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*Why is economics not part of a system
of scientific ethics? A review essay on
Wilfred Dolfsma and Ioana Negru's
The Ethical Formation of Economists*

Altug Yalcintas

Why is economics not part of a system of scientific ethics? A review essay on Wilfred Dolfsma and Ioana Negru's *The Ethical Formation of Economists*

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Abstract: Until the 1990s, the most used research and teaching materials for economists were print journal articles and print books. Since the Internet was commercialized in the 1990s, economists have used digital technologies in research and teaching. Journal articles and books are now more easily accessed. Online subscription systems allow economists to acquire electronic study and research materials in real time. Researchers can access a wealth of teaching and research materials freely and openly. In this essay [1], I focus on Wilfred Dolfsma and Ioana Negru's *The Ethical Formation of Economists* (Dolfsma and Negru 2019) and claim that digital economics research requires a global understanding of ethics consistent with the values of scholarly practices. In the absence of scientific ethics, digital tools and software can harm the members of scholarly communities internationally and become a source of scientific misconduct. Economics should be taught as part of a system of scientific ethics.

Keywords: applied ethics, scientific integrity, research misconduct, digitization

Introduction

In *History of Economic Thought: A Book of Readings* (1949, p. 3), K. William Kapp and Lore L. Kapp claim thus: 'Economic thought tends to reflect the economic and social conditions of its time ... Medieval economic thought was thus part of the general stream of medieval thought, far from forming the subject of a special

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science, it was the by-product of the religious, ethical, and political thinking of its time. In fact, *economic thought was part of a system of applied ethics ...* (italics added). Such deterministic arguments are not popular among economists these days. Today, it is evident for many complexity scientists that the same economic and social conditions often lead to different consequences. For instance, W. Brian Arthur, Yu. M. Ermoliev, and Yu. M. Kaniovski (1987) show that path dependent systems 'possess a *multiplicity* of possible asymptotic outcomes.' This suggests that medieval economic and social conditions may have caused non-religious, non-ethical, and non-political thinking of its time.

However, until the 1980s, many writers thought that determinism was a useful methodology for the analysis of the twentieth century society. It was common to model the emergence of a social institution by a single or a few 'simple' factors such as geographical contingencies and random political events. For many economists, it still is. In this essay, I argue that deterministic arguments in the history of economic thought should not be rejected altogether. Circular and cumulative causations between single factors (or 'historical accidents' (David 1985)) often lead to determinate pathways (or 'technological lock-ins' (Arthur 1989)) where it is not straightforward to move the outcomes to another steady state. For instance, under conditions of path dependence, factors are often interdependent and there are positive feedbacks between causes and consequences.

The economic and social conditions in the twenty-first century provide economists with an opportunity to reconsider the roles of a factor that shaped the ways in which economists explain the world. This factor is the digital transformation of technology. Since the advent of digital technologies and the Internet, research methods in economics have drastically changed. Research and teaching materials have ceased to be scarce. Digital technologies and the Internet provide researchers with endless opportunities to cooperate, publish, and disseminate knowledge. How does the abundance of research and teaching materials available in digital formats online affect scientific practices in economics? For instance, what are the most trusted web sources on poverty and income inequality? How can researchers confirm the validity of an argument about stock markets presented by an unknown user on social media? Should researchers make licensed data openly available? Can we find any explicit or implicit sign of ethical reflection or guidance in these materials?

Below I focus on Wilfred Dolfsma and Ioana Negru's *The Ethical Formation of Economists* and claim that digital economics research requires a global understanding of ethics consistent with the values of scholarly practices. An absence

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of scientific ethics, digital tools and software can harm the members of scholarly communities internationally and become a source of scientific misconduct. *The Ethical Formation* is an important contribution to the literature on applied ethics in economics as this collection of articles is one of the most recent attempts to lock-out the intellectual pathway where it is argued that economics has no space for ethical considerations. The editors argue:

Although economics has moral and ethical roots, many economists do not allow for ethics within their analysis, and very often ethics in economics is conflated with the ethics of economists. This book is an attempt to resurrect interest in the ethics of *economists* and to advance a moral conception of the economic science. (*italics* in the original, p.1)

This edited volume is a collection of excellent essays by some of the most prominent economists who have contributed to the literature on economics and ethics. The editors claim that economists, even mainstream economists, have a conceptual space for ethical considerations. The aim of the volume is to show that 'there are economics-specific experiences that economists may have undergone that will have affected their ethical view' (p. 4). In my understanding, the methodology of this volume is rooted in an evaluation of the ethics of activities or choices of professional economists in terms of whether the choices of economists inflict harm upon others. In my interpretation, the viewpoint of Dolfsma and Negru reaffirms Amartya Sen's claim that 'some of these ethical considerations can be helpfully analysed further by using various approaches and procedures utilized in economics itself' (Sen 1987, p. 71). I think this is important.

Scientific ethics

Economics has long been dependent on an intellectual pathway where economists have believed that study within the discipline should be unhindered by value judgements. For instance, Léon Walras argued in his *Elements of Pure Economics* (1874 [2013], p. 65) that 'we need not concern ourselves with the morality or immorality of any desire which a useful thing answers or serves to satisfy'. In 'The methodology of positive economics' (1953 [1979], p. 19) Milton Friedman concurred, stating 'positive economics is in principle independent of any particular ethical or normative judgements.'

Since the 2008 Financial Crisis, however, this economic consensus has fallen into serious uncertainty, with many writers (Colander et al. 2009) claiming that the

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crisis was the consequence of a systematic failure of economics, signalling the necessity for an ethical code to warn economists as to the limitations and misuse of economic models. Some economists (Harvey 2012; Arrow, Monroes, and Lampros 2017, pp. 125-160) argued that the profession had behaved irresponsibly, playing a significant role in its materialisation. In *The Oxford Handbook of Professional Economic Ethics* (2016, p. 3), George DeMartino and Deirdre N. McCloskey argued that the economic profession had ignored 'the ethical challenges that attend the profession's influence over the lives of others.'

In my understanding, *The Ethical Formation* shows that economics as part of a system of scientific ethics would provide solutions to the problem of researchers inflicting harm to the intellectual capital of other scholars. Although 'economics as applied ethics' (Beckerman 2017) would bring large beneficial effects to economic research, one of my concerns regarding the direction of the current debates on economics and ethics is that economists have understudied scientific ethics (Yalcintas and Wible 2016). In *The Ethical Formation*, there is an excellent chapter where Steve T. Ziliak and Esward R. Teather-Posadas argue that econometricians have paid insufficient attention to scientific ethics. As Ziliak and Teather-Posadas claim, economists do not only ignore ethical challenges in their analysis of markets and corporations, but also in their scientific practices. In a previous study (Yalcintas and Selcuk 2016), my co-author and I revealed that scientific ethics were absent in the standard curriculum at many research universities in the US and Europe. Furthermore, we disclosed the serious shortage of publications exploring the scientific responsibility of economists.

Questionable scientific practices producing harmful consequences for professional economists at universities and companies demonstrate the importance of a scientific ethics education in economics. Scientific ethics education can increase awareness of intellectual responsibility, trustworthiness, and respect among students. As George F. DeMartino argues in his chapter, 'professional ethics is something to be cultivated at every juncture of practice, including engaging non-specialists who must rely on the profession about the ethically fraught nature of the work, training of new initiates to the field, and continuous interrogation of one's own conduct (and the conduct of one's peers), with an eye to continuous ethical maturation.' DeMartino calls for a pedagogical reform in graduate training and recommends that economists should serve apprenticeships. Andrew Mearman and Robert McMaster endorse DeMartino's arguments. They claim that 'the system produces students who

are expert technicians but unable to think independently about real problems: they are well trained but poorly educated.'

The reliability of findings in economics have been questioned by many scholars since the 2008 Financial Crisis broke out. With a significant proportion of published articles in economics being irreplicable, Höffler (2013) suggests that replication studies should be integrated into the education of young scholars to train them to design replicable research. In addition to this, plagiarism in economics has become a critical issue (Enders and Hoover 2004; List, Euzent, and Martin 2001; Necker 2014; Karabag and Berggren 2016). In 2017, the American Economic Association hosted two sessions on replication crisis in economics, entitled 'Replication and Ethics in Economics: Thirty Years After Dewald, Thursby, and Anderson' and 'Replication in Microeconomics' (papers available on the AEA Website.) In a recent study, Stitzel, Hoover, and Clark (2018) revealed that 50% of journal editors report one or more cases of plagiarism per year, becoming so common in economics that authors often find themselves reviewing papers containing scholarship lifted wholesale from their own previously published articles (Sayan 2016). As of October 2020, RePec Plagiarism Page has reported 27 cases of plagiarism and 12 cases of fraud in economics. The alphabetical list of plagiarism offenders contains 97 economists (see <https://plagiarism.repec.org>).

So far, many economists or governors have resigned or been dismissed from the profession because they were involved in scientific misconduct. For instance, in 2013, Brain Swart (Grinnel College) resigned from his post after Indiana University rescinded his thesis in which he copied and pasted from four articles previously published. Andrei Vorobyov, the region governor of Moscow, resigned from his position due to allegation of plagiarism in his thesis.[2] Such examples suggest that scientific misconduct in economics has been a serious problem for more than two decades.

Digitized research and scientific misconduct

In the age of digitised research, there exists a wealth of study and teaching materials. Until the 1990s, the most used research and teaching materials for economists were print journal articles and print books. Students and scholars of economics were required to visit libraries and university repositories where they could find the resources for which they looked. Libraries and university repositories were the centres where knowledge was stored. It was a concern for economists, even

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in high income countries, to acquire access to research and teaching materials printed by international publishers across the countries. For instance, in Turkey it took weeks, even months, to acquire and read the most recent articles and books in economics unless they were locally printed. In low income countries, the scarcity of research and teaching materials were part of a significant problem. Students, scholars, and research institutions were not always able to afford to buy many print journal articles and books sold in foreign countries.

Since the Internet was commercialized in the 1990s, economists have used digital technologies in research and teaching. Journal articles and books are now more easily accessed. Online subscription systems allow economists to acquire electronic study and research materials in real time. Researchers can access a wealth of teaching and research materials freely and openly. Today many journals and printing houses give open access to articles, chapters, and books. Many of the digitized research tools and software (social media, mobile apps, data visualisation techniques etc.) that economists commonly use in teaching, publication, and scientific communication are freely available on the Internet. Digital technologies and the Internet allow researchers to read recent articles on social media platforms, watch the latest videos of conference presentations on Youtube and Vimeo, and listen to podcasts of the most influential thinkers on Spotify and Soundcloud in real time. Growing possibilities of free communication (emails, Google spreadsheets, Zoom meetings etc.) have given rise to set up scientific networks and conduct online research much more easily than before. The privately run (data) sharing economy of researchgate.net and academia.edu allow economists to collaborate and communicate efficiently. Online subscription systems allow individuals to acquire electronic study and research materials in real time. Today, economists rely on social media to conduct research. As Wim Groot and Henriette Maassen van den Brink argue (p. 134), 'to utilize economic knowledge, academics need to be visible in (social) media by writing columns, blogs and article in newspaper and by being available to give expert opinions on radio television and through new media like podcasts.' Of course, involvement of economists in social (and non-social media) gives rise to ethical issues. How?

Consider the publication industry. Traditionally, publication and distribution of journals and books have been expensive. Printing houses had to pay the typesetters, printers, and distributors. They also paid the authors and editors for their academic services. Today, however, unlike the traditional business model in the printing industry, writers, referees, and editors do not get paid for the work that they do

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for digital publishers. The costs of storing and distributing are practically non-existent. Oftentimes, the authors take care of the typesetting of their manuscripts by themselves. Therefore, the total costs of digital publishing have seriously diminished the total costs of publishing an article or a book. The marginal cost of producing the digital issue of a journal has been almost zero. But the prices of journals and books that are published digitally are still unreasonably high. This has become a huge financial burden for public research institutions.

Copy and pasting is a common yet questionable research practice in the sciences and the humanities. Since the 1990s, economists have more frequently used digital research tools including social media, mobile apps, and data visualisation techniques. However, the ethical challenges with regards to digital technologies have largely been ignored. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been reported that many social scientists - including economists - have struggled in terms of access to online working conditions (Flores 2020), with online teaching requiring lecturers to equip themselves with digitally responsive pedagogies. Policymakers should ensure that new standards are established in licencing requirements and assisting lecturer performance (Darling-Hammond and Hyler 2020). An ethical understanding aligned with scholarly values would allow researchers to use digital tools and software honestly, responsibly, and accountably. However, economists have not always been fully knowledgeable about the norms, morals, and regulations of using digital research tools, a result of missing teaching and professional learning options in their education in addition to their current research practices.

Digital publishers selling their products in bundles do not allow universities to buy the most needed journal issues and books at low price levels. For instance, Ankara University, a public research institution in Turkey where I currently work, paid 1.45 million USD to digital publishers in 2017 only (Yalcintas 2019). And yet the university library is not able to provide its academic members with the opportunity of access to all issues of prestigious journals. As a consequence, academic members, willingly or unwillingly, are pushed to use illegal websites where they download or share pirated versions of copyrighted research materials.

The condition of economists in emerging economies is even more challenging. In Turkey, India, Pakistan, Russia, and China, cases of scientific misconduct have prevailed for decades, including plagiarism, data manufacturing, and data falsification. At the same time, the invention of the Internet has given researchers in those countries the opportunity to read much of the material published behind paywalls. Sharing platforms and copy culture, endorsed, and propagated by

such platforms as SciHub and LibGen, have resulted in allegations of copyright infringement from publishers. Turkey hosts one of the internationally largest pirate markets for intellectual goods. Although this abundance of digitised material allows Turkish scholars to access research and teaching materials for free online, this creates ethical concerns, for instance, regarding the authenticity of articles, data collection transparency, and the privacy of subjects involved in academic research. However, ethics guidelines are now being introduced or adopted, such as plagiarism procedures and privacy policies. A developmental strategy for the Turkish university system requires not only a strong legal framework but also an awareness among scholars of responsible digital research practices.

There is growing interest among Turkish economists concerned by the alarming consequences of scientific misconduct in the economics departments of Turkish universities. Recently, researchers have published reliable data into its prevalence, providing valuable insight into the consequences of plagiarism and predatory publications in the country (Demir 2018; Akça and Akbulut 2018; Özkaya 2019). In 2019, Dr. Kizilca of Ankara University discovered that the governor of the Central Bank of Turkey, Murat Uysal, plagiarised portions of his 2001 graduate thesis written at Marmara University in Istanbul. In his paper entitled 'Inflation targeting: world and Turkish experiences', he copied and pasted large passages from Frederic S. Mishkin's 'Inflation targeting in emerging market countries' (2000). Additionally, Kizilca disclosed that he had copied and pasted from another previously published study authored by three of his colleagues at Halkbank and the Central Bank of Turkey. After sharing the post on social media, the news spread rapidly, with users able to freely download Mr. Uysal's thesis from the National Thesis Centre website to confirm the information for themselves. Within a week, several news channels covered the story and reported it across their online outlets (Soylu 2019; Hardie 2019; The Economist 2019; Bianet English 2019.) [3]

What should economists do?

As Patrick O'Sullivan claims (p. 56), 'the attempted elimination of normative discourse from the professional conduct of economists is thus methodologically impossible and indefensible.' Then, what should economists do? *The Ethical Formation* contains a number of policy recommendations for professional economists. Deirdre N. McCloskey's argument is as follows: 'What do to, then, for economics? Answer: raise ethical men and women, some of whom become economists. We are not doing so not in the education of economists ... I suggest

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instead a simpler proposal: reinstate as a required course in graduate programs the history of economic thought. One less econometrics course, say. That way the economists can learn what Mill and Pareto and Wicksteed actually said, largely favorable to a liberal regime of commercially tested betterment' (pp. 177, 181).

I agree. I would also argue that economics should be part of a system of scientific ethics. As Dolfsma and Negru claim, 'economics has moral and ethical roots' (p. 1). The moral and ethical roots of economics require professional economists to think like ethical scientists. Teaching economics as part of a system of scientific ethics is teaching economics as a sub-discipline of moral philosophy. Ethics has gradually disappeared from the economics departments since the 1870s. Economists play a role in the negligence of ethics in the economics and *The Ethical Formation* accomplishes a tremendous job of focusing the attention on economists themselves. However, the chapters in the edited volume do not provide a clear answer to the following question: Why should economists teach ethics *now*? I would have liked to read more on the causes of a general need for ethics among economists.

In *The Ethical Formation*, there is an excellent chapter where Steve T. Ziliak and Edward R. Teather-Posadas argue that econometricians have paid insufficient attention to scientific ethics. As Ziliak and Teather-Posadas claim, economists do not only ignore ethical challenges in their analysis of markets and corporations but also in their scientific practices. I certainly agree. In my perspective, digital technologies and the Internet play a more significant role here. Digital research tools have yielded myriad opportunities for manufacture, distribution, and consumption of research materials at low costs and high productivity levels. However, the inconsistencies of norms and imbalances of international regulations on scientific ethics often produce conditions whereby cases of scientific misconduct emerge in countries - often low-income. Scientific misconduct produces a shadow economy - or 'black market economy' - in which norms and regulations are violated (Mercan and Yalcintas 2021, forthcoming).

In my understanding, *The Ethical Formation* shows that economics as part of a system of scientific ethics would provide solutions to the problem of researchers inflicting harm to the intellectual capital of other scholars. Although 'economics as applied ethics' (Beckerman 2017) would bring large beneficial effects to economic research, one of my concerns regarding the direction of the current debates on economics and ethics is that economists have understudied scientific ethics (Yalcintas and Wible 2016). This edited volume is a contribution that would fill in this gap.

Endnotes

[1] An earlier version of the arguments in this essay were previously expressed in a grant application at Humboldt Foundation in 2020. I would like to thank Thomas Potthast, Cordula Brand, and Kemal Kizilca for their helpful remarks.

[2] Information based on <http://www.thesandb.com/news/econ-professor-swart-resigned-due-to-plagiarism.html> and on <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/10/28/moscow-region-governor-resigns-from-university-post-avoiding-plagiarism-charges-a28989>, respectively.

[3] The original tweets and responses are available on my *Research Ethics in Economics* twitter account: <https://twitter.com/EconResEthics/status/1147945846803193857?s=19>.

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