

Further Comments on McCloskey's Argument

A.W. Coats and Steven Pressman

A.W. COATS

It is difficult to summarize McCloskey's argument briefly and fairly, given the wide range of topics he covers and the distinctiveness and force of his literary style. The conscientious critic faces the task of separating the grains of cognitive wheat from the polemical and declamatory chaff; of exposing and assessing the central argument without being unduly distracted by the accompanying rhetorical embellishments and the parade of sources and authorities unfamiliar to many methodologists, let alone humble workaday practising economists.

The interpretative problem posed by McCloskey's recent publications is to distinguish among three interrelated targets of his attack:

- i) The more extreme manifestations of "modernism" proposed by certain philosophers and specialist methodologists, which are now generally discredited;
- ii) the crude misuse or abuse of modernist claims by illiterate economist practitioners seeking a weapon against their professional opponents and other 'softer' social scientists;
- iii) the best predominantly anti-positivist current literature in economic methodology. It is currently in a state of flux owing to the loss of confidence in economics as a science, and recent controversies in the philosophy, history and sociology of science.

On a sympathetic reading, it seems that McCloskey is mainly concerned with (ii), while devoting most of his polemic energy to attacking (i)—largely a dead horse—and unintentionally or deliberately misrepresenting (iii). In so doing he is diverting attention from the current stimulating and constructive work in economic methodology, thereby undermining his professed aim of promoting good disciplinary conversation. Statements of the kind that "all talk of causes is [merely?] metaphorical" or that "philosophical consistency" is merely an "appeal to a figure of speech" (pp. 80, 101) gloss over or obscure matters that require much more thorough discussion.

A major point that deserves further development is McCloskey's contention that "the standards of 'good' reasons and 'warrantable' belief and 'plausible' conclusions" are, in a sense, immanent since they come from

the conversations of practitioners themselves, in their laboratories or seminar rooms or conference halls. It is the sort of evaluation that economists and other dealers in ideas do anyway, by professional habit (p. 29).

Such conversations are at least partly closed to outsiders, for "if you are not familiar with the history of a conversation, you will misunderstand the remarks made in it, and if you are bold, you will make remarks of your own that do not bear on the issue" (pp. 130–1). While all conversations, whether in science or elsewhere, have common features that the rhetorical approach emphasizes, each field has its 'special topics' which are only known to the cognoscendi. And although he does not explicitly say so, perhaps the best argument against orthodox methodology, especially in its more rigid and dictatorial manifestations, is that the

outsider is incapable either of understanding or evaluating what is going on among the practitioners. But if this is what McCloskey is really getting at he could have done so much more clearly and directly. Indeed, his frequent allusions to the role of the audience and the social character of knowledge, science and scholarship, lead directly into the existing rich and rapidly growing literature of the history and sociology of science. Whether this literature eliminates the need for epistemological or methodological analysis and interpretation, as for example advocates of the Strong program maintain, is still unsettled. Unfortunately McCloskey does not discuss how to distinguish between "well-educated participants in the conversations of our civilization and of our field" (p. 46) and the rest of mankind. Nor does he shed any light on the structure and internal functioning of the scholarly and scientific communities who engage in disciplined conversations. Perhaps here is a function for the methodologist-cum-historian-cum-sociologist.

Beyond this, I believe, contrary to McCloskey, that a study of the recent literature of economic methodology, far from being inhibiting or constricting, is actually liberating—albeit confusing—given the wide variety, controversial character, and even incompatibility of current views, not to mention their transitional elements. The significant constraints and inhibitions in contemporary economics derive not from methodological literature, which has never exerted great influence, but from the organization and structure of the economics profession. Of particular importance, especially in the U.S.A., seem to be the relative homogeneity of economics textbooks; the standardization and narrowness of training, especially at the advanced level; and the influence of economic orthodoxy on such matters as the choice of suitable dissertation topics, professional placement and promotions (especially in the so-called elite academic institutions), and the management of the leading professional journals, learned societies, conference programs, and the award of prizes and honors. There is a growing professional protest literature focused on these matters, and many of McCloskey's legitimate complaints can be brought under this umbrella. Unfortunately professional inertia is such that no significant change is likely in this state of affairs.

STEVEN PRESSMAN

The failures of modernism lead McCloskey to plead that we give up on methodology. In its place he advocates a new focus—rhetoric. "Rhetoric is not a new methodology. It is antimethodology. It points out what we actually do, what seems to persuade us and why" (p. 51). We must examine how we speak and how we argue as economists, and we need to think about how economists can communicate better.

Unfortunately McCloskey does not provide guidelines for improving our rhetoric—a serious shortfall of the book. Instead, he believes, a mere desire to improve our rhetoric will have lasting professional benefits. We will become better teachers. "Economics is badly taught . . . because [economists] . . . teach by axiom and proof instead of by problem-solving and practice" (p. 178). In addition, relations with the natural sciences, which have abandoned modernism, and the social sciences, which have never accepted it, will improve. Finally, the public esteem of economists will rise if we recognize that common sense arguments, questionnaires, introspection, and other rhetorical devices are legitimate forms of argument.

While McCloskey is good on why methodology is bad, he is bad on why rhetoric is good. The failings of modernism do *not* entail the demise of all methodology. Nor do they necessitate a rhetorical cure. The rhetoric of economics might not have been a problem, in which case a cure would have been unnecessary. The argument for self-consciousness about rhetoric is the

inability of economists to communicate clearly. This argument is independent of any methodological problems, and it is not an argument that McCloskey makes strongly or clearly.

More importantly though, it seems to me that McCloskey has identified the problem incorrectly. It is not that economics ignores rhetoric, but that economics has a bad rhetoric. This rhetoric is not explicitly recognized as such, it is tacit, but it is a rhetoric nonetheless. That rhetoric is formalism.

Formalism says that English is messy and ambiguous. It is therefore hard to communicate precisely in English. Consequently, misunderstandings frequently arise. To alleviate these problems economic analysis should be couched in terms of formal mathematics to the greatest extent possible. Symbolic notation and formulas should replace words. Our goal as economists should be to communicate with each other in these terms and to educate others in this mathematical jargon. Metaphors, analogies, and explanations in English are meant only to remind us of the real arguments. They do not replace those arguments.

This rhetoric dovetails with both modernism and neoclassical economic analysis. Formalism as such is consistent with a body of economic knowledge that abstracts from all social, political, and psychological considerations. What is quantifiable is good; social relations and human irrationalities, which are messy and not subject to quantification, are bad. Formalism also runs counter to the common sense arguments, introspection, and questionnaires that McCloskey favors.

We thus return to the problems noted earlier. Economists cannot communicate with each other and cannot communicate with the untrained layman. To remedy this situation economics needs a new rhetoric. We need guidelines for improving our arguments and for clearly communicating them. McCloskey, unfortunately, does not provide this.