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Open Economics

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De Gruyter

Suggested Citation: Torgler, Benno (2019) : Letter to the Editor: To the John Bates Clark Medal Committee, Open Economics, ISSN 2451-3458, De Gruyter, Warsaw, Vol. 2, Iss. 1, pp. 40-42, <https://doi.org/10.1515/openec-2019-0004>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/236596>

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Letter to the Editor

Benno Torgler*

To the John Bates Clark Medal Committee¹

<https://doi.org/10.1515/openec-2019-0004>

Received April 8, 2019; accepted April 26, 2019

Abstract: This humoristic piece pretends to offer a candidacy for the John Bates Clark Medal.

Keywords: John Bates Clark Medal, Economics of Science, Humour

To whom it may concern,

This letter² is to officially offer my candidacy for the John Bates Clark Medal, an award that I want you to know I would be extremely honored to receive. Now, before jumping to any conclusions about my self-nomination, rest assured that I am fully aware that I am an unusual choice for the John Bates Clark Medal, given my extremely limited research credentials. But please allow me to take the opportunity to explain and elaborate on the reasons why you should give my candidacy serious consideration.

First of all, you need to make sure that medal award winners represent the wide diversity of areas in economics. You have certainly covered many areas. Labor Economics? Yes. Economics of Education? Yes. Macroeconomics? Yes. Political Economy? Yes. Plumbing³ in the developing world? Yes. Garbage collection? No. This is a critical and growing subfield of forensic economics, and not once has the John Bates Clark Medal Committee deemed to honor it with an award. Around the world waste generation rates are rising. The World Bank estimates that waste generation will increase from 2.01 billion tons in 2016 to 3.40 billion tons in 2050⁴. It is time to remedy this oversight as this empirical area provides detailed insights into the hidden aspects of human nature and humans' dynamic consumer patterns, particularly in relation to household behavior. As John Bates Clark himself pointed out in his 1898 *QJE* article *The Future of Economic Theory*, some of the greatest problems of the future are concerned with dynamic values. Each week, every bin tells a story and this is the case for every single household. John Bates Clark also noted that consumption is not an organized process at all, but rather an individualistic operation (p. 5). Opening each bin is like opening a Pandora's box, holding a mirror to great and unexpected pleasures and troubles, with traces that may even predict future negative outcomes such as potential health or relationship issues. The garbage bin has the beauty of measuring *actual* behavior. All the hype around digital footprints is overrated because such data mostly measure *intention* to behave. Actual reality mining requires digging into the rubbish bin. If you are really looking for a "social supercollider" (Watts 2013) or a "knowledge accelerator" (Helbing 2015) that produces a richer and more realistic portrait of human nature, the garbage bin will do the trick. Looking at littered cigarette packs in the city of Chicago to study tax avoidance (Merriman 2010) is just the beginning, or the tip of the iceberg.

1 Words of warning: This should hopefully be a humoristic piece and I, Benno Torgler, hereby declare that it is not my intention to propose myself for the John Bates Clark Medal. Oliver Smith bears full responsibility for this letter.

2 My friend Robert Bargasian who nominated himself for the Fields Medal strongly helped with the drafting of this nomination (Adams 2018)

3 Duflo (2017).

4 See <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/what-a-waste/>

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The John Bates Clark medal should not just be about past success but also about *potential*, about someone that is ready for a big push. If you are keen on reviving the “can-do” American Dream I may just be the right person for that. I would be proud to represent the practitioners of this burgeoning area as a John Bates Clark medalist. It should also come to your attention that awarding an outsider like me would help ease potential criticisms of nepotism and connectivity. I could imagine that you are deeply concerned about the former Medalists’ six degrees of intertemporal separation with John Bates Clark himself. Just look at the first John Bates Clark medalist, the late and great Paul Samuelson. John Bates Clark’s doctoral advisor was Karl Knies. Knies doctoral advisor was Bruno Hildebrand. Another of Hildebrand’s students was Eugen Böhm von Bawerk whose student was Joseph Schumpeter and Schumpeter was Paul Samuelson’s doctoral advisor. Thus, in my case you don’t need to worry about such intertemporal closeness as I don’t have a PhD or any connections to academia.

You may also feel that I am unqualified because I am more than forty years old. I should note that relying on chronological age is highly problematic. I would like to claim that subjective age is more important than chronological age. I have found substantial evidence that feeling relatively old reduces life satisfaction, lowers self-esteem and self-efficacy, increases pessimism, and leads to higher work strain (Mock and Eibach 2011). Taking well-being considerations into account would be a great sign that economists are now not only contributing to the happiness literature but are also actively including happiness and wellbeing in their public policy goals. Limiting the chronological age to 40 may also be seen as age-based stereotyping. I am sure you are aware that the US Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) forbids age discrimination against people who are age 40 or older (see <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/age.cfm>). You may therefore double-check whether limiting the age of recipients is an actionable offense. In any case, American culture needs a more flattering impression of aging (Cuddy, Norton, and Fiske 2005; Mock and Eibach 2011). And what about those who finished their degrees later than others? Are they not discriminated against when solely relying on chronological age? As a further consideration, you certainly want to pick someone who looks mature enough and not better looking than John Bates Clark whose face is on the medal (not sure who is the other Zeus-like guy with the spear on the other side of the medal).

I should also note that my last name, Smith, is a good representation of last names in the US ranking number 1 with 2,376,206 occurrences before Johnson, Williams, and Brown (based on the U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Contrary to the Nobel Prize in economics no Smith has yet received the John Bates Clark Medal, something that deserves to be changed to guarantee a good US representation. My first name Oliver is also among the 10 most popular baby names in the US⁵. Only one John Bates Clark medalist made it into the top 10 baby name list, namely James (Tobin) but he received the medal a long time ago, back in 1955. It is therefore time to change that, particularly for someone who represents an early career award. Using the name as evaluation criteria is very important. The Australian evolutionary biologist and geneticist David Haig once said: “For direct reciprocity you need a face. For indirect reciprocity you need a name”⁶. Moving away from a familiar face in the academic sphere to a representative US name would again help the committee to reduce potential issues surrounding nepotism. It would also be an indirect acknowledgement that indirect reciprocity is a key mechanism propelling the evolution of human language and social intelligence.

Grigori Perelman was once offered the Fields Medal but declined the award stating, among other things, that he doesn’t want to be on display like an animal in a zoo. As I see myself as a naked ape⁷ whose everyday life is a Goffmanian role-playing performance of self-presentation⁸, I wouldn’t mind being displayed in public. I don’t have Grigori’s impeccable honesty. My life so far has revolved around seeing what others throw away. Now the public has a chance to see my usefulness, demonstrating what we can learn from looking at their everyday waste. As a further consideration, you certainly want to pick someone whose opportunity costs of doing invited speeches, media interviews, dinner invitations, or receptions are much lower than those brilliant minds who usually get the award. This would allow them to focus on what they

⁵ https://nameberry.com/popular_names

⁶ Nowak and Highfield (2011, p. 67).

⁷ Morris (1967).

⁸ Goffman (1959).

are really good and passionate about, namely research⁹. Moreover, I would reduce the psychological burden of that scholar who did not get it, as winning the Medal would raise the expectation of winning the Nobel Prize in the future (see Chan, Mixon, and Torgler 2018). We still don't know how such massive expectations among peers affect an award recipient's well-being. Better safe than sorry!

I realize that competition is stiff even if the John Bates Clark Medal is now awarded on a yearly basis. Now, what are the consequences of not choosing me? I'm not sure how your nomination process works and who the committee members are. Although my research output has been limited, I am well connected within the solid waste management community. As you know, waste management service provision is essential for the health and well-being of your environment and community. When garbage collectors go on strike, cities and communities fall apart and every single person is affected by it. Our biological needs must be met. Garbage removal is one of the basics of our healthy existence. Uncollected garbage is dangerous and can have far-reaching health effects. One can even go so far as to say that garbage collectors should ethically not be permitted to strike (for a discussion see Loewy 2000). I'm not saying I would be the cause of a strike as that maybe even self-incriminating, but I just wanted to put that out there.

But my friend Robert Bergusian has also reminded me not to finish on a negative note. Let's end by thinking about what the John Bates Clark Medal represents. It is an award that should stand for all that is good and beautiful about economics. It is a beacon, setting a standard for young economists to which we can all, young and old, aspire. Even me.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Oliver Smith

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⁹ There are obviously exceptions. Paul A. Samuelson (2004, p. 62) on the enjoyment around the Nobel Prize: "My family enjoyed the Stockholm hoopla. Some colleagues in science have looked back with pain at the public interviews and turmoil that took them out of their laboratories. I bore up well and discovered that it takes only a few days of dependence upon one's own chauffeur to develop an addiction".