

Using normative methodology to make pluralism consistent with realism

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Abstract

This paper argues that realism and pluralism are inconsistent. Realism implies that it is possible for a theory, or a set of theoretical methods, to be erroneous — to be incompatible with a description of social ontology. This contradicts methodological pluralism, which advocates the acceptance of all theoretical approaches. For pluralism to be consistent with a realist vision of social ontology would require a framework that would allow us to judge which theories respect some agreed upon vision of social ontology. I propose a normative methodological framework as a possible answer to that question. I call this Realist Normative Methodology and it is derived from Tony Lawson's critique of mainstream economics. I do this by turning Lawson's arguments into generally applicable principles. In this paper, I will discuss the issues presented by the inconsistency between realism and pluralism and outline these principles that could serve to resolve this issue.

1. The problem with heterodox economics

Heterodox economics is, by definition, a movement that is opposed to the orthodoxy in economics, which I will refer to as mainstream economics. However, there is a problem with the way that heterodox economics currently

argues for reform in the way that economics is institutionalised, taught, and exercised by the mainstream. Generally speaking, there are two main theoretical proposals that form the basis for how heterodox economics argues that the discipline of economics should change. In other words, there are two main arguments — with corresponding solutions — as to why economics, as currently dominated by its mainstream, is producing poor theoretical outcomes and must therefore reform how it is practised. These two theoretical arguments are realism and pluralism. The problem they pose for heterodox economics is that they are inconsistent with one another.

On the one hand, realism argues that we are able to know the way in which social reality exists — we are able to elaborate a description of social ontology — and that, therefore, we should aim to use methods when doing economics — and all social science, for that matter — which respect this reality. Realism's explanation for why there is a problem with how economics is currently practised is that the discipline is dominated by a mainstream that uses methods that do not respect social reality. The argument is that the exclusive reliance of the mainstream of economics on mathematical modelling presupposes an ontology that is inconsistent with the social reality that it is trying to understand (Lawson, 2006). According to realism, for economics — and social science in general — to produce good results it must use methods that presuppose a social ontology that corresponds to social reality. Therefore, the solution proposed to the current predicament is to search for methods that respect the way that social reality exists.

On the other hand, pluralism argues that social reality is difficult to understand and that, therefore, in our attempts to render it intelligible, we

should embrace the largest number of methodological approaches possible. For social theory and social science to function optimally, we need a pluridisciplinary environment that fosters debate. It is precisely because we do not know how the social elements of our world exist that we should not discount any approaches that are attempting to understand them. The argument is that we will have the best chance of understanding the social world if we have as many methodological approaches as possible trying to do just that. Therefore, pluralism's explanation for why economics is currently in a dire situation is the fact that there is a dominant mainstream that relies on a single methodological approach. In other words, mainstream economics produces poor results because it is methodologically monist. Therefore, the solution for pluralism is to remove the mainstream from its monolithic position and for there to be both equality and exchange between all of the different schools of thought in economics.

The point of agreement between these two theoretical arguments is that the mainstream of economics is doing things wrong, which is why they enjoy somewhat general support from heterodox economists. However, the reason why each position thinks that the mainstream is doing things wrong differs substantially. Consequently, the solutions presented to this problem, as stated above, differ also. On the one hand, we can know whether methods are inappropriate for understanding social material and therefore we should only use appropriate methods. On the other, we do not know what methods should be used and therefore we should use a mixture of them all. From this simple comparison it should already be clear that inconsistencies exist between the two arguments.

However, the consensus position — as much as there is any kind of a consensus position among heterodox economists — is to be both realist and pluralist. It is very common for heterodox economists to argue concurrently that the problem with mainstream economics is that it is both unrealistic and monist. It is also very common for heterodox economists to argue that economics must be reformed both by making it more realist and by arguing that we must embrace methodological pluralism. In this paper, I argue that there are important inconsistencies between these two arguments, between realism and pluralism. I will then present a solution to this consistency issue.

2. What realism means

I understand the argument posed by realism as follows. I base this understanding, for the most part, on the work of Lawson (1997, 2003, 2006, 2012, 2015). In the context of heterodox economics, the argument for realism comes from Lawson's analysis, most succinctly outlined in Lawson (2006), as to why there is a problem with the way that the mainstream of economics practices the discipline.

The argument is that first, what unites the mainstream of economics is its general reliance on mathematical modelling. Second, Lawson argues that this kind of mathematical modelling necessarily presupposes a world in which the agents of the model — human beings — are isolated atoms. Finally then, Lawson makes the, to my mind, uncontroversial assertion that this does not conform to the way in which human beings actually exists. Therefore, the method employed by mainstream economics presupposes a vision of reality — a social ontology — that is inconsistent with reality. The general argument derived from this

regarding the way that social science is practiced is that, to produce good theoretical outcomes, social science must be realist. In other words, the idea is that the methods used by a social scientific discipline must presuppose a vision of reality that conforms to how reality really is.

The obvious question then is: how is reality really? What is the nature of social reality? Though it may be easy to point to things as being unrealistic without too much contention, it is a different kettle of fish to try and define what is realistic, to define how reality exists. Nevertheless, the challenge has been taken up by the discipline that now calls itself social ontology. The main aim of social ontology or of social-philosophical ontology as it is classified by the Cambridge Social Ontology Group — the research group built by, and formed around the work of, Lawson — is to provide a general account of the nature of social reality (Lawson, 2015). This is a pursuit that is not exclusive to Lawson or the Cambridge group. Indeed, others such as John Searle, and for reasons not necessarily linked to the issues faced by economics or social science more generally, have attempted such ontological outlines (see Searle 1995, 2010). The point being that realism, as I understand it here, does not necessarily impose one type of description of social ontology. It does, however, require as its base a description of the way that social reality exists.

Let us then take Lawson's description for social reality as a model that is as good as — and to my mind better than — any other. His latest comprehensive outline of his vision of social ontology can be found in Lawson (2015). In short, Lawson's vision of social reality is that it is made up of human beings and social structures. These social structures are the products of human action and agency and require continual maintenance by human beings to continue to exist.

However, at the same time, these structures exercise a power of conditioning over those human beings. They therefore take on an element of independence and cannot be reduced to the human beings who created them. The ensemble then if one of continual back and forth — of production, reproduction, transformation, conditioning and disappearance — in an inherently interdependent, dynamic, unstable and changing whole. For Lawson, all of social reality exists this way and all social structures have the same ontology, regardless of whether they are studied currently by academics who call themselves economists or political scientists or sociologists, etc.

The first conclusion then that is taken from this description of social ontology is that the disciplinary separation that currently exists between the social sciences is unjustified:

[T]he materials and principles of social reality are the same across economics, sociology, politics, anthropology, human geography, and all other disciplines concerned with the study of social life. Hence I think we must accept that there is no legitimate basis for distinguishing a *separate* science of economics. Rather, economics is best viewed as at most a division of labour within a single social science. (Lawson, 2006, p.499)

Because of the way that realism conceptualises the manner in which appropriate methods should be chosen for understanding phenomena — that is, methods must correspond to a description of social ontology — logically, because all social phenomena exist, according to Lawson's description, in the same way, the same method should be used to understand all social phenomena. Therefore,

there is no justification for separation between the social sciences. It should be possible to find one united method for social science. In that case, any disciplinary division would indeed simply be a “division of labour” within the one common pursuit: understanding the social world.

Lawson provides suggestions for what that method might be with his concepts of retrodution and contrast explanation. I will not go into either here because the specifics of such methodological proposals have no bearing on my argument. For more see Lawson (1997, 2003). The point I am making is that the logical conclusion of realist reasoning, as found in the work of Tony Lawson, but also in Orléan (2011) and Searle (2010), for example, is that such an account of social ontology — to which both Orléan and Searle also largely prescribe — means that there should not be a division between the social sciences and that their subject matter should be able to be understood using a common method:

This point is essential; I believe that the social sciences share a common intelligibility. I propose the term “unidisciplinary” for this framework, which aims to overcome the artificial divisions that currently exist between the social sciences.¹ (Orléan, 2011, p.186)

A consequence of this investigation is that all of human social-institutional reality has a common underlying structure. Now if this is right, it is a mistake to treat different branches of the social sciences, such as sociology and economics, for example, as if they dealt with fundamentally different subject matters. (Searle, 2010, pp.201-202)

This is not a conclusion that is conducive to pluralism. The result of Lawson's description of social ontology is to understand that all social phenomena have the same ontology. The idea that realism puts forward is that the correct way to understand phenomena is to use methods that presuppose the same ontology as the thing that you are studying. The aim then, which comes logically from this train of reasoning, is that we should try and develop a method for understanding social phenomena that would correspond to the description of social ontology given to us by Lawson. This method would then be able to be used by all social scientists no matter what phenomenon they were trying to understand. The conclusion here is not that a plurality of approaches is the best way forward for economics and for social science. The conclusion that realism presents is that it is possible to find out what the correct method for understanding social phenomena is and therefore that is what we should do.

3. The inconsistencies between pluralism and realism

The idea that it is possible for us to know the right way to understand social phenomena is obviously inconsistent with the arguments of pluralism, of which I largely base my understanding on the work of Dow (1998, 2010). What pluralism argues is almost the opposite. The argument, rather, is that we do not, and cannot, know the right way to understand social phenomena. Therefore, the best thing that we can do is to embrace as many different types of research methods as possible and to encourage individual researchers to use as many varied methodological approaches as possible. Crudely, the idea is that because we cannot know the right way to understand social phenomena, we will increase our chances of better doing so by using a variety of different research methods. I

repeat, this is inconsistent with realism. Realism's logic ends by arguing that we should develop one method for social science. Pluralism's whole argument is that we need to accept and use many different methods. However, both of these positions enjoy somewhat general support among heterodox economists. This creates inconsistencies within, and I believe therefore weakens, the arguments presented advocating reform in economics. The monolithic position that the mainstream of economics currently enjoys must mean that without a united front, the heterodox agenda has very little chance of succeeding. What then are we to do?

One way would be to simply follow one or the other, to be either a realist or a pluralist. The other would be to try and find a consensual and consistent middle ground between realism and pluralism. I believe that the latter has more hope of building the consensus needed among heterodox economists to present the united front referred to above. Not only does the theoretical argument itself need to be consistent, as many heterodox economists as possible need to get on board. Rather than isolate either the more realist or pluralist camps, a consistent compromise between the two ideas seems to me to have more chance of bringing everyone together.

A good starting point for rendering these two theoretical arguments consistent with one another is to question what I believe is the weakest assertion of the realist argument: the idea that, once we have a description of social ontology, we will necessarily be able to develop methods that will be appropriate for understanding that same reality. Can the description of social ontology presented by Lawson really be understood using some common methodological

structure? I have argued previously that the answer, in fact, is no (Slade-Caffarel, 2013, 2016).

I will not detail why I believe that to be the case here for the only aim in this paper is to find a coherent crossover version of pluralism and realism. The point I am making is simply that if we begin to doubt the possibility of finding some united social scientific methodology then this creates room for a dose of pluralism within a realist framework. And I do not think that it is much of a stretch to doubt, somewhat, the possibility of being able to find such a united method.

If we go back to Lawson's description of social ontology, it is one in which all entities are constantly changing. That is obviously going to be a state of affairs that is particularly difficult to understand. Furthermore, as referred to briefly above, Lawson's methodological suggestions of retroduction and contrast explanation do not provide very strict indications for how research is to proceed. Indeed, they leave much to the individual preferences of individual researchers. Suffice it to say that despite realist reasoning logically concluding that the way forward should be to find a united method for social science, in practice, doing this in fact can prove very difficult. Moreover, much of what is suggested leaves scope for individual preferences and would therefore include a variety of methodological approaches.

The inherently dynamic and changing social world described by Lawson means that the argument of realism could be altered to fit more easily with that of pluralism. The majority of the realist argument can remain; there is no need to alter that rationale of arguing that we should outline what we believe reality to be and that we should expect the methods used by social theories to respect such

a reality. The difference with what I am suggesting here is that, with a reality such as the one described by Lawson, we can also concede the point to pluralism that such a reality is very difficult to understand. I would even go so far as to say that it is so difficult to understand that there is most probably no way of knowing how to do so without trying as many different approaches as possible.

Whether or not this argument is believed to be right, I do think that it finds a middle ground between the arguments of realism and the arguments of pluralism. On the one hand, we keep the assertion that we can know what reality is like and that we should outline a description of social ontology that we can use to keep theoretical approaches faithful to such a reality. On the other, we keep the argument that reality is very difficult to understand and that therefore the best way to do so is to use a plurality of methodological approaches. One problem, however, remains. The example of mainstream economics means that, even if using many methodological approaches might be a good thing, not all methodological approaches should be embraced. Lawson's critique concludes that we can assert that mainstream economics is using a method that is inappropriate for social material. How then, while fostering pluralism, do we continue to police methodological approaches that do not respect reality as we conceive it to be? How do we keep out unrealistic theories? For pluralism and realism to be consistent, we need a pluralism with boundaries.

4. Pluralism needs boundaries: Realist Normative Methodology

The boundary set to pluralism by realism is that the research methods used by theories must presuppose an ontology that respects an outlined vision of social ontology. My proposal, therefore, for making pluralism and realism consistent

with one another, is to set up a framework that would be able to judge whether or not a theory's presupposed ontology respected such a vision. This framework would analyse methodology, in the sense that it would derive the ontological presuppositions of given theories. It would be normative, in the sense that it would conduct such an analysis with a final aim of providing a judgment. It would be realist because this judgment would be made with regard to whether or not a theory's presupposed ontology respected the description of social ontology deemed real. I therefore call the framework Realist Normative Methodology.

I base the process for conducting such an analysis and judgment on the manner in which mainstream economics is criticised in Lawson (2006). In short, following the outline of Lawson's description of social ontology, the argument goes as follows: "modern mainstream economics is just the reliance on certain forms of mathematical (deductivist) method" (Lawson, 2006, p.489). Mainstream economics is defined by the method that unites this school of thought: mathematical modelling. Then, because, "all methods have ontological presuppositions or preconditions" we are able to derive what kind of an ontology is presupposed by the method identified above (Lawson, 2003, p.12). In the case of mainstream economics:

[T]he ontological presuppositions of the insistence on mathematical modelling include the restriction that the social domain is everywhere constituted by sets of isolated atoms. (Lawson 2006, p.495)

We now know what kind of an ontology is presupposed by the methods used by mainstream economics. All that is left to do is to compare this to how social ontology exists according to Lawson and then to judge whether or not the presupposed ontology of mainstream economics conforms to this description. Lawson's judgment is that this ontology does not conform to his description or, in his words, "a world of isolated atoms [...] may actually be rather rare in the social realm" (Lawson, 2006, p.495). Here, we have a process of critique that could be generally applied to all theories that would like to take part in this hypothetical realist pluralist space. In general terms then, the process for judging whether a theory can be admitted or not would be:

Realist Normative Methodology:

1. Define real ontology
2. Define the theory analysed by method
3. Infer ontology from method
4. Judge a theory's presupposed ontology by its proximity to the defined real ontology

Unless the result of such an analysis was that only one methodological approach remained, this process would be one that would concurrently create a space that was pluralist and realist. Theories within this space would at once have varied methodological approaches and also be held to the requirement that the methods that they use presuppose a realist description of social ontology. What we need to do then is twofold. First, we need to, among heterodox economists, generally agree upon a description of social ontology that can be used as a

measuring stick. Second, we would need to conduct a realist normative methodological analysis of all theories that could potentially be a part of pluralist and realist heterodox economics. Theories that did not pass the test would be rejected.

If this could happen then we would resolve the theoretical inconsistencies between realism and pluralism. Furthermore, the arguments made by heterodox economists for how to reform economics would be strengthened. Mainstream economics, and unrealistic approaches like it, would not be allowed to partake in heterodox economics. This would make sense for a school — heterodox economics — that, by definition, is opposed to this mainstream. Moreover, it would form a consistent basis for saying why heterodox economics is opposed to the mainstream and for demonstrating what kind of an alternative methodological proposal it is making. If there is ever going to be a chance to reform the way economics is practiced, the argument against the mainstream needs to be strong. Inconsistent arguments are not strong. This is just one proposal for how to render the arguments of realism and pluralism consistent. But this consistency is crucial if the reformative agenda of heterodox economics is to succeed.

Footnotes

¹ My translation: « Ce point est essentiel : selon nous, les sciences sociales relèvent toutes d'une même intelligibilité. Nous proposons le terme d' « unidisciplinaire » pour qualifier cette perspective qui vise à surmonter les divisions artificielles que connaissent actuellement les sciences sociales en affirmant leur profonde unité conceptuelle » (Orléan, 2011, p.186)

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