



Observations of the Owl (21)

Fighting the Beast

We owls are wise, we are loners and... okay, admittedly,... we are also rather cocky. These are things I think you already know. However, there's yet another side to an owl's nature that you wouldn't have credited us with: we also have a pretty spiteful streak running through our character. There's no point in trying to pretend otherwise – we very easily take great

pleasure in mocking someone else's misfortune and we often find ourselves making *veeery* nasty jokes.

Our primary victims, by default, – I'm sure you've already guessed – are those ridiculously clumsy and stupid chickens. Let's be honest, they are *sooo* far beyond help that there's little else left to do but joke about them. Our list is endless and most of them are *reeeeally* grim.

So for now, I'll just tell you one, which even every owl knows. An owl goes up to a chicken and says, "Hey chicken, there's a lot of yummy grain in the next valley. Shall we go and check it out?" The chicken monotonously nods his head up and down. "Shall we fly or walk?" the owl asks with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "Woooooook!" came the reply.

Hrrrm! Perhaps I'll leave the joke-telling to the owlets... Now then, let's return to our original topic: science. What do you think always amuses me the most when it comes to your human research business? No idea? Well, let me remind you what I just said about our rather spiteful character. There's no other way of phrasing my answer: it's your perpetual whinging and lamenting about your funding systems.

There are some really entertaining quotes from a couple of texts I recently read on this topic. For example, a young human scientist concluded, "The second half of 2007 and all of 2008 had been a nightmare – 14 of these 18 months had been almost entirely devoted to writing grant applications. I now see how I've changed from being an enthusiastic scientist into an insecure bureaucrat." Poor guy!

Or, how about this particular statement by Nobel Laureate, Arthur Kornberg, many years ago, "People do not realise that when it comes to arguing their case for more funding, scientists who do basic research are the least articulate, least organised and least temperamentally equipped to justify what they are doing. In a society where selling is so important, where the medium is the message, these handicaps can spell extinction." Wonderful!

And, finally, "It is neither right nor sensible to ask scientists to become astrologists and predict precisely the path their research will follow – and then to judge them on how persuasively they can put over this fiction. It takes far too long to write a grant because the requirements are so complex and demanding. Applications have become so detailed and so technical that trying to select the best proposals has become a dark art. For postdoctoral fellowships, there are so many arcane and restrictive rules that

applicants frequently find themselves to be of the wrong nationality, in the wrong lab, too young or too old. Young scientists who make the career mistake of concentrating on their research may easily miss the deadline for the only grant they might have won." Awesome!

What? You're not amused? Okay, I'll drop my "spiteful mode" now. If the truth be known, I expected that – and I fully agree with you. It's a real shame as to what kind of beast your science funding system has become. A hungry beast, recklessly devouring far too much time, enthusiasm, creativity and, last but not least, pleasure and fun.

What can one do? Take up your arms and go down, fighting the beast together? No, SORRY, sorry... I promise to keep it serious – and will try to make constructive suggestions. For my part, when reading all those lamentable comments, I was immediately reminded of an interesting conversation with one of your human colleagues who sometimes comes to visit me in my favourite tree (honestly, it's true). And during this long late night talk he outlined his "dream" of a revised research funding system.

Without giving you the details, it basically goes like this: create a peer-reviewed 'track' system that consists of five categories, each providing a set amount of money. Accordingly, everyone should be assigned one of these funding categories and assessed for productivity every five years (and *not* for their dazzling prophecies of fictive future projects). If productivity is down, you are moved down a category; if you're productive, you get five more years of resources; and if it is high, you can apply to move up.

At first hand, a system like this would stabilise funding and thereby encourage productivity and, further still, possibly the pursuit of "risky" projects with open outcomes (which, if positive, often turn out to be the most innovative ones). If it finally came down to having backed the wrong horse, it wouldn't be such a drama because you wouldn't drop right down to zero – just make a new (but safe) start in the next lower category.

Moreover, this system would foster independence since it would allow each PI to control the way in which their money is allocated. And, perhaps the most crucial benefit: it is simple, it would cost a minimum effort and no time would be wasted writing terribly over-bureaucratic grant applications.

But how would you enter the system, starting out as a young PI? Well, they would be in a different category and would have to apply separately to get onto the treadmill.

"Very similar to our owls' research funding system," I thought rather smugly at the time. "And this has proven very successful." But I didn't tell *him* that!

Sometimes, it's better to fight a beast with your dreams.

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