

at the same time. This turn in the argument led to a second: the fabrication of ideas enjoys increasing returns to scale. Expensive to produce, they are cheap, almost costless, to reproduce. Thus the total cost of a design does not change much, whether it is used by one person or by a million.

Blessed with increasing returns, the manufacture of ideas might seem like a good business to go into. Actually, the opposite is true. If the business is free to enter, it is not worth doing so, because competition pares the price of a design down to the negligible cost of reproducing it. Unless idea factories can enjoy some measure of monopoly over their designs—by patenting them, copyrighting them, or just keeping them secret—they will not be able to cover the fixed cost of inventing them. That was the final turn in Mr Romer's new theory of growth.

As useful as poetry

How much guidance do these theories offer to policymakers, such as those sitting on the World Bank's commission? In Mr Solow's model, according to a common caricature, technology falls like "manna from heaven", leaving the bank's commissioners with little to do but pray. Mr Romer's theory, by contrast, calls for a more worldly response: educate people, subsidise their research, import ideas from abroad, carefully gauge the protection offered to intellectual property.

But did policymakers need Mr Romer's model to reveal the importance of such things? Mr Solow has expressed doubts. Despite the caricature, he did not intend in his 1956 model to deny that innovation is often dearly bought and profit-driven. The question is whether anything useful can be said about that process at the level of the economy as a whole. That question has yet to be answered definitively. In particular, Mr Solow worries that some of the "more powerful conclusions" of the new growth theory are "unearned", flowing as they do from powerful assumptions.

At one point in Mr Warsh's book, Mr Romer is quoted comparing the building of economic models to writing poetry. It is a triumph of form as much as content. This creative economist did not discover anything new about the world with his 1990 paper on growth. Rather, he extended the metre and rhyme-scheme of economics to capture a world—the knowledge economy—expressed until then only in the loosest kind of doggerel. That is how economics makes progress. Sadly, it does not, in and of itself, help economies make progress.