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Current Philosophy of Science

The papers included in the following special section have been presented at the conference *Current Philosophy of Science* (Současná filosofie vědy) held on the University of Economics, Prague on September 15th, 2018. The conference concentrated on the philosophically relevant aspects of behavioral and social sciences. We aimed at bringing together a variety of scholars, both philosophers, and scientists, to exchange ideas that would be relevant to practitioners in fields dealing with human action and its social consequences, foremost in economics.

The authority and public image of economics have been badly shaken by the Great Recession of 2008 and its aftermath. The economists were exposed in their inability to predict the crash and to minimize its impact. These failures, together with the previous self-confident presentation of the triumphs of the economic science¹ whose senior representatives like Alan Greenspan were treated almost as demigods, led to an understandable public outrage. Today, a decade after the

catastrophe, the discipline is still struggling to recover its prestige.

Nevertheless, there are signs that many economists have taken the lesson of the meltdown to heart. The last ten years have seen a rejuvenation of interest in heterodox approaches to economics,² as well as a widespread effort to enhance the economic models by importing findings from other social sciences, especially psychology.³ The discipline is growing more empirically oriented utilizing robust methods like randomized controlled trials.⁴ Also in methodology, humility is in vogue as strong claims of economic imperialism are being mitigated and the context-dependence of model selection gets to the center of the stage.⁵

² Frederic S. Lee and Bruce Cronin, eds., *Handbook of Research Methods and Applications in Heterodox Economics*, Handbooks of Research Methods and Applications (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016).

³ Richard H. Thaler, "Behavioral Economics: Past, Present, and Future," *American Economic Review* 106, no. 7 (2016): 1577–1600.

⁴ Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012).

⁵ Dani Rodrik, *Economics Rules: The Rights and Wrongs of the Dismal Science* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).

¹ See, e.g., Edward P. Lazear, "Economic Imperialism," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115, no. 1 (2000): 99–146.

In this context, we were seeking contributions that would dedicate attention to the problems on the research frontier of the philosophy of science in a way that would be inspiring for economists and perhaps also other social scientists. What follows is a selection of four papers that are, in our view, suitable for the task at hand.

Josef Menšík in his paper "Structuralism in Social Science: Obsolete or Promising?" considers the perspectives of a possible structuralist turn in the social sciences. He shows that the shortcomings that led to a loss of interest in structuralism are specific features of French structuralism and do not have to extend to structuralism in general. If we accept that ahistoricism, methodological holism, and universalism are indeed rightful targets for criticism, it does not preclude us from engaging in a fruitful debate about the possibilities of reshaping the structuralist approach along different lines. If the structuralist social ontology can be updated to be able to account for human interaction and agency, for the evolutionary development of institutions, and the emergence of the aggregate macrophenomena from the grass-roots of microeconomic behavior, it may yet prove to be a formidable alternative to the current mainstream.

Michal Müller's study "Challenges and Problems of Neuro-

economics: Several Tasks for Social Scientists" concentrates on the issue of the more thorough integration between economics and neuroscience. Any choice is a result of a process in which the human brain interacts in complex ways with the environment. The recent decades have witnessed a stunning development in the scientific knowledge of the brain functioning and sophisticated neuroimaging methods. To what extent should economists, for whom choice is a fundamental building block in their study of the behavior of complex social systems, learn and draw inspiration from neuroscience? In other words, what are the perspectives of neuroeconomics? In Müller's view, the implementation of the neuroeconomic insights into the social-scientific mainstream is impeded by neuroeconomics' exaggerated rhetoric that inevitably leads to unrealistic expectations of the impending scientific revolution, by the fragmentation of its research program, as well as by numerous problems of technical nature and of interpretations of the empirical results. Nevertheless, Müller argues that these issues should be confronted by the social scientists in a constructive way – they represent opportunities for further exploration, rather than reasons for wholesale rejection of neuroeconomics as irrelevant.

“The Paradox of Moralistic Fallacy” by Tomáš Ondráček makes a case against considering any knowledge *a priori* dangerous, and therefore socially undesirable. Such discussion is, of course, highly relevant for the representatives of “dismal science” who are being accused on a regular basis that the models depicting self-interested individuals undermine the students’ (if not public) morals. Ondráček shows how placing limits on scientific inquiry based on the fallacious argument that findings that could be misused ought not to be searched for can easily lead to counter-productive results. Moralistic opposition to the research of controversial topics fosters ignorance of pragmatically important, and value-neutral, facts. Such ignorance prevents anybody, including the moralist herself, from choosing the most effective means to achieve their aims, whatever these may be. In the context of the current “culture wars” which threaten to engulf science in ideological conflicts, the discussion of the paradox of moralistic fallacy is more timely than ever.

Miroslav Vacura’s study “Lacey’s Concept of Value-free Science” completes the picture by its considerations of the current state of debate on the scientific value neutrality. This issue is of central importance concerning the conflict between mainstream economics

which dons the mantel of disinterested science, and heterodox approaches like feminist or post-Keynesian economics that blame the mainstream for hidden ideological presuppositions. Vacura examines the work of the prominent defender of the value-free science Hugh Lacey and highlights the tension between cognitive and non-cognitive values in scientific inquiry. He shows that, contrary to Lacey’s claims, materialistic research strategies which aim at increasing the degree of human control over the world cannot be replaced without sacrificing the pragmatic value of science. At the same time, science without pragmatic value seems incapable of enabling the achievement of “non-materialistic” ends like “authentic development” or “social justice.” In the three steps of the scientific research – 1) goal selection; 2) theory selection; 3) applications of results – Vacura proposes to limit the influence of non-cognitive values to the first and third step, so the process of theory selection remains isolated from them.

Hopefully, the findings published in connection to our conference will prove valuable to the practitioners in the social sciences when considering the methodological perspectives as well as the research challenges their disciplines face. We believe that philosophical inquiry is a worthy source of inspiration for

science, as long as it keeps in touch with the empirical realities. The four articles in the following special section represent valuable steps in this direction.

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