This narrative traces the life and fate of a paper submitted to the journal Social Problems and ultimately rejected, with the author claiming that the review was "unfair." It is an editor's story and seeks to specify various "ethical" dilemmas that help to define such work.

The chance to write an essay about "ethical issues which surround publishing in scholarly journals" seemed appealing when I said yes to the editor's invitation. But to actually write about ethics without sounding pompous and/or obvious has proven much more difficult. My solution here is to tell a story from my experience as editor of Social Problems that feels replete with ethical questions. I call the story "The Case of the 'Unfair' Review" and I offer it with a minimum of explicit interpretation, hoping the questions bearing on ethics can be read as they are found. I say this with a working definition of ethics as assertion and debate in a community about how things there should be done. The story is meant to provide objects for such debate.

The First Review: "Reject, but . . ."

Shortly before Thanksgiving a paper criticizing the theories of a well-known, living sociologist whose work has had a notable impact in the discipline arrived for review. It was, and was intended as, a highly provocative paper, but the underlying thesis that the famous person's ideas are empirically wrong, ideologically biased, and, in fact, foment unrest and conflict in the larger society is just the kind of scholarly polemic Social Problems could consider.

I had trouble finding reviewers in my file whose reviewing I knew, whose areas fit the paper's, and who were free. I found three people who had reviewed for previous editors and the paper went out three days after it arrived. I sent an
acknowledgement letter to the author. Two weeks later one of the reviewers returned the paper saying it was not in his area. He suggested an alternative reviewer (whom I didn’t know and who was not in the reviewers file) and I sent the paper to that person.

At the end of February, the author called wondering about the decision. It had been slightly more than twelve weeks. Two reviews had come in and both were quite positive. The third, from the reviewer whose name I knew best and who had reviewed many papers for the journal, had not come in. The two positive reviews called for slight revisions. The replacement reviewer wrote one-third of a page of comments for the author, urging that the reviewer’s own work be cited and that a particular empirical point be addressed. In the “confidential comments for editor,” that same reviewer said the “comments or adjective” used about the target author in the paper “might be a bit strong.” The other person, who occasionally reviewed for Social Problems, recommended a revision and told the author the paper was “very provocative and well worth publishing if it is revised.” This reviewer was enthusiastic about the paper for Social Problems and felt its problems were “fixable.” The outline and organization of the paper needed to be improved, footnotes discarded discussion of secondary data more clearly presented, and a more careful characterization of the focus of the paper given relative to the target author’s work. He noted also that the paper’s claims about said author might be “a bit libelous.” The author should broaden the object of critique to include the theoretical argument rather than the theorist and discuss others who had used the ideas. In the confidential comments to me, this reviewer wrote: “This is a very important paper, SP has been rather bland of late. We need original thinking like this, even if it is provocative and a bit desultory.”

I felt the author needed more specific suggestions about how to make the argument and evidence stronger. I was a bit uneasy because while I too liked provocation, I couldn’t forget the comments about “libelous” and “too strong” adjectives. At the same time, however, I was embarrassed by the already too-long time in review. Against usual practice, I called the third reviewer to ask if the review was on its way. After two or three days of messages, this reviewer told me the paper had never arrived but that if I would send a new copy he would review it right away. I sent it express mail and had the review back in a disappointing three weeks.

It was a devastatingly negative judgment with brief comments to the author: “This is not a scholarly piece but is rather a political position paper buttressed by scholarly citations. . . . [F]requent argument by assertion rather than from data” and other empirical and conceptual inadequacies (albeit only vaguely characterized). In the confidential comments, the reviewer simply repeated these judgments.

This review would not be helpful to me or to the author. It gave me meager resources for my decision letter. I could have ignored this third review and endorsed the other two, giving a revise-to-publish decision. The problem with that choice was that I had little substantive advice of my own to pass on to the