

Miscellany

The Conference Handbook

There is an ancient joke about the two traveling salesmen in the age of the train. The younger drummer was being initiated into the social life of the traveler by the older. They proceeded to the smoking parlor on the train, where a group of drummers were congregated. One said, “87,” and a wave of laughter went through the group. The older drummer explained to the younger that they traveled together so often that they had numbered their jokes. The younger drummer wished to participate in the event and diffidently ventured to say, “36.” He was greeted by cool silence. The older drummer took him aside and explained that they had already heard that joke. (In another version, the younger drummer was told that he had told the joke badly.)

This parable has often recurred to me as I attend conferences of economists. Economists travel together a great deal, and there is no reason why the discussions which follow the presentation of papers should not utilize a handbook of commentary. The following is a preliminary list of numbered comments, which itself will cover a large share of the comments elicited in most conferences. If the proposal meets approval, the list can be extended, and a second list of the standard replies to these comments can be provided.

Introductory Remarks

- A. The paper is a splendid review of the literature, but unfortunately it does not break new ground.
- B. The paper admirably solves the problem which it sets for itself; unfortunately, this was the wrong problem.
- C. What a pity that the vast erudition and industry of the author were misdirected.

- D. I am an amateur in this field so my remarks must be diffident and tentative. However, even a novice must find much to quarrel with in this piece.
- E. I can be very sympathetic with the author; until 2 years ago I was thinking along similar lines.
- F. It is good to have a nonspecialist looking at our problem. There is always a chance of a fresh viewpoint, although usually, as in this case, the advantages of the division of labor are reaffirmed.
- G. This paper contains much that is new and much that is good.
- H. Although the paper was promised 3 weeks ago, I received it as I entered this room.

Comments

- 1. Adam Smith said that.
- 2. Unfortunately, there is an identification problem which is not dealt with adequately in the paper.
- 3. The residuals are clearly nonnormal and the specification of the model is incorrect.
- 4. Theorizing is not fruitful at this stage: we need a series of case studies.
- 5. Case studies are a clue, but no real progress can be made until a model of the process is constructed.
- 6. The second-best consideration would of course vitiate the argument.
- 7. That is an index number problem (obs., except in Cambridge).
- 8. Have you tried two-stage least squares?
- 9. The conclusions change if you introduce uncertainty.
- 10. You didn't use probit analysis?
- 11. I proved the main results in a paper published years ago.
- 12. The analysis is marred by a failure to distinguish transitory and permanent components.
- 13. The market cannot, of course, deal satisfactorily with that externality.
- 14. But what if transaction costs are not zero?
- 15. That follows from the Coase theorem.
- 16. Of course, if you allow for the investment in human capital, the entire picture changes.
- 17. Of course the demand function is quite inelastic.
- 18. Of course the supply function is highly inelastic.
- 19. The author uses a sledgehammer to crack a peanut.
- 20. What empirical finding would contradict your theory?
- 21. The central argument is not only a tautology, it is false.
- 22. What happens when you extend the analysis to the later (or earlier) period?

23. The motivation of the agents in this theory is so narrowly egotistic that it cannot possibly explain the behavior of real people.
24. The flabby economic actor in this impressionistic model should be replaced by the utility-maximizing individual.
25. Did you have any trouble in inverting the singular matrix?
26. It was unfortunate that the wrong choice was made between M_1 and M_2 .
27. That is alright in theory, but it doesn't work out in practice (use sparingly).
28. The speaker apparently believes that there is still one free lunch.
29. The problem cannot be dealt with by partial equilibrium methods: it requires a general equilibrium formulation.
30. The paper is rigidly confined by the paradigm of neoclassical economics, so large parts of urgent reality are outside its comprehension.
31. The conclusion rests on the assumption of fixed tastes, but of course tastes have surely changed.
32. The trouble with the present situation is that the property rights have not been fully assigned.

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