

OTHER THINGS EQUAL

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He's Smart. And He's a Nice Guy, Too.

Share \$100 if you say the magic word, a word American economists use every day to describe an economist they approve of. "Well *informed* about the economy"? Get serious. "Wise about the place of economics in the conversation of humanity"? Give me a break. "*Imaginative, energetic, empirically sound* or scientifically *reliable*?" Ho, ho, ha, ha hee, hee/ My name is Pinky Lee.

The word is: "smart," as in "He's very smart" or "Boy, is he smart." The economist being evaluated has never met a farmer or worker or businessperson. He doesn't have a clue what American national income was last year. He makes up "stylized facts" about history as he goes along. He has no idea how economic advice works out in practice. He couldn't convince a freshman about the good of markets on a bet. He's never read *The Wealth of Nations*, not to speak of *The Theory of Monopolistic Competition* or *The General Theory of Employment Interest and Money*. But, I'm telling you, he's *smart*. He's not scholarly, scientific, learned, curious, thorough, patient, serious, imaginative, broad-minded, humane, involved. He doesn't read books. He doesn't talk to sociologists. He's never thought in depth about the society he's in. But he's smart.

Then the American economists will add, oddly, a one-word judgment on the guy's character. (In these capsule evaluations it's a guy, not a gal. The vocabulary for describing women economists is underdeveloped, and doesn't allow two dimensions.) Share another \$100 if you say the magic word. "Possessing *integrity*?" Don't be absurd. "Exhibiting *courage, prudence, temperance, and justice*?" Don't make me laugh. "*Faith, hope, and charity*?" What planet do you live on?

The magic word is "nice." If the judgment is favorable by the relaxed standard of America in the late 20th century, they'll say, "And he's a nice guy, too." (You can see it's a male business, the phrase, since female economists are assumed to be nice.) The evaluative vocabulary of economic science in America consists of two adjectives, "smart" and "nice," plus the adverb "not very."

The words are genuinely American and genuinely economics. The nice-guy talk would not get you very far in Paris. In Japan it appears that being nice is conforming rigidly to a social role in a strict hierarchy, which is not what makes Bob Solow the classic nice guy in American economics. Bob is "smart," too, lo these forty years. In Britain "smart" means "well dressed," which is not obviously relevant to economic science. The corresponding British word is "clever," and is usually deprecating, as in "too clever by half." In Dutch economics the smart young people are called "whiz kids" (called so using the English phrase: you know about the Dutch and foreign languages),

with just that degree of doubt in the voice. Among historians to call someone "smart," even in America, would simply be puzzling. Smart, schmart. What books has he written? Among biologists being "smart" doesn't sound like it would win NSF money, if not combined with care in running the experiments. Among real political scientists being "bright" entails reading more hard books at a younger age than a "smart" economist would believe humanly possible, at any rate among the political scientists who have not become second-rate economists. Even mathematicians don't usually talk about how smart a person is in the economist's sense. I suspect that the only other field in which being "smart" has the same valence it has in economics is theoretical physics, which from popular accounts (chiefly Feynman, I admit) appears to consist of smarty-pants undergraduates who prefer drinking and practical jokes to studying. But, boy, are they smart.

The word matters because it sets the intellectual agenda of the field. Back when economists were not consumed with a desire to be reckoned "smart" they were better empiricists and philosophers (not usually simultaneously, which was a problem). Smart says: Don't read much. Figure it out yourself. Think fast, not deep or thorough. Force the assumptions to do the work. Fake it.

But the other part, the "nice guy" part, matters, too. Anyway, people talk about it all the time. And in truth, contrary to the received view on the Method of science, character does matter in science. The received view is that The Facts or The Truth Will Out, regardless of character. Thus the journalist Steven Levy on the biologist Gerald Edelman: "Ultimately, of course, none of Edelman's personal traits will matter when it comes to determining whether or not his notion of a neuronal-group selection is valid. Science, Edelman's god, will administer the test. The facts will out" [1994, 73]. One wonders why science journalists write so much about character if they actually believe in fact-and-truth-outing—an hypothesis contradicted by every modern historical and sociological study about how science works, and contradicted even by the stories by the science writers themselves. A page earlier Levy quotes the philosopher Daniel Dennett explaining why Edelman's work is too often ignored: Edelman "makes it impossible for people to listen. He's gone around and offended people, criticized people, and misrepresented and insulted them. He's brought a lot of this on himself" [1994, 71]. Dennett's indignation does not sound like the Facts or the Truth Coming Out. It sounds, as it often does when economists are explaining why they ignore some non-powerful person who is "not a very nice guy," more like a childish excuse for not bothering to face the facts or the truth. Heh, shoot the messenger. It sounds like a complaint—irrelevant under the hypothesis that The Facts Will Out—that Edelman is not a nice guy, so it serves him right, and we have permission therefore to remain ignorant and misled about what he is arguing.

We could improve our evaluations of economists if we dropped the words "smart" and "nice" and started using the more grownup and complicated word "good." "Good" is complicated because it has a 3000-year history of written thinking behind it. "Smart" and "nice," by contrast have no thinking at all behind them.

The trouble with "smart" is that it celebrates intellectual qualities that reach a maximum around age 20. They may be OK for mathematics, but bad for economics

which also makes important use of qualities that peak at age 20 or 40 or 80. Of course if you define economics to be a depraved form of mathematics, as we tried doing for a while in the 1970s, then "smart" in the IQ sense is going to be all that matters. But an economics back on a factual tract, an economics in the 1990s, cannot really believe it. So "smart" won't do for grownups in science.

Likewise with "nice." It celebrates moral qualities that reach a maximum around age 20. Everyone is "nice" at 20, because all 20-year-olds want to be popular and none has a position of authority to abuse. You learn whether someone is a *mensch* despite surface brusqueness, the way Harry Johnson was, or on the other hand, a *momzer* despite surface grace, the way George Stigler was, only when the people are Johnsons or Stiglers and have the mature opportunity to screw people on a large scale.

Moral goodness —"ethos," as the Greeks called it, which is to say "character"—would be irrelevant to scientific goodness only if science actually worked the way the Method says. But we all know it doesn't, though we don't let the students hear us saying it. Science in fact depends on ethics (I argue hopefully), which is one connection between the Good Economist and the Good Person, the smart and the nice and a lot more. A man who listens when people argue with him about, say, politics, and tries to see how they could hold such views, is more believable as an economic scientist than an ideologue who evaluates everyone against a party line in the first thirty seconds of conversation. A woman with evident integrity and straightforwardness, who in other ways would not think of dissembling, is more believable as an economic scientist than a notorious gossip and manipulator.

And it's deeper than the correlation. Science actually does operate on norms and trust, right down at the level of language. The philosopher Hilary Putnam observed recently that "To say that belief is justified is to say that it is what we ought to believe; justification is a normative notion on the face of it" [1990, 115]. Or as the social psychologist Rom Harré puts it, "To publish abroad a discovery couched in the rhetoric of science is to let it be known that the presumed fact can safely be used in debate, in practical projects, and so on. Knowledge claims are tacitly prefixed with a performative of trust" [1986, 90].

So I propose a new matrix of possibilities: Good Economist, Bad Economist, Good Person, Bad Person. At least it brings the discussion of scientific and personal merit up to age 40, and suggests as a hypothesis that there may be a quality, "goodness," that figures in both. I've known people who fit into all four cells of the matrix. (I'm not of course going to fill any of the Bad cells with living economists. I've got enough enemies.) In olden times, it is evident that Keynes was a Bad Person in lots of ways, though in most people's reckoning an exceptionally Good Economist. Marshall appears to have been a surprisingly Bad Person. Marx was of course much more so, an all-around louse, and we are therefore unsurprised to learn that as a scientist he never visited a factory or a farm. Adam Smith was the kind of friend one would want to have, at least according to David Hume, himself a Good Person by most accounts. And so forth. You can fill in the matrix with your own personal lists and then think about what correlation, if any, the 2E2 classification reveals. My notion of the Good Economist/Good Person cell would include: Robert Fogel, Theodore Schultz, Otto

Eckstein, Milton Friedman, Robert Solow, Clopper Almon, Margaret Reid, Gordon Tullock, Armen Alchian. By "good," you see, I don't mean just "smart" or "nice." Good has more to it.

You often can't spot a good person without thorough acquaintance. Dr. Johnson said, "Judge ability at its best, character at its worst." The best of our abilities get published in the *American Economic Review* for all to see; the worst of our private deeds are often hidden from view, unless you get a lot of views. If you've never been someone's employee, for example, you are missing crucial evidence about the good. Some people, contrary to the maximizing model of man, are ethical with students, unethical with colleagues. I know two professors like that, both Good Economists, one a colleague at Chicago, the other a colleague at Iowa. And I know one very Good Economist who is a Bad Person only to his boss, and behaves worse the higher up the boss. You can imagine how well he has done in worldly terms.

The business is tricky, yet determines our judgment of the scientist. Startlingly, for instance, some people say that Bob Fogel is not a Good Person. Their ideology or their chagrin has blinded them to his obvious excellence as a human being. Equally startlingly, some people — Paul Samuelson, for example — say that Ronald Coase is not a Good Economist. They must not be reading his work, a disability in judging it that is surprisingly widespread among people with opinions on the matter. In the other cells, some of George Stigler's followers are always telling me that he was in fact a Good Guy, contrary to my daily experience in twelve years as his colleague. For sure, he was funny, very, very funny and very, very, smart. But he was cruel, arrogant, dogmatic, and willfully ignorant beyond even the local standard in such matters at Chicago. At a seminar over in the Law School he once made a grown man weep. Yet Stigler was just about the Best Economist I've ever known. It makes me want to join the man in weeping.

Ask yourself, then, what the connection is between goodness in scholarship and goodness in character. The "smart/nice" talk suggests that we would like the off-diagonal cells of the matrix to be empty. Unhappily, the data don't seem to line up that way. And yet who doesn't believe that ethical goodness has a positive marginal product in science? Whatever the answer to that empirical question, as a policy matter let's go for the grownup Good and stop using those adolescent categories, "smart" and "nice."

REFERENCES

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