

Positive Ethics and the Science of Economics: Robbins's lasting fallacies
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Abstract

Regardless of how well received was Robbins's conception of economics at the time, there is clear evidence of its lingering legacy in most modern textbooks. The significance of this is that Robbins's position is very much a contemporary issue as it is a historical one. Moreover, there is an apparent anomaly between Robbins's attempt to argue for the independence of economics in the face of *historicism* and the current infiltration of other areas of the social sciences by economics. It is only an apparent anomaly as the way in which Robbins chose to delineate economics was through the focus on the 'means-ends' problem. In so doing, Robbins identifies economics as the study of opportunistic behaviour. This, in turn, while constitutes a clear definition of the subject also allows economics to be applied, almost indiscriminately, to all other areas of the social sciences.

The purpose of this paper is to identify both the fallacy behind this notion of opportunistic behaviour and the attempt to isolate economics as an independent science. I propose to do this using Robbins's own conception of methodology (i.e. the universal nature of axioms). My argument is based on a claim—not recognised by Robbins but well establish among many of his predecessors-- that individuals are fundamentally social being and would naturally have opinions about the others. I would call these opinions—irrespective of how they are being formed-- positive ethics. While these opinions may or may not constitute ends in themselves, they are certain to be relevant both to the choice of means and to the evaluation of the outcomes. If this is so, economics cannot really generate generalisations, which are independent of the moral position of agents. The coordinated outcome of individuals' search to resolve their own problem of reconciling wants with scarcity is not independent of what agents think about the way in which such an outcome had been achieved. Moreover, if opinions are dynamic, the motivation for actions may change in the next round. Indeed, I will demonstrate that in spite of the fact that Robbins felt that he was building on the progress in economics analysis, his conception of the subject is much less realistic, enlightened or relevant than those of his predecessors.