

REPLY TO JACK HIGH

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Jack High's comment resembles what soldiers call "friendly fire"—shells from one's own artillery that accidentally fall on one's own front line. He praises the details of my essay but disagrees with its broader themes. I'm a little worried that the offensive he and I both want to start will not get started if the shells fall short.

I have to agree with him that a lot of bad writing does get published. I also have to agree that good writing is expensive—though he in turn agrees with me that on balance the high cost to writers and editors would be more than balanced by the lower cost to readers. Hemingway said, "Easy writing makes hard reading." The market failure comes at the retail stage, at the editor's. If six nameable editors of journals in economics started acting as agents for the readers, as is their plain duty, the social and private cost of writing would become equal.

Editors have good reason to avoid their duty. As editor of the *Journal of Economic History* for five and a half years I faced a lot of bad writing, in a journal that gets better than average writing submitted to it. At first I did spend "the enormous amount of time it would take an editor to transform every piece into respectable prose." What killed my enthusiasm after a few years was that most authors were outraged by my suggestions for making their writing better. One author, after I had spent three days translating his piece into English, did not speak to me for a year. His was only the worst case of many of looking the gift horse squarely in the mouth. As I say in the article, most economists have a bush-league attitude towards revision, unlike the major leaguers in journalism or literature. The major leaguers like criticism, because they can pick out the good parts of it and make their stuff better. The others think that if you criticize their illiteracies you don't love them.

So there is a market failure. The high value that readers put on economic writing they can understand does not get transmitted back to the manufacturer. But I still maintain, contrary to High, that even in the presence of market failure it is advantageous for an economist to write better. That is, good writing is not valued as highly as it should be, yet nonetheless is valued highly enough that an economist would do well to supply it.

Not all economists would, of course. Some people have such a comparative disadvantage in writing that they should go into some other line. But economists learn mathematics and statistics and economic reasoning. Most of them could learn to write a lot better, too, if they worked at it.

The argument is that better writing gets read. Many economists get more attention than their creativity or penetration as economists warrants because they are good at mathematics. I'm saying that the same holds for writing, that

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the coefficient is strongly positive. Turn over in your mind the following sample of good and bad writers: Harry Johnson, George Stigler, Oliver Williamson, Paul Samuelson, Robert Solow, Robert Mundell, Francis Edgeworth, John Maynard Keynes. Control as you will. The partial derivative on style is large. How many mute, inglorious John Muths exist out there whose pathbreaking but incomprehensible article was *not* rediscovered ten years after it was written?

It sounds cute to an economist's ear to say that obscurity is profitable. The story is told of a French historian, notorious for his wretched style, whose book was translated at great effort into utterly lucid English. He read the translation and concluded with a sneer that "it does not capture my profundity." Ha! "Profundity" my foot. More often than the profunditeurs realize they are seen through.

Suppose it is true, though, that in fact "an economist trying to publish will misallocate his resources if he takes 'Economical Writing' too much to heart"? Suppose I am wrong that for most economists an investment in better writing would pay off well. Suppose it is advantageous to write badly.

I say in reply that anyway writing badly is immoral. It is immoral to write badly when at small cost you can do better, and it is especially immoral to cultivate obscurity to get some material benefit. High agrees with this in the end, promising the careful writer of economics rewards in utils, not in prestige or pages published. I would go further. I would say, with Socrates in Plato's *Gorgias*, that it is better to suffer evil (lack of promotion) than to perpetrate it (writing in the Official Style for selfish advantage): "Happiest therefore is he who has no vice in his soul, since we found this to be the greatest of all evils" (478E).

Most economists will be uncomfortable with such an argument. Our scientific civilization is uncomfortable with moral discourse, dismissing it as "preaching" (so different, you see, from the preaching that goes on in handbooks of scientific method). But good science is after all a matter of goodness: it's a matter of not lying; of not being a fake; of listening to others; of being courteous to ideas.

Some economists, worse scientists on this account, believe that they must be immoral in order to be true to their selfish model of man. They believe that because an economic man would do it they should do it too. The belief justifies much immorality in economic scholarship, such as the immorality of saying something in twenty-eight vague words when you could say it in eleven clear ones. It's time that we outgrew this yuppie way of looking at the good. Whatever the economic man may think, we know that the good is not merely what is profitable.

So I stick to my guns, and hope that Jack High's friendly fire is not misunderstood. I think good writing is privately profitable; he is not so sure. We agree, however, on the main issue of the war: even if it were not profitable to write as well as you can, it is the moral way of scientific life.



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