

On the Nature and Significance of Economics Redux

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Abstract

Seventy-five years after the original publication of Lionel Robbins's methodological masterpiece, many of the points made in that essay are as relevant as ever. In this paper we consider some of these points from a contemporary perspective, assessing both the importance and meaning of Robbins's original formulation and its instrumental role in order to obtain a better understanding of new developments of and challenges to the discipline. Special emphasis will be given to the appropriate definition of the current status of economics as a scientific field of inquiry, namely the characterization of its subject matter and the apparent lack of concern with the solving of economic problems and the facing of daily life economic reality "as a basis for political practice", as Robbins would put it. The current methodological trends in economics will also be discussed in the light of Robbins's own contributions in the field of pure methodology. The paper will address the problem of the nature and use of economic generalizations and the mechanical extension of an allegedly universal method of economics to a diversity of fields of economic agency and behavior. In this context, the paper will also deal with one of the major innovative contributions offered by Robbins' *Essay* which still reveals a strong heuristic capacity, as shown in contemporary debates about the (im)possibility of interpersonal utility comparisons.

It is therefore our purpose to bring Robbins's classic themes to light again, in both a critical and revisited, redux, form, taking into consideration the evolution economics went through since the publication of the *Essay*.

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