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ROBBINS AND THE SEPARATION OF ETHICS AND ECONOMICS*

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Abstract. This paper offers a new viewpoint on *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*. It focuses on the proposed separation of economics and ethics, and identifies two arguments by which the book defends it, i.e., Weber's instrumental neutrality and Hume's *no ought from is* principle. The two arguments are dismissed on the ground that they are essentially unrelated to the very strong conclusion. The paper also shows that the proposed separation clashed with the basic assumptions of the new welfare economics school.

1. Introduction

There seems to be a revival of interest in Robbins's *Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (1932-1935, henceforth NS), as evidenced by some recent interesting scholarly and methodological pieces.[1] An underlying theme is that there is more to the book than the widely quoted definition: "Economics is the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses" (p.16). While making a strong claim about what is specific about the economic science, this statement does yet decide how the science is, or should be, pursued. In particular, it neither entails, nor even suggests, that economics is to be pursued independently of the neighbouring disciplines of technology, psychology and ethics. But NS also makes this triple separation claim, and it manifests Robbins's originality more strikingly than the popular definition. Here, we focus on the last separation, considering the first two only to put it in perspective. The paper is critical, its main points being made in the style of analytical philosophy; we wish to argue that Robbins's arguments to sever the links of economics with ethics are not so much wrong or dubious as they are irrelevant to his conclusion. As a historical aside, we will show that the proposed separation did not agree with the work pursued at the time by the so-called new welfare economics, contrary to what is sometimes suggested in the literature. The clash would be even more dramatic with today's richer normative developments, and this is the major reason – over and above the scholarly interest and the need for analytical clarity – why we revisited NS in this critical way.

2. Robbins's two arguments

The passage of NS that is most relevant to our purposes is a section of the final chapter VI, the title of which ("Economics and Ethics") suggests a parallel with the two separations already drawn (cf. "Economics and Technology", in chapter II, and "Economics and Psychology", in chapter IV). But the separation from ethics is also foreshadowed in the

* Many thanks to Brian Hill and Benjamin Polak for carefully reviewing a first version of this paper.
[1] See Howson (2004), Davis (2005), Sugden (2005), and the forthcoming special issue of *Economica* on Robbins.

apparently surprising comparison with aesthetics, which Robbins likens to ethics,[2] in the semantic discussion of economic rationality, where he excludes any interpretation in terms of ethically appropriate actions,[3] as well as in the opening discussion of chapter VI. In a way, NS is an ongoing discussion of the threats that ethics means for economics. Neither technology, nor psychology are subjected to the same thorough discussion. Evidently, Robbins did not worry to the same extent about their threatening encroachments.

The weighty claims of chapter VI on ethics are slightly obscured by a polemic against two economists, Hawtrey and Hobson, who are little remembered by now, but the passage retains its climactic strength nonetheless:

"In recent years, certain economists… have urged that the boundaries of the subject should be extended to include normative studies. Mr. Hawtrey and Mr. Hobson, for instance, have argued that Economics should not only take into account of valuations and ethical standards as given data … but that it should also pronounce upon the ultimate validity of these valuations and standards. "Economics", says Mr. Hawtrey, "cannot be dissociated from Ethics".

Unfortunately, it does not seem logically possible to associate the two studies in any form but mere juxtaposition. Economics deals with ascertainable facts; ethics with valuations and obligations. The two fields of inquiries are not on the same plane of discourse. Between the generalisations of positive and normative studies there is a logical gulf fixed which no ingenuity can disguise and no juxtaposition in space and time can bridge over" (p. 148).[4]

As the passage is written, Robbins does not so much make a prohibition as he recognizes an impossibility. Indeed, he claims that normative studies - more broadly than ethics - are barred the way to economics by their logical nature. The underlying argument is soon clarified in terms of the alleged gap between *is* and *ought*, which today's philosophers refer to as *Hume's no bridge principle*:

"Propositions involving the verb "ought" are different in kind from propositions involving the verb "is"" (p.148-149).[5]

This is not all that Robbins has to say in support of his grand separation claim. Earlier in the chapter, and already in the analysis of economic rationality, he had echoed another classic argument, which is Weber's plea for *Wertfreiheit* or value-neutrality:

"Economic analysis is *wertfrei* in the Weber sense. The value of which it takes account are valuations of individuals. The question whether in any further sense they are valuable valuations is not one which enters into its scope. If the word rationality is to be construed as in any way implying this meaning, then it may be said that the concept for which it stands does not enter into economic analysis" (p.91).

Notice again the shift from ethics *stricto sensu* to normative studies generally. What is really at issue with his separation of ethics claim is *whether there should, or even can, exist a branch or an activity of normative economics*. He denies it flatly, with the "should not" part being defended along Weberian *methodological* lines, and the "cannot" part along Humean

[2] P. 30-32. It was not uncommon at the time to liken aesthetics to logic and ethics, inasmuch as they were "normative sciences", each being concerned with a dominant value (beauty, truth, goodness or rightness).

[3] P. 90-94. As the surrounding passages are primarily concerned with psychology, this section may seem digressive, but it serves to reinforce Robbins's dismissal of hedonism, which he quite correctly takes to be both a psychological and ethical doctrine.

[4] Robbins (1927) had already argued against the "ethical" conception of economics defended by Hawtrey. The unpublished papers brought out by Howson (2004) provide further evidence of his long-standing worry that both ethics and politics might encroach on economics.

[5] See also p. 142-143, where Robbins anticipates on his Humean-like argument. We have no evidence that he had in mind the *Treatise on Human Nature* rather than a folk tradition of British academia. At any rate, expressions such as "Hume's principle" or "law" became standard among philosophers only after his book.

logical lines. The latter argument is stronger than the former, and would make it unnecessary if it worked, but Robbins, who has masterly control of rhetoric, wants to exploit the persuasive effect of both. So he fires his guns in the right order, reserving the more powerful one for the final blow against an opponent whom the first has already wounded.

Both the logical and the methodological argument had circulated before. They can be traced back to 19th century discussions, notably the controversies raised by the German historical school, in which Weber and others introduced the concern for value-neutrality. But more often than not, the arguments had been made only at the level of the general social science, and something had to be added to clarify their bearing on economics. Those Austrian economists who had taken steps in this direction, like von Mises, had relied on their own special views of the field. Robbins was aware of many, if not all, of his predecessors. As we reconstruct him, he set himself to the task of bringing the neutrality position in line with what he took to be the relevant form of modern economics. By the same token, he gave his own twist to the existing arguments, and did much to popularize them because of his rhetorically powerful formulations.[6]

We will conclude that neither of the two arguments grounds the separation-of-ethics claim because – this is a novel angle on these famous topics – *they are essentially unrelated to it*. The paper is a sequel to a more philosophical one in which we taxonomized the abstract stands that can be taken vis-à-vis value judgments in economics (Mongin, 2006). There, we took Robbins to be the main representative of a *strong neutrality position* that we contrasted with a weak variant, and we rejected both, though the Robbinsian one more heavily, for being ill-founded and ill-suited to the practice of economics. By strong neutrality, we mean the claim that the economist *qua* economist should refrain from making any prescription and any value judgment whatever. For many purposes, strong neutrality is equivalent to the separation of ethics, as we have just reformulated it: economics is, or should be, an entirely positive discipline. Here, we will use the equivalence of the formulations freely, trying to push the previous critique one step further, and in particular, offering some perspective on Hume's principle itself.

3. The methodological argument

Let us begin with the less sweeping argument of the two, i.e., Weberian *Wertfreitheit*. Robbins echoes it when stating that "economics is not concerned with ends as such" (p. 24). This sentence is like the Wagnerian *leitmotiv* of the book; it is repeated throughout both literally and in slight variants.[7] It seems to makes another claim, not a proper argument, but what Robbins really means, following Weber, is twofold: it is both possible and desirable to investigate what the appropriate means to some individual's end are, while treating the end as a mere datum, and in particular not making the judgment that it is, or it is not, worth pursuing.[8]

We will not to dispute the argument directly, but rather make the preemptive point that theoretical economics does not reason in terms of ends and means, as Robbins suggests, but in terms of preferences and constraints, and that *these are widely different categorial systems*.

[6] Robbins's indisputable literary talent led to mixed assessments. As Howson (2004) mentions, some of his economists readers found the flourish of the book out of place.
[7] See p. 25, 30, 31fn, and in variant forms, p. 40 and 145.
[8] Robbins's sources are Weber's (1922) classic papers on the "objectivity of the social sciences" and "the meaning of value neutrality in the social and economic science"; see p. 90 and 148.

Neutrality is deemed possible and desirable "as between ends", and there is no guarantee that the same twofold condition can be defended for preferences. It is not necessary to claim, as Mongin (2006) does perhaps too strongly, that the end-means categorial system has altogether less expressive power than the preference-constraint categorial system. To conclude that Robbins should have taken their dissimilarity into account, it is actually sufficient to say that there are economic propositions that can be expressed in terms of the latter system and not in terms the former.[9] Indeed, a preference map, in the theoretical economist's sense, compares *states of affairs*, which are compounds of partly realized ends and partly employed means – say, a low unemployment rate and a high public deficit on the one hand, and a moderate unemployment rate and a moderate deficit on the other. Given the map and a set of constraints summarized into a feasible set of states, it is possible to trade off means against ends, and ends against ends, which the other reasoning cannot do, because it considers one end at a time, and is accordingly limited to trading off means against means. So the theoretical economist's system differs significantly from the other, more commonsensical one.

Admittedly, NS mentions that economics will typically face *several ends at a time*, and this is indeed the feature by which the book distinguishes it from technology.[10] But the formulation in terms of ends is again inappropriate, as the following example, due to Robbins himself, makes clear. Suppose that Robinson Crusoe has two ends, i.e., to fence a ground and to make good fires, and that his means, which is wood, is too scarce for him to achieve both. The economist's typical solution to this problem consists in deciding how much of the means to devote to each end, and for what result in terms of these ends, but in order to propose this solution, the economist needs to attribute to Crusoe a preference relation on the fencing-firing-expense-of-wood vectors, as well as a feasible set comprising of the same items. This step involves changing the description of Crusoe's problem considerably. The solution is forthcoming only because there is added information, which only the choice of a new perspective made available. Robbins misrepresents the process by clinging to the old one as if it could accommodate all the required data. He would probably retort that any vector of the form just said is simply a conjunctive statement of end and means. But the real point is that the preference relation permits comparing these conjunctive statements even though they refer to different ends.

There is another possible reply, which is to say that the satisfaction of Crusoe's preference relation is Crusoe's end, but it shifts the initial meaning of "end" as a straightforward concrete objective of action towards something like an ultimate end, and it anyhow sounds like an avowal of defeat, since it uses the very category - preference relation - that must be shown to be replaceable. Furthermore, as a construal of the use of this category, the reply is misleading. When attributing an end to an individual x, one is implying that x makes at least some steps to bring it about, and that x's actions can be evaluated in terms of how successful it is realized. But the claim to be met in economics is that the individual satisfies his preferences given the feasible set, not that he *attempts* to satisfy his preferences given this set, as the sentence "the satisfaction of Crusoe's preference relation is Crusoe's end" rather suggests.

[9] It may be the case that there are also some significant propositions that can be expressed in terms of ends and means, and not in terms of preferences and constraints. We owe this point to James Dreier.

[10] "The problem of technique and the problem of economy are fundamentally different problems… The problem of technique arises when there is one end and a multiplicity of means, the problem of economy when both the ends and the means are multiple" (p. 35). The classic definition of economics does not stress the multiplicity of ends, but the condition was clearly stated on p. 12.

We are at a fringe point where economics, at least of the kind considered here, breaks away from sheer commonsense. Robbins does not recognize the semantic gap, and this is the stranger since he is supposedly reflecting not on the work of Jevons, Menger, and Walras, in which the preference-constraint system is not really put to use, but on the more recent contributions of Pareto and his followers, which raises it to prominence. At the time of NS, Allen and Hicks were already active on the British scene, and the book actually mentions both their work and the Paretian source.[11] There is no escape from the conclusion that Robbins did not catch up with the change. Historically, the point speaks against his acumen. Philosophically, it means that NS, and even its opening definition of the subject-matter, are threatened by conceptual irrelevance. Without following this line to its most dramatic implications, we may conclude that Robbins was wrong to borrow Weber's end neutrality argument off the shelf. It was not an argument for neutrality *in economics*.[12]

Here is a possible defensive move. The *theoretical* economist, it will be granted, states his results in terms of preferences and constraints, but the *applied* economist receives information stated in the colloquial language of ends and means from the politician or, more generally, the client, and the burning issues of value-neutrality have to do with the applied, not the theoretical economist's situation. So Weber's end neutrality claim is relevant after all. In the course of answering this move, we will make it clear that the difference between the two categorial systems is significant not simply abstractly, but also for the issue at hand.

If the applied economist is to make use of theoretical results, he must translate the client's data into the other categorial system. Such a translation is possible, though from has been shown, it is bound to be defective. It is a relevant possibility that end neutrality can get lost in the process, and we would go as far as to claim that it *will* get lost. To reconstruct an entire preference map from data on desirable ends and available means involves the applied economist in introducing rationality principles, like transitivity, time-consistency, von Neumann-Morgenstern independence, and arguably, with each such addition, *a value judgment is made*. A sophisticated up-to-date Robbinsian will perhaps claim that these are "economizing" principles in disguise, e.g., that an individual who violates transitivity will be open to a money pump. But we would reply that the astute reinterpretations take a position on the content of the end (not to lose money, in the transitivity example), beside, for one, not being workable for all and every rationality principle that the applied economist needs to invoke, and for another, being questionable even in the best workable examples.[13]

Futhermore, it is not always be the case that the client's information comes in the language of ends and means. Sometimes, it is expressed in the language of *values* and means, and this imposes a translation step in which neutrality will get lost even more clearly than in the step just considered. If the politician asks how to levy taxes *in a better way*, given that the budget should remain balanced, and says no more than that, the applied economist will have not to reconstruct, but rather to construct from scratch, the social preference to be maximized under the balanced budget constraint. Bergson, Arrow, Sen, and others in welfare economics or social choice theory, have claimed that this process involves him in making value judgments, and it is not difficult to adduce philosophical arguments for their position.[14] (A new welfare

[11] Cf. "The indifference systems of Pareto and Messrs. Hicks and Allen" (p. 75); see also p. 56.
[12] Weber himself missed the point about the two categorial systems, but he could be excused by the inchoative stage of the neo-classical economics of his time, and his supporting examples were anyway mostly borrowed from history and general social science, where the ends-means system prevails.
[13] Many objections have been raised against the money pump argument; see, e.g., Anand (1993).
[14] See Mongin (1999) or Hausman and McPherson (2006).

economist, Bergson provides a standard of historical comparison we will return to.) The distinction between stating an end and stating a value is blurred throughout NS as it is sometimes, most regrettably, in the Weberian sources thmeselves. Robbins has a curious example in which the "safeguarding of conditions under which individual demands… are satisfied as amply as possible" is meant to illustrate the kind of *end* that can be investigated neutrally (p.145-146). This strikes one as a self-defeating example, because what is stated does not appear to be an achievable objective; it is more of the nature of a value to be honoured and acted on.

4. The logical argument

Let us now ponder over Robbins's second argument, which is to invoke Hume's no-bridge principle. Classically, it says that an ought-statement cannot be deduced from premisses that are exclusively is-statements; there must already be an ought-statement among the premisses, or the derivation is not deductively correct.[15] It is an elementary, but also a crucial point that *there is no converse to the principle*. Take a set of premisses not all of which are is-statements. Granting that the distinction with ought-statements is exhaustive, at least some of the premisses must be of that form, and it follows that we cannot say anything general about the conclusions, since ought-statements typically have is-statements among their deductive consequences. (The classic example is that "ought" implies "can" on some relevant interpretations of the two verbs.) Thus, although Hume's no-bridge principle may warrant Robbins's saying that is- and ought-statements are "different in kind", the difference is not such that the two groups relate to each other by "mere juxtaposition" and "are not on the same plane of discourse". The likely reasons for Robbins's jumbling the three formulations together is that he believes that the unpalatable converse is available or does not even realize that he needs it.

An example will help to bring the critical point home. Suppose an economist says: "we should try to maintain full employment". Following Robbins, this use of "should" automatically segregates the expressed statement from the body of economics; in other words, the economist can only be speaking *qua* morally concerned citizen, not *qua* economist. How can Hume's principle help him to make his case? It entails that the statement in question can belong to an economic theory that is exclusively built upon is-statements. But to construct one's economic theory in this way is but *a* logical possibility, by no means the only one. It would be equally consistent to build a theory on both is- and ought-statements, so as to accommodate the statement under discussion either as a postulate or as a theorem. Here we see what difference it makes not to have a converse to the no-bridge principle. Separation is one way, as it were. An economist who excludes ought-statements in his postulates will not come across one when drawing the consequences: free from *ought* once, free forever. But logically speaking, this is just an option, and it is as well if the economist mixes *is* with *ought* in his postulates and theorems. Presumably, Robbins believes that the no-bridge principle results in two symmetric branches, one comprising of is-statements alone, and the other of ought-statements alone.

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[15] "Of a sudden I am surprised to find that instead of the usual copulations of propositions *is* and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought* and an *ought not*... As this *ought* and *ought not* expresses some new relation or affirmation 'tis necessary that it be observed and explained; and at the same time a reason should be given for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others which are entirely different from it" (Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, 1738, III, I).

Now, the previous analysis was concerned with normative statements of the *ought* form, as if they were the stake of the intended demarcation line. But of course, beside prescriptions, ethical systems consist of evaluations made in terms of *good*, *better*, *right*, *just*, and their antonyms, and Robbins should worry about this class much more than about the other. The sentence we discussed is unrepresentative. When an economist makes a normative pronouncement about unemployment, he will typically say "a society with full employment is better than a society with unemployment", or "it would be right if we could maintain full employment", or still utter other sentences which, semantically speaking, express evaluations and not prescriptions. The genuine difficulty lies here, and it becomes compounded when one takes into account, as we have proposed to do, the assessments made in terms of non-ethical, but still evaluative predicates, such as *rational*, *consistent*, *efficient*, *welfare*, *poverty*.

We have labelled *replacement strategy* the move that consists in disposing of an evaluation by treating it as it were a prescription.[16] The word "strategy" suggests an intentional move, whereas Robbins may have simply overlooked the distinction. But let us again make the best of his position, as if it were philosophically informed. All meta-ethical systems do distinguish evaluations from prescriptions, acknowledging both their syntactical and semantic differences, but not all of them separate them sharply, and some connect them so tightly that for some purposes, they may be treated as being the same statements. Is a defence forthcoming along this line? We doubt it for two reasons that we state only summarily. First, the choice of a metaethics appears to be restricted by the current context of discussion. What is most relevant to economics is *consequentialism*, with its familiar claim that the obligatory action is the best that can be performed given the circumstances. Leaving aside the teasing problem of multiple solutions, this claim makes some evaluations - i.e., those based on the predicate *best-given-the-circumstances* – interchangeable with prescriptions. However, consequentialist ethics also permits making evaluations in terms of *good* and *better*, *bad* and *worse*, and the extent to which these can also be swapped against prescriptions is a contentious matter. Second, the evaluative non-ethical predicates now rise to the forefront. By their very nature, meta-ethical systems are not well-equipped to handle them. Consequentialism is a doctrine flexible enough to cover predicates like *rational* and perhaps *consistent*, but it is far from clear that it can associate them with definite prescriptions, and it will anyway stumble on the case of *thick* evaluative predicates, i.e., those which have a descriptive and evaluative content at the same time, like, in economics, *poverty* or *progress*. Shall we say that it is part of the meaning of poverty that it should be remedied, and part of the meaning of progress that it should be promoted? This seems to be far-fetched in general, and especially dubious in the context of those economic theories which make use of the two predicates.[17]

If the replacement strategy remains dubious on further examination, and one nonetheless wishes to argue for a Robbinsian separation in terms of Hume's no-bridge principle, there is only one way, which is to *reformulate it in terms of evaluations instead of prescriptions*. Robbins himself could not notice this solution, which had not emerged at the time of NS. Later meta-ethical philosophers have provided the following variant to the classical principle: an evaluative statement cannot be deduced from premisses that are all descriptive statements; there must already be an evaluative statement among the premisses. The ensuing paragraphs assess this claim. Thus far, our argument has taken for granted that Hume's principle was

[16] Davis (2005) has followed up this point.
[17] More on thick predicates and their relevance to economics in Mongin (2006).

correct within its limits; it is time to decide whether this is actually the case; but we will do that for the present, more relevant version, and not for the historical one.

If Hume's principle is a genuine piece of logic, it must be amenable to a syntactical form. So let us assume that there is a logical language of first-order logic in which a large set of predicates, both descriptive and evaluative, are symbolized. In this language, we can form sentences such that "Unemployment is high", "Unemployment is bad", "If unemployment is high, unemployment is bad", and the like. To make matters simple, we assume that there is a partition of predicate symbols into those, like "bad", which designate evaluative properties, and those, like "high", which designate descriptive properties, and furthermore that a sentence means an evaluation only if it contains a predicate symbol of the former category.[18] Now, a plausible syntactical rendering of the suggested Hume principle is as follows:
(*) A sentence that contains an evaluative predicate symbol cannot be inferred, in the first-order logic sense, from a set of sentences each of which contains only descriptive predicate symbols.
To illustrate by an example, "Unemployment is bad" cannot be inferred in the first-order sense from "Unemployment is low" unless the other premisses contain or imply "If unemployment is high, unemployment is bad". The added sentence satisfies the necessary condition for meaning an evaluation, and intuition suggests that it does mean an evaluation. The value-loaded conclusion can be obtained only from value-loaded premisses.

However, (*) is open to well-known objections: take the inference from "China produces 500 million tons of steel" to "China produces 500 millions of steel or unemployment is bad". One might not worry too much about or-sentences if one takes the view that they do not mean evaluations. Since the occurrence of an evaluative predicate symbol in a sentence is only a necessary condition to classify it, there is room for adding restrictions like this one. But even if semantically sound, the answer would be incomplete. Something has to be done about (*), which is refuted formally. The plan of rescue is to replace "inferred in the first-order logic sense" by "essentially inferred", while making out a syntactical definition for the latter expression that has the effect of putting the problematic inferences on the non-essential side. Let us assume that this plan can be carried out successfully.[19]

If we now ask, what is the use of the revised version of (*) for Robbins's argument, two disenchanting comments step to the mind. First, it is an unspecific theorem: it works not only for the given partition of the set of predicate symbols, or sentences, into evaluative and descriptive components, but for any other choice of a partition whatever. The Australian philosopher Pigden (1991) has a picturesque - and presumably also Australian - example to bring this point home. Let us assume that our logical language has a symbol for the predicate symbol "being a hedgehog". Now, some sentences of the language contain this symbol, while the others do not. This new partition will give rise to a new theorem, which will have to be interpreted thus: hedgehog-loaded conclusions cannot be essentially inferred from hedgehog-free premisses. In sum, the present version of Hume's principle is not tied with Robbins's

[18] There may also be neutral predicates, i.e., predicates which cannot be classified either way, such as those concerned with logical properties like *consistent* or *contradictory* in the logical, not the decision-theoretic sense. To simplify, we lump them with the descriptive predicates.
[19] Intuitively, "China produces 500 millions of steel or unemployment is bad" is disqualified from its status as a counterexample by the fact that the subsentence "China produces 500 millions of steel" can be replaced in the premisses by any arbitrary sentence without the subsentence of interest, "Unemployment is bad", disappearing from the conclusion. It is easy to handle this particular class of sentences, but to obtain a fully safe version of (*) requires more work.

project of separating economics from normative studies. It is just an example of the syntactical property that *deductive inferences are non-creative*: a non-logical symbol that does not occur in the premisses does not occur in the conclusion – save for particular cases that the essentiality clause is meant to cover. Thus construed, Hume's principle is safe from many philosophical criticisms that have been directed against it, but it is unimpressive. It reminds one of how words are to be used consistently, and achieves no more.

Second, like the classical version of the principle, the present one does not admit of a converse. Counterexamples are now provided by the thick evaluative predicates, since their descriptive content must show up somewhere in the deductions. For instance, it is easy to think of choices that a poor person would naturally make – so there are descriptive consequences of the evaluative statement that the person is poor, when the latter is conjoined with the descriptive statement of his circumstances. This renewed failure of the converse leads us back to the stage of the argument that we had reached before questioning Robbins's replacement strategy. To isolate the class of non-evaluative statements is but a logical possibility, and to claim that this is the thing to be done, another reason than Hume's principle must be given.

5. The missing step in Robbins's reasoning

What is expected at this juncture is the claim that economists should, or at least had better, avoid making normative, i.e., prescriptive and evaluative, statements *as a matter of sound methodology*. Only when this is granted can Hume's little piece of logic be of interest. It will then say that the whole of economics is positive if the postulates are; this is useful to remember when doubts arise about a particular statement.[20] Either Robbins did not realize the need for the other argument, or he thought it was too easy and well-known to be made, which in either case shows a faulty judgment.[21] The same misplaced emphasis occurs elsewhere in economic works, no doubt partly as a consequence of NS circulating so widely. One should be sorry that readers were not better acquainted with a less scintillating, but more sensible work, J.N. Keynes's *Scope and Method of Political Economy* (1891), which alludes to Hume's principle without exaggerate claims of significance, and actually reaches different conclusions from those of NS.[22]

A scholarly Robbinsian will complain that many excellent writers have explained at length - and even *ad nauseam* - that it is best in a meta-theoretical sense if scientists in general proceed in the way natural scientists have generally done since the Galilean beginnings of modern mechanics and astronomy, i.e., by leaving aside intimate convictions, political and theological commitments, and normative views altogether. Allegedly, Robbins would capitalize on a distinguished tradition that does not need rehearsing to the wise. But this is another bullying move, since the bag of excluded concerns is very large indeed, and

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[20] Without saying so much, Robbins uses Hume's principle in this clarificatory way on p. 151, fn 1.

[21] After his resounding statements on the logical gulf between is- and ought-statements, Robbins adds: "And it is difficult to see *what possible good can be served by not keeping them separate*, or failing to recognise their essential difference" (p.149). The italicized part conveys the need for a methodological argument, but the end destroys the point by emphasizing the logic again.

[22] Keynes (1891, p. 50-51) distinguishes between "what is" and "what ought to be" only to say that is logically possible to avoid mixing statements of the second sort with statements of the first, and he readily moves to the methodological reasons why one may wish to do so. This is exactly the line that Robbins should have followed. Keynes's final conclusion is that there is room for a branch of normative economics.

especially when it comes to the social sciences, one may not wish to put on the same footing politics, religion and ethics, or - this was part of our argument - ethics and the normative in general, and within the normative, evaluations and prescriptions. Furthermore, even irrespective of this wide conceptual diversity, the methodological claims of the scientific neutrality tradition - let us call it this way - are not equally assertive. Here is an example of a claim that would not preclude the existence of a branch of normative economics.

Francis Bacon famously wrote that a theory is likely to be the more "fruit-bearing", the more straightforwardly "light-bearing" it is - in another words (this is the received interpretation), practical demands are likely to be served by those theories which pursue only the aim of knowledge more efficiently than by those which pursue it already in connection with the practical demands. This claim greatly impressed J.N. Keynes, who appeared to prefer it to any other in the scientific neutrality tradition.[23] It is sufficiently strong to justify a division between normative and positive economics, but too weak for the conclusion that there is no room for the former. From a Baconian-Keynesian standpoint, the work on economic norms can usefully complement the search for regularities and causes, provided the two are kept separate. For instance, while positive economics relates unemployment to other economic quantities, normative economics would explore the extent to which unemployment is unjust and undesirable. These clarifications may become of practical interest only when causal regularities are discovered, but it is enough to expect them to be useful at this later stage in order to feel that the normative branch deserves encouraging from now on.

The argument serves as evidence, *contra* the Robbinsian, that the unfinished reasoning of NS cannot be completed merely by invoking the scientific neutrality tradition. What appears to be needed is the much more specific claim that normative statements are not an object for rational investigation, but only for subjective opinions, feelings, and passions. At one point, Robbins himself comes close to this view, although he does not formulate canonically:

"If we disagree about ends, it is a case of thy blood or mine – or live and let live, according to the importance of the difference, or the relative strength of our opponents. But if we disagree about means, then scientific analysis can often help us to resolve our differences" (p.150).

In the more standard formulation, prescriptions and evaluations, not statements of *ends*, are the objects of the allegedly irreconcilable disagreement. Robbins's semantic shift, which reflects his obnubilation with instrumental reasoning, is infelicitous since it would make the claim self-contradictory. An end can typically be turned into an intermediary objective for further ends, and thus become amenable to the same "scientific analysis" as a means towards an end. Thus, in the applied monetary economics of 1970-80, Friedman's *k*-% rule was discussed as an end to be achieved without much blood being poured by the participants. The peaceful tone of the discussion can be explained, along Robbins's own lines, by the fact that the *k*-% rule was taken to promote the higher end of a low stable inflation.

Let us then replace "ends" by "values or imperatives" in the sentence above. The claim it thus makes belongs to the *emotivist* theory of normative sentences, which was articulated by logical positivist philosophers about the time of NS.[24] Evaluative sentences express only the feelings or attitudes of those who utter them; this exhausts their meaning; they do not have any cognitive significance. Prescriptive sentences have the further, still non-cognitive, meaning of attempts to change someone's feelings, attitudes or actions. The founders of emotivism took it to entail that normative issues cannot be resolved, let alone discussed,

[23] See Keynes (1891, p. 48-49); he refers to Bacon, *Novum Organum*, Bk I, Aph. 70.

[24] The historical statement of emotivism is Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936). It would be interesting to find out whether Robbins was aware of this work or simply catching the *air du temps*.

rationally, and this consequence is the usual way in which their views have surfaced in methodological writings, especially in economics. Today's meta-ethical work is generally dismissive of emotivism, and even those who still accept it would probably deny the consequence in its most extreme form, i.e., that normative issues cannot be discussed rationally.[25] Thus, the prospects to complete the unfinished argument of NS satisfactorily are bleak.

6. Robbins and normative economics

Beside the opening definition of economics in chapter I, the critique of interpersonal comparisons of satisfaction in chapter VI is probably the best known passage of NS. It is a tangled passage with two distinct arguments presented in smooth succession. First, there is, and there can be, no scientific evidence for statements of interpersonal comparisons of satisfaction, and this lack of testability pushes them away from science to metaphysics (p.139-140). Second, any such statement is ethical, and as such, outside the province of economics:

"Interesting as a development of *an ethical postulate*, it does not at all follow from the positive assumptions of the theory" (p. 141, our emphasis).

Admittedly, this sentence appears before the crucial section in which Robbins separates economics from ethics and invokes the *no ought from is* argument, but what it says already exemplifies both the separation claim and the Humean wedge. As a rhetorician, Robbins never minds explaining the application of a principle before this principle itself.

Most of his analysis is actually phrased in terms of a highly specific comparison. Several economists, he says, have more or less unwittingly extended the Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility to the case of more than one individual. For them, a rich man has both a lower marginal utility for money than he would have if he were poor, *and than a poor man actually has*. For Robbins, the addition must be resisted, inasmuch as it is metaphysical or ethical or both. The double argument just said is really made against the comparison of interpersonal differences in satisfaction, which is utilitarian in spirit. Robbins is very clear about this polemical target:

"(This statement of comparison) is simply the accidental deposit of the historical association of English Economics with Utilitarianism: and both the utilitarian postulates from which it derives and the analytical Economics with which it has been associated will be the better and the more convincing if this is clearly recognised" (p.141; this sentence succeeds the last quoted one).

Nowhere else does the book give a clearer example of the proposed separation from ethics, so we may take the rejection of utilitarianism to be the major consequence, at the level of theoretical economics, of this meta-theoretical move. That NS is an anti-utilitarian manifesto belongs to the textbook commentary on Robbins. We mean to enrich it with the following, perhaps less obvious comment: *the meta-theoretical move was out of proportion with the theoretical result to be obtained*. In one sense, the move was too weak; in another sense, it was too strong. First, by rejecting the normative outside the confines of economics, Robbins did not necessarily choose the relevant line to dispose of utilitarian comparisons, because they might be, as his own metaphysical interpretation suggests, not evaluative, but rather factual and untestable. Second, supposing that these comparisons are evaluative after all, it seems exaggerate to deny that there should exist a branch of normative economics on the mere ground that *utilitarian* normative economics has proved faulty. Let us now elaborate on this part of the critique.

[25] Stevenson's (1944) restatement of emotivism already steps back from this utterly strong claim.

Since Robbins's time, the social choice theorists' work about interpersonal utility comparisons (IUC) has shown that there are various ways of making interpersonal comparisons of satisfaction, and that some may be more defensible than others. To give only the most famous example, the apparatus of "social welfare functionals", as developed by Sen and followers, has made it possible to contrast utilitarianism with Rawlsian egalitarianism in terms of their underlying IUC, so that it became possible to reason for or against the rules from the IUC, or conversely, or both at a time (in order to reach a reflective equilibrium). By and large, this has been a normative, not a metaphysical investigation, and one should be intellectually pleased that it has taken place *within* economics, because this location has favoured both analytical rigour and unity – the same technical concepts, like that of a utility function to account for individual satisfaction, being already employed in better understood parts of economics, like individual decision theory. So with the benefit of hindsight, Robbins appears to have thrown the baby with the tubwater.

But there is more to be said about the clash of NS with theoretical developments. Even from the perspective of the 1930s, it was an exaggerate move to prohibit normative economics on the basis of a failure of utilitarianism. For the prohibition also hit the new welfare economics, which sided with Robbins against utilitarianism, and nonetheless meant to formulate and investigate evaluative judgments about social welfare *within the discipline itself*, barring from it only those which took the special form of interpersonal comparisons of satisfaction. Not yet labelled this way, the Pareto principle emerged as the major candidate for this kind of exploration. One of the first after Pareto himself to realize its potential, Bergson (1938) made it very clear that he regarded it as a "value proposition".[26] He placed it on the same footing as any other condition, such as the utilitarian ones, which could logically be imposed on an "economic welfare function"; in this way, he denied the principle any specific claim to escape from the list of evaluative statements. This stand led him to express reservations about Robbins's "requirement that the economist takes the values of the community as data".[27] Bergson's normative interpretation of the Pareto principle was endorsed by Samuelson (1947), whose qualms against Robbins are more definite. After rhetorically conceding some of the points made in NS, he concluded against the most significant of all:

"It is not valid to conclude from this (= what S. had just conceded) that there is no room in economics for what goes under the name of "welfare economics"" (p. 220).

The welfare economics Samuelson has in mind is one which not only studies, but *makes* value judgments; this comes out fairly clearly from the *Foundations*.[28] The contemporaneous writers on the "compensation principle" were less articulate than Bergson and Samuelson, but it seems to be an acceptable simplification that the two economists spoke in the name of the entire school of new welfare economics. Thus, we may eventually conclude that by making his case about the separation from ethics, Robbins was estranging himself from a major theoretical development of his time as well.

This last comment will serve to correct a view that is sometimes encountered, i.e., that NS is the meta-theoretical accompaniment to the theoretical change from the "old" to the "new welfare economics". As just explained, there are two sides to the change, one being the

[26] See, e.g., Bergson (1938, p. 318). His general project is to "state in a precise form the value judgments required for the derivation of the conditions of maximum economic welfare" (p. 310).
[27] See Bergson (1938, p. 323, fn 2). After mentioning the Robbinsian possibility of taking the value judgments of his paper as mere data, Bergson distances himself from it with the following reason: "In so far as I urge that the economist also *study* these data it represents perhaps a more positive attitude than might be inferred as desirable from his essays".
[28] See Samuelson (1947, p. 249-240).

rejection of utilitarianism, which is well registered in NS, the other and less obvious side being the normative – "ethical" in Bergson's and Samuelson's parlance as well – connection of economics created by the Pareto principle, a connection that NS implicitly rejects. This leads to another question for the historian: when writing NS, did Robbins ignore the potential of the Pareto principle to renew welfare economics, or did he realize it, and consciously decide that both the principle and its consequences did not belong to economics?[29]

7. Conclusion

To take stock, we have reread NS to explore its twofold sketch of an argument for the separation of economics and ethics, and found it unimpressive, not because the arguments, once developed, show faults of their own, but because they are mostly irrelevant to the purported conclusion. What is eventually available in order to ground this separation is a philosophical doctrine - emotivism - that is neither specific to Robbins, nor well expressed by him, nor - but this would deserve more philosophical discussion - truly defensible.

One may wonder whether NS is more convincing when it pushes forward the separation of economics from technology and psychology. Robbins is both less drastic and less original there. The separation cannot be radical, because economic theories need technological and psychological assumptions, the only questions being the *extent* and *content* of these assumptions. Robbins's slant is to keep the extent to a bare minimum, and furthermore to regard the content as being fixed once for all, whatever the possible changes occurring in technology and psychology. In his 1836 essay "On the Definition of Political Economy", J.S. Mill had defended a similarly restrictive view of the connections of economics with the neighbouring sciences. Given the force of this precedent, especially on the British scene, Robbins could not think that he was making the same methodological breakthrough as when he was proclaiming the separation from ethics.[30] What this Millian line amounts to depends on the exact substance of the technological and psychological assumptions that are regarded as basic to economics. In NS, the analysis of technology is disappointingly brief, but that of psychology is elaborate, and it delivers a striking claim: the assumption that "individual wants … can be arranged in a certain order" (p. 75) is the psychological basis that economics needs. Clearly, this is a very narrow basis for economics in view of so many developments that have followed; so once again, Robbins offered a hostage to fortune.[31] However, the claim can be said to accord with the psychology of Paretian economics not too badly, and although it is marred by the confusion throughout the book with ends-means reasoning, it may remain as a decent testimony to the economic changes of the 1930s. No such soothing comment can be made in connection with the proposed separation of economics and ethics.

[29] In a late paper, Robbins (1981) acknowledged the overarching importance of the Pareto principle, but still denied that it belonged to economics proper. He located in "political economy", a limboo which he created between economics and ethics.

[30] NS often cites J.S. Mill, and once the essay, so it seems strange that Mill's own separationist project is never mentioned. A possible reason is that the psychological basis that Mill had conceived for economics was stained in Robbin's eyes by the hedonism that he generally dismisses. The suggestion of connecting Robbins with Mill is due to Hausman (1992).

[31] See Sugden's (2005) critique of Robbins's separation of economics and psychology.

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