

Words Poorly Used #84 — Scientist

Once again we've see this too-broad-by-multiples word, *scientist*, asked to carry far more straw than would break a camel's back. If we look at its etymology, we can see the truth that it was not meant to tote all the baggage attached to it today. The Online Etymology Encyclopedia describes the oldest usage as "scientist (n.) 1834, a hybrid coined from Latin *scientia* (see science) by the Rev. William Whewell (1794-1866), English polymath, by analogy with artist, in the same paragraph in which he coined physicist (q.v.)." This directs us to "science," the entry for which reads "(12c.), from Latin *scientia* "knowledge, a knowing; expertness," from *sciens* (genitive *scientis*) "intelligent, skilled," present participle of *scire* "to know," probably originally "to separate one thing from another, to distinguish ... " I like that. That is "to separate one thing from another, to distinguish." You can see that there is nothing there that pins us down very hard. The upshot is that scientists call themselves scientists because they give themselves permission to call themselves scientists. This renders absurd the sentence, "X % of scientists agree that A is true." There is no definite denominator for the percentage calculation, nor is there a stable numerator. *Caveat Emptor!* Labels call for the very greatest caution. Consider this Zen Koan:

Shuzan held out his short staff and said, "If you call this a short staff, you oppose its reality. If you do not call it a short staff, you ignore the fact. Now what do you wish to call this?" — The Buddhaful Tao, Some Great Koans

Let me paraphrase this, if you call this wooden object a thing only related to its current use then you have to ignore all the other truths about its multilayered reality. But if you don't call it a name by way of recognizing its current use, you forget why it exists, at present in its current form. So, when we refer to science we refer to some vast field of endeavor with multitudinous and separate rule bases, not a static entity. If we refuse to label a scientist as such, we ignore the right of any human being to label herself as such. And we expose ourselves to the risk that this "scientist" may in fact know enough to state a truth that might change our lives profoundly. I myself am a scientist, a computer scientist. But does that mean I am fluent in marine biology? It should only mean that I am conversant with Bayesian logic operations, combinatorics, numerical analysis, conversion of digital code to decimal code, hexadecimal code, octal code, structured programming, and directly related fields. Do I know how to set up my family members' home computers? No, probably.

Furthermore, by virtue of being a scientist to I get to join a consensus in any other or all fields scientific? No, definitely.