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The Tyranny of the Harsh Reviewer

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At some point, every author has experienced the disappointment of receiving a negative decision on a manuscript submitted to a scientific journal. Frustration is natural—and understandable. However, this feeling is often exacerbated by how the rejection is framed and justified. In most cases, editors base their decisions on the peer-review reports they receive. However, what happens when those reviews are conflicting? Moreover, more troubling still: what happens when the editor chooses to side with the harsher critique?

Let us set aside, momentarily, the emotional bond we inevitably form with our manuscripts. Even then, it is common to feel that the negative review lacked sufficient justification to warrant rejection. As both editor and author, I have encountered this situation repeatedly. In many of those instances, editorial decisions leaned toward the more severe critique, perhaps under the assumption that it was more rigorous. However, severity is not synonymous with rigor. A review can be firm and constructive without being destructive. A thoughtful critique can identify methodological or conceptual limitations without invalidating a manuscript outright. In contrast, overly harsh reviews—often framed in authoritative or dismissive tones—can conceal superficial engagement or even bias.

The asymmetry between the impact of negative and positive events, extensively documented by Baumeister and colleagues (2001), offers a revealing lens — here applied through our interpretation — for understanding particular dynamics of editorial decision-making in scientific journals. According to the authors, negative information tends to be more salient, more thoroughly processed, and more enduring in memory than positive information. When applied to editorial contexts, one may argue that editors are more inclined to give greater weight to negative reviews, even when accompanied by equally substantiated positive assessments. This asymmetry, often unconscious, can lead to rejecting meritorious manuscripts based on a single dissenting opinion under the guise of caution or rigor. Recognizing that this tendency stems from a general psychological bias — rather than from superior technical judgment — is a first step toward fostering more balanced and fair editorial practices.

As much as we like to believe that peer review and consultative editorial processes bring objectivity to manuscript evaluation, we must recognize that subjectivity permeates the entire system. Subjectivity and inconsistency in evaluating manuscripts and research proposals are not mere anomalies but indicators of a structural issue in how scientific judgments are organized and interpreted. The study by Pier et al. (2018), which realistically replicated the National Institutes of Health (NIH) peer-review process, revealed strikingly low agreement among reviewers in identifying strengths and weaknesses and translating these observations into numerical ratings. Therefore, when faced with conflicting reviews—assuming both were written in good faith and reflect the best of the reviewers' knowledge—we deal with two legitimate perspectives on the same piece of knowledge. In such cases, the editor's arbitration becomes the decisive force that seals the manuscript's fate.

Furthermore, history reminds us just how consequential such decisions can be. Several groundbreaking scientific contributions were once rejected by prestigious journals, only to be celebrated later as foundational. One famous case is that of Hans Krebs, whose discovery of the citric acid cycle—today known as the Krebs cycle—was initially rejected by Nature in 1937. The journal cited a backlog of submissions as the reason for its refusal. Krebs, disheartened, published the findings in Enzymologia, and in 1953, he received the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine (Borrell 2010). Decades later, an anonymous Nature editor referred to the rejection as one of the journal's most "egregious errors" (Borrell 2010).

Another iconic example is Lynn Margulis. Her

1967 article "On the Origin of Mitosing Cells" proposed the endosymbiotic theory, suggesting that mitochondria and plastids originated as free-living prokaryotes (Sagan 1967). More than a dozen journals rejected the manuscript before being published in the Journal of Theoretical Biology. Today, her work is seen as revolutionary, marking the modern revival of symbiotic thinking in evolutionary biology (see Gray 2017).

Such cases are historical curiosities and reminders of how editorial subjectivity can suppress, delay, or elevate scientific ideas. As editors, we must be mindful of the weight our decisions carry. They shape the trajectory of manuscripts and help define the values and contours of the academic ecosystem. Critically evaluating peer reviews and offering clear, transparent justifications for our decisions is a core editorial responsibility. This behavior includes the courage to challenge poorly substantiated reviews—even when they appear to be cloaked in the language of rigor.

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