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Should Acknowledgments in Published Academic Articles Include Gratitude for Reviewers Who Reviewed for Journals that Rejected Those Articles?

by

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Abstract: It is a common practice for authors of an academic work to thank the anonymous reviewers at the journal that is publishing it. Allegedly, scholars thank the reviewers because their comments improved the paper and thanking them is a proper way to show gratitude to them. Yet often, a paper that is eventually accepted by one journal is first rejected by other journals, and even though those journals' reviewers also supply comments that improve the quality of the work, those reviewers are not customarily thanked. We contacted prominent scholars in bioethics and philosophy of medicine and asked whether thanking such reviewers would be a welcome trend. Having received responses from 107 scholars, we discuss the suggested proposal in light of both philosophical argument and the results of this survey. We argue that when an author's work is published, the author should thank the reviewers whose comments improved the paper regardless of whether those reviewers' journals rejected or accepted the work. That is because scholars should show gratitude to those who deserve it, and those whose comments improved the paper deserve gratitude. We also consider objections against this practice raised by scholars and show why they are not entirely persuasive.

Keywords: publishing, gratitude, acknowledgements, bioethics, research ethics, academic ethics

1. Introduction

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN on who deserves to be credited as an author of a scholarly paper (see Hansson, 2017; Bülow & Helgesson, 2018; Tang, 2018; Bülow & Helgesson, 2019), but less ink has been spilled on who should be thanked in the acknowledgments section of the published paper. Our aim here is to start the academic discussion on the latter question.

Researchers often thank the reviewers who reviewed their paper for the journal in which it is being published. This habit is seen as good academic practice and

courtesy. Authors show their gratitude to those reviewers because their comments improved the paper, and therefore they deserve the acknowledgment.

However, because leading journals in science and philosophy have very low acceptance rates, and anecdotal evidence shows that papers are often rejected by multiple journals before being accepted by one, it is likely that many published papers have been improved by the comments of referees reviewing them for journals that ended up rejecting them. Despite this, authors almost never thank reviewers who reviewed their work for journals that rejected it.

The practice of omitting reviewers who reviewed for journals that reject the work has not gone unnoticed — although a detailed analysis of the practice has not been made. In this journal, the editor Sven Ove Hansson (2018, p. 114) briefly discusses the topic of thanking journal reviewers and notices that whereas authors often thank referees at the journal that is publishing their work, thanks to prior referees are much less common. A similar point was also recently raised by an anonymous reader of the philosophy blog *Daily Nous* (2020).

In this paper, we suggest that when academic work is published, the author should thank the reviewers whose comments improved its quality regardless of whether the journals for which those colleagues were reviewing rejected or accepted the paper.¹ That is because we should show our gratitude to *all* those who deserve it, and those whose comments improved the quality of our work deserve our gratitude.² Our suggestion would thus be against current norms in publishing.

We contacted prominent scholars in bioethics and philosophy of medicine and asked whether thanking reviewers at journals that rejected the work would be a welcome trend. Having received 107 responses, we discuss the suggested proposal in light of both philosophical argument and the results of this survey.

In the next section, we frame the argument why authors should thank the reviewers who reviewed for journals that rejected the work.³ After that, we discuss the results of the survey to see what academics working in bioethics and related areas think about the idea. After framing the argument and giving the initial defence of the proposal, we consider some objections against our suggestion that scholars raised. We show that the objections are ultimately unsuccessful.

1 That includes thanking others for objections, replies, spotting typos, and offering original views that the author incorporates in the paper, among others.

2 Gratitude is the proper response from beneficiary to benefactor. Gratitude is usually expressed verbally, by thanking. In academic work, gratitude is often communicated in an acknowledgments section, footnote, or endnote. We assume here that it is appropriate to show gratitude by thanking. For more about gratitude see, for example, Walker (1981).

3 In this paper, we use the terms reviewer and referee interchangeably.

2. Why Scholars Should Thank Reviewers at Journals that Rejected Their Work

Suppose you write a paper that is rejected from a few different journals before finding one that publishes it. Suppose further that several anonymous referees from different journals improve the paper by giving useful feedback. Should you thank them all in the paper that eventually gets published? We think so. But why? Here is a one possible way to structure such an argument.

Premise 1. The author should thank all whose comments improved the paper.

Premise 2. Comments from (some of) the reviewers at journals that rejected the paper improved the paper.

Conclusion. The author should thank (some of) the reviewers at the journals that rejected the paper.⁴

The first premise seems obviously true. Intuitively, it seems right that those who improve the quality of one's work deserve one's gratitude. Scholars often also act in a way that suggests that they think this premise is true: When publishing a paper in a journal, they thank many people (reviewers at that journal included) whose comments have indeed improved that paper.⁵ The appropriate place to thank reviewers is at the end of the paper (or the beginning, depending on the journal), in the acknowledgments section.⁶

Sometimes authors fail to thank everyone who should be thanked, for instance, when the author has forgotten the names of some of the colleagues who have commented on previous versions of the paper. Sometimes authors explicitly apologize for possible omissions in the acknowledgments. This indicates that scholars believe they *should thank everyone* whose comments have improved that paper.

The second premise is a more difficult one because it seems to rely on an empirical fact: that the comments of the reviewers at the journals that reject a paper actually improve the quality of it. We claim that there are compelling reasons to believe the premise is often true. To be clear, however, we are not arguing

4 Similarly, authors should thank (some of the reviewers) who reviewed for a journal which does not technically reject the paper but eventually does not accept the paper either. Such a case would be when the author chooses not to resubmit after being encouraged to do so by the editors but incorporates some of the changes suggested by the referee(s) and proceeds to another journal instead.

5 They do similarly in books, but in this paper we are concerned primarily with articles.

6 We do not argue, but we assume, that expressing gratitude should be done by thanking reviewers in the acknowledgement section of the article (although we give a preliminary reason for *public* acknowledgement later in the paper). However, if you feel that reviewers of journals that accept the work should be thanked but not necessarily publicly, our argument should convince you to treat reviewers of journals that reject your work similarly (i.e., thanking them privately as well).

that *all* reviewers at the journals that rejected a paper ought to be thanked, only that those who provide helpful comments should be.

What reasons are there to believe that comments from at least some of the reviewers at journals that rejected the paper improved the paper? First, as authors, our work has often been improved by the comments of reviewers from journals that end up rejecting our work. We see no reason to believe that our experience is radically different from that of other scholars. In fact, studies indicate that papers that have been rejected end up receiving more citations than papers accepted on first submission (Ball, 2012). It is likely that this is because the peer-review process improves the quality of the papers.

Second, some respondents in our survey say they have used comments from referees who rejected papers to improve those papers. We see no reason to believe that these respondents' experience is radically different from other scholars. Some respondents even say they have struggled with how to acknowledge help from previous reviewers. As respondent 3 says: "I (...) have recently encountered this issue myself, with a paper that Journal 1 rejected, but the useful reviewers' comments informed its acceptance in Journal 2 — but I couldn't quite find a way to acknowledge this."

A third reason to believe that reviewer comments from previous rounds of submission have improved the quality of many papers is that leading journals have extremely low acceptance rates. Because basically any journal worth publishing in rejects more papers than it accepts, and because we doubt that authors usually give up on a paper after one rejection, many papers that end up published may first have been rejected. It is plausible that many such papers benefit from feedback from reviewers at journals that reject them.⁷

⁷ For instance, two of the top journals in moral philosophy are, allegedly, *Ethics* and *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (according to a poll at *Leiter Reports*, one of the world's most popular philosophy blogs, run by Professor Brian Leiter). The acceptance rate for *Philosophy and Public Affairs* was 2.66 per cent in 2016 (Satz, 2018), and from July 1, 2018 to June 30, 2019, it was 2.7 per cent (Quong & Stilz, 2020). The acceptance rate for *Ethics* during 2016 was 2.2 per cent (Richardson, 2018). Since then, acceptance rates in *Ethics* have remained roughly the same (Driver & Rosati, 2019). Due to these very low acceptance rates, it is at least plausible that some of the papers eventually published in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* had previously been submitted to *Ethics*, and vice versa. These papers may have received useful comments from the journals that rejected them. Yet, we are not aware of any papers in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* where the author thanks the reviewers from *Ethics* or vice versa (of course, our being unaware does not mean that there are no such papers). The same is true for more specialized journals. Some journals reveal acceptance rates directly on their websites or in their rejection letters. For instance, the acceptance rate for the *Journal of Medical Ethics* is 38 per cent (2020), the acceptance rate for *Bioethics* is roughly 15 per cent, and the acceptance rate for the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* is around 15–18 per cent depending on the year. It is very plausible that at least some of the papers submitted to these journals were initially submitted and rejected elsewhere, perhaps receiving very useful comments from the reviewers. Top journals in other fields have low acceptance rates as well. For instance, in medicine, the acceptance rate of *The Lancet* is roughly 5 per cent and the acceptance rate for research articles in *JAMA* is 4 per cent. The overall global acceptance rates for journals has been estimated to be 35–40

Finally, suppose we are wrong. Suppose that comments from the reviewers at journals that reject a paper *never* improve its quality. The argument would still work as a conditional one: *If* comments from (some of) the reviewers at journals that reject a paper improve its quality, *then* they should be thanked.

We have now framed the preliminary argument that authors, in the acknowledgments section of a paper, should thank all those reviewers whose comments have improved the quality of that paper, even those who reviewed for journals that rejected the work. We have also given the initial support for the plausibility of the premises of the argument. In the next section, we will present and analyse the results of the survey we conducted.

3. Methods of the Questionnaire

We contacted prominent scholars working in bioethics and philosophy of medicine to ask what they would think of our proposal. We sent an electronic questionnaire to editors, associate editors, and editorial board members at 18 journals in bioethics and philosophy of medicine.⁸ Of 392 scholars we contacted, 107 (27.3 per cent) responded to our survey.

We kept the questionnaire brief to get as many answers as possible. The questionnaire contained just one statement. The respondents were asked whether and to what degree they agree with it. They were also invited to leave comments related to the statement. The questionnaire was anonymous.

This is what we asked:

Do you agree with the following:

It would be a good practice for authors in my field to thank (in the acknowledgement section of the paper) anonymous referees of those journals that previously rejected the paper if the comments of those reviewers improved the quality of the final published paper. Example: "I would like to thank the anonymous referees of journals A, B and C for valuable comments that improved the quality of the paper" (where C is the journal that eventually publishes the paper).

The answer was given on a five-point Likert scale (fully agree/partly agree/cannot say/partly disagree/fully disagree).

per cent (Björk, 2019). Of course, it could also be that journals that reject many papers rarely give any feedback to authors.

⁸ The journals were: *Nursing Ethics*, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, *Bioethics*, *BMC Medical Ethics*, *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, *Public Health Ethics*, *HEC Forum*, *Monash Bioethics Review*, *The American Journal of Bioethics*, *Hastings Center Report*, *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, *Health Care Analysis*, *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, *Journal of Law, Medicine, and Ethics*, *The New Bioethics*, and *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*. We thank all those who responded to the survey.

Do you agree with the following: "It would be a good practice for authors in my field to thank (in the acknowledgement section of the paper) anonymous referees of those journals that previously rejected the paper if the comments of those reviewers improve the quality of the paper."

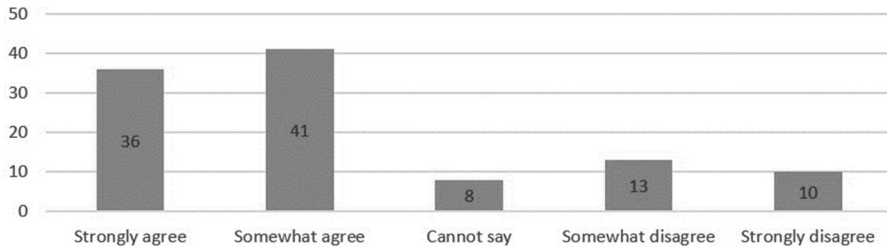


Figure 1. The results of the survey

4. Results of the Questionnaire

A great majority of the respondents (71.0 per cent) agreed fully or partly with the claim, and approximately one-fifth (21.5 per cent) disagreed fully or partly (Figure 1). A smaller number (7.5 per cent) chose the answer "cannot say." Sixty-seven respondents (62.6 per cent) gave comments.⁹

Here are examples of comments given by the scholars sympathetic to our proposal:

Respondent 19 said: "I think that this would be not only good but also ethical and true scholarly practice. It's possible that without these earlier critical comments the paper may not have been published in its final form."

Others called for thanking *everyone* whose input improved the paper. As respondent 59 said, "Everyone who helped improve the paper — whether a reviewer, a colleague, a student, a friend, or a family member — should be thanked."

One respondent, number 73, said that as a reviewer he or she takes offence when not thanked in these cases: "I take offense when I am the reviewer in these circumstances and I am not acknowledged. Very impolite in my book."

⁹ It is worth mentioning that someone might think that how we framed the question was leading. Another possible way to frame the question could have been: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following."

Not all respondents agreed with our proposal and even many of those who agreed in principle, raised worries whether it would work in practice. We will consider these worries and objections next.

5. Objections, Clarifications, and Replies

In this section, we consider some objections respondents raised against our suggestion that scholars should thank reviewers at journals that rejected the work. We show that the objections either prove too much or for other reasons lack argumentative force and can be rejected.

5.1 *First objection: Making the author look bad*

One of the most common worries among the respondents was that thanking reviewers at journals that have rejected the paper could make the author look bad because it would directly show the rejection history of the given article. This would show that the authors' work was not good enough for other journals.

As a respondent in the survey framed this worry:

My thought is that it might seem awkward to “announce” that my paper was rejected by three respectable journals before it was published in this journal. That is what it might look like to a reader and feel like to an author. —Respondent number 53

Respondent 4 noted related considerations: This may serve to distract from the actual quality of their argument and alter the perceptions of readers of the quality of the piece. For reputational and career reasons, it would also be ill-advised for them to do so.”

5.2 *Reply*

We understand the worries the scholars express. But we also believe these worries might be unwarranted. There are a few reasons to believe so.

First, this worry might be more pressing on early-career academics who do not yet have tenured jobs. We doubt that many senior scholars should care much even if the rejection history was shown in their articles. Senior scholars have already built a reputation in the field and gained job security, and it is doubtful that their reputation would diminish or that they would lose their jobs if their rejection history were made publicly visible.

Early-career scholars might also choose their publication venues differently than senior scholars do. For an early-career scholar, it might be more relevant to publish in journals that have decent review time or short backlogs on accepted papers or to choose journals that use reviewers who might give useful comments for the authors. Thus, we think it is unlikely, that those who would suffer the most

for showing the rejection history of journals (young scholars) actually care that much about journal prestige.¹⁰ It would therefore be unlikely that young scholars would get rejections from the most prestigious journals because they might not send their papers to those journals in the first place. However, this would not refute the objection altogether if the problem is showing rejections and not showing rejections from the most prestigious journals.

Second, it is an open secret among scholars that everyone gets rejections. Every scholar working in academia (with the possible exception of new PhD students just starting to publish¹¹) knows this. Sometimes rejections are justified, sometimes they are not, but they happen. Because any given (sub)field has a limited number of decent journals, readers can probably guess which journals have likely rejected a paper in that field that appears in a particular journal. Acknowledging the work of the previous journal reviewers just makes public what people already know.

Despite the fact that everyone knows rejections happen, showing the rejection history of a given article seems to be related to a free-rider problem. Everyone would benefit if some authors thank previous reviewers because it would make the publication process more open and honest and it would give at least some referees the acknowledgment they deserve. But the cost would fall only on those authors willing to show the rejection histories of their articles.

In fact, if many but not all authors in a given field were always thanking previous journal reviewers, people might mistakenly believe everyone does it. This might lead to the point where some authors were praised for their ingenious work because they never get rejections, when in fact they would merely be the ones not showing their rejection histories but profiting on the false belief that everyone shows their rejection histories in the articles.

If the proposal we have argued for becomes academic routine, it makes public what scholars already know: often papers get rejected before finding a journal that accepts them. If this becomes common practice, we think these worries will disappear.

10 That said, it could also be that younger scholars care about journal rankings more than senior scholars because young scholars do not have permanent jobs and they think (regardless of whether it is true) that to get a permanent job one needs publications in prestigious journals. We thank Caj Strandberg for this remark.

11 It could also be that students are not aware of how common rejections are. This might raise some problems in teaching if articles with rejection histories visible are used in teaching. Students might mistakenly think that many rejections means the work is bad. We thank Jonas Ekeberg Aasen for pressing us on this. However, we think the best way to cope with this is to let the students know that rejections are not necessarily an indication of bad scholarly work. So, we do not think this objection is sufficient to justify omitting acknowledgments of prior referees.

Although there might be some practical issues related to our proposal, such as the free-rider problem, we do not think all of the practical issues need to be settled here. Nevertheless, we want to say here that one could sometimes benefit from showing the rejection histories of one's papers. Suppose you were the only author showing the rejection histories of published articles. This might make you stand out, which could be beneficial in the competitive job market, especially in fields such as philosophy, where originality of ideas is valued.¹²

5.3 *Second objection: No need to thank when the referees are doing their job*

One might claim that it is a part of the job of reviewers to make suggestions; thus, there is no need to thank them. As respondent 43 framed this objection: "It is the reviewer's job to help improve the paper. Not sure they should be acknowledged, especially anonymously because they don't receive credit to them."

5.4 *Reply*

This objection proves too much because it equally works against thanking the reviewers at the journals that is publishing a paper. Some might think that reviewers should *never* be thanked in a paper, whether their reviews lead to its acceptance or its rejection. In fact, some journals explicitly say that thanks for anonymous reviewers are not appropriate. However, at least sometimes this is because the journal itself will add thanks to reviewers in every paper.¹³

Nevertheless, most respondents in our survey think, correctly we believe, that authors should thank reviewers — when there is a reason to do so. Authors should thank reviewers because it is polite to do so. For instance, it is polite to thank a taxi driver who is driving you home even though it is that person's job. Moreover, reviewing papers is no one's job, at least if by *job* we mean something

12 There are further reasons for making rejection histories visible. If people truly think that announcing rejection history would make them look bad, people might spend more time polishing papers. They might send papers to only those journals that have a reasonable chance publishing them, rather than trying their luck with the most prestigious journals. This would reduce the number of journal submissions, reduce the workload of editors and reviewers, and possibly shorten the backlog of papers in journals. It might even improve the quality of published papers. These seem all welcome things.

13 For instance, an anonymous respondent reminds us that *Nature* explicitly tells authors, "Keep acknowledgements brief and do not include thanks to anonymous referees or editors." However, this not because reviewers should not be thanked; it is because the journal itself adds the thanks so the authors do not have to do that themselves. Regarding *Nature*'s reviewer information, the journal says: "In recognition of the time and expertise our reviewers provide to *Nature*'s editorial process, we formally acknowledge their contribution to the external peer review of articles published in the journal. All peer-reviewed content will carry an anonymous statement of peer reviewer acknowledgement, and for those reviewers who give their consent, we will publish their names alongside the published article." See <<https://www.nature.com/nature/for-authors/initial-submission>> and <<https://www.nature.com/nature/for-authors/editorial-criteria-and-processes>>.

one gets paid for. Suppose your taxi driver carries your bags to the third floor of the building you live in; surely, you should say thanks because the taxi driver is doing *more* than the job requires. The same goes for reviewers who give useful comments that help an author to improve a paper.

5.5 Third objection: Thanking does not give credit to reviewers because they are anonymous

One could object and claim that because of the anonymity it does not make sense to thank the referees. Respondent 39 put it this way: “This is silly. Since the author has no idea who the reviewers are none of this makes any sense at all.”

5.6 Reply

This objection proves too much because it also works against thanking those who reviewed for the journal that publishes the work. But most scholars think, correctly we believe, that authors should thank reviewers when there is a reason to do so, despite the fact that reviewers are anonymous. This is why most scholars thank reviewers who reviewed for the journal that publishes the work. If we are correct, they should thank prior reviewers as well.

There is another problem with this objection. It often makes sense to thank anonymous people. Suppose that just when I am stepping out of the metro, someone gives me my wallet, which the person has seen me accidentally drop on the floor. Suppose, further, that I do not have time to thank that person, but I am very grateful and want somehow to give credit for what was done. So, later, at home, I write a short letter to the editor of my local newspaper, in which I describe the person, the situation, and my relief at not losing my wallet because of them. It certainly makes sense for me to do all this. And even if it does not, it would not make more sense, if I knew the person’s name, to thank by name in a letter to the editor. We think this case is analogous enough with thanking the reviewers and thus shows that this objection is not persuasive.

5.7 Fourth objection: The reviewers might not find out that they were thanked

Someone could also claim that it does not make sense to thank prior referees because they might not find out they were thanked. This could be different from thanking the reviewers at the journal that publishes the work; these reviewers are likely to know if and when the paper is published, but prior referees from other journals do not know where the rejected paper will eventually end up. As respondent 74, who agrees with our proposal, said: “I agree that this would be good practice, but presumably the prior referees would only find out if they happen across the paper by chance? So I’m not sure how much difference it will make in practice.”

5.8 Reply

This objection proves too much because according to it, authors should not thank conference participants who give useful feedback: after all, they have no idea where the author is going to send the paper, and they would only learn they were thanked if they happened to come across the paper by accident. But people think conference participants should be thanked, when they give good comments—that is the best explanation of why people thank conference participants—so this objection does not undermine our suggestion.

More importantly, part of the reason that scholars thank people in the acknowledgments section of a paper is to let the readers know that these people contributed to the development of the paper somehow. Otherwise, scholars could just express their gratitude directly by email or in person. Because part of the reason for including thanks in the paper is to let the readers know who has given useful feedback, this objection lacks argumentative force: the point is not that those who are thanked will see that they are thanked but that the readers see who is thanked.¹⁴

5.9 Fifth objection: Reviewers may not wish to be associated with papers they advise journals to reject

It has been suggested to us that some reviewers may not wish to be associated with some of the papers that they advise journals to reject, just as some academics may withdraw their authorship from papers that they do not regard as rigorous enough. For instance, suppose that a referee recommends that a journal reject a paper because of its major flaws, but then later the revised version of the same paper ends up published in another journal, with an acknowledgment to a reviewer at the first journal for detailed criticism. The referee is dissatisfied. He does not want to be associated with the paper because he still thinks the paper is bad and should not have been published even in this revised form.¹⁵

5.10 Reply

If one thinks that thanking journal referees does not make any sense because of their anonymity (see the third objection), then this objection lacks force as well. If thanking a referee whose comments help make the paper publishable does not satisfy the referee because of anonymity, being thanked in a paper that is still not (in the

14 Reviewer 1 at *Theoria* asks whether the author's primary debt is owed to the anonymous reviewers or the readers of the published version of the article. We think that the authors *owe* the gratitude to the reviewers but that expressing this gratitude should be *shown* to the readers.

15 We thank anonymous reviewer 1 at *Research Ethics* for this objection.

referee's opinion) of publishable quality should not dissatisfy the referee either. If anonymity prevents giving the credit, it equally prevents giving the discredit.

However, we have argued that anonymity is not a (major) problem when we give credit to people. But we also believe that prior referees should not be worried about being thanked. They will remain anonymous and thus will not be associated with papers in a relevant way that they still believe are not worthy of publication.

5.11 Sixth objection: Thanking one reviewer when there have been several reviewers puts reviewers in a position where they cannot know which referee is being thanked

One could object against our proposal by claiming that, when thanking “an anonymous reviewer at [journal name],” any given reviewer will never know whether he or she is the one being thanked since presumably, each journal uses more than one reviewer. Because it seems odd to argue that an agent is owed a debt when that agent is not in a position to know whether the debt has been repaid, our proposal should be rejected or at least revised significantly.

An anonymous referee at *Theoria* expresses this worry in the following way.

Imagine that *Theoria* does not publish this paper, but later it is published after revisions in *Research Ethics* with an acknowledgement that states “We thank the reviewers at *Theoria* and *Research Ethics* for helpful comments on this paper.” The authors of this manuscript would be fulfilling the debt of gratitude they describe in the paper, but I'll never be sure whether I am the reviewer who is being thanked.¹⁶

5.12 Reply

First, when journals use more than one reviewer, the reviewers have numbers. For instance, this objection came from reviewer 1 at *Theoria*. Acknowledgements could be written to include reviewer numbers to identify which referee is being thanked. Second, often all reviewers provide useful comments and they all should be thanked, in such a case this problem does not raise. Third, thanks to reviewers could also be expressed in footnotes at particular sections of the paper, if this style is followed, then, again the problem does not raise (for instance, see footnote 16 in this paper).

6. Alternative Approaches

So far, we have considered six objections against our proposal that authors should thank prior reviewers in the acknowledgments sections of their papers, when

¹⁶ We thank anonymous reviewer 1 at *Theoria* for raising this objection.

there is a reason to do so, and found them unpersuasive. However, some respondents were supportive of our proposal but were sceptical as to whether it is a good idea to name the journals involved or whether authors would be willing to do that. Instead, they proposed revised versions of our proposal. Here we consider whether the revised versions are better alternatives than our proposal.

Respondent 78 said: “I would endorse an amended version of the statement, which is to acknowledge referees from all points of the publication process.”

Respondent 99 offered specific language: “I’m not sure that giving credit for input requires recounting the full review history of a manuscript. It might be enough to say, for example, ‘I would like to thank the several anonymous reviewers who read and commented on this paper.’”

Respondent 105 phrased the suggestion as a conditional agreement with our proposal: “As long as the earlier journals that rejected the paper are not named. Authors should not reveal — certainly not have to reveal — the journals that previously rejected the paper. So reword: ‘I would like to thank the anonymous referees of this journal and other journals to which the paper was submitted for their valuable comments that improved the quality of the paper.’”

6.1 First alternative

So, here is one possible alternative for our proposal: “I would like to thank several anonymous reviewers who commented on this paper.”

The problem is that this acknowledgment is too vague. Consider the following acknowledgment appearing, for instance, in one’s PhD dissertation: “I would like to thank several colleagues for commenting on this paper.” It is obvious that this acknowledgment is too vague. It is not clear at all whom the person is thanking.

Consider an alternative version: “I would like to thank several colleagues at the University of X, the University of Y, and the University of Z, where parts of the dissertation were written.” This version is obviously better, although it would be best to name the people the author wants to thank.¹⁷ We believe this case is analogous enough with journal publication. If this is so, it shows that this alternative is too vague to be useful, so our version should be preferred.

6.2 Second alternative

Consider, then, a slightly more specific version: I would like to thank reviewers at [title of the journal in which the work is being published] and other journals for valuable feedback on this paper.

¹⁷ Although thanking anonymous reviewers might not be specific enough because authors do not know the identity of the reviewers, that is the best they can do.

This is better than the first alternative because it provides more information about whom the author is thanking. Yet, if one believes it is ill-advised for authors to let readers know that their papers were rejected by other journals (as one version of the first objection stated), it would also be ill-advised to use this version of the acknowledgment. So this version is a bit like trying to have your cake and eat it too.

If one does not think the first objection is persuasive or if one is willing to reveal that one's paper was rejected elsewhere, we believe one should also be ready to reveal the names of the journals whose referees were helpful. That is because if by making a somewhat similar sacrifice, you could bring about either a good outcome or an even better outcome, you should choose the better outcome (Horton, 2017).¹⁸

To put it another way, if you are willing to let readers know that you have gotten rejections, you should be willing to let the others know *where* you have gotten the rejections from, because this way you provide more information on whom you are thanking. As seen with our reply to the first alternative, it seems to be better to provide more than less information on whom one is thanking.

However, if you are worried about your career prospects and think naming the journals is the problem, it is better to follow this approach than to thank only the reviewers of the journal that is publishing your article.

7. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have proposed that the author or authors of an academic article should include in its acknowledgments section thanks to any reviewers whose journals rejected the paper but whose comments helped improve it.¹⁹ We conducted a survey of scholars working in bioethics and philosophy of medicine and asked whether our proposal would be a welcome trend.

A great majority of the respondents (71.0 per cent) agreed fully or partly with our proposal. We considered some objections scholars raised against our proposal and found them unpersuasive. Most of the objections proved too much, implying that the authors should not thank any reviewers. Although some might think that

18 However, our reply here will probably not convince those who think the problem is not showing the rejection history but showing rejection history from prestigious journals.

19 Acknowledgments should, however, be omitted from the manuscript before final acceptance to avoid possible biases. But this rule is not limited to acknowledgments of reviewers at journals that rejected the paper. It also applies to acknowledgments of named colleagues or conferences. Instead of the acknowledgments section of the paper, thanks to referees could also be in the footnotes to specific parts of the paper where their comments were useful. The important thing is that at least somewhere in the paper, the referees are thanked.

reviewers should not be thanked, we do not think so; the results of our study indicate that most scholars do not think so either. It is not clear that thanking journal reviewers is enough, although we think it is better than nothing.²⁰

So, the next time you are writing acknowledgements of an academic article, thank anonymous reviewers if you think their comments made the paper better — do this even if they reviewed for journals that rejected your paper. Do this because it is a polite and the right thing to do.

Acknowledgements

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²⁰ There are also other promising ways to give credit to the reviewers, such as using Publons, an online platform that keep track of scholars' reviewing history. See for example da Silva and Al-Khatib (2019) on pros and cons of using Publons.

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