

# Value-Free Economics in Management and Engineering Education

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## Abstract

In arguing that “economic analysis is *wertfrei* (value free)” Robbins contributed to the long-developing separation of economics from its parent discipline of moral philosophy. In the decades that followed publication of *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, economics became, in the words of Amartya Sen, “self-consciously non-ethical”. Sen and others believe that there have been significant costs associated with this growing divide between economics and ethics, and it is conceivable that adherence to an extreme form of the *wertfrei* concept may have had unanticipated and negative consequences in related fields.

We see some of these consequences in management and engineering education. Before his untimely death, Sumantra Ghoshal provided a withering critique of management education, focusing on the role that economics played in fostering an “ethically blind” approach to management. In engineering education, the value-free approach in economics threatens to further marginalize economics in current curricular initiatives related to engineering ethics. In this paper, I review the nature of the value-free doctrine and argue that Robbins’s influence on the ethos of economics, specifically his strident advocacy of value-free analysis and a strict separation of ethics and economics, contributed to the development of an ethically blind approach in economics. Ultimately, and in homage to Sen, unintended consequences associated with this approach may impoverish not just economics and ethics, but other fields such as management and engineering education.

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** A20, Economics Education and Teaching of Economics  
B41, Economic Methodology

**KEY WORDS:** Robbins, Value-Free Analysis, Ethics