

# Department of Economics

## Working Paper

**Samuels on Methodological  
Pluralism in Economics**

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# Samuels on Methodological Pluralism in Economics

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## **Abstract.**

**Abstract:** Warren Samuels was an influential proponent of methodological pluralism in economics. This short paper discusses his understanding of methodological pluralism, and argues that it is based on three distinct components: (1) his critique of the idea that theories have epistemic foundations and his ‘matrix approach to meaningfulness,’ (2) his belief that the absence of meta-principles for science combined with our human psychology create an existential dilemma for theorists and policy-makers, and (3) his understanding of relativism, social constructivism, and ‘limited but affirmative’ defense of nihilism against the charge of skepticism. The paper closes with a brief discussion of what Samuels’ methodological pluralism might tell us about historiography and the history of economics.

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## 1. Introduction

Among Warren Samuels' many contributions to the field of economic methodology, his influential defense of methodological pluralism stands out, both as an important reflection on his overall thinking about economics and policy and in the challenges it poses to conventional views about knowledge and truth in economics.<sup>1</sup> Though Samuels only began characterizing his thinking as methodologically pluralist relatively late in his career, he had advanced ideas from the beginning, based on his extensive study of the history of economic theory and policy, which could have easily gone by that name. Thus, when in the late 1990s economic methodologists began to debate what the terms 'pluralist' and 'pluralism' meant and implied about economics (see, Salanti and Screpanti, 1997), Samuels was well prepared to articulate his interpretation of them. Indeed he was already familiar with methodological pluralism as had been developed in connection with the history and philosophy of science by Paul Feyerabend in *Against Method* (Feyerabend, 1975), which Samuels had probably read by the late 1970s at the latest.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, his own views were primarily the product of his understanding of intellectual history and economics, so that it was not the logic of knowledge and truth as abstract epistemological categories which drove his thinking about pluralism, but more what history told us about what economic theories and policies could achieve in the way of persuasiveness and credibility in a world in which they were regarded as more or less adequate and generally contested.

At the same time, Samuels also believed that there were fundamental – indeed existential –

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<sup>1</sup> For brief discussions of Samuels' work in general including his methodological thinking, see Davis (2012) and Biddle, Davis, and Medema (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Wade Hands for this dating.

limits on what human thinking could achieve in any domain, and he used this philosophical view of the world to explain how economic theories and policies acquired an at best tenuous status that he believed called for a pluralist stance. However, his methodological pluralism also left him with a problem about which he felt strongly, namely, whether he ought to regard himself as a relativist, a much maligned posture in a time when positive science was a largely unquestioned ideal (despite – or perhaps partly on account of – Feyerabend’s defense of anarchism), and this led him to develop his unrepentant ‘limited but affirmative’ defense of nihilism against the charge of skepticism.

This paper seeks to explain the nature and grounds for Samuels’ understanding of methodological pluralism. The second section presents his critique of the idea that there are epistemological foundations for knowledge and truth in connection with what he called a ‘matrix approach to meaningfulness.’ The third section discusses his view of the limitations of human psychology, given the nature of social reality, and his emphasis on the necessity of making existential choices in regard to theory and policy when meta-principles which might justify those choices do not exist. The fourth section describes Samuels’ relativist position and his defense of it against the charge of skepticism in connection with his view that knowledge needs to be seen as socially constructed. The last section closes by commenting on possible implications of Samuels’ methodological pluralism for the historiography, or economic methodology, of the history of economics.

## **2. ‘The matrix approach to meaningfulness’**

Samuels always saw the history of economics as intellectual history (Samuels, 1972). The history of economics could not be confined to a record of doctrines economists have advanced, particularly as found in a handful of key written texts, since these doctrines had to be understood in their historical context along with many other types of historical evidence and materials. That is, economic doctrines do not stand on their own, however plausible and well-argued they may appear to be, but have their meaning and credibility according to how well they along with many other historical materials speak to the issues of their time. While this seems an obvious and correct point to make about how to understand the history of economics, Samuels argued that it turns out to be more far-reaching than it initially appears when one considers the character of the world which economic doctrines must somehow explain together with the problem of representation.

First, social reality is itself heterogeneous and ambiguous ... [which] permits a complex and heterogeneous body of knowledge thereof. Second, our modes of intellectualizing and interpreting social reality are complex and heterogeneous: there are diverse epistemological credentials, diverse modes of thought, and diverse systems of rationality (306).

Both sides of the equation, that is, social reality and our thinking about it thus have many dimensions, and the problem of representation is that this makes their fit to one another an especially complicated matter. Despite this, Samuels' opinion about how we ought to proceed is nonetheless clear. Contrary to the popular view that a well-developed economic theory is coherent, cohesive, and consistent, he argues that a well-developed economic theory must rather be multi-faceted, flexible, and ambiguous in crucial ways if it is to be

serviceable for representing a world that is of a similar character. In effect, since there are many points of possible contact between economics and the economy, tightly constructed theories are unlikely to capture much and at best possess small scope. What we need instead are theories and economic policies which are openended enough that they can fit the world in more ways than we are able to anticipate.

This then tells us something important for Samuels about the producers of economic theory and policy. They do not – cannot – all see the world in the same way, because they occupy different locations in a world which is uneven and varied across its many locations. This implies that there must always be “differences in problems and questions posed and treated, and differences between answers to the same and to different questions and problems” (307).

Looked at differently, there are different definitions of problems, different methods for obtaining data, different methods for drawing conclusions from data, different methods for the collation and reconciliation of differing conclusions draw from data; hence a diversity of ways of conceiving and solving problems, with competing and complementary resolutions and emphases, and with fundamental incompleteness a characteristic of each (307).

It can hardly be said, then, that “the development of economic thought [is] progress from error to truth, rather than ... a complex process and structure of inquiry and the conflict of ideas” (308). But how, then, should we investigate this “complex process and structure of

inquiry” if we hope to make sense of it? Samuels’ answer was his ‘matrix approach to meaningfulness.’

The basic idea behind his ‘matrix approach to meaningfulness’ is that ‘the meaningfulness of ideas, theories, and schools of thought resides in the matrix formed by the totality of views of each held by both advocates and critics’ (Samuels, 1995, 353). Two key concepts are central to this view. First, there is the standpoint or perspective (or selective perception as Samuels often put it) that determines a theorist’s point of entry. Its existence implies that any one theory or text is always limited by its perspective, and thus the notion that a theory can be general or comprehensive is a fallacy. ‘Truth,’ such as it is for Samuels, only emerges in the complex exchange between people operating from different perspectives, some of whom may be supportive of a theory and some of whom may be critical. This accordingly leads us to ask: how does this ‘emergence’ actually take place?

Second, then, the necessity of perspective implies the inevitability of criticism. “Criticism is important to elicit both the strengths and limitations and therefore the meaningfulness and the multiplicity of nuances and meanings as something is viewed from different positions” (354). Criticism for Samuels is accordingly the means by which economic theory and policy can emerge as coherent and acquire social impact. To be clear, criticism is not the same thing as skepticism. Rather it is simply the recurring sharp edge of a discipline’s shared investigation which taken as a whole can be explained as a process. In that regard, Samuels tells us that his ‘general strategy of inquiry ... begins with a modified version of the Dilthey-Weber concept of *verstehen*, moves on to Whitehead’s concept of *perspective*, and concludes

with Cohen's *systematic relativism* or *field theory*' (318).<sup>3</sup> The concept of *verstehen*, one should note, adds an interesting dimension to Samuels' interpretation of position and perspective. Essentially it means "the historian [puts] himself into the position of the original thinkers, to understand like, indeed, to think like them" (318). The historian is thus able to compare different perspectives, and consequently experience what is involved in (hypothetically) giving up one's own perspective.

This intellectual exercise, when carried out over many individuals, produces what Samuels then calls systematic relativism (perhaps his first careful statement of his understanding of relativism as a coherent doctrine). His position is straightforward. When historians with different views imaginatively put themselves in one another's places, they learn to carry out a kind of two-level, analogical reasoning that Cohen associated with a research community's shared development of a field of disparate yet interconnected ideas.

Systematic relativism depends on the researcher having "the insight that whatever can be said in one system can probably also be said in another seemingly mutually exclusive system, so that knowledge or understanding resides not only in that which can be said in each relevant system but also in the formulation of the difference(s) between the systems making them to appear so formidably mutually exclusive" (320). Thus systematic relativism is also characterized as field theory, since general understanding resides in the field of ideas and their positions in relation to one another. As Samuels explains Cohen's thinking: "What is necessary and possible, then, Cohen asserts, is a recognition that each

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<sup>3</sup> On the concept of perspective, Samuels cites Whitehead (1958). Felix Cohen (1907-1953) was an American lawyer, legal philosopher, and leading figure in the American legal realist movement.



type of social thought, each school of economics, and so on, is relative to each's opposing type and that the assertions of each 'are merely ordering principles for systematic thinking,' that the significance of any doctrine may lie only 'in its function in organizing inquiry'" (321).<sup>4</sup>

When Samuels later developed an interest in the nature of language as an interpretive system, and re-approached economics as a particular kind of discourse and conversation, he had occasion to reframe these views in terms of the idea of the hermeneutic circle. Language is a system of interpretation, but "interpretation is interpretive-system specific" implying that "there are no meta-criteria on which to choose between alternative theories, etc., with any serious degree of conclusivity, except by selecting the premise on which rests the theory thereby chosen" (Samuels, 1990, 11). This is the idea of the hermeneutic circle whereby our understanding of the whole of a theory depends on the understanding of our entry points while our understanding of our entry points depends on our understanding of the whole of a theory. An important implication of the circle, then, is that our arguments depend on our assumptions in a 'self-referential' way. Samuels advanced this analysis in part to defend his matrix view and systematic relativism, since it was another way of striking down linear ways of thinking.<sup>5</sup> But doing so also allowed him to place special emphasis on an idea that would become central to his defense of methodological pluralism: the absence of meta-criteria or meta-principles. At the same time, it was their absence,

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<sup>4</sup> Samuels' inclusion of page numbers accompanying the Cohen quotations is omitted here. Along with Cohen, Samuels cites Ernst Nagel for similar arguments in regard to Nagel's realist view of theories (Nagel, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> He also did so to explain the nature of ideology: "One function of ideology and the myth and symbol system of society is to obfuscate the fact of the arbitrary selection of interpretive base" (Samuels, 1990, 11).

coupled with his view of human intellectual psychology, which produced what might be called an existential dilemma for the theorist and policy-maker.

### **3. The economist's existential dilemma**

Behavioral economics became influential in economics at the end of the twentieth century by showing that people's psychological heuristics and biases play an important role in economic behavior. Samuels, however, anticipated this sort of argument, though in a domain much closer to home for the economist, namely, in connection with the heuristics and biases of theorists and policy-makers. Contrary to the self-congratulating view of many in the economics profession that their own research and investigative practices are objective, scientific, and free of bias, Samuels believed that economists, like all other people, were subject to certain kinds of blindness and willful misperception that not infrequently gave them an unrealistic view of their research.<sup>6</sup> Thus, on the one hand, as emphasized above, human thinking is in Samuels' view is always perspectival. Yet on the other hand, ironically, theorists perennially claim that they are able to advance general theories more or less on their own or independently of one another (or at least only in the company of those with whom they share the same fundamental assumptions), that is, without a sense of how their theories obtain what standing they have only within a matrix of ideas. Samuels asks, then, why is it that economists are so disinclined to recognize the role of perspective and the interaction of often opposed ideas in the development of

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, he never hesitated to say that economics was thoroughly value-laden, and that economists regularly made value-judgments in their research which they typically denied. See, for example, Samuels (1981, 1988).

economics and in their own research? His answer is simple: “The belabored human mind tends to prefer simplicity and unity to complexity and diversity and thereby to perceive only burdensomeness in the latter” (Samuels, 1972, 307). In effect, a simplicity heuristic or bias in human psychology causes theorists to neglect the complexity and diversity that reality actually exhibits, and thus causes them to resist “open-endedness and ambiguity (such as plurality of meaning)” that economic theory requires, instead preferring “determinacy and closure” (Samuels, 1998, 301; also cf. 1997, 67).

One manifestation of this is the tyranny of the received view, or “the role of the received cognitive system” (1972, 310), which imparts a special dynamic to the history of economics and policy. Faced with the challenge of how a multi-faceted reality ought to be addressed, theorists take what they already find in place and apparently accepted by others as evidently coherent and explanatory of the world.<sup>7</sup> But this overlooks something that Samuels believed a casual review of the history of economics readily ought to show us, namely, that “the history of the discipline *is* a history of controversy,” a history, moreover, in which the same controversies appear to be replayed and continually replicated (314). Seeing this as its history, one might think, would teach the economics profession that a matrix approach, or something along the lines of Samuels’ view, would constitute a better guide to understanding how economic theories develop. That this has not happened is grounds for Samuels’ claim that economists are no less free of psychological bias than other people in having a preference for determinacy and closure that prevents them from seeing the world as it is. Yet this alone does not add up to an existential dilemma.

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<sup>7</sup> This is what is now referred to in behavioral economics as status quo bias.

The economist's existential dilemma, then, arises out of this bias combined with a second psychological characteristic, namely, that people are disposed to make theoretical and policy choices despite the absence of secure meta-principles for grounding those choices. Samuels frames this in terms of the theorists' reliance on methodological entry points, despite the fact that they are self-referential and imply circular (in hermeneutic terms) argumentation.

Methodological pluralism ultimately rests on a belief in the necessity of choice in the absence of a single conclusive final methodological or epistemological principle. Choice has to be made between alternative methodologies each of which has its own internal limitations, and there is no single unequivocal, conclusive metaprinciple on which to make that choice (1998: 301).

Thus, not only do human beings exhibit a preference for simplicity and unity, and not only do they prefer to act rather than do nothing, but they also willfully turn a blind eye to the limitations their chosen points of entry possess. One might accordingly then say that the human response to the complexity and diversity of social reality is to act so as to impose order on the world. This, in fact, is one way to explain part of Samuels' oft-stated provocative definition of economics: "Economics is knowledge, it is social control, and it is psychic balm" (Samuels, 1972: 314). Neither the knowledge nor social control parts of his definition would surprise most economists (though the idea of social control would likely need to be re-phrased in more positive terms as the desirability of enacting policy based on good economics), but many would think the psychic balm idea in need of explanation. The interpretation offered here for Samuels is that it is the effect of a deep psychological need

to make the world appear as we would like it to be. Economics then serves this purpose when it recasts the world as harmonious and unified rather than as ridden by indeterminacy and conflict, however much this might betray economics' other goals of knowledge and social control. Let us turn, then, to Samuels' case for methodological pluralism.

### **3. Methodological pluralism**

Samuels' methodological pluralism constitutes the posture he believed was called for in light of his view of the cognitive character of the economics profession. One might reasonably think it too enlightened a sort of position to recommend to economists, given his view of human psychology, but to that concern he might have had an answer. For him methodological pluralism is an epistemological pluralism, and not an ontological pluralism, which denies there is a single reality. Samuels did not deny there is a single social reality; he simply saw that social reality as heterogeneous and diverse.<sup>8</sup> Thus, if the greatest resistance to pluralism is based on thinking it includes ontological pluralism, then setting this aside might allow the merits of methodological or epistemological pluralism to be fairly considered. Indeed, there are grounds for thinking the economics profession might be disposed to methodological/epistemological pluralism, since it already practices a sort of *de facto* pluralism in employing a division of labor across areas of specialization which allows the questions, methods, and criteria for validating research to vary by specialization.

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<sup>8</sup> Though he allows he might be wrong about this: "The possibility that the world is not heterogeneous, and that the multiplicity of facets may be illusory, is not denied" (Samuels, 1998, 302).

In effect, then, economists already agree that the social reality of the economy is heterogeneous and diverse, and accept that it needs to be approached in multiple ways with a variety of concepts and methods.

But this still leaves the worry which many have that an explicit commitment to epistemological pluralism, because it abandons the standard of a single truth and knowledge, is relativist and must thus imply skepticism. On this view, the notion that truth is multiple renders the concept of truth itself meaningless. In the 'anything goes' version of this critique, then, everything and nothing is true, implying that we can believe nothing, and are confined to skepticism. Furthermore, with this line of argument, epistemological pluralism even undermines itself, since it is no more likely true than false.

Samuels' argument, however, is not that the concept of truth is meaningless, but rather presupposes the concept of truth in arguing that there are no ultimate criteria or meta-principles by which we can definitively say what it is that is true.

The rationale of methodological pluralism is that, in the absence of metacriteria by which by one methodology can be shown unequivocally to be superior to all others, analyses should not be rejected solely on the basis of methodological considerations. On the other hand, methodological anarchy is avoided by emphasizing, first, the identification of the precise nature, grounds, and limits of particular methodologies; second, the importance of the *process* by which knowledge and the credentials of knowledge are pursued and knowledge worked out; and third, the process of *criticism* itself (301).

It is not the case, then, that ‘anything goes’ *per se*, though it could conceivably be the case that ‘anything goes’ which comes with sufficient clarity about the “grounds and limits” of the methodology employed in its defense. In terms of the idea that entry points have a self-referential character, Samuels’ view is simply that one needs to be explicit about the grounds for one’s positions, since they provide the justification for those positions. They may not be absolute justifications by some abstract philosophical standard, but they are justifications nonetheless because they allow the community of researchers to judge, relative to the matrix of practices employed across the whole of research, the adequacy of a particular researcher’s position on an issue. In effect, what Samuels seeks to do is make the individual researcher’s subjective hermeneutic circle a virtuous circle by making it public, known, and transparent. Central to this, as he states above, is that this make clear to all what the “*process [is] by which knowledge and the credentials of knowledge are pursued and knowledge worked out,*” and simultaneously places a premium on criticism to maintain openness and scrutiny of individual researcher’s work in that process. This is the means by which objectivity is achieved in science.

Samuels of course was an institutionalist economist in the Veblen-Commons tradition as well as an historian and methodologist of economics, and this dimension of his thinking needs to be emphasized in explaining his understanding of methodological pluralism. Thus what he states in the passage above clearly reflects his institutional analysis of the economics profession as an organized research community that functions according to conventions, explicit rules, inherited practices, and organizing structures. When he calls for methodological pluralism, then, what he is recommending is not so much the adoption

of a new set of philosophical convictions by economists, but a change in the institutional nature of the economics profession, particularly in regard to its conventions about the production and evaluation of research and policy. That is, methodological pluralism does not make claims about what counts as truth and knowledge (and good policy) in economics – this is the job of economists themselves – but rather it focuses on how the claims which economists make about what they believe to be true come to have the standing they do. In effect, truth is embedded in those social structures which allow the economics profession to rule on the particular claims individual researchers make.

This, then, is what Samuels understood as a social constructivist approach to science and knowledge (Samuels, 1995). Social constructivism is a sociology of scientific knowledge approach which argues that the social organization of scientific communities determines what counts as knowledge in those communities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Hands, 2001, 190ff, 207ff). In contrast non-constructivist views assume that the nature of the world determines the content of science, and that scientists are only left the task of finding out what this is. Samuels explicitly rejects this position on the grounds that it constitutes a form of scientific determinism which removes “room for human free will and decisions, including determination of which causal process(es) will be set in motion and/or reinforced, and how” (Samuels, 1993, 237). That is, the notion that the nature of the world is given and inalterable not only rules out any substantive role for scientists in explaining the world but also rules out the possibility that scientists may reasonably change their beliefs about the nature of the world. Samuels characterizes his resistance to this kind of thinking his ‘limited but affirmative defense of nihilism’ where what he is nihilistic about



are non-constructivist accounts of science that ignore the way in which the scientists and the organization of science influences science. A methodological pluralist, consequently, not only accepts that there are no conclusive meta-criteria that underlie science, but also defends the principle that the openness of science needs to be seen as central to the organization of science.

Thus Samuels was not a skeptic in the ordinary sense of that term meaning someone who always doubts and holds no firm beliefs. He certainly held firm beliefs about economics, which he also regarded as true beliefs, though he thought it important to emphasize that this included the possibility that he could be mistaken. Nor was Samuels a relativist if that is taken to imply radical subjectivism about ideas. Rather with his matrix approach to meaningfulness he judged individual beliefs as 'relative to' something in particular, namely the totality of views on any given subject, which taken together provided as objective a foundation for knowledge as he thought is available to us. Methodological pluralism, therefore, is best seen as a doctrine regarding what is needed to secure good epistemic practices in scientific communities. In this regard, it is probably close to what many economists and scientists would defend were they to step back from what they individually advocate in their own work and think in terms of what maintains policy and research in their fields overall. I turn in closing, then, to possible implications of Samuels' thinking for the historiography of the history of economics.

#### **4. Samuels' methodological pluralism and the historiography of the history of economics**

Samuels' own view of historiographic practice in the history of economics drew upon his training at the University of Wisconsin where he was systematically exposed to different and often strongly opposed schools of thought by his professors (Samuels, 1996). And, as he had made the economic role of government the focus of his research, and as this subject is one of the most polarizing in economics, he became aware from quite early on that schools of thought, over and above laying out their views, devoted remarkable amount of rhetorical effort to legitimizing their respective standpoints. At the same time, he also came to believe that the desire to legitimate ideas often came at the expense of good science, because a steadfast defense of a view is one-sided by nature. Accordingly he developed his matrix approach to meaningfulness specifically as a response to this legitimation problem. But of course economists' impulse to legitimate their approaches is not eliminated by taking a matrix approach. Indeed, Samuels' matrix approach was designed to accommodate and compensate for this impulse by producing a discourse whose wider scope comprehended and exposed an array of conflicting views.

One lesson in this is that historians of economics need to recognize and somehow separate out the role that economists' efforts to legitimize their standpoints plays in the articulation of their views. In principle this may seem a reasonable goal, but in practice it may well be doubted that clear line can be drawn between advancing an idea and seeking to promote it. Indeed, Samuels' matrix approach does not actually attempt to make this distinction, but instead adopts a more indirect strategy in simply juxtaposing different types of views in the

hope that we may then be able to distinguish promotion from content, and thereby judge the respective merits of any given approach relative to others. I suggest, then, in the spirit of his thinking that we add two direct methods of assessing the weight and significance of legitimizing discourse in economics: one that follows a traditional historiographic method and another that involves historians re-appraising the role that methodological reasoning plays in economists' defenses of their respective standpoints.

The traditional method involves identifying value judgments in discourse claimed to be positive and value-free. Legitimization operates on two levels in such cases. First, a text said to be positive and value-free is claimed to be objective and scientific, and on those grounds then said to merit acceptance. Second, the particular value judgments which are suppressed in the text are implicitly authorized under the cover of objectivity and science (demonstrating ironically that 'is' does imply 'ought'). Historians of economics, however, have established methods for detecting hidden value judgments. As Samuels emphasized in his own work on economic discourse (1990), language is variable in meaning, and thus often makes normative connotations close associations of seemingly value-neutral terms and expressions. A good example is 'rational' as used in standard choice theory in economics. The term gets its technical meaning from axioms applied to preferences which have no immediate normative content. But rational choices are also ones that satisfy individual preferences, so to be 'rational' is suddenly also to satisfy one's preferences. In addition, in ordinary language 'rational' is a term of praise, so choice theory in economics essentially tells us people ought to satisfy their preferences, whereas of course there are

many other meanings of 'rational' and associated things that people ought to do in order to be rational.<sup>9</sup>

Economists who represent rational choice theory as an objective and scientific account of choice behavior, then, are engaged in a legitimizing discourse that is distinct and separate from their analysis of preference-motivated choice. Their analysis of preference-motivated choice counts as an explanation of certain types of choices people make, but their claim that analysis of preference-motivated choice is rational, where that implies people ought to act on their preferences, mixes in and conceals value-judgments in the interest of legitimizing that view of choice as a universal theory of choice and rationality.

This historiographic method of analyzing economic texts is a well-established strategy for separating out legitimizing economics discourse from discourse that articulates economic views (if perhaps infrequently employed by historians of economics). A second less common strategy directly addresses ways in which economists defend their respective standpoints. This strategy was actively employed by the University of Amsterdam History and Methodology of Economics group (Mark Blaug, Marcel Boumans, Harro Maas, Tiago Mata, Mary Morgan, Geert Reuten, Peter Rodenburg, myself, and others),<sup>10</sup> and involved examining the ways in which economists selectively appropriate methodological tools and also past episodes in the history of economics to promote and legitimate their own research approaches. The Amsterdam group devoted special attention to the recent

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<sup>9</sup> This general argument is developed slightly differently and in greater detail in Hausman and McPherson (2006). Also see Boumans and Davis (2010, Ch. 7).

<sup>10</sup> The HME group was closed and broken up in 2011 under conditions of 'financial exigency' in the Amsterdam School of Economics.

history of economics. Thus one example from recent economics of this kind of legitimizing strategy is how proponents of the subjective well-being or happiness approach developed in behavioral economics justified that approach by arguing that it was shown to be methodologically progressive by early English utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham (e.g., Kahneman, Wakker, and Sarin, 1997). The strategy of such (arguably Whig) arguments is to defend a view, which may be contested and perhaps not theoretically or empirically particularly well-founded, by saying that not only has that view been held by a notable figure in the history of economics, but more importantly by suggesting that the economic methodology involved, as associated with certain types of explanatory concepts and potential empirical justifications, justifies that approach. That is, the prime defense of a theory is meta-theory, or economic methodology. Further, since citing notable proponents is generally seen to be a weak defense of a theory (though still commonly employed), the weight of legitimation here falls on the recourse to methodology. Samuels of course would be quick to remind us that there are no absolutes in this domain either, but it is interesting to speculate on why this particular method of legitimation might be appealing to economists.

Most obviously, making reference to methodological strategies claimed to support a view suggests that the research involved in producing that view has proper scientific credentials, implying that the explanations provided ought to be regarded as well grounded. But there is another way to look at the role methodological argument plays for economists in justifying their views which is especially evident when our focus as historians of economics is recent economics. Note, then, that in contrast to the older history of economics which is

largely past us and seems comparatively settled, recent economics, as still incomplete and open-ended, is unclear in its value, since it may turn out that what seems important today is not tomorrow. In fact it is an illusion that past economics was not also open-ended and unclear in value at the time, though it is understandable with the weight of history before them that that historians often fail to approach the past with a sense of the risks research always carries. In any event, what recent economics tells us about economists' recourse to methodological arguments is that they offer an appearance of closure which their explanations alone typically lack. This is especially important since economists have come to do theory less and model more, since theory at least makes claims to generality, while no one denies that models are by nature partial accounts of the world. Indeed from Samuels' perspective they are examples *par excellence* of selective perception, and thus inescapably open-ended forms of representation even if models seem highly determined in virtue of being carefully specified. What we then see, when we look at recent economics, is that economic methodology arguments are often appropriated as a means of advancing sophisticated standpoint justifications meant to accommodate the specific perspectives the researcher has chosen to adopt.

At the same time, interestingly, this recourse to legitimizing methodological argument on the part of economists rarely draws on, and indeed operates at significant remove from the specialist economics methodology literature.<sup>11</sup> In effect, economists employing this type of legitimizing strategy need to be in a position to employ it selectively as well, and without

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<sup>11</sup> Thus economists commonly write about modeling without any recognition of the extensive research on the part of philosophers and economic methodologists on the subject of modeling.

interference from researchers specialized in the field of economic methodology who might dispute how methodological concepts are interpreted and applied. This further shows the legitimizing nature of such appropriations, but also makes it possible to see more clearly what the substantive content of the relevant view is when this adventitious methodology discourse is stripped away.

In closing, it is worth emphasizing again that Samuels was not a skeptic in the ordinary sense of that term. He did not deny, that is, that economic explanations often contain valuable content which we may accept, at least provisionally, as being true of the world. Further, that we change our views of what we regard as true only reinforces the reliance we place on the category of truth as a tool of thinking, if not as an ontological category. What was problematic for him was the response that many researchers and policy-makers seem prone to exhibit to this unsettling constant change in what gets counted as true. This is the source of the legitimizing impulse in economics which he thought makes the process of criticism that is necessary to science all the more difficult to carry out (or as he would say, that continually 'obfuscates' that process). But he was also convinced that a human desire for simplicity and unity will never be abated. Thus it remains a task for historians of economics to always parse the wheat from the chaff. To be good at doing this required that one be a methodological pluralist.

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