



## Communications

### Reply to Caldwell and Coats

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The warm response to "The Rhetoric of Economics" has been astonishing. Though sometimes misread as a defense of verbal deviousness or as an attack on some particular school of economics, for the most part it has exposed a vein of sophistication among economists and calculators that few would have expected. The remarks of Bruce Caldwell and Bob Coats are fairly representative: a standard deviation below the mean in warmth, perhaps, but pretty warm withal. They even include a plug for the book. With such enemies who needs friends?

Still the point is to encourage good conversation among economists, and for the sake of conversation I'll reply.<sup>1</sup> Caldwell and Coats have two objections. First, the paper ignored some of the recent work on economic methodology that also speaks of the decline of modernism. Second, the paper attacked the very idea of methodology.

Put so baldly it is clear that the two are connected. If I don't think much of the claims of philosophers such as Plato, Descartes, Hume, and Russell to have made useful restrictions on conversation by epistemological legislation, it would not be rational for me to allocate much attention to the latter-day claims of economist/philosophers to have done so. If the project to say something useful about The

<sup>1</sup>I, too, would not wish to get bogged down in semantics, but I do not understand the difficulties with the vocabulary of the paper. It seems ordinary enough. "Modernism" and "rhetoric" are elaborately defined. The words are protean because the things they denote are. "Conversation" is extended only slightly beyond its common meaning: for instance, Caldwell, Coats, and I are presently having one.

Nature of Knowledge has failed, from Plato until 1975, as I think Caldwell and Coats would admit, it seems at least doubtful that it would have succeeded since, especially considering that the pros in the philosophy departments make no such claim. I was probably right in the paper to let Mark Blaug's fine (though wrong) book, *The Methodology of Economics*, stand as a summary of the state of play.

On the matter of the end of methodology it will help to make some distinctions. I and the people I cribbed from (Dewey, later Wittgenstein, Kenneth Burke, Stephen Toulmin, Michael Polanyi, Chaim Perelman, Wayne Booth, Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Richard Rorty) object to the pretensions of Methodology, with a capital M. This Methodology tells us what Science is; it orders us to be Objective; it mandates Quantification; it segregates Ought from Is. Altogether it has a schoolmarmish tone, lurching occasionally towards inquisition. When it is not slapping wrists it is seizing heretical non-Scientists and burning them at the stake.

Below Methodology in philosophical generality is plain old methodology, with a small m. It tells us how to do regression analysis or tells us what metaphors are persuasive nowadays. No one objects to it, though I have been astonished that so many economists agree we should think about it more self-consciously. The paper calls it "workaday rhetoric" and, unlike the fancy, official rhetoric, it is largely homegrown within a field such as economics. Above Methodology in philosophical generality is what Jürgen Habermas calls *Sprachethik*, namely, the metarules that we implicitly adopt by the mere

act of joining what our culture thinks of as conversation: Don't shout; Pay attention; Be reasonably openminded; Explain yourself when asked; Don't resort to violence in aid of your ideas. No one objects to these, either, though only rhetorically sophisticated people recognize that they exist. They are powerful limitations on the "anything goes" that Methodological authoritarians dread.

The point is that the pretension of Economic Philosophers to have a Method spills over onto the other levels. It spoils the modest utility of methodology (small m) or the glorious civility of *Sprachethik*. That was the empirical claim of the paper. Caldwell and Coats do not respond. They reiterate without arguing, as though unaware that it requires argument, that Methodology deals with "profound and troubling questions" such as "What is science?" or "What about its rationality?" They criticize me, and British sociologists of science such as Shapin, Barnes, Bloor, and Collins (with whom I have much sympathy), for "leaving unexplained the critical issue of how to distinguish between true and false beliefs."

If I may wax wroth a little, what in heaven's name is "critical" or "profound" about these issues? It is significant that they can be better expressed with portentous capitals. What is Science? What is True? The point is that such questions—the putative subject of Methodology—are a waste of time. We can and do know what is true, or civil, without any inquiry into what is True, capital T, according to an approved Methodology, capital M.<sup>2</sup> The project

<sup>2</sup> At a practical level this is plain enough. But it is also true philosophically. By Searle's Lemma on Meaningfulness, we must actually have a look-see ("projective") opinion about the truth of economic propositions, for otherwise we would not know whether or not a proposed Methodology (an extensional criterion) was adequate (cf. John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, pp. 6-10).

of demarcating Science from non-Science, or Truth from truth, lacks point. It's not a "serious problem" that the paper bypasses the Methodological inquiry in favor of an inquiry into workaday rhetoric and the conversational morality of economic science. It's not a problem: it's the solution.

Caldwell and Coats think of issues in methodology or *Sprachethik* as problems of Methodology. That is what their talk of "criteria" for "good and bad rhetoric" is about; that is why they think that I am proposing Methodologies while attacking Methodology. They do not like my social definition of good and bad argument (for instance that the opinions of the justly influential should and, of course, do have weight). Their idea is to search for a brief and timeless set of rules, such as Falsifiability or congruence with the Word of God. The idea is that supplied with such rules we can tell what is good and bad argument without the trouble of listening to our fellows or persuading them. The idea has thrived among intellectuals in the West since Plato in his middle-age discovered mathematics. Unlike methodology or *Sprachethik*, the timeless rules of Methodology are asocial, solipsistic. They are supposed to be better for being conceivable in isolation. I and other anti-modernists say: No, they are worse, as the late dialogues of Plato are worse conversations than his early dialogues. Knowledge is social, not arbitrary or unreasoned—just social.

I did not claim that Methodology was dead. Alas, it is alive and well and living in the heads of Caldwell and Coats. The 2500-year quest for certitude goes on and on, in the face of its evident failure, and in the face of our need to know most things well short of certitude. It is a shame that people spend time attempting by a philosophical yank on the bootstrap to hurtle into a higher realm of truth. Methodology (capital M) is an invitation to such delinquency. There ought to be a law.