingly hot and, on occasion share a bucket of Karl's Popper-Corn with them. *Sci* as a journal is the right—perhaps the best place—to engage in this conversation, as it has a fine tradition of being extraordinarily open and transparent, cherishing openness and inclusivity at its core. Additionally, we need to be more open, not only among ourselves but also among the wider public. This is why we have asked each team of authors to provide us with a short additional abstract written in simple language, which we have decided to share here with you.

The series of Feature Papers (Editors Collection) Special Issues continues. This initiative has been going on since 2020 [16]. The collection organized in 2022 has also been successful with four valuable contributions [17–20] and the Special Issue for 2023 you can find here (https://www.mdpi.com/journal/sci/special_issues/Y1E5UQV4W2, accessed on 7 February 2023). If you wish to read more about *Sci*, please refer to [21,22]. We wish you a joyful reading of our collection and a healthy New Year 2023.

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