

# Basic Instincts: Robbins's Essay and the "Physical Groundwork of Economics"

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Historians of economics have repeatedly argued that the hedonism of the early marginalists was a reason to reject their framing of the principle of marginal utility. Though this can be easily shown for Robbins's *Essay*, this paper emphasizes not so much the hedonism of the early marginalists, but on their attempts to search for a physiological underpinning of marginal utility. This has not so much been emphasized in the secondary literature, yet, as will be shown, it proved of decisive importance for the views of economists on the relevance of experimental methods in investigating choice behaviour. Thus, this paper argues that Robbins's *Essay* can be seen as the decisive moment where the experimental method vanished from economics for much of the twentieth century.

This paper then examines Lionel Robbins' *Essay* against the background of a search for a physiological basis for human economizing behaviour. Robbins distanced himself in the *Essay* from attempts like those of Jevons and Edgeworth so consider the principle of marginal utility "as a special case of the Weber-Fechner Law", or to think of the human agent as a "pleasure machine". Rather than searching for such a (in Jevons's words) "physical groundwork of economics", Robbins considered it sufficient to think of choice behaviour as goal-oriented – something that could be assessed on a common sense basis.

Robbins's stance will be compared with a debate in Germany between (political) economists, sociologists and psychologists in the first decades of the twentieth century in which psychophysical experiments were considered particularly suited to tackle one of the most pressing issues of the day, the Labour, or Social Question. This German context, for which the work of the German Historical economist Lujo Brentano and the psychologist Emile Kraepelin is particularly relevant, culminated in Max Weber's rejection of the relevance of psychophysics for economics.