

Short Note

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Short Note

Six Feet of Uncertainty: Fauci's Unbacked Decisions

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Abstract: This article explores the profound implications of Dr. Anthony Fauci's testimony before the U.S. House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, where he admitted that key COVID-19 policies lacked scientific backing. By analyzing the foundation of these decisions, the piece delves into the broader issues of scientific evidence, hypothesis validation, and the societal consequences of implementing unverified measures. It raises critical questions about the role of scientific rigor and accountability in policy-making, urging a reflection on our approach to scientific inquiry and decision-making in public health.

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In June 2024, when questioned under oath by the U.S. House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the main driving force behind various COVID-19 pandemic policies that became standard for the rest of the world, categorically stated that the decisions made did not “have scientific backing” (U.S. House of Representatives, 2024). Among these were social distancing of about 1.8 meters (6 feet in American measurement) and the controversial use of masks in children, causing a great uproar in the world press. Beyond the “scientific” merit discussion of such policies, the words of the former director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) bring profound reflections on how societies and the scientific community itself, currently not very inclined to the free discussion of ideas, understand the *modus operandi* of scientific labor—an activity of the speculative intellect in pursuit of knowledge, yet adorned with an infallibility that clashes with its own foundations.

The context of the former director's statement, which unravels the present discussion, has a very precise meaning in the scientific community. The lack of scientific backing implies that such decisions were not based on results from empirical tests but merely “sort of just appeared (sic)” to quote the deponent verbatim. In other words, the decisions were based on assumptions or hypotheses that were not properly evaluated for their scientific merit. Hypotheses are the dynamo of Science, as natural phenomena do not provide ready answers: it is necessary to provoke nature with questions and propositions and, to some extent, violate the structure of reality by isolating causal associations of interest amid a myriad of relationships, or as precisely put in the *Didascalion* of the distant 12th century: “analyze purely what in Nature is mixed” (Hugo of Saint Victor, 1961).

This perspective is very close to Popper's view of Science, which succinctly attributes scientificity to what is subject to refutation (Popper, 2002). In this sense, the formulation of a hypothesis about distancing or another potentially preventive measure is not entirely lacking in scientific foundation, as it aligns with the paradigm of airborne diseases and is susceptible to refutation or corroboration, even though the longed-for “incontestable proof” is elusive. The core of the problem under discussion does not lie in the foundation of the hypothesis, which has potential merits, but in the concept of scientific evidence. Empirical sciences fall into the category of probable, not apodictic, knowledge, unlike logical-mathematical sciences. The Scholastic philosophers, duly advised by the ancients, knew well that human capacity for knowledge is naturally limited by gnosiological, physical, metaphysical, and empirical boundaries. In other words, our intellectual faculties cannot grasp the entire causal network of *Physis*, and even if a given explanation for a particular event is plausible, there are no guarantees that other explanations are not superior (Artigas, 1992).

Precisely because of these limits inherent in our human essence, we are compelled to verify our hypotheses in an artificial manner through controlled tests and measurements, discovering in the end which ones hold up or not. This is why they are called Empirical Sciences: they must travel a path that begins with hypothetical formulation and puts it to the test. As these tests hold up within the scientific community, we create a kind of consensus or paradigm that will guide future investigations, which may even overthrow the current paradigm (Kuhn, 2006). Thus, Science is hierarchically oriented by the explanatory power of the evidence it produces, so that “*Evidence Based on Expert Opinion and Case Reports*” (Baur, 2021) occupies the lowest level of evidence due to high susceptibility to biases and lack of methodological rigor, which is exactly the situation discussed in this essay.

Even though the criterion of scientificity may lie in the verification of hypotheses, it would be naive to believe that it was blindly applied throughout the history of Science. As Paul Feyerabend (2010) pointed out well, there are numerous examples of hypotheses and proposals that could only be accepted or refuted many years after their proposition, with one of the most emblematic cases being that of Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis and his obstinate defense of hand asepsis as a preventive method for puerperal fever, versus the solid scientific consensus of the time, which was only scientifically corroborated after Pasteur and Lister’s investigations decades later. Therefore, we should not abandon explanatory proposals immediately, even when we do not yet have the means to test them.

The key issue of this discussion does not lie in the potential or hypothetical scientificity of Fauci’s team’s proposals but in their deficiency based on facts and their possible consequences. Recognizing the urgency of Science in modern societies increases the responsibility of those who produce knowledge and establish norms in its name. Again, resorting to Scholastic circumspection: “*qui probabiliter agit prudenter agit*,” that is, in situations of wide repercussions, the most prudent action is the prudent action. And what would that be in this case? Based on the lack of data corroborating such hypotheses, the proposals should have been only optional or voluntary, never mandatory or punitive, which ended up becoming commonplace in various parts of the globe.

In a way, the uproar caused by Fauci’s statement takes the form of a late rebound effect from someone who seems to have used scientific rhetoric and position as a steamroller, even in the absence of more solid backing. But this event, far from being an isolated case, is a product of our times and follows the wake of a deficiency of modern societies themselves in reflecting on their own limitations, claiming to be the bearers of supreme knowledge and forgetting the medieval prudence in recognizing that the more one knows, the more one perceives the extent of one’s own ignorance (Cusa, 1981). Fauci’s pedantry mirrors this same society that views Science dogmatically, becoming both a victim and executioner of its own designs. Finally, in light of the arguments presented in this essay, a reflection seems legitimate: *are we really a scientific society?*

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