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Value neutrality and the question of ends in teleological economic definitions

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Abstract: The principle of value neutrality has long shaped mainstream economic thought, particularly through Robbins' influential definition of economics as the science that studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means with alternative uses. This definition, widely adopted in economics textbooks, excludes ethical evaluation of the ends, positioning them as given and beyond the scope of economic inquiry. However, this purported neutrality conceals a normative stance that limits the field's ability to engage with questions of human well-being and collective purpose. To address this issue, the teleological character of Robbins' definition will be examined first, which focuses on the means and takes the ends as given, in contrast to two historical conceptions of economics: as the study of wealth and as the science of exchange (catallactics). Subsequently, the paper will focus on Homo Economicus, the agent responsible for the execution of the means and who makes himself up as a teleological subject. Finally, the idea of how ethics can be integrated into a definition of economics will be presented.

Keywords: Robbins' definition, scarce means, ends, ethics, homo economicus.

Introduction

A huge portion of economic theory acknowledges the occurrence of limited resources and emphasizes the importance of utilizing them efficiently to achieve desired outcomes, all under the assumption of value neutrality toward the ends pursued. The interconnectedness between resources (as means possible) and results (as ends possible), underscoring the necessity of employing appropriate methodologies to harmonize the two, has led to a longstanding body of literature that studies optimal resource allocation in production and allocation. This literature is notably embodied in Robbins' (1935, p. 16) definition, which states that economics is 'the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses.' [1] A definition that has been widely elaborated upon through neoclassical theories and is a common theme in many introductory economics textbooks (e.g., McAfee & Lewis 2009, p. 1; Samuelson & Nordhaus 2009, pp. 3-4; Mankiw 2012, p. 4; Krugman & Wells 2015, p. 6) [2].

This paper deals with the teleological nature of Robbins' definition of economics and explains why ends should be part of economic analysis. By doing so, the field of economics can be enriched by opening it up to ethical considerations about the desirability of different ends and their interaction with the available means to achieve them. Rather than remaining confined to a purely positive realm of maximizing given preferences, economics can embrace a normative dimension by evaluating the merits of preferences themselves and examining how they can be shaped towards more ends that are consistent with human values. To address this issue, the teleological character of Robbins' definition will be examined first, which takes the ends as given, in contrast to two historical conceptions of economics: as the study of wealth and as the science of exchange (catallactics). Subsequently, the paper will focus on homo economicus, the agent responsible for the execution of the means and who makes himself up as a teleological subject. Finally, the idea of how ethics can be integrated into a definition of economics will be presented.

The teleological commitment of the economy

Economics evaluates the efficiency of situations and prospective alternatives in achieving desired objectives while accounting for limited resources, operating under a principle of value neutrality – that is, the methodological stance by which economists refrain from judging or evaluating the intrinsic worth of the ends themselves and focus solely on the means of attaining them. At its core, economics is concerned with the interplay between scarce resources and the realization of human ends. Economic systems aim to optimize the use of available resources and make the most of them. To achieve this aspiration, these theories must offer valuable insights into how resources can be allocated and managed as efficiently as possible, so that communities can flourish and grow. By focusing on techniques to achieve goals efficiently, economics plays a critical role in promoting the well-being of individuals, firms, and societies by helping to optimize the use of resources (Leiashvily 1996; Beckert 2003).

This teleological perspective, oriented toward strategies aimed at facilitating the development and advancement of communities, manifested itself through two historically enduring and influential economic conceptualizations. The first conceptualization, which can be traced back to mercantilism and reached its apex in the 18th century, regarded economics as the study of wealth accumulation. This characterization is personified by Smith ([1776] 1977), who posited that the fundamental objective of studying political economy resided in elucidating the 'nature and causes of the wealth of nations' within the context of a dynamic state. [3] Ten years earlier, Steuart ([1767] 1992) argued that economics was the art of satisfying all wants and that his main focus was on securing a certain subsistence fund for all inhabitants [4]. Economics is characterized as a field of study devoted to the ongoing accumulation of wealth, as a repository of analytical tools conducive to more informed decision-making processes in search of prosperity. Wealth is not an end in itself but a path to higher goals, which are often viewed through a moral lens. Aristotle's understanding of economics as part of politics, which aims to satisfy material needs to lead a virtuous life, also includes the idea that economic activity should be guided by ethical considerations [5]. Even within this view of economics as wealth (be it the production or distribution of wealth, as with David Ricardo), it remains clear that economics is a discipline concerned with means to an end, but it is still the end that determines the means and not as something exogenously given [6]. The case of Neville Keynes ([1891] 2011) is interesting. Keynes, who attempted to clarify the scope and method of political economy around a century ago, wrote his works primarily for undergraduate students who were unsettled by the controversial debates among leading economists about the basic nature and validity of economic knowledge. In doing so, he carried on the tradition established by earlier economists such as Smith by defining economic activity as encompassing 'the creation, acquisition, and accumulation of wealth' and economics as 'a field of study concerned with economic phenomena and activities relating to wealth' (Keynes ibid., p. 7) [7]. Beyond maintaining these definitions, Keynes wanted to give students just starting out in the field a clearer understanding of economics by eliminating the confusion caused by the ideological disputes among economists of the time.

The other competing view of economics is that of a catallactic (or science of exchange) discipline. Whately's characterization of man as 'an animal that makes exchanges' (1831, pp. 6–7) supports this point of view. The main goal of this idea is to identify the laws of exchange and use free competition to derive the laws of production and distribution. The replacement of the noun 'wealth' with the verbal noun 'exchange' in the definitions of political economy was a meaningful change [8]. The subject of science was now defined by the nature of the transactions involved in the production and distribution of goods rather than by the objective properties of these goods themselves. Despite this departure from the classical understanding of economics as the study of wealth, Whately's proposal was not as radical as it might initially seem. In Whately's catallactic framework, the object of exchange remains the same 'material wealth' that was central to Smith's political economy. It is important to remember that for Smith, the act of exchange served as a means of exploiting the mutual benefits that resulted from the division of labour and specialization. In contrast, Whately challenged this idea by focusing on the acts of exchange themselves rather than the goods exchanged, leading to a subjective theory of value in which 'the same thing is different to different people,' and it is these subjective differences in value that underlie all exchange. This shift in focus underscores the intrinsic heterogeneity of individual valuations underlying economic transactions. If the aggregate of these exchanges, each motivated by distinct subjective valuations, represents the apex of societal cooperation and specialization, it could be argued that this intricate network embodies economic interdependence and constitutes the manifestation of collective welfare. Whately's perspective suggests that the aggregate of these exchanges, each driven by individual subjective valuations, forms the backbone of a society's economic structure. This intricate network of transactions not only reflects the complex interplay of supply and demand but also embodies the pinnacle of societal progress in terms of economic cooperation and know-how. Ultimately, this network of exchange, fuelled by the subjective values of individuals, becomes a testament to society's adaptability and innovation in meeting the diverse needs and preferences of its members.

Boulding (1969), for example, argues that economics is primarily concerned with that part of the social system that is structured around the mechanism of exchange, focusing on the circulation of exchangeable commodities. Boulding argues that this perspective captures the essence of economics more accurately than definitions based on scarcity or resource allocation. He argues that the distribution of limited resources is a societal challenge that transcends the boundaries of economics and influences a range of social decisions and frameworks. This includes not only economic transactions but also extends to political acts carried out under coercion or intimidation, as well as the sphere of non-material exchange found in relationships of affection and communal bonds [9]. Boulding's criticism of scarcity-centred definitions is based on the conviction that they do not adequately capture the multi-layered nature of economic activity. He suggests that while scarcity and allocation are indeed significant, they represent a collective concern that permeates various aspects of social life and thus transcends the realm of economics alone. In short, an interpretation of the economy that concentrates exclusively on the allocation of limited resources is restrictive and does not capture the totality of economic behaviour. When looking at the economy from the perspective of exchange, it becomes logical to understand it as a system of choices and possibilities. The role of the economist is not to judge or determine why consumers make certain choices, but to understand the choices made and analyse how they are expressed in market behaviour. Moreover, this catallactic approach facilitated the incorporation of mathematical methods into economic theory, in keeping with the methodological ideals of the physical sciences (Weintraub 2002; Dow 2003; Drakopoulos & Katselidis 2015).

Although both share a common goal-oriented approach, the previous approaches have triggered controversial debates about methodology. These debates persist, although they disregard the ultimate end goals, as if this were outside the realm of economic theory, since mainstream economics has developed virtually independently of explicit methodological analysis (Dow 2012) [10]. In this type of economic theory, the concept of unity of purpose prevails, ignoring the heterogeneity of individual goals of human action. Individual ends are seen as part of a broader general good such as prosperity, subsistence, or exchange. However, this general good is intricately linked to the satisfaction of desires, forming a cyclical relationship between the satisfaction of the desire for wealth through exchange and the use of wealth to fulfil desires through consumption that is the consequence of multiple exchanges. This relationship between wealth, desire, and exchange illustrates the interaction between economics, individual motivation, and social processes.

Beyond what has been said, the diversity of ends and their influence on the availability of media are not taken into account in Robbins' teleological analysis, which also means that the investigation of contradictory or opposing ends that are incompatible is excluded. Here, Robbins' reference to Mises' praxeology is decisive: both regard economics as a value-neutral science that studies human action in terms of satisfying preference. Mises' assertion that ultimate ends are irrational underpins Robbins' exclusion of ethical ends [11]. This aligns with the Austrian rejection of interpersonal utility comparisons and reinforces the dominance of ordinal utility [12]. Since Robbins follows Mises, one could argue that his definition simply aims to exclude values and norms from economics without claiming that individuals necessarily have selfish or self-interested aims. As Mises (1996, p. 884) states, 'To apply the concept rational or irrational to the ultimate ends chosen is nonsensical. We may call irrational the ultimate given, viz., those things that our thinking can neither analyse nor reduce to other ultimately given things. Then every ultimate end chosen by any man is irrational. It is neither more nor less rational to aim at riches like Croesus than to aim at poverty like a Buddhist monk'; and Mises continues: 'We may furthermore say that it is perfectly neutral with regard to all judgments of value, as it refers always to means and never to the choice of ultimate ends' (ibid., p. 885). Behind, this seemingly value-neutral stance, however, lies a profound normative commitment that undermines the foundations of the Austrian claim to methodological objectivity. The claim that ultimate ends are 'irrational' and defy rational examination is itself a substantive philosophical position about the nature of human reason and moral deliberation. By declaring ethical ends categorically irrational, Mises and Robbins do not achieve value neutrality but rather impose a specific conception of rationality that privileges instrumental over substantive reasoning. This step naturalizes a certain view of human agency while simultaneously denying its normative character [13].

Robbins' definition assumes that once a desired end is established, the means to achieve it do not modify the end itself. In this way, ends are excluded from the economist's work. Since the ends are given, the evaluative character of the means is diminished. In other words, if the focus of the economist is exclusively on the means and not on the ends, the evaluative aspect of his work is reduced. The economist assumes that the desired outcomes, or 'ends,' are normatively established and are not up for debate. Within this teleological framework, economics faces the fundamental challenge of devising methods to effectively allocate scarce resources to achieve predetermined goals. Economics is, therefore, concerned with efficiency and scarcity and is based on the belief that there is a causal relationship between means and ends. Fundamentally, scarcity and competition are intertwined concepts because one only competes for what is scarce. Thus, Cassel ([1924] 1968, pp. 5-16) formulated that the essence of economic theory and the entire field of economics is anchored in the principle of scarcity. This principle not only presupposes the need for selection and prioritization in the allocation of resources, but it also underlines the importance of efficiency within the economic system. By viewing needs as fixed quantities, economists can objectively analyse how resources are allocated to satisfy those needs, bypassing ethical or non-economic judgments [14]. Since only a limited number of resources are available, agents and entities engage in competition to obtain them. In this way, Mill ([1848] 1965) already argued that the only justifiable theory of economics must be based on competition arising from scarcity. According to Mill, competition may legitimately be regarded as a scientific field if it is motivated by rational principles like the transfer of capital and labour to more productive endeavours.

It is also possible to interpret Robbins' definition as an all-encompassing, abstract description that is applicable to both macro and microeconomic issues. Its inherent abstraction not only facilitates a diverse range of interpretations, spanning the subjectivist to the objectivist spectrums, but also imparts a static quality to its appearance, suggesting a timeless relevance to its conceptual underpinnings. However, this does not mean that its limitations have disappeared. A simple macroeconomic example suffices to illustrate how restrictive Robbins' definition still is. The interaction between money, credit, and inflation is a complex topic that goes beyond the mere allocation of scarce resources to alternative uses. Inflation, which undermines the value of money, can have a profound impact on the economy by reducing purchasing power and distorting price signals that are critical to investment and saving decisions.

Involuntary savings reduction, where individuals experience a loss of purchasing power without having planned for it, and excessive investment, which can lead to economic bubbles, are phenomena that may arise in a high inflation environment. Dealing with these issues requires a careful analysis of monetary and fiscal policy and an understanding of how inflation expectations can influence economic and financial behaviour, which seems to go beyond Robbins' definition focused on scarce means.

Bye (1939) provided a modified Robbinsian interpretation of economics, stating that it is 'the branch of science concerned with the social organization and process by which the scarce means of production are directed to the satisfaction of human wants.' This definition emphasizes the social aspect of the discipline and excludes mechanical techniques or individual psychology, which have nothing to do with social phenomena [15]. Bye (ibid.) follows the approach of Marshall ([1890] 2013, p. 1) who upheld a very general definition of economics by stating that this is a study of humankind in the ordinary business of life, to which he adds that it is also a part of the study of man : 'Political economy or economics is a study of mankind in the ordinary business of life; it examines that part of individual and social action which is most closely connected with the attainment and with the use of the material requisites of wellbeing. Thus, it is on the one side a study of wealth; and on the other, and more important side, a part of the study of man'. Unlike Robbins, Bye's definition avoids limiting the subject to alternative uses and yet emphasizes the problem of directing scarce resources towards the satisfaction of human needs. Since the ends for which resources are to be used are not predetermined, Bye's definition allows for the examination of the ends themselves, which is crucial for broadening the scope of economic ethics [16]. By contrast, classical economists centred their analysis on distribution and economic growth—using socioeconomic classes rather than individual actors as their primary unit of inquiry. This class-based perspective not only defined their conception of economics but also set the stage for the systematic emergence of the *homo economicus* model in Marginalism (Aspromourgos 2009; Kurz 2019). The emphasis on the social and complex aspects of the economy leads to a certain incompleteness. Indeed, economics can be overdetermined in that there is not just one object centred on scarcity; rather, there can be multiple objects: Since it is heterogeneous, there can be several possible objects without a common root [17].

The classical preoccupation with growth led to a focus on allocating the surplus between so-called productive activities (i.e., necessary consumption at all levels) and unproductive ones (i.e., luxury consumption). However, with the modern Robbinsian redefinition of economics concerned with efficiency, the study of surplus allocation and growth was shifted to the periphery of economic theory. Indeed, the distinction between productive and unproductive labour has been largely (if not entirely, given the rent-seeking idea introduced by public choice) eliminated from the neoclassical toolkit. Thus, according to Khalil (1996), whereas the neoclassical concern is optimization, the classical approach centres on capital accumulation. The classical tradition views accumulation as a positive function of the relative size of productive and unproductive consumption. Thus, the classical approach demands, in principle, a critical evaluation of tastes regarding whether they promote productive consumption or not. This highlights a normative judgment on saving decisions and other growth-inducing tastes, which accords uneasily with the positivist tone of modern economics.

Looking back, both wealth and exchange are definitions of economics that focus on ends. From an ethical point of view, however, they are merely means, as Aristotle had argued earlier. In this way, the economy can detach itself from moral obligations and focus on dealing with scarcity. Assuming that the means are the subject of economics in relation to a given end, the question arises as to who the subject or economic agent is –the one who carries out these means. The following section will focus on the concept of homo economicus as a representative agent who acts according to economic principles (rather than principles derived from him) and embodies a particular worldview shaped by the signals and interpretations of the society in which the economy functions.

Homo economicus

According to Robbins' definition, economic theory places great emphasis on the idea of efficiency. This efficient allocation is called maximization, which means that the goal is to achieve the greatest benefit with the least number of resources, given their scarcity [18]. The intricacies of maximization in the economic sense cannot be fully explored here, but it is important to note that when maximization is considered the standard for effectiveness in allocating resources, agents are assumed to always act in their own best interest by choosing lower costs or higher benefits when deciding about available resources –leaving aside that there are situations in which agents do not maximize, e.g., when they act irrationally, are misled, or are influenced by altruistic emotions [19].

This raises the question of who the individual is who embodies the concept of maximization in economic theory. This idealized agent, known as 'homo economicus', was first mentioned by Mill (1836/2007, pp. 111-112) [20] and named by Ingram (1888/1915, p. 152) to simplify economic calculations within a theoretical mode [21]. The behaviour of this fictional agent prompts us to consider political economy as a theoretical construct of human nature in the pursuit of wealth. Within this framework, one might think, albeit mistakenly, that agents are motivated solely by their pursuit of maximizing wealth accumulation. The distinctive characteristics of homo economicus, according to Mill's analysis, include: (i) the disregard for feelings that do not lead to the accumulation of wealth; (ii) the aversion to work; (iii) the absence of moral and religious values; (iv) the calculation of costs and benefits in every decision; and (v) the pursuit of luxury and pleasure [22].

(i) In terms of the accumulation of wealth, it can be viewed through the lens of Aristotle's concept of chrematistics. Aristotle (1984, 1256a-b) distinguishes between two methods of acquiring goods. The first method is to acquire the means necessary for subsistence, which are limited in nature and serve the ultimate goal of achieving self-sufficiency for the city through the distribution of functions and tasks that correspond to everyone –an idea also recognized by Plato in the *Laws* (1994, 875a-e). The second method is the pursuit of unlimited wealth for its own sake, which Aristotle calls chrematistics (ibid., 1257a). Aristotle argues that although trade is a supplement to natural self-sufficiency, it is not part of chrematistics. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the advent of currency facilitates trade, which can degenerate into mere buying and selling transactions, introduces a new technique for optimizing profits through exchange. The result is a never-ending cycle of means and ends with the sole purpose of maximizing benefits and acquiring the largest number of resources through exchange. According to Aristotle, chrematistics represents a departure from the first form of acquiring goods, which serves a greater purpose, and is instead focused on the infinite accumulation of wealth. This concept highlights the idea of an endless chain of means and ends, with the primary aim of maximizing benefits, that is central to the accumulation of wealth in the eyes of Aristotle. From an Aristotelian perspective, homo economicus can be seen as an embodiment of chrematistics, involving the manipulation of property and wealth for its own sake [23].

Regarding (ii), the homo economicus appear to function as an expense incurred to acquire a reward without additional labour. In line with Mill, Senior's (ibid., p. 26) foundational principle in political economy posits that each person tries to increase their wealth while exerting the least amount of effort: 'every man desire to obtain additional wealth with as little sacrifice as possible' [24]. The homo economicus degrades labour because it equals sacrifice; the homo economicus concept perceives labour as a form of cost, reducing its value. This perspective understands labour merely as a means to an end and not as a positive or valuable aspect of life. The neoclassical economic paradigm, which intrinsically encompasses the phenomenon of unemployment, places paramount emphasis on the rational economic agent, the 'homo economicus', as a central tenet of its theoretical construct. However, this perspective presents an inherent paradox when juxtaposed against the lived experience of individuals grappling with unemployment. The fundamental assumption that individuals approach employment as a disutility or cost to be minimized is inherently at odds with the psychological and emotional reality faced by those who find themselves bereft of gainful employment [25]. In such circumstances, the pursuit of work transcends the realm of mere economic calculus, becoming an existential necessity imbued with profound personal and societal implications. When someone is unemployed, they hardly think of work as a cost. Undoubtedly, this phenomenon can experience amplification at the societal level. In those communities where unemployment prevails at elevated levels, extending for prolonged periods of time, economic agents will tend to perceive employment almost as a blessing, both for those who lack means of subsistence and for those who find themselves deprived of a remunerative occupation. Under these circumstances, work transcends its merely economic dimension, becoming a coveted and longed-for asset because of its capacity to provide sustenance and dignity to individuals and the community as a whole.

Broadly speaking, according to neoclassical theory, unemployment arises from rigidities in the labour market, assuming that the real wage can adjust to the level at which the labour market clears, ultimately reaching an equilibrium price. However, this viewpoint has faced numerous criticisms over the years. Some critics argue that the assumptions made by classical theory are unrealistic due to the natural rate of unemployment or the diminishing returns of workers entering the market. For example, according to Keynes' theory, workers desire to be fully employed, not just seek to maximize their leisure time. He believed that unemployment was a result of a short-term mismatch between the high demand for labour and the shortage of supply. In his view, this was a clear indication that the labour market was not functioning optimally and required intervention to bring it to a state of full employment. However, there is also a critique that incorporates ethics into the economy, which questions the notion that work should be limited to the price system. If work is seen as something more than just a means of exchange for a salary and instead is considered an activity that encompasses life plans, impacts on the common good, beliefs, desires, and other values, then it can be argued that labour should not be reduced to a price. If labour is an integral part of how we live our lives, then how can it have a price? This would mean that wages should not be treated as a price and instead should be considered from a broader ethical perspective. The concept of homo economicus works as an undesirable activity and puts a price on it, reflecting the idea that the maximizing agent is only concerned with maximizing their wealth. This is not to say that workers do not receive a salary, but rather that work should be considered as more than just a source of income, or, in a worst-case scenario, a cost.

(iii) Here, the idea of homo economicus runs under the assumption of strict positivism, in which spiritual values are completely excluded from the decision-making process [26]. According to the findings of Bouckaert (2011; 2017), the integration of spiritual dimensions into the realms of economics and business praxis may represent an indispensable stride towards addressing and solving the prevailing quandaries that beset the contemporary economic situation. This resurgence of metaphysical considerations within the discipline departs from the Aristotelian conception of natural teleology and heralds a clear paradigm shift in the epistemological foundations of economic thought. However, spirituality is often misunderstood in economics. Some see it merely as part of a religious group, as a psychological tool to heighten emotions, or as a form of therapy for stress and depression. While these may be valuable personal aspects of spirituality, what is of interest in this context is spirituality as a means of promoting social change and social innovation. By subjecting the construct of spirituality to rigorous scrutiny through the conceptual lens of a public good, one can illuminate its inherent potential to catalyse a transformative paradigm shift within the prevailing economic paradigm.

If morality and religion are excluded, the homo economicus is viewed as the result of a controllable psychology, but if non-positive elements, such as ethics or religion, are introduced, making predictions becomes more challenging. Therefore, the homo economicus model operates within the fact-value dichotomy paradigm by eliminating the ethical motivations of economic acts through the exclusion of normative elements. This approach was further developed by Friedman (1953).

Friedman has argued that positive economics, in contrast to normative economics, consists of providing a system of generalizations that can make correct predictions about the consequences of any change of circumstance and must be judged by its predictive power for the class of phenomena it is intended to explain. Positive economics is, in principle, independent of any ethical position or normative judgment. This point has been challenged, for example, by Putnam (2004) and Sen (1977), among others such as Boulding (1966) or, in relation to equal opportunities, Arneson (1999, 2018). While Friedman, like Robbins and Mises, contends that ethical considerations lie beyond rational and critical scrutiny and should therefore be excluded to maintain economic objectivity, this foundational premise itself warrants critical examination. The systematic exclusion of normative dimensions does not necessarily enhance scientific objectivity but may instead constrain the explanatory and predictive capacity of economic models. As Sen and Putnam demonstrate, value judgments are inherently intertwined with economic facts, and their artificial exclusion may lead to an incomplete understanding of economic phenomena. This critique also has been extensively developed by Hands (2012), who argues that the positive-normative dichotomy in economics requires fundamental reconsideration given its philosophical and methodological limitations. Moreover, other scholarships have demonstrated that the fact-value distinction itself is problematic when applied to economic analysis (Mongin 2006; Davis 2013), while empirical evidence suggests that incorporating normative considerations can enhance rather than diminish the scientific rigor of economic inquiry (Dasgupta 2005;

Koshrowi 2019). Furthermore, the integration of spiritual and ethical considerations, rather than undermining scientific rigor, may enrich economic analysis by acknowledging the multidimensional complexity of human behaviour. The question here is to what extent value judgments, for example, are determinants in the teleological chain so that they are considered in economic models, something that will be returned to later.

Points (iv) and (v) constitute a cohesive unit of analysis, and they will therefore be assessed together. The homo economicus is characterized as an agent of maximization, yet the precise object of maximization remains an open inquiry that warrants further exploration. According to classical and neoclassical economics, the answer is any entity that has the function of giving a benefit to whoever owns their rights. The entity that offers benefits can be either tangible (physical) or intangible (perceived). The principle of utility can therefore be applied not only to physical resources such as gold but also to intangible assets such as knowledge and information. Even abstract concepts like freedom and rights can be utilized to generate wealth and enhance a nation's overall well-being, as long as they are recognized as valuable entities. If the homo economicus is indeed the subject or agent of Robbins' teleological definition, then it would behave rationally under consistent preferences within the constraints imposed by the distribution of scarce goods. Robbins' definition of economics can be extended to the concept of homo economicus, as both place the teleological notion of utility at the core. They encapsulate the process of making judicious choices regarding the allocation of scarce resources among a multitude of competing desired ends. The efficiency of homo economicus represents the culmination of maximizing the satisfaction derived from available resources, achieving the greatest benefit at the minimal cost.

The overarching goal of political economy lies in elucidating the mechanisms through which scarce resources are allocated to fulfil the ends and desires that cause the satisfaction of society. According to Hausman (1992, p. 167), the opposite of satisfaction is 'non-satiation'. The axiom that the homo economicus exhibits a preference for a larger quantity of commodities over a smaller one is predicated upon the array of options available to them as commodity bundles. This assumption portrays agents as being either self-interested or indifferent to the welfare of others, with their sole concern being the aggregate size of the commodity bundles they ultimately possess. Economic rationality is often (implicitly) defined as a synergistic amalgamation of utility theory and the principle of non-satiation. Although it is frequently assumed that diminishing marginal utility is an intrinsic component of economic rationality, it is merely an empirical generalization of individuals' preferences for different combinations of commodities. The concept of teleological utility in Robbins' definition is often perceived as an abstract characteristic where media acts as a way of integrating their demands. This means that the demand for goods can be seen as a representative sample of the utility that these goods (or an abstract good) bring in a specific situation. As a result, shifts in media preferences may show changes in an individual's underlying utility function.

However, the changes in the consumption probability of a particular medium may not simply be a result of an individual's choice when he moves through a specific teleological chain. In this sense, we can realize that the utility, or usefulness, of an item or entity is what makes it considered good in the eyes of the consumer. In other words, the level of satisfaction or benefit that a person derives from using or consuming the item determines its value and makes it a desirable commodity. Without utility, an entity may have other desirable attributes, but it would not be considered a good. Thus, it can be said that the utility of an entity is a decisive factor in determining its teleological status as a good. But the value of a good to a consumer is not determined by the good itself, but rather by its characteristics or properties. A good may have multiple characteristics that contribute to its overall utility, and some of these characteristics may be shared by multiple goods. Furthermore, the combination of goods may produce characteristics that are different from those of the individual goods, leading to a unique hedonist value proposition for the consumer (Lancaster 1966). But, in addition, utility will still be identified with the understanding of internal states or with a certain self-awareness of the expected satisfaction. In this way, utility is understood as subjective since it is rooted in the internal processes that operate on the intentional transformations of objects, structuring itself in units of measurement that constitute the pursuit of pleasure.

If homo economicus incorporates the analysis made in these points, then it will have evolved into homo sapiens, as would say Thaler (2000) [27]. However, the Robbins' definition is tied to homo economicus, although it has been idealized and caricatured in diverse ways over time (Morgan 2006) [28]. Consequently, the traditionally accepted definition of economy should be changed to advance this species of Homo sapiens. In other words, you cannot overcome homo economicus without redefining the field of economics itself. As Ailon (2020) suggests, the model of homo economicus, or economic man, is not only a fictitious abstraction but also a lived experience that shapes how people perceive themselves and others in market societies. Lindenberg (1990) has integrated the figure of homo economicus with that of homo socio-economicus in a general model of human behaviour that would imply rationality, social norms, and emotions. Therefore, homo socio-economicus would be a general model of man that can accommodate various specific models of man depending on assumptions about goals, constraints, and social influences.

Overreliance on the construct of homo economicus as an interpretive lens to comprehend economic behaviour leads to an inherently constrained viewpoint that neglects the intrinsic complexities underpinning human decision-making processes. By expanding our conceptual framework to capture the multidimensional nature of human behaviour, we can develop more nuanced economic theories that better reflect the realities of social interactions and the multifaceted motivations driving individual agency (Davis 2003). This paradigm shift towards a more holistic understanding of human behaviour is imperative for the further development of economics as a discipline that strives to illuminate and improve the functioning of societies (Etzioni 2011). Transcending the stringent assumptions of homo economicus requires acknowledging the influential roles of social norms, ethical considerations, bounded rationality, and context-dependent preferences in shaping economic outcomes (Brzezicka & Wiśniewski 2015). Such an expanded purview promises to yield economic models with enhanced descriptive and prescriptive validity, better attuned to the nuances and vicissitudes of human agency.

Again, homo economicus represents the ideal of an economic agent, acting according to Robbins' definition, but also represents a way of seeing the world through certain norms and interpretations of the society in which the economy operates. In other words, the homo economicus model reflects a particular worldview that emphasizes individualism, rationality, and self-interest as the key drivers of economic behaviour [29]. This leads to the question raised by

Strober (1994, p. 146): Why does economics have so much to say about selfishness and competition and so little to say about the individual's pursuit of the welfare of others or about cooperation? This worldview is deeply rooted in Western culture and has been shaped by centuries of philosophical, political, and economic discourse.

It is time to recapitulate the main points previously discussed in three key subjects: First, the text questions the overemphasis on the notion of scarcity as the central axis of the discipline. While resource scarcity is a relevant factor, confining economics only to this issue limits its scope and isolates it from other social dimensions of economic behaviour that go beyond the mere allocation of resources. Second, the text criticizes Robbins' reductionist view that conceives ends as predetermined –and enshrined under a posture of value neutrality, whereby economists deliberately refrain from evaluating the worth of those ends themselves– relegating economics to the mere role of providing efficient means. This perspective interrupts the inherent teleology of the definition, since means only gain meaning as dynamic signposts to ends. However, if the ends are considered exogenous and unchanging, the economist is reduced to a mere technical instrument detached from the evaluation and analysis of these ends. This contradicts the intrinsically intertwined nature of means and ends, which demands that the ends themselves be subjected to scrutiny and not treated as external elements of economic analysis, be it wealth or catallactic.

Finally, the critique is directed against the construct of homo economicus, the rational and maximizing agent that embodies Robbins' teleological definition. In short, homo economicus' archetype is an excessively simplistic and reductionist representation of behaviour, incapable of capturing the richness and complexity of motivations, ethical values, and social and transcendent dimensions that characterize real economic behaviour.

Can ethics be part of Robbins' definition?

Robbins argued that economics should remain entirely value-neutral in terms of the ends being pursued. According to his definition, economics is not to assess or evaluate the desirability of the ends themselves. Rather, economics is solely concerned with understanding how individuals make choices about the allocation of their limited resources among the various competing ends they wish to achieve. The ends themselves do not interest economics. If economists study how people allocate their scarce resources among competing ends to maximize their satisfaction or utility, then the focus of economic analysis will be on efficiency. The ends may be noble or low, material or immaterial; it does not matter. However, if the achievement of one set of ends requires the renunciation of other ends, then this activity has an economic aspect because it is transformed or considered useful. In response, Robbins introduced the notion of the 'economic aspect' (ibid., p. 14), which encompasses any action involving the allocation of scarce resources over time. In fact, according to Kirzner (1976, p. 135), Robbins wanted to emphasize that ethical considerations cannot have any influence on the economic aspect of an issue. The economic perspective is concerned with an understanding of actions in which the ends are already fixed and remain unchanged for the duration of the action. The nature of these ends is irrelevant to the economic aspect of the action and, therefore, to the economic analysis. The inclusion of value judgments in the evaluation of the economic results of actions contradicts the actual limits of economic analysis [30]. This methodological stance, particularly the argument for a value-neutral economics, was strongly influenced by the scientific philosophy of logical positivism, which gained prominence in the 1930s. Robbins' central objective was to construct a positive economic science free from values through the application of logical positivism. Reflecting this approach, Robbins contended that psychological elements and mental states, which were features of earlier marginalist economics, had no place in a value-free positive economics and were deemed unscientific. A key illustration of this positivist-inspired methodology was Robbins' highly influential position on interpersonal comparisons of utility (ICU). Robbins argued that the possibility of comparing the utility, welfare, or general mental states of different individuals constituted a value judgment. Consequently, he considered such comparisons scientifically meaningless. This explicit rejection of ICU, based on branding them as value judgments, was a direct outcome of his commitment to a value-free science. Robbins' perspective, shaped profoundly by the influence of positivism, subsequently established the basis for how mainstream economists approached utility comparisons (see Drakopoulos 2024).

However, it proves difficult to establish a precise set of criteria to determine whether a valuative aspect is economic. For this reason, Robbins' definition works in the hedonistic paradigm, in which the subjective nature of utility represents well-being. The abstraction of utility implies that, while welfare and economic welfare may be different, the latter can be considered a credible approximation of the former. This raises a simple and important question about utility: Given a limited number of resources, why do some people feel satisfaction while others do not? This could be due to different priorities and needs, or it could result from life experiences and circumstances that affect a person's overall well-being. For example, a person who has suffered trauma or loss may find it difficult to find contentment, even if they have access to resources. In addition, personality and psychological factors play a crucial role in determining a person's level of happiness. Factors such as resilience, optimism, and emotional intelligence can significantly influence a person's sense of satisfaction.

From an intersubjective point of view, the crux of the matter, however, lies in the intentionality inherent in the means, as the ends serve to structure our intentions coherently, guiding our behaviour over time. Agents, by enabling the coordination of our current activities with the future goals we aim to achieve, incorporate partial action plans. This incorporation facilitates social coordination by providing a shared framework. Based on this framework, others can anticipate our behaviour and engage in cooperative interactions, as suggested by Bratman (1987). The introduction of intentions carries the risk of introducing normative aspects that should be left aside according to Robbins' definition and the archetype of homo economicus. Nevertheless, while economic analysis cannot determine the ultimate value or meaning of human well-being, it can provide valuable insights into the conditions that promote or hinder the realization of that well-being. Therefore, a reconciliation between the teleological nature of intentions and the value-neutral stance advocated by Robbins becomes a crucial endeavour to understand the intricate interplay between means, ends, and the pursuit of well-being within economic theory. As Koslowsky (2008 p.39) has explained: 'Ethical economy is not a hybrid of subsystems of a different kind or genus, but a conceptual synthesis. It is a combination of the ethical and the economic mode of thinking. Both methods must overcome their mistrust of each other.' Ethical economics aims to integrate the normative and descriptive aspects of economic analysis by incorporating values and principles into economic theory and practice. Economic agents are not only maximizers and self-interested individuals, but also beings with moral and social intentions who are concerned with justice, fairness, and sustainability. According to Robbins, the conventional separation between economics and ethics leads to conflicts and trade-offs between efficiency and equity, growth and the environment, profit and responsibility.

Sen (1987) has argued that economic analysis must consider the ethical and normative dimensions of human well-being and that economic policy should aim to promote capabilities and freedoms rather than just increasing individual utility. Under this view, economics is not only a positive science but also a normative art. It requires not only logical reasoning and empirical evidence but also ethical principles and moral intuition. It aims not only to understand how the formal aspect of the economy works but also how it can be improved for the benefit of society. However, it should be clarified that ethics is not only found in the ends but can also be found in the means. This means that the actions and decisions that lead to a certain outcome are also subject to ethical evaluation and judgment. For example, if a company wants to increase its profits, it cannot do so by exploiting its workers or harming the environment. These means are unethical and unacceptable, even if they result in higher profits. Robbins' position on values is that their essence is inherently contained in the values themselves, making the means by which they are achieved or maintained irrelevant [31].

Scoon (1943) asserted that, according to Robbins, the notion of economy is a theoretical field grounded in fundamental generalizations rather than immediate practical applications. Economists employ assumptions to streamline reality and derive logical inferences. The definition of economics takes on two dimensions: practical and theoretical. The practical interpretation mirrors the concerns of policymakers and professionals, whereas the theoretical interpretation underscores the scientific and analytical facets of economics. Economic theory serves as a framework for comprehending and explaining specific facts while potentially yielding practical ramifications. The subject of economics encompasses our personal judgments and actions, which serve as both subjects of comprehension and consequences of assessment [32]. Economic data remains dynamic rather than static, subject to the influence of human intellect, the interpretations and ideologies of economists. This perspective dismisses the erroneous dichotomy between a shadowy, irrational domain and an illuminated, purely scientific realm, a divide that economists are purportedly capable of bridging [33].

The notion of completely unambiguous, readily presented ends existing as a unified whole, without any form of constraint or choice, is a concept that is faltering. This is primarily because there is no single person who has a comprehensive knowledge of all such ends. Therefore, these ends cannot be considered as given, nor can they be wholly regarded as ends. Instead, they remain enmeshed within an intricate web of data and an ongoing process. The dynamics involved involve the use of different means to achieve different ends. This intricate interplay encompasses numerous ends that often come into conflict without the guiding influence of practical reason. The lack of unifying guiding principles leads to a complex web of interactions in which different goals clash, vie for attention, and occasionally exceed the limits of human control. In other words, the premise that there are clear, predetermined ends that exist independently and harmoniously is questionable. The absence of a singular, all-knowing authority, coupled with the stratified composition of these ends, highlights the complexity inherent in their mutual connections. Such an understanding necessitates a refined comprehension of the delicate dynamics that exist among strategies, limitations, and the elaborate domain of applied rationality. Sandel (2009, pp. 97-99) argues that we must strive to understand the inherent goal or purpose of these practices in order to determine the appropriate norms for social practices. For example, when considering whether it is fair that wealthy parents can provide educational benefits to their offspring, we need to think about the purpose of education and the kind of community we want to create. Thus, the economy may be connected to the realms of politics, judicial, military, medical, and more. While each of these domains keeps its unique hierarchical characteristics, they intersect in the realm of ethics, where they are harmonized by common underlying principles. Again, this goes beyond the idea of mere scarcity management.

Conclusion

In short, the standard definition of economics that appears in Robbins leads us to consider the teleological foundations of human decisions and actions as tendencies and behaviours that can be understood. In the beginning, this teleological character was conceived with an ultimate end that gave meaning to all possible means, which has integrated economic theory and political economy since Aristotle. With industrialization, especially in the 20th century, the teleological structure of human action has lost its ultimate end and has become an endless chain of means, which is represented in economic theory based on the idea of catallactics. The result is an emptying of meaning, of the direction that guides economic behaviour. If the aim of economic technique is to enhance the conditions conducive to development, a fulfilling life, or a life worth living (whatever that may be), one can think that it is only a technique of means and not of ends in itself. The meaning of the economy would be found outside of it, but if economic theory were to include it in its models, it would certainly change it.

Reclaiming ends in economics requires dismantling the myth of value neutrality inherited from Robbins and Mises, that economists can abstain from judging which ends are worthwhile. Only by acknowledging that ends themselves shape the coherence and purpose of economic inquiry can we move beyond a purely instrumental focus on means. Embedding frameworks of virtue ethics and participatory deliberation allows the discipline to ask not just 'How should scarce resources be allocated?' but 'Which ends—climate sustainability, social equity, human flourishing—merit our collective effort?' This expanded teleological stance both honours Aristotle's insight that means gain meaning only in light of substantive goals and equips economics to tackle contemporary challenges that a strictly Pareto-oriented, technically neutral approach inherently ignores.

Moreover, revisiting ends as constitutive elements shaping the very applicability of means is a vital concern for economics and its inherently teleological nature, as Aristotle envisioned it. However, this was foregone in Robbins' definition, and with this, the ethical foundation of the economy was also evaded. While means are employed, ends are realized; however, when economics sets aside ends, it also forgoes critical analysis regarding their realization, as economics itself would then be reduced to mere means. This represents an abandonment of the teleological integrity of economic analysis, wherein it becomes simply a tool subordinated to externally supplied ends rather than a comprehensive inquiry into the realization of those ends themselves. While Robbins' approach provides a clear argument for the role of values in economic reasoning, there is also a danger of seeing economics as part of a positivist framework that separates economics from moral or ethical responsibility: economics cannot be seen as part of a belief system but as a neutral, value-free means of decision-making.

Finally, it seems appropriate, then, to rethink Robbins' definition in economics manuals, incorporating the ethical aspects that make up the commitment of economists regarding the ends that he himself offers. If this does not happen, economists will be trained to take actions without consideration and evaluate the ultimate effects of those actions. Thus, economics risks being reduced to a purely technical exercise, divorcing itself from the critical examination of ends as the overarching purpose toward which means are responsibly oriented.

Endnotes

[1] To complete the idea, Robbins (ibid., p. 15) affirms: 'The material means of achieving ends are limited. We have been turned out of Paradise. We have neither eternal life nor unlimited means of gratification. Everywhere we turn, if we choose one thing, we must relinquish others which, in different circumstances, we wish not to have relinquished. Scarcity of means to satisfy ends of varying importance is an almost ubiquitous condition of human behaviour.' On the historical origin of Robbins' text, see, Howson (2004).

[2] See also: Backhouse & Medema (2009a; 2009b); Colander (2015).

[3] Thus, Smith (ibid., p. 118) states: 'It deserves to be remarked, perhaps, that it is in the progressive state, while the society is advancing to the further acquisition, rather than when it has acquired its full complement of riches, that the condition of the labouring poor, of the great body of the people, seems to be the happiest and the most comfortable.'

[4] Steuart (ibid., p. 3) posits, drawing parallels with the management of a household, in the realm of political economy: 'The principal object of this science is to secure a certain fund of subsistence for all the inhabitants, to obviate every circumstance which may render it precarious; to provide everything necessary for supplying the wants of the society, and to employ the inhabitants (supposing them to be freemen) in such a manner as naturally to create reciprocal relations and dependencies between them, so as to make their several interests lead them to supply one another with their reciprocal wants'.

[5] In fact, in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1984, 1099b) he emphasizes the importance of meeting material needs as a prerequisite for the exercise of virtue.

He posits that true happiness is not devoid of the need for external goods. This underscores the intricate relationship between fulfilled needs and moral excellence in Aristotle's philosophical discourse.

[6] For instance, Fisher (1912, pp. 1-5) argued that 'everything which concerns wealth in its general sense comes within the scope of economics'. Subsequently, he linked wealth to ownership and appropriation: 'meaning of wealth includes only material objects owned by human beings and external to the owner' (ibid., p. 3); or 'wealth, then, includes all those parts of the material universe that have been appropriated to the uses of mankind' (ibid., p. 4). To ultimately deduce measures of wealth such as price and value and to unfold the broad tree that encompasses the topics of economics in general.

[7] In this line, for example, Senior begins his *treatise* ([1836] 1965, p. 1): 'We propose in the following Treatise to give an outline of the Science which treats of the Nature, the Production, and the Distribution of Wealth. To that Science we give the name of Political Economy'. And he continues: 'the subject treated by the Political Economist, using that term in the limited sense in which we apply it, is not Happiness, but Wealth' (ibid. p. 2). Also Say ([1880] 1971, p. 9) following Adam Smith, affirms that economic policy is 'the manner in which wealth is produced, distributed, and consumed'.

[8] Thus, Whately (ibid.) states: 'A. Smith, indeed, has designated his work a treatise on the 'Wealth of Nations'; but this supplies a name only for the subject-matter, not for the science itself. The name I should have preferred as the most descriptive, and on the whole least objectionable, is that of Catallactics, or the 'Science of Exchanges'. Man might be defined, 'An animal that makes Exchanges': no other, even of those animals which in other points make the nearest approach to rationality, having, to all appearance, the least notion of bartering, or in any way exchanging one thing for another. And it is in this point of view alone that Man is contemplated by Political Economy'. Incidentally, Edgeworth (1881, p. 6) likewise adopted a catallactic perspective, noting that 'Economics investigates the arrangements between agents, each striving to maximize his own utility.'

[9] Boulding's conceptual framework culminated in the social triangle, which conceives of society as an entity governed by three principal social mechanisms:

exchange, threat, and love. These mechanisms are intermingled in various proportions to shape societal dynamics. See also Fontaine (2010).

[10] Although you can adopt the perspective of Colander, Holt & Rosser (2004), that economics is currently undergoing a fundamental shift in its method, away from neoclassical economics and into something new.

[11] It is worth remembering that, for many at the time, Robbins was doing nothing other than popularizing Austrian ideas in the UK. Before writing his well-known 1932 book, he regularly participated in Mises's seminar in Vienna (Wasserman 2019), and he acknowledges his special debt to Mises in the preface to his book. Also, Menger's definition of economics -many decades before- is similar to Robbins: 'If we sum up what has previously been said together with this characterization of the nature of economy, it is clear that 'economy' ultimately means that activity by which we satisfy our direct material needs with the directly available goods.' (Menger [1883] 1963, p. 217).

[12] Robbins' rejection of cardinal utility (e.g., Pigou's welfare economics) narrowed economics to Pareto efficiency, where 'optimal' resource allocation requires no ethical judgment about ends. This shift enabled the fact-value dichotomy but obscured distributive justice, as Pareto improvements ignore whether gains accrue to the wealthy or impoverished.

[13] I am indebted to the insightful comments of an anonymous referee for this analysis.

[14] Thus, Cassel (ibid., p. 5) maintains: 'Only scarce means are economic means. Every economic system thus labours under the condition of a scarcity of means for the satisfaction of wants; in this sense, economics is governed by the 'Principle of Scarcity.' Hence the special task of economy is to equate wants with the available means for their satisfaction in the way which is most advantageous. In so far as this task is completed successfully, the economic activity may be regarded as truly economic.'

[15] Mises (ibid., p. 92) also emphasized the centrality of man and consequently human action, as it alone has the capacity to transform an object into a means: 'Economics is not about things and tangible material objects; it is about men, their meanings and actions. Goods, commodities, and wealth and all the other notions of conduct are not elements of nature; they are elements of human

meaning and conduct. He who wants to deal with them must not look at the external world; he must search for them in the meaning of acting men'.

[16] This is remarkably close to the position of Weber ([1922] 1978, pp. 63-64), who considered economic social action the fundamental unit of analysis that distinguishes itself from conventional economic action by incorporating the social aspect into its determinants. Weber defined 'economic social action' as behaviour that is infused with meaning, driven by the pursuit of utility, and directed towards another actor. The utility factor classifies the action as 'economic', while the aspect of orientation towards another actor constitutes the social aspect of the behaviour. The significance given to meaning highlights that Weber's sociology is regarded as interpretive, and his economic sociology, in particular, is considered a form of interpretive economic sociology.

[17] This viewpoint aligns with Mäki's (2002) perspective.

[18] Following Pettit (1995), although many economists employ straightforward models, the array of available theories is effectively demonstrated by Bayesian theories of rationality. Under the framework of Bayesian theory, an action is deemed rational if it maximizes an agent's expected utility. In essence, the Bayesian concept dictates that every agent possesses a utility function that assigns a specific level of utility or preference for every possible outcome in the world, or prospect, and a probability function that gauges the likelihood that selecting a certain option would result in the realization of a given prospect – something that is represented by homo economicus.

[19] According to Hochman and Rodgers (1969), altruism in economics is understood as the degree to which an individual's utility function directly incorporates another person's well-being. In the neoclassical framework, Becker (1974) formalizes this by introducing positive interdependence among individuals' utility functions.

[20] At the same time, Mill (ibid., p.113) offers an alternative definition of economic policy: 'The science which traces the laws of such of the phenomena of society as arise from the combined operations of mankind for the production of wealth, in so far as those phenomena are not modified by the pursuit of any other object'.

[21] The term 'homo economicus' was first used by Pareto in 1906, although O'Boyle (2009) suggests that it was previously employed by his Italian colleague Pantaleoni in 1889. For a genealogy of the homo economicus and subsequent debates over the century, one may refer to the work of Bee & Desmarais-Tremblay (2023).

[22] About Mill's economic man, see Persky (1995). Doucouliagos (1994) identified two groups of criticisms of Homo Economicus: 'the first is the bounded rationality satisficing behaviour critique. This has three components: (1) there are cognitive limitations to rational choice; (2) agents adapt but do not optimize; and (3) agents are not maximizers; they are satisficers. The second set of criticisms focuses on the role of institutions and group behaviour, with two main criticisms: (1) agents may not act individualistically, and (2) agents´ tastes and preferences are neither exogenous nor independent.' Although we may agree with these criticisms, it is not the purpose of this work to be part of any of the aforementioned groups.

[23] Cf. Kuzmanić (2019), who employs the term 'homo economicus' to distinguish it from 'homo chrematisticus', two distinct ways of acquiring wealth that are associated with two forms of life: the former being natural and political, while the latter being anti-natural and artificial, contaminating the political sphere. However, this differentiation stems from interpreting the term 'economicus' as ekonomiké, a way of life inherent to human beings, rather than merely as a profit-maximizing agent.

[24] It is posited that individuals universally experience a deficiency in the fulfilment of their desires; there exists an inherent belief that the acquisition of further wealth would suffice to satisfy these unmet needs (Senior, ibid.).

[25] It is worth clarifying that, although there is a significant difference in that the variable in question in economics is labour effort, not employment, the basic assumption is that the individual is negotiating the gains from work (the goods and services it enables them to purchase) against the disutility of labour. Thus, the models can be extended to include utility-generating benefits that may be associated with the work itself. For example, Jevons' theory of labour is also built on the premise that labour is disutility or pain -a view which was also held by H. Gossen (Jevons [1871] 2013, pp.168-169).

[26] The positivist characteristic of Robbins' definition has been exposed early by Parsons (1934).

[27] Thaler (ibid.) predicts that homo economicus will evolve into Homo sapiens, indicating that economics will become more related to human behaviour. Also see Dopfer (2004).

[28] Morgan (ibid.) traces the history of how 'economic man' has changed over time, from Mill's hedonistic and rational agent to modern mathematical and artificial characters. She also discusses how some economists have criticized or modified this model to include more psychological, social, or ethical factors.

[29] Marshall, *Principles of Economics* ([1890] 2013, p. xix), affirms: 'But ethical forces are among those of which the economist has to take account. Attempts have indeed been made to construct an abstract science with regard to the actions of an 'economic man,' who is under no ethical influences and who pursues pecuniary gain warily and energetically, but mechanically and selfishly. But they have not been successful.'

[30] Kirzner (ibid., pp. 119-124) highlighted two main implications of Robbins' definition: its 'breadth', that is, the expansion of the scope of the science that it entails, resulting from its capacity to encompass issues that had not been considered economic on the basis of any previous definition of the discipline; and its 'formalism', that is, Robbins' emphasis that economics has an exclusive interest in the relationship between means and ends, and not in these elements themselves. As Becker (1976, pp. 8-15) argues, the fundamental economic problem of allocating scarce resources among alternative ends serves as an overarching paradigm transcending traditional economic contexts. By grounding the economic approach in the universal realities of scarcity and choice, it acquires a generalized applicability for comprehensively analysing human behaviour across diverse domains. This expansive interpretation of economics, rooted in Robbins' influential definition, positions the optimization logic of constrained maximization as a powerful conceptual apparatus capable of elucidating the underlying rationales driving behaviour in spheres extending far beyond market transactions.

[31] As we further explore this topic, it becomes key to shed light on the differing domains of intrinsic and extrinsic values. Intrinsic values, by their very nature,

are integral to the essence of the subject or object in consideration. They are not contingent on external factors but are rather inherent and profound. Extrinsic values, on the other hand, are contingent upon external circumstances or influences. They often involve tangible rewards or recognition bestowed by others for the attainment of certain goals and achievements. Seen as a mechanism that enables the realization of ends given, the economy effectively sidesteps the ethical conundrum associated with being morally accountable for extrinsic value. Economists, in their pursuit of comprehending economic dynamics, frequently prioritize the examination of trade-offs, incentives, and interrelationships within their field of study. This strategic approach effectively relegates the task of making value-based judgments to the realm of ends.

[32] See Crespo (2013, pp. 17-28), who conceptualizes economics as a practical science restores the proper orientation. Within this framework, economics centres on selecting the ends conducive to the good life. Technique remains appropriately subordinated, constrained by the ends pursued by human beings. Simultaneously, the adequate deployment of practical reason is essential for both the judicious choice of ends and the suitable employment of means. When practical reason attains practical truth, it bestows freedom, rendering it a capacity for action aimed at securing personal and communal well-being. This Aristotelian perspective will undergird the central arguments advanced in this book.

[33] Buchanan (1964) critiqued Robbins' perspective on the economy, which defined it in terms of a problem or set of problems rather than a specific type of human activity. Buchanan's catallactic critique argues that Robbins' individualistic, scarcity-based definition may overlook the inherently social, interactive, and institutional nature of economic phenomena. Buchanan advocated for a more process-oriented, exchange-centric perspective to fully comprehend the complex web of cooperation and exchange underlying economic systems. He suggested that economists should focus on market or exchange institutions, conceived in the broadest sense, without prejudging or predisposing themselves for or against any particular social order. Studying how markets function, whether they perform better or worse according to the imposed criteria, would provide a more informed understanding than relying on uninformed opinions.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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