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The ultimate goal of Economics and the Philosophy of Science (hereafter EPS) is to "give economists and other social scientists the necessary background to discuss methodological matters with authority (p. viii)". The projects, therefore, scholarly in conception and execution. It indeed contains no new contributions to philosophy of science, economics, economic methodology, nor are there new interpretations of what important figures have had to say in these fields. Consequently, this review will address the question of whether the book is a useful tool for economists who wish to become knowledgeable about methodology.

EPS aims to achieve its pedagogical goal of providing background by doing the following (all of the quotations in this list are from pp. vii-viii):  
1) Providing "...an accurate critical survey of the philosophy of science, beginning with the Vienna Circle, and to trace modern economists’ relationship with the philosophy of science."
2) Representing "...as many methodological positions as possible and to draw on the ideas of economists from all areas of the discipline, both mainstream and non-traditional.
3) Familiarizing readers with "modern arguments in economics that are supported by positions grounded in the philosophy of science."
4) Showing "that falsification (as conclusive disproof) does not exist in science...".
5) Discussing the “danger” that some of Kuhn’s positions present to science and intellectual activity in general.

With respect to 1), two things stand out. The first is the central position accorded to the philosophy of Popper throughout the entire book. Much space is devoted to Popper himself, while Lakatos and Feyerabend are characterized as belonging to a "Popperian School". Popper is undoubtedly an important figure and economists who write about methodology have given him much, perhaps too much, attention. But seeing the whole of philosophy of science as somehow related to Popper’s writings has led Redman to leave serious lacunae in her survey of philosophy of science, especially with respect to issues that philosophers of science have thought particularly important in the last fifteen years or so.

For example, I would have thought that the big topic in recent philosophy of science has been scientific realism. A quick look at the titles of books by prominent philosophers of science and articles appearing in journals like Philosophy of Science and The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science will bear this out. There is no discussion, or even mention, of the field in EPS. This silence might have been partly justified if these developments in philosophy of science were irrelevant to economics, but such is obviously not the case. The most discussed work in all of economic methodology, Friedman’s "The Methodology of Positive Economics", is often characterized as expressing instrumentalism, a variety of anti-realism. I would agree that de-emphasis of the Friedman is, by now, a good thing, but it is very odd that a survey with any claim to completeness could omit this issue. Moreover, EPS’s very large bibliography (for which a near-completeness claim is also made) does not list many really important works in the area, Van Fraassen (1978) and Hacking (1983), for instance.

I shall mention only two more developments in philosophy of science that are of importance to understanding economics but which are not mentioned in EPS. In connection with Popper, Redman includes three or four lines about methodological individualism (pp. 110 and 111), but there is no mention of the copious literature on microfoundations and theoretical reduction in general. Philosophers of science have recently begun to investigate relationships with philosophy of psychology in this regard. The interested reader will need to consult works not listed in EPS’s bibliography, for example, MacDonald and Pettit (1981), Rosenberg (1988), and Nelson (1990b). Another recent trend in philosophy of science is a new emphasis on the role of experiment. This is obviously relevant to economics because it is often criticized for the lack of controlled experimentation. The interested reader will need to consult works which Redman does not discuss, for example, Hacking (1983) and Cartwright (1983).3

It is untrue that the book “represents as many methodological positions as possible” unless
"represent" means "mention in a footnote", so 2) is not given a fully satisfactory treatment. The following are among the positions left undisputed: McCloskey's (1985) advocacy of studying rhetoric, calls for "methodological pluralism" by Caldwell (1982) and P. Roth (1987), Hausman's attempt to rehabilitate Millian Methodology (1981, 1990), institutionalism, Marxism, Post-Keynesianism, and what might be called "experimentalism" (A. Roth 1988 and Smith 1988); there is also virtually no discussion of econometric methodology, or the application of game theory to economics. It is correspondingly untrue that the book "draws on the ideas of economists from all areas of the discipline, both mainstream and non-traditional" since the work of marxists, institutionalists, experimentalists, etc. is left undisputed.

3) is somewhat more difficult to evaluate. Redman's phrase, "modern arguments in economics that are supported by positions grounded in the philosophy of science" is, in isolation, ambiguous. It might mean a) economic arguments that are somehow supported by philosophical positions, or b) methodological or philosophical arguments put forward by economists that have some affinities with things philosophers have written. Surely a) is of much greater importance to those interested in economic methodology; straight philosophy is best left to philosophers. EPS, however, is exclusively concerned with b). After reading through all the quotations from economists one is inclined to agree with Hausman's assessment (quoted by Redman on p. 101):

... almost all leading economists have at one time or another tried their hand at methodological reflection. The results are usually poor. If one read only their methodology, one would have a hard time understanding how Milton Friedman or Paul Samuelson could possibly win Nobel Prizes.

4) and 5) are entirely straightforward to deal with. No one enjoying even the slightest acquaintance with the philosophy of science since 1960 would have thought that real scientific theories can be "conclusively disproved" in a logical sense by the application of some empirical test. EPS contains many quotations stating this consensus. The Kuhnian "danger" Redman has in mind is the one discussed by most of the contributors to Lakatos and Musgrave (1970). If one takes Kuhn's famous distinction between normal science and extraordinary science as prescriptive rather than descriptive, then one might be tempted to strive to be a "normal scientist". And insofar as normal scientists are dull, poorly trained, dogmatic, and incapable of thinking critically, that would be a bad thing. Moreover, a Kuhnian prescription for economics may be misguided because it is not clear that any of the social sciences have emerged from a pre-paradigmatic state in which there is no normal science anyway.

The danger, however, lies entirely in the misapplication, not the application of Kuhn's positions. As Kuhn pointed out to his objectors in Lakatos and Musgrave (1970), the distinctive features of his position are not to be understood prescriptively. Furthermore, those doing normal science can be doing work that is important and imaginative, in short, work that is excellent science. Of course one might object to Kuhn by attacking the distinction between normal and extraordinary science, but even if the distinction does not hold up, it cannot be plausibly thought to pose any "danger" to science and intellectual activity in general. Redman seems, in the end, to realize this since she quotes part of Kuhn's defense against what is really a rather misguided charge.

To what extent, then, do 1)-5) enable EPS to achieve its goal of giving "economists and other social scientists the necessary background to discuss methodological matters with authority"? I have argued that 1) and 2) are well conceived aims, but that EPS is only partially successful in realizing them. 3) is of some use, but I think that most readers will wish for a more substantive methodological view of some real economics. 4) and 5) are dated and too inconsequential to be of much interest.

Notes
1. One recent attempt to connect this important part of current philosophy of science to economics in particular is Nelson (1990a).
2. The bibliography is generally weak on items that appear in philosophy journals and that do not have "economics" in the title. Just a few of the many very interesting and highly publicized works that do not appear are Braybrooke (1987), MacDonald and Pettit (1981), Rosenberg (1988), and Roth (1987). There are also a number of misprints that may make the items that are in the bibliography hard to find.
3. There is also no discussion of the methodology of the controlled experimentation that has been done in economics. The interested reader will want to consult A. Roth (1988) and Smith (1988).
4. Those wanting an introduction to a) will still do well to consult Blaug (1980). Blaug also discusses the "Popperian School", Kuhn, and does quite a lot of b), so it is, on the whole, a much more useful book. The advantages of EPS over the Blaug volume are a somewhat clearer and more complete presentation of Popper's views, longer and more numerous quotations, and an updated (though still inadequate) bibliography.
5. Redman takes no note of the great philosophical and methodological interest generated by recent Kuhn-inspired social studies of science. A good work to consult for an
introduction to this literature as well as bibliographic assistance is Woolgar (1987).

6. My impression is that "other social scientists" are currently primarily interested in a completely different set of methodological issues. They may find the discussions of the Popperian School and Kuhn of some interest, but will probably find a book such as Hollis and Lukes (1982) a better introduction to the appropriate philosophical questions.

References