

Is It In, or Is It Out?

Sometimes I actually try to mollify disappointed authors. I tell them that the decision to pass up the opportunity to publish their paper does not mean that it is unappreciated or inadequate. Multiple factors enter into decisions concerning submitted manuscripts, including balance among areas, disciplinary levels, and systems. I tell them journals must represent and appeal to their subscribers and can't be overloaded with papers in one area. I tell them that breadth of interest and impact are major considerations, as is length, and that even political and competitive issues may have to be taken into account. This is all true. Some of it is even true for the *Journal of Biological Rhythms*. Some of it may even be relevant to the paper in question.

I say these things mainly to avoid arguing about quality. I get a lot of guff about quality. A few authors seem to believe that their papers are good unless they're demonstrably bad, that their papers should be published unless the reviewers provide convincing reasons why they shouldn't be. For some, a high-quality paper is simply one whose results haven't been reported before, at least in the system used, and are likely to be valid, especially if the experiments were complex or difficult, even if inconclusive. They tell me, sometimes quoting a reviewer, that the paper is "publishable." I tell them that "publishable but not accepted" is like "approved but not funded."

These few, these disgruntled few, don't seem to consider the possibility that their judgment might be faulty when it comes to the quality of their own paper. There is a parable that I consider a good guide to figuring out when and how much one's judgment may be clouded. It goes, "How do you know when you've had too much to drink?" And the answer is "If one person tells you that you've had too much, stop drinking and running around. If two people tell you, then you'd best sit down. If three people tell you, then go lie down." For papers, if one reviewer makes a criticism, or doesn't think much of the paper, take it seriously,

though the reviewer may have misunderstood, or be biased, or ignorant, and may be wrong. If two reviewers make the same criticism, or don't think much of the paper, take it *very* seriously, try hard to satisfy the criticism, and reconsider your views. If three reviewers make the same criticism, or don't think much of the paper, take it to heart, learn what you can from their comments, and go lie down.

Once, an author demanded that his paper be judged on its "inherent quality." I don't know quite what he was talking about. "Quality" is difficult enough to define or determine, let alone "inherent quality." That is a really slippery concept. The author's demand seems to presume that there's some objective measure of quality, some ruler in the sky that we hold a paper up against, each of us trying to read the scale through the clouds and our own myopia. Each paper carries a stamp, however difficult it may be to read, indicating its overall ranking and the revisions needed for acceptability. This view sees the reviewers as being sharp-eyed or dim-witted, as perhaps compensating for each other's limitations, and as being, individually and collectively, right or wrong.

There's another, quite different, way of looking at the matter, however. The paper in question is neither acceptable nor unacceptable—or, better still, both acceptable and unacceptable, a sort of Schrödinger's cat—until the editor, with the help of the reviewers, turns his gaze upon it to determine which it is. Then there's a sort of quantum collapse and it becomes one or the other. The great baseball umpire, Bill Klem, in what is for us a parable, but for baseball a deep truth, expressed this view best. Asked after an important pitch, "Is it a ball or a strike?" he answered, "It ain't nothin' till I call it." As for whether a paper is acceptable or not acceptable, it could be said that it ain't nothin' till it's called.

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