

THE EXCLUSION OF MORALITY IN LUDWIG VON MISES'S EPISTEMOLOGY: PRAXEOLGY IN DIALOGUE WITH R. G. COLLINGWOOD

*La exclusión de la moralidad en la epistemología de
Ludwig von Mises: la praxeología en diálogo con R. G.
Collingwood*

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Abstract

This article examines Ludwig von Mises's exclusion of moral considerations from praxeology as both a methodological achievement and a potential philosophical limitation. Mises's value-free science of human action isolates the formal means–end structure common to purposive action, thereby allowing economic analysis to proceed independently of judgments concerning the moral content of individual ends. The article argues that this exclusion should initially be understood as a legitimate methodological abstraction. It then brings Mises's conception of action into dialogue with R. G. Collingwood's distinction between impulsive, expedient, and moral action and with his philosophical theory of the *scale of forms*. Collingwood's analysis suggests that moral action can preserve an expedient means–end structure while adding the irreducible determination of duty. The article therefore concludes that the universality of the praxeological form does not establish the philosophical exhaustiveness of action: praxeology can remain valid within its explanatory domain without constituting a complete philosophy of human action.

Keywords: Mises - praxeology - human action – Collingwood - scale of forms - moral action

Resumen

Este artículo examina la exclusión de elementos morales en la praxeología de Ludwig von Mises, considerándola tanto un logro metodológico como una posible limitación filosófica. La ciencia de la acción humana libre de valores de Mises aísla la estructura formal de medios y fines común a la acción intencional, lo que permite que el análisis económico se desarrolle independientemente de los juicios relativos al contenido moral de los fines individuales. El artículo sostiene que esta exclusión debe entenderse, en un primer momento, como una abstracción metodológica legítima. Luego, establece un diálogo entre la concepción de la acción de Mises y la distinción que establece R. G. Collingwood entre acción impulsiva, expeditiva y moral, así como con su teoría filosófica de la *escala de formas*. El análisis de Collingwood sugiere que la acción moral puede conservar una estructura expeditiva de medios y fines al tiempo que añade la determinación del deber, que es irreducible a la forma expeditiva. Por lo tanto, el artículo concluye que la universalidad de la forma praxeológica no establece la exhaustividad filosófica de la acción: la praxeología puede seguir siendo válida dentro de su ámbito explicativo sin constituir una filosofía completa de la acción humana.

Palabras clave: Mises – praxeología – acción humana – Collingwood – escala de formas – acción moral

1. Introduction

Historically speaking, one of the consequences of the progressive specialization in the field of economic theory—accelerated since the application of mathematical tools to economic analysis in the late 19th century—was the demand for the theoretical purification of the economic phenomenon itself. This demand put pressure on the specialist to focus on economic facts independently of value judgments. To be effective, scientific analysis required a purely positive understanding of the phenomenon involved, i.e., of what is and not of what ought to be. The Austrian School of Economics also shared this positivistic spirit (in the broad sense). Economic science needed, above all, detachment from any moral perspective and focus on the bare facts. To make this possible, new epistemological foundations were accordingly required, ones that are suitable for studying economic phenomena and the laws of social cooperation “as the physicist studies the laws of nature” (Mises, 2007, p. 2), that is, as they present themselves as positive data independent of value judgments.

However, the empirical data of interest to the social scientist is in fact categorically distinct from that of the natural scientist. The difference lies in the fact that every social science—including economics—must describe human actions, that is, activities grounded in purpose and carried out deliberately. The concepts of purpose and will, on the other hand, have no place in the natural sciences (cf. Mises, 2007, p. 26). Therefore, human actions exhibit a type of regularity that is also categorically distinct from natural regularities. According to Mises, these actions possess a structure that makes possible a universal science of human action—a rational science tasked with

formally describing their structure, independent of any special circumstances related to a historical moment, a particular society, ethnicity, group or class. Such a science, being strictly formal, must exclude from its analysis any value-laden content of actions; it must be "value-free" (*wertfrei*), as Max Weber had already suggested before Mises (cf. Weber, 1949, pp. 1-47).

Especially in Mises's case, this 'positivization' of science thus entailed the expulsion of values from the realm of knowledge. With the motto: "There is no such thing as a normative science, a science of what ought to be" (Mises, 2005, p. 55), Mises has banished values from the realm of science. And in doing so, he is compelled to adopt an epistemological utilitarianism that, while different and more subtle than its classical version, nevertheless leads him to ground both his economic agent and the society that emerges from it on purely utilitarian and expedient foundations.

1.1. Rothbard's Critique of Mises's Utilitarianism

The conflict between moral values and utilitarianism, and the ethical implications of Mises's epistemology, have already generated an important discussion within the Austrian tradition, whose most important figure is, without a doubt, Murry Rothbard. Of interest for us is to note that the disagreement between the two economists does not consist of a rejection by Rothbard of Misesian economics or of the value-free character of praxeology. Rothbard accepted the principal elements of Mises's theory of human action and agreed that economic science, as such, cannot derive normative conclusions from its positive propositions. Their disagreement concerns a different question: whether Mises's utilitarian account of social cooperation can provide an adequate ethical foundation for liberalism.

Mises's defense of the market rests largely upon the capacity of private property, exchange, and the division of labor to coordinate individual plans and promote peaceful social cooperation. Economic science can demonstrate that certain policies frustrate the ends for which they are adopted and that socialism prevents rational economic calculation. For Rothbard, however, such demonstrations remain conditional upon the ends assumed. They can establish that particular means are inadequate, but they cannot establish which ends are morally legitimate or why individual liberty ought to be respected. A value-free science of means cannot by itself provide a justification for choosing "better" ends.

Mises believes in a harmony of rightly understood interests (cf. Mises, 1978, pp. 1-12), and he defends this view based on the distinction between the short and long term (temporal preference). For him, in a liberal society, the "rightly understood interests" of all social actors harmonize in the long run. But for Rothbard, "Mises has a grave problem" here (Rothbard, 1978, p. ii). He explains:

The great problem here is: why should people always consult their long-run, as contrasted to their short-run, interests? Why is the long-run the "right understanding"? [...] How can Mises, as a utilitarian, say that a lower time preference for the present is "better" than a higher? In brief, some moral doctrine beyond utilitarianism is necessary to assert that people should consult their long-run over their short-run interests. (Rothbard, 1978, p. ii)

Only a moral doctrine or "moral principles beyond utilitarianism" (p. iii) can provide the basis for legitimately speaking of "duty" and for judging something to be "better" than something else. When it comes to conflicts of interest in society, a mere appeal to the "harmony of correctly understood interests" cannot fully resolve the ethical problem, since particular persons or groups may in fact benefit from coercive privileges at the expense of others. To demonstrate that such privileges diminish general productivity or social cooperation is not yet to demonstrate that they are unjust. The question of justice, again, requires a criterion independent of the competing interests and subjective valuations involved.

Rothbard therefore sought to supplement the value-free science of human action with an objective ethics grounded in natural law and natural rights. In *The Ethics of Liberty* (1982/2002), he rejects the view that reason is restricted to selecting appropriate means for arbitrarily chosen ends. Natural-law philosophy, as he understands it, permits reason to investigate human nature and to identify principles governing the proper ends of social and political action. Liberty is thus defended not merely because it is useful or productive (expeditive), but because coercive aggression violates rights that belong to people by virtue of their nature. As he says, "Justice, not the weak reed of mere utility, must be the motivating force if liberty is to be attained" (2002, p. 258).

1.2. From the Austrian Debate to the Philosophical Problem

Rothbard's criticism identifies an important limitation in Mises's utilitarian liberalism. The value-free propositions of praxeology may explain the consequences of alternative means and institutional arrangements, but they cannot by themselves establish that liberty, property, or any other social end ought to be preferred. Rothbard sought to overcome this limitation by supplementing Misesian economics with an objective ethics of natural law and natural rights. The present article does not attempt to assess that solution directly. Instead, it asks a prior philosophical question: is the absence of an objective ethics merely an element missing from Mises's system, or is it connected with the way praxeology itself conceptualizes action and value?

This question requires distinguishing methodological abstraction from philosophical reduction. The exclusion of moral judgments may be indispensable to economic science insofar as economics seeks to identify regularities that hold independently of the moral evaluation of particular ends. Yet it does not follow that the features retained by such an abstraction constitute an exhaustive account of human action. A method may legitimately isolate one dimension of its object in accordance with its particular explanatory aims without thereby exhausting the philosophical nature of that object. The difficulty examined here arises precisely at this point: Mises's formal analysis of the means–end structure of action provides a powerful epistemological foundation for praxeology, but it remains open to question whether that formal structure is sufficient as a *philosophical* foundation of action.

It is for this reason that R. G. Collingwood is a particularly useful interlocutor. His importance for the present argument does not consist in a mere rejection of the expedient structure identified by Mises. On the contrary, Collingwood explicitly recognizes a form of economic or utilitarian action structured by the subordination of means to ends. His philosophical analysis differs from Mises's epistemological approach in maintaining that this form does not exhaust the concept of action.

Through the distinction (Collingwood, 1926) between impulsive, expedient, and moral action, and especially through the doctrine of the "scale of forms" (Collingwood, 1933/2005) that provides the philosophical framework for this distinction, Collingwood understands these forms not as mutually exclusive classes but as hierarchically related determinations. Moral action preserves the expedient dimension while adding the irreducible determination of duty. The comparison therefore allows us to ask whether Mises correctly identifies a universal feature of purposive action while nevertheless reducing the whole phenomenon of action to that exclusive feature.

The argument proceeds in three stages. First, we reconstruct the methodological reasons that led Mises to separate moral judgment from pure economic theory and argue that this separation was crucial to the constitution of praxeology as a value-free science of human action. Second, we examine Collingwood's analysis of impulsive, expedient, and moral action together with his philosophical doctrine of the scale of forms, asking whether the means–end structure identified by Mises exhausts the formal character of human action or constitutes only one of its determinations. Finally, we bring the two positions into direct confrontation in order to assess whether the methodological abstraction required by praxeology becomes a philosophical reduction when expedient action is treated as the fundamental and exhaustive model of action. The resulting analysis seeks neither to deny the explanatory validity of praxeology within its proper domain nor to derive an objective ethics from economic theory, but to determine more precisely the philosophical limits of Mises's exclusion of morality.

2. The Need to Separate Ethics from Pure Economic Theory

One of the elements that social theory has highlighted as a fundamental unifying force in societies lies in their utilitarian dimension—that is, in the way each participant uses the other as a means to achieve their ends.¹ This is a principle that operates in all types of contracts and in all economic exchanges.² It is, therefore, a principle that describes the concrete and practical dimension of social life, to which value judgments based on ethical principles—with most of them being ideal and abstract—have traditionally been opposed. Consequently, the traditional analysis of society constantly encountered the problem posed by this clash between the description of facts and norms, between what is and what ought to be.

However, in the face of this division between what is and what ought to be—which used to be attributed, respectively, to the natural and practical sciences—a new way of analytically approaching social phenomena emerges, one that completely suspends any normative

¹ This idea is summarized in the Roman legal expression *do ut des* (I give so that you may give), which, according to Mises, expresses "the fundamental social relation" (2007, p. 194). It can be found in Emperor Justinian's *Digest* (533 AD): "In hac quaestione totius ob rem dati tractatus inspicere potest. Qui in his competit speciebus: aut enim do tibi ut des, aut do ut facias, aut facio ut des, aut facio ut facias: in quibus quaeritur, quae obligatio nascatur." [In this question, the entire treatise on giving for a cause may be examined. It is divided into these opposing cases: either I give so that you may give, or I give so that you may do, or I do so that you may give, or I do so that you may do; in which case the question is what obligation arises] (*Digest* 19. 5. 5. Pr.).

² In the case of economic exchange, Collingwood (1926) states that "each party is using the other as a means to his own ends by permitting the other to use him in the same way" (p. 170). This principle is often criticized while overlooking its fundamental character of reciprocity.

consideration of an ethical or deontological nature and aims solely at the rational description of the positive regularities found in the actions of concrete life. This is the approach Mises advocates:

Bewildered, people had to face a new view of society. They learned with stupefaction that there is another aspect from which human action might be viewed than that of good and bad, of fair and unfair, of just and unjust. In the course of social events there prevails a regularity of phenomena to which man must adjust his action if he wishes to succeed. It is futile to approach social facts with the attitude of a censor who approves or disapproves from the point of view of quite arbitrary standards and subjective judgments of value. (2007, p. 2, emphasis added)

This passage makes it clear that the new way of studying social phenomena stands in contrast to the ethical approach, whose judgment is more of a value judgment than a judgment about facts. In contrast to the perspective that judges from the standpoint of what ought to be, there thus emerges that "other aspect" which scholars of the human disciplines had not, according to Mises, clearly identified until then, or whose existence they had simply denied: the prevalence of a "regularity" in the phenomena studied by those disciplines. The novelty of this for the emerging human sciences lies in the discovery that regularities capable of being studied exist not only in natural phenomena but also in human phenomena. For this reason, Mises states that:

One must study the laws of human action and social cooperation as the physicist studies the laws of nature. Human action and social cooperation seen as the object of a science of given relations, no longer as a normative discipline of things that ought to be—this was a revolution of tremendous consequences for knowledge and philosophy as well as for social action. (2007, p. 2, emphasis added)

These "given relations" refer to the structure of regularities in phenomena produced by human actions.³ These regularities are empirically observable. Accepting this fact, however, implies substantially modifying the conception of experience that has been inherited primarily from empiricist philosophy. Unlike empiricism, which understands experience as the configuration of that which can only be given through the senses, Mises understands that real experience is also shaped by *structures of meaning* that cannot be perceived by the senses (cf. Hülsman, 2003, pp. xlii–xliv). This, however, is not a mere addition to empiricist theory. Human facts are empirical phenomena that, nevertheless, cannot be perceived solely through the senses, because the senses provide us with information that pertains only to their external dimension—for example, the movement of a body from point A to point B. But this is not enough to make that fact intelligible to us; it does not tell us that Caesar crossed the Rubicon, nor does it tell us what this fact *means*. To penetrate the meaning of actions, it is also necessary to engage in "an act of self-reflection on the imperceptible *structural features of human action*" (Hülsman, 2003, p. xliv).

Consequently, the empirical regularities that can be studied by the social scientist, just as the physicist studies natural regularities, differ from the latter in that their perception is not provided solely through the senses; rather, they require that act of self-reflective understanding on the part

³ Already in 1913 Max Weber stated: "Like all events, human behavior ('external' or 'internal') exhibits connections and regularities. However, there is something that is unique to human behavior, at least in the full sense: the course of regularities and connections is interpretable *through understanding*" (2012, pp. 188–189).

of the social scientist, which is what captures his own internal structures, thereby allowing him to access, through an act of empathetic projection, the inner workings of the action of others and, with it, its meaning.

The fact that structural regularities were found in this self-reflective understanding was what, according to Mises, "bewildered" those who analyzed social phenomena through the moral lens, according to categories of good and evil.

2.1 Where Regular Structures Are Found

One of the paths that led to this new way of understanding human phenomena arose from reflection on the problem of the value paradox faced by classical economic theory, which it was unable to resolve satisfactorily. Why is diamond worth more than bread (or iron), even though the latter is far more useful and "valuable" for human life? The ideas developed by the Austrian School of economics showed that the problem was defectively framed. It is presented as a general and abstract problem unrelated to the concrete reality of people's actions and valuations. The Austrians showed that what actually happens is that people make decisions in specific circumstances regarding quantities of equally specific goods and that, on this level, the problem is very different from the one posed by classical theory. No one chooses between the totality of the good "diamond" and the totality of the good "bread" (see Mises, 2007, pp. 45, 63, 121; Rothbard, 2009, pp. 22, 33; Kauder, 1965, p. 74). The prices of goods, therefore, are not determined by considering the good in general, but by the "relative utility of particular units of goods" (Hülsmann, 2003, p. xii). This led the theory to focus on particular choices and the individual making them, and thus to abandon abstractions as a foundation or theoretical starting point. The generalized value of the good (diamond, bread) is the result of interactions between individuals' concrete decisions and valuations regarding concrete quantities of those goods. It is a *bottom-up* process. In contrast, the explanatory approach that started with the value of bread and diamond as such sought a *top-down* explanation. *Water* or *bread* as such are abstract entities that do not form part of the agent's practical horizon; therefore, they do not actually have value or utility in practical reality—only the specific units that enter into practice do, and these units do not possess that value as an intrinsic value simply by virtue of being water or bread (as if the value were first objectively fixed in the general good and then passed on to each of its particular units), but rather they possess only a "marginal" value—that is, one relative to the quantity of units available.⁴ This way of understanding and explaining the whole based on the interaction of the parts gave rise to a way of viewing social phenomena that we could describe, in a certain sense, as "emergentist"—that is, as the results of particular phenomena and no longer as general, autonomous entities.

It was by focusing on the individual actions and decisions that theory discovered the structures and *regularities* that made its scientific study possible.

⁴ On this point, see Menger (2007, pp. 121–148), and Rothbard (2009, pp. 21–33).

2.2 Subjectivism Makes Objectivity Possible

The solution to the problem of value through marginal theory thus leads to identifying the individual as the ultimate source of value—that is, of the value that determines his own action. Value is, at the same time, what gives purpose (ends) to action, and if ends have hierarchies of subordination, one can accept an ultimate end toward which all other intermediate ends point. The content of these ultimate ends, however, is determined by the individual himself; that is, they are, according to Mises, subjective and not subject to scientific examination:

In this sense we speak of the subjectivism of the general science of human action. It takes the ultimate ends chosen by acting man as data, it is entirely neutral with regard to them, and it refrains from passing any value judgments. The only standard which it applies is whether or not the means chosen are fit for the attainment of the ends aimed at. (Mises, 2007, p. 21)

The science of human action finds here a universal and constant structure applicable to all action, namely, the adequacy of the means to the ends.⁵ It does not consider or pass judgment on the content of those ends. And as we saw in the Introduction, this idea lies at the root of Rothbard's criticism of Mises. With it, Mises can focus solely on the structural relationship between means and ends, thereby reducing his entire science to an investigation of the adequacy of means and ends. That is why, in a seemingly paradoxical way, he says that "it is in this subjectivism that the objectivity of our science lies" (2007, p. 21). And he adds:

Because it is subjectivistic and takes the value judgments of acting man as ultimate data not open to any further critical examination, it is itself above all strife of parties and factions, it is indifferent to the conflicts of all schools of dogmatism and ethical doctrines, it is free from valuations and preconceived ideas and judgments, it is universally valid and absolutely and plainly human. (2007, p. 21, emphasis added)

The fact that ends are not analyzable is due to the fact that "they differ with various people and with the same people at various moments in their lives" (2007, p. 95); in other words, their content is not stable; it does not provide a basis of structural regularity that would allow it to be determined universally.⁶

Particular motives have no relevance in a general theory of human action. What matters is its general form: every action is a quest for satisfaction, whether of physiological, psychological, or ethical origin. In other words, the classification of "types" of action is not part of general science, because every species continues to take the form of the genus:

[...] the variety and manifoldness of the motives instigating a man's action is without relevance for a comprehensive study of acting. Every action is motivated by the urge to remove a felt uneasiness. It

⁵ Once again, here Mises follows what Max Weber had already stated in 1904 in his essay *The 'Objectivity' of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy*: "The question of whether the means are appropriate for the given ends is, above all, unconditionally accessible to scientific consideration" (2012, p. 46).

⁶ Subjectivism allows theory to disregard the value content of the ends of the actions carried out by individuals. By being able to disregard that content, it can focus exclusively on the form, which, as the regular structure of action, is not determined by any value judgment. Thus, theory can claim for itself the label of "objective".

does not matter for the science of action how people qualify this uneasiness from a physiological, psychological, or ethical point of view. (Mises, 2007, p. 233)

The physiological, psychological, or ethical determines the *content* of the action; Mises, however, is interested in its *form*. My action is *formally* the same whether I perform it out of love or hunger, and even more so, whether I do "good" or "evil." When we consider moral value, we thus encounter a different sort of paradox of value, for formally I always do good,⁷ even if materially I do evil. In this distinction between form and content, we find, therefore, one of the first tensions in Mises's praxeological approach.

With the explanation of prices and exchange based on marginal value theory, economic theory moved beyond the exclusive boundaries of purely "economic" actions and became a general theory of human action, capable of explaining social phenomena positively (without resorting to the world of things as they ought to be).

2.3 Why Did the Moral Lens Hinder the Development of Praxeology?

We might consider the political theory contained in Plato's *Republic* as the traditional model of analysis of social phenomena, a model in which, starting from the idea of the Good, social orders and their relationships are theoretically and rationally inferred as they *ought* to be. This type of approach, however, produces an insurmountable duality between the (theoretical) world of what ought to be and the (practical) world of what is, for while it is effective in constructing a deontological model, it is powerless to explain the concrete functioning of social reality. That is why Mises, with somewhat caustic rhetoric, says of reformist theorists that:

They did not search for the laws of social cooperation because they thought that man could organize society as he pleased. If social conditions did not fulfill the wishes of the reformers, if their utopias proved unrealizable, the fault was seen in the moral failure of man. Social problems were considered ethical problems. What was needed in order to construct the ideal society, they thought, was good princes and virtuous citizens. With righteous men any utopia might be realized. (2007, p. 2)

Once the Good itself has been identified, the next step is to organize society in accordance with that good. This brings us back to the *top-down* model. Its problem lies in the fact that it fails to take into account the very laws that govern society *as it is*. This is analogous to, for example, decreeing that it is just for people to have free energy and, therefore, that what must be done is to build perpetual motion machines capable of generating perpetual energy—all without taking into account the laws of thermodynamics and the conservation of energy. When deontological theory failed, its failure was attributed to the wickedness of people and not to the fact that the theory did not take into account fundamental laws of the social order. It is the same as attributing the failure of the perpetual motion machine to the incompetence of the builders and not to the laws of thermodynamics.

⁷ Every action seeks to obtain a good.

For Mises, as we saw, the value content of ends is not susceptible to scientific determination or analysis.⁸ Therefore, establishing a higher end as the good upon which a society must be organized implies treating a particular and restricted interpretation as if it were universal and real.⁹ It becomes a reductive model that necessarily produces rigidities and limitations that often end up causing the model itself to collapse. The ultimate good lies in the realm of duty; social laws, on the other hand, lie in the realm of being. Determining what ought to be does not imply knowing what is. Herein lies the source of the difficulty that arises when considering social problems exclusively or primarily as ethical problems. That is why Mises says:

Ethical doctrines are intent upon establishing scales of value according to which man should act but does not necessarily always act. They claim for themselves the vocation of telling right from wrong and of advising man concerning what he should aim at as the supreme good. They are normative disciplines aiming at the cognition of what ought to be. They are not neutral with regard to facts; they judge them from the point of view of freely adopted standards. (2007, p. 95, emphasis added)

Once the good is identified, what would make a society good is, by definition, attained: if people are good (if they act in accordance with the good), society will be good. And if the good is what we all seek, then it seems evident that fundamental social doctrine must be deontological in nature. For Mises, however, this is a "scientifically unfruitful method" (Mises, 2003, p. 3), because the good also has another characteristic that makes it problematic as an object of scientific theory: since it is intrinsically teleological, it is what gives meaning and direction to action, and therefore, when one believes to be in possession of the good in itself or the universal good, it is easy to believe to be in possession of the ends of humanity and of universal history. The ethical theory of society thus becomes a theory of the destinies of humanity, thereby losing sight of the concrete reality of the individual actions that constitute social reality. That is why Mises says that the problem with normative sciences is that "they began not with the individual and his action, but with attempts to view the totality. What they wanted to discover was not the regularity prevailing in the action of men, but the whole course of mankind's progression from its origin to the end of all things" (2003, p. 3).¹⁰

In such cases, something occurs that Max Weber had already warned against in his essays on methodology (see Weber, 1949, pp. 18-22) (and this is worth emphasizing), namely, the introduction of value judgments into the *strictly causal analysis* of premises and conclusions. In science, value judgments influence the choice of topics to be studied, but they must not interfere with the logical analysis of the data. The data must indicate its own logical connections and consequences, which must be taken as such regardless of our moral or value-based preferences. Therefore, judgments

⁸ "Value judgments are voluntaristic. They express the feelings, tastes, or preferences of the individual who utters them. With regard to them, there can be no question of truth or falsity. They are ultimate and not subject to any proof or evidence. [...] All value judgments are personal and subjective" (Mises, 2005, pp. 13, 15).

⁹ On the problem of "scientistic" rationalism applied to the social sciences, see Hayek's essay "*Scientism and the Study of Society*" (1952, pp. 13-102).

¹⁰ In the realm of economic theory, Max Weber identifies a similar problem: "even today, the vague notion [...] that political economy must produce *value judgments* based on a specific 'economic worldview' has not disappeared" (2012, p. 46).

about good and evil, just and unjust, must remain outside scientific analysis, or as Mises puts it, "with regard to them there cannot be any question of truth and falsity" (2005, p. 13). Science cannot and must not say: "This is just; therefore, this is what must be done." It can only refer to the logical-causal relationship between the facts in question: "If X is done, Z will result." Whether one prefers or chooses to actually do X is a personal matter. For this reason, for Mises, "there is no such thing as a normative science, a science of what ought to be" (2005, p. 37).

In the history of economic thought, we find several examples of ethical interpretations of economic phenomena. The case of loans and interest charges is one of the most common, and it will help us illustrate the point.

Medieval jurists and theologians, inspired by the Church Fathers, tended to view the charging of interest as an act of usury that, therefore, should be morally and legally condemned.¹¹ Money, since Aristotle, was considered "sterile" and, therefore, a good that was by nature incapable of producing more money;¹² thus, in the case of interest, it was understood that profit was being extracted from something that did not exist, thereby committing fraud.¹³ The charging of interest, therefore, could only be the result of the wickedness or moral degeneration of moneylenders. This response fit well within the ethical framework of those societies, and thus scientific research into this phenomenon found its limits there. And this same pattern was replicated in other types of economic phenomena, such as those related to profits, redistribution, and so on.¹⁴

In these cases, the analysis reaches the point where one of the phenomena in question violates or appears to violate a moral precept. A moral end might be, for example, the equality of all members of society. In such a case, prior to the economic analysis, the following precept will therefore serve as an analytical principle: commerce and economic exchanges must promote equality, for the good of all. Another moral principle might be: every person must be considered for

¹¹ For example, in the 12th-century *Decree of Gratian*, the distinction between usury (*Lat.* usura) and interest (*Lat.* fenus) is practically nonexistent; in most cases, they are considered synonyms. Interest is generally viewed as theft and, therefore, as a sin: "Rapinam facit qui usuram accipit. Si quis usuram accipit, rapinam facit, vita non vivit" [He who practices usury commits theft. If anyone practices usury, he commits theft; he does not live] (Causa 14, q.4 c.10). And also: "Quod vero elemosine non sint faciende ex fenore vel usuris, nec ex quolibet male acquisito [...] Nolite velle elemosinas facere de fenore et usuris" [Alms should not be given from usury or interest, nor from anything obtained illicitly ... Do not wish to give alms from usury and interest] (Causa 14, q.5, d.a.c.1 and c.1).

¹² "The most hated sort, and with the greatest reason, is usury [obolostatiké], which makes a gain out of money itself, and not from the natural use of it. For money was intended to be used in exchange, but not to increase at interest. And this term [interest] [tókos], which means the birth of money from money, is applied to the breeding of money because the offspring resembles the parent. Wherefore of all modes of making money this is the most unnatural" (Aristotle, *Pol.* I, 10, 1258b).

¹³ "Ille qui accipit usuram vendit id quod non est" [He who charges interest sells what does not exist] (St. Thomas, *Sum. Theo.* II-II q.78 a.1).

¹⁴ Once again, the *Decree of Gratian*: "Turpe lucrum sequitur, qui minus emit, ut plus vendat. Quicumque tempore messis vel vindemie non necessitate, sed propter cupiditatem comparat annonam vel vinum, verbi gratia de duobus denariis comparat modium unum, et servat, usque dum vendatur denariis quatuor aut sex, aut amplius, hoc turpe lucrum dicimus" [Shameful profit is the pursuit of one who buys less to sell more. Whoever, at the time of harvest or grape harvest, buys grain or wine not out of necessity but out of greed—for example, buying one modius [approx. 9 liters] for two denarii and storing it until it can be sold for four, six, or more denarii—we call this shameful profit] (Causa 14, q.4 c.9).

their own sake, that is, as an end in themselves and never as a means. But in economic practice, people are effectively considered as means (reciprocally) (cf. Collingwood, 1926, p. 170; Mises, 2007, pp. 194 y 834-5), so from this point of view it would follow that economic exchanges are *a fortiori* morally wrong and, therefore, punishable. Another moral principle: both the good of the individual and that of society are achieved where members form a collective unity. The economic system promotes individualism and, consequently, social dissolution and the dissolution of the common good; therefore, economic relations must be subordinated to the collective action of society and its ends.¹⁵

It is easy, then, to observe the tension that exists between moral judgment and judgment of knowledge, given that moral judgment, if there is to be one, must be based on the *facts* that are to be judged. Therefore, it is necessary first to know those facts (in this sense, moral judgment presupposes not only a judgment of knowledge, but knowledge of the fact itself), and to know them requires a non-moral analysis, whereby we encounter a sort of circularity here. Moreover, social facts themselves are not phenomena similar to natural facts (cf. Hayek, 1958, pp. 57-76), so more or less immediate intuitions regarding them are not usually good conveyors of true information. On the contrary, these phenomena are often highly counterintuitive. Therefore, greater caution is required here when establishing a fact. This requires an appropriate method, and this is what the epistemology of the social sciences discovered, for which a clear separation and distinction between factual judgments and value judgments was necessary (on this distinction, cf. Weber, 1949, pp. 1-47; Mises, 2005, pp. 13-17).

In short, from a strictly scientific perspective, moral precepts acted as obstacles to the development of a positive understanding of economic—and, by extension, social—phenomena, independent of personal judgments. Only once technical analysis was freed from moral judgments was it possible to move toward a purely positive and value-free understanding of these phenomena, and in doing so, a type of regularity and corresponding knowledge was discovered in them that differed from traditional bodies of knowledge; that is, in addition to the regularities in natural phenomena, successfully studied by the natural sciences, and the regularities found in the logical structures of thought, studied by logic, a realm of social regularities arising from the formal structures of human actions is discovered, thereby making possible a type of knowledge "which could be regarded neither as logic, mathematics, psychology, physics, nor biology" (Mises, 2007, p. 1).

We can say that Mises excluded ethics for good methodological reasons, and that this exclusion should initially be understood as a methodological *abstraction*, since in order to identify the formal regularities of action, praxeology brackets the particular content of the ends pursued and restricts itself to the formal relation between means and ends. Such an abstraction is not in itself problematic: every science isolate certain features of its object in accordance with its specific

¹⁵ Sowell (2015), regarding the functioning of bonds and stocks in the stock market, says: "It's not some moral principle that makes this happen. It happens because people will not take the risk of buying stocks unless they can expect a higher average rate of return than they get from bonds" (p. 309).

explanatory purpose. A different question arises, however, if the structure obtained through abstraction is taken to constitute *an exhaustive account of the object itself*. At that point methodological (and epistemological) abstraction would become *philosophical reduction*. Whether Mises's praxeology crosses this boundary cannot yet be decided on methodological grounds alone; it requires a philosophical examination of the concept of action itself.

3. R. G. Collingwood. Economic and Moral Action as Parts of a Scale of Forms

By recognizing the epistemic function of the distinction between facts and values, Mises is thus able to develop a formal and abstract science that allows him to detach himself almost entirely from the moral content of the actions involved. As he puts it:

Modern economics is not and cannot be concerned with whether someone prefers healthful food or narcotic poisons; no matter how perverted may be the ethical or other ideas that govern his conduct, its "correctness" is not a matter to be judged by economics. [...] Prohibitionists see a serious failing of mankind in the consumption of alcoholic beverages, which they attribute to misunderstanding, weakness of character, and immorality. But in the view of catallactics there is only the fact that there is a demand for alcohol. He who has to explain the price of brandy is not concerned with the question whether it is "rational" or moral to drink brandy. (2003, p. 101)

Now, having reached this point of view, a new question arises for him, namely, whether this formal structure of "economic" action is not, in reality, the general form that must be assumed in *all* human action. And, as is well known, this is in fact the thesis held by Mises (2007, p. 11; 2003, p. 157), which is why the theory of economic action evolved into a general theory of human action pure and simple, or praxeology.

With this, Mises makes a generalization based on his epistemological interpretation of action, which—for the purposes of the science he seeks to establish—understands action exclusively in terms of means and ends, essentially reducing it to expedient, efficient action. In this, it is evident, moreover, that Mises's utilitarian position is prominently present here, at the core of his theory. But this raises the question of whether that epistemological understanding has sufficient grounds to make the definition of action (and, consequently, of value as well) *absolute*, as Mises intends.

To analyze this point, in this section we will employ the comparative method to contrast Mises's position with the analysis of action offered by the English philosopher R. G. Collingwood in his 1926 article *Economics as a Philosophical Science* and his philosophical theory of what he termed "scale of forms", as the necessary framework for a proper understanding of his analysis of action.¹⁶

¹⁶ Mises apparently discovered Collingwood's work somewhat late. He does not cite him in his works from the 1930s nor in *Human Action*, but he does in *Theory and History* (1957) and in *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science* (1962). In the former, after naming Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert, Max Weber, Croce, and Collingwood, he states the following: "Their interpretations were in many regards unsatisfactory. They were deluded by many of the fundamental errors of historicism. *All but Collingwood* failed entirely to recognize the unique epistemological character of economics" (2005, p. 204, emphasis added).

3.1 Economic and Moral Action In the 1926 Essay

Collingwood argues that the fundamental concepts of economics (value, wealth, etc.) arise as derivations of the specific type of action that he calls "economic" (1926, p. 162). For him, the analysis of this type of action cannot be done empirically, but rather "philosophically" or "purely," (p. 163) which implies conducting a rational analysis of the meaning of its concept. In doing so, he closely follows Mises's methodological position. Using this criterion, Collingwood distinguishes three general types of action (cf. 1926, p. 164, 166):

- 1) impulsive, referring to immediate actions, without the mediation of deliberation, which are performed simply because one wants to perform them;
- 2) economic or utilitarian, which encompasses the set of utilitarian or expedient actions, whose general structure is: means to an end;
- 3) moral, corresponding to those actions performed in accordance with a duty. These are actions of a deontological nature.¹⁷

The first thing to note in this classification is the categorial differentiation between the moral and economic elements. Collingwood says:

To invest money in a stock chosen for its promise of good dividends, [...] may be right or wrong when judged by moral standards; but such actions can be done, and frequently are done, without the agent's rising any moral issue whatever. [...] Not only, however, are some acts done without the agent's asking himself whether they are morally right, but a non-moral element is distinguishable within actions where this question has been raised. (1926, p. 164; emphasis added)

What is relevant here is that this non-moral element is analytically distinguishable as a distinct characteristic. If someone, for example, makes an investment based on a sense of moral obligation, the action is certainly moral, "but nevertheless the act of investment as such is the non-moral and purely utilitarian act of lending money with the expectation of a good return, and to lend money otherwise than this is not properly investment at all" (1926, p. 164). The economic or utilitarian action is, therefore, by definition, amoral, since it involves only its own utility, that is, the effectiveness of the means in achieving an expected end. This instrumental character is its fundamental feature, just as subordination to a moral duty is the fundamental feature in the case of moral actions.¹⁸

For Collingwood, however, the three types of action identified are not mutually exclusive, but rather have a hierarchical relationship of subordination. Every action has an element of "impulsivity," of wanting to perform an immediate action: "there is no action in which impulse or desire does not play a part, and there is, therefore, a sense in which all action is impulsive. [...]"

¹⁷ This classification closely resembles to Max Weber's classification in *Economy and Society*, where he states that every action can be: 1) rational in terms of ends (*Zweckrational*), 2) rational in terms of values (*Wertrational*), 3) affective, and 4) traditional (cf. Weber, 1978, pp. 24-25). The first three correspond exactly to Collingwood's economic, moral, and impulsive actions. Mises (2003) analyzes and critiques Weber's classification (pp. 88-92).

¹⁸ Further references to the problem of the instrumentality of utilitarian or economic actions in general can be found in Collingwood (1971, pp. 104-110), and in relation to society in Collingwood (1924, pp. 221-225).

Impulse is, as it were, the foundation of all action" (1926, p. 166). It is the first and most immediate requirement for action to occur at all. But this impulse can be modulated or shaped through subordination to another principle. When immediate desire is subordinated to (future) utility and the relationship between means and ends thus emerges, the action becomes economic (or utilitarian). When the initial impulse is subordinated to moral obligation, the relationship between means and ends also appears, but it is itself subordinated to duty, whereby "all moral action thus has within it a subordinate element of economic action" (1926, p. 165), only that by subordinating the means—that is, the immediate action—to moral duty, the action becomes itself morally good and, therefore, also an end in itself: in moral action, the means and the end occur simultaneously. Thus, in Collingwood's classification, we have a pyramidal structure of subordination in three sections, at the base of which we find purely impulsive action, in the center economic action built upon the impulsive foundation, and at the apex moral action, which subjects the entire pyramidal substructure to its principle.

It should be noted that these distinctions do not involve value judgments, but merely an analytical description of characteristics inherent in the actions themselves. They are not arbitrary or accidental distinctions: "It is a philosophical distinction; one which is made not because we choose to make it, but *because we cannot think about the subject at all without making it*" (Collingwood, 1926, p. 166, emphasis added). These are distinctions that refer to the necessary conditions for understanding and conceivability of the very object in question. Without the notion of means and ends, economic action is unintelligible, and without the idea of subordination to a duty, moral action is equally so.

In the specific case of economic action, what exists, according to Collingwood, is a relationship between two aspects of temporally determined action: the immediate act and the mediate act.¹⁹ The former is the means, the latter the end. As he says, "an economic act is an act which differentiates itself into two parts, one of which is done for the sake of the other. The act is not complete till both these parts are present" (1926, p. 167). The immediate impulsive action, in which we do what we want, unfolds in the temporal dimension and transforms into economic action, in which "we do what we do not want in order that we may do what we want" (Collingwood, 1926, p. 168), such that now "what is immediately desired is the end" (1926, p. 168), while "the means is only mediately desired." (1926, p.168). And with regard to action, Collingwood concludes, "that which is immediately done is the means; the end is only mediately done, as consequential upon the means" (1926, p. 168).

From this point on, the English philosopher draws a series of conclusions regarding economic phenomena that we will not delve into here. Before continuing, however, we feel it is worth pointing out the broad sense with which he uses his concept of the economic. For if all actions that pursue an end are economic, then kicking a chair (the example is Collingwood's) on a mere impulse of the moment is certainly an impulsive act, but if there is prior deliberation involved (for example, deciding to kick it *to release* pent-up anger and thus regain a state of calm), then even though the

¹⁹ In subsequent analyses, however, Collingwood (1942/1971, pp. 106-107) places greater emphasis on the purely logical relationship as more fundamental than the temporal one.

same action is seen from the outside, it has ceased to be purely impulsive and has become "economic." Thus, any action that consciously or deliberately seeks an end is, in this classification, economic. Going to church to pray is an economic action; cooking is an economic action, etc. The adjective "economic" is here made equivalent to "utilitarian," "useful," or "expedient." It is, therefore, a much broader definition than what is accepted in our common use of the adjective "economic." And, as we saw, this is exactly the definition Mises gives to define not only economic action, but *all* human actions (cf. Mises, 2007, p. 11).

3.2. The Scale of Forms as Philosophical Method

In his 1926 article, Collingwood says that the three actions he describes are "types or *forms* of action" (1926, p. 166, emphasis added) that "are not mutually exclusive species of a genus," (1926, p. 166) that is, that "in economic action impulse is, though present, *subordinated* to utility, much as in moral action utility is *subordinated* to duty" (p. 166, emphasis added), such that in moral action the distinction between means and end "is merged in a fresh unit" (1926, p. 168) since "a moral act is an end in itself." (p. 168) And he adds the somewhat obscure remark that "the distinction between means and end is here [in the moral case] a real distinction, though a *distinction without a difference*" (1926, p. 168, emphasis added). Throughout this characterization, he is implicitly referring to his idea that philosophical concepts are related to one another in what he will later call a "scale of forms"—a conception of the nature of philosophical concepts that he developed mainly in his 1933 book *An Essay on Philosophical Method*.

In this essay, his main argument is that philosophical concepts do not behave in the same way as logical-scientific concepts do, in the sense that the latter operate according to mutually exclusive taxonomies of species, such as those that we find in zoology, where, for example, the species "canine" and "feline" are mutually exclusive, a feature that holds true throughout the taxonomic hierarchy (wolf and lion, mammal and reptile, animal and plant, and so on) (cf. Collingwood, 1933/2005, pp. 26-30). Philosophical concepts (such as good, beauty, truth, or art, religion, and philosophy, among others), on the other hand, relate to one another not by exclusive mutual relations, but through overlapping, forming a hierarchy of types and degrees in which each higher-level term surpasses, preserves, and fulfills the lower one. In this way, philosophical concepts merge with one another not only on qualitative scales but also on scales of intensity, while nevertheless maintaining their specific differences, where a higher form (species) expresses the genus more completely than a lower one and, for the same reason, no species, no matter how distant it may be from the supreme genus, is understood as "false," but only as "less true," that is, "less complete." As Collingwood put it:

In a philosophical scale of forms, the variable is identical with the generic essence itself [...]. [And] the result of this identification is that every form, so far as it is low in the scale, is to that extent an imperfect or inadequate specification of the generic essence, which is realized with progressive adequacy as the scale is ascended. (1933/2005, pp. 60, 61)

Thus, in the case of the actions we are analyzing, the genus is "human action," and the species are those we have already examined: impulsive, utilitarian or economic, and moral action, which form

a scale of forms whose lowest degree is that of mere impulsivity, and whose highest is that of moral action, which would be the degree at which the genus "human action" finds its most complete expression. Thus, what, with respect to the genus, remains indeterminate and problematic in a lower species (in mere impulsivity, or in mere utilitarian action) is resolved at the next level, without this higher degree completely negating the lower one. On the contrary, every higher form includes its lower counterpart (or, more precisely, it's included to the extent to which the true aspect contained in that lower form embodied the generic essence, and everything else is left out), while at the same time going beyond it. In this way, utilitarian action encompasses impulsive action but neutralizes and transforms its merely impulsive character by subordinating it to the means-end structure, thereby effectively elevating it to this higher stage. And the same is true of moral action. For Collingwood, then, utilitarian action is incapable of fully accounting for the entirety of the concept (genus) of human action, and the problems it encounters are resolved when its utilitarian element is, in turn, subordinated to the higher species of moral or of duty. Once again, moral action does not deny the utilitarian element of the action (as if it were something completely alien to itself and false); nor, by transitivity, does it deny the impulsive element, which is included within the utilitarian one. Rather, it integrates both aspects into a new, higher unity by neutralizing utilitarian exclusivity through subordination to the moral element of duty.

Moral action is, therefore, also impulsive and utilitarian, but under a new form, because in it means and ends are merged into the same action (and not at different moments). A moral action is a good action, and a good action is an end in itself. Thus, says Collingwood (1926), "it is actually a definition of moral action to say that a moral act is an end in itself" (p. 168). I can, for example, help someone, say, build his house. The purely technical and practical aspect of these specific actions is purely utilitarian and expedient. But if I perform them out of a sense of moral duty, each action is, in addition to being useful, morally good and, therefore, an end in itself. They are an end in itself not because they are useful, but because they are good. It is the moral presence of goodness that makes an action an end in itself. "The end which the moral man sets before himself is to be good; and the only means to being good is—being good. Yet the distinction between means and end is here a real distinction, though a distinction without a difference" (Collingwood, 1926, p. 168).

So, in moral action, the presence of means and ends (that is, the utilitarian element) implies a "distinction without a difference" (Collingwood, 1926, p. 168; 1933/2005, p. 50). *Difference*, as in logic and traditional taxonomy, refers to the *difference in the instantiation* of a species (specific difference) that separates it from others (for example, the difference between vertebrate and invertebrate animals). In turn, *distinction* refers to the distinction present *in the concept* that captures the instance referred to that possesses said difference (for example, the conceptual distinction between "vertebrates" and "invertebrates"). In philosophy, however, the nature of the facts or instances in question makes it possible to make "a distinction in the concepts without a difference in the instances" (Collingwood, 1933/2005, p. 50), and that's why "two or more specifically differing concepts may be exemplified in the same instances" (Collingwood, 1933/2005, p. 50). A single action, being a single fact, a single instance, can embody all three conceptually distinguished levels of impulsivity, expediency, and morality (as in the example of helping to build a house). That

is why Collingwood argues that, in philosophical concepts, the difference "in kind" takes place through a difference "in degree" with respect to the instantiated genus. These concepts differentiate themselves by having both difference in kind and difference in degree at the same time. Or as Collingwood put it:

The combination of differences in degree with differences in kind implies that a generic concept is specified in a somewhat peculiar way. [...] In respect of the variable, each specific form of the concept differs from the rest in degree; in respect of the manner in which the generic essence is specified, each differs from the rest in kind. (1933/2005, p. 57)

The distinction between the three kinds of action is based on a difference in degrees: utilitarian action is more properly an action than merely impulsive action, and in turn, moral action is more properly an action (it instantiates the genus to a greater degree) than utilitarian action. That is why the presence of the utilitarian element (means and ends) in moral action is "a distinction without a difference"—a distinction in the conceptual categorization of an aspect that pertains to the same fact (which is the characteristic feature of philosophical concepts).

Collingwood's analysis therefore allows the problem posed at the outset to be formulated now with more precision. The question is no longer whether moral action possesses a means–end structure (Collingwood himself accepts that it does) as if both aspects were mutually exclusive, but whether the presence of that structure allows us to identify the whole action with its expedient dimension. If duty constitutes a distinct determination of the same action, then the universality of the praxeological form does not by itself establish its philosophical exhaustiveness.

4. The Limits of the Praxeological Conception of Action

Mises could offer, however, a response to Collingwood's philosophical argument. As we know, he defines human action as "purposeful behavior" (2007, p. 11) and so as "invariably [aiming] at the attainment of ends chosen" (2003, p. lxv), because by definition "action means the employment of means for the attainment of ends" (2007, p. 13). And from this he understands that "the economic principle is the fundamental principle of all rational action, and not just a particular feature of a certain kind of rational action. All rational action is therefore an act of economizing." (2003, p. 157). Hence, given that "human action is necessarily always rational" (2007, p. 19), it follows that, to Mises, actions are, by definition, rational, economical (i.e. expeditive) means-end structured purposeful action. Therefore, based on this interpretation, he could respond to the case of moral action by saying that it remains an action performed with the purpose or aim of removing a certain uneasiness nonetheless and that, therefore, to that end, the agent rationally selects the means he deems appropriate.

This means that, in our example of an action performed out of a moral duty to help, the agent is actually motivated to act either by the concern that he might fail to fulfill his moral duty or by the fear of looking bad in the eyes of the friend or person he is helping. The appropriate *means* of eliminating this concern is, of course, to perform the act of helping. This is the utilitarian necessary interpretation of any moral action. Necessary, because it must interpret it as a means to fulfill a

certain end, being unable to see it as an end in itself. Thus, praxeology does not deny duty; it simply treats the particular motive as irrational (not analyzable) and irrelevant to the general science of action.²⁰

However, based on what can be inferred from our previous analyses, the issue is not whether moral action also has the expedient structure of means and end. We already know that Collingwood agrees it does. The question is whether being describable under a certain form or aspect X entails being exhaustively constituted by that form or aspect. Collingwood's scale of forms denies it.

Mises is not mistaken in maintaining that moral action possesses a means–end structure. From Collingwood's perspective, the error would consist, as we said, rather in treating this structure as exhaustive of the action itself. If philosophical forms overlap, the fact that a moral action can also be described as expedient does not entail that its moral determination is reducible to expediency.²¹ Mises's analysis may therefore remain valid at the level of the expedient form while failing to account for everything that is philosophically present and relevant in moral action.

5. Conclusion

The exclusion of moral judgments from economic analysis was not an arbitrary feature of Mises's epistemology, but one of the conditions that made possible the constitution of praxeology as a rigorous and value-free science of human action. By suspending judgment concerning the moral content of the ends pursued by individuals, Mises was able to isolate a formal regularity that remains constant across the diversity of concrete actions: the relation between means and ends. In this respect, the exclusion of morality must initially be regarded as a legitimate *methodological abstraction* rather than as a philosophical deficiency.

The difficulty arises only when the result of this abstraction is generalized into an exhaustive conception of human action. Collingwood's analysis makes it possible to identify this transition more precisely. His distinction between impulsive, expedient, and moral action does not deny that moral action contains an expedient means–end structure. On the contrary, through his doctrine of the scale of forms, he argues that the higher form preserves the positive elements of the lower while incorporating it into a more determinate unity. Moral action therefore includes an expedient dimension without being reducible to it, since duty constitutes a distinct determination of the same action.

Seen from this perspective, the central difficulty in Mises's praxeology does not lie in the claim that all deliberate action possesses a means–end structure. The problem lies instead in the inference from the universality of this structure to its philosophical exhaustiveness. That every moral action can also be described as expedient does not imply that its moral determination is

²⁰ "There is, accordingly, an inevitable discrepancy between what can be explained on utilitarian principles and what happens in the world. This is the negative characteristic of utility. It explains nothing except the abstract conformity of the means-plan with the abstract specifications of the end-plan. [...] Everything except the conformity of these indefinite individuals to one another is, from the utilitarian point of view, irrational. What is irrational means what my principles of explanation do not explain. An irrational element in the self is called 'caprice'." (Collingwood, 1942/1971, p. 110).

²¹ Reducible to expediency, with respect to its formal structure, and to irrationality, with regard to its content.

nothing more than a subjective end inserted into an otherwise unchanged instrumental structure. Praxeology may therefore correctly identify a universal dimension of action while remaining incomplete as a philosophical account of action as a whole.

This distinction also allows us to reconsider Rothbard's criticism of Mises. Rothbard argued that a value-free science of means cannot by itself supply the normative foundations required for a defense of liberty and therefore sought to supplement praxeology with an objective ethics of natural law and natural rights. The argument developed here does not assess the validity of that solution. It suggests, however, that the difficulty identified by Rothbard may arise at a more fundamental level: not merely because an ethical doctrine is absent from Mises's system, but because duty and moral determination are relegated to the contingent content of subjective ends once the expedient form of action is treated as philosophically exhaustive.

The resulting conclusion is therefore neither a rejection of praxeology nor an attempt to transform economics into a normative science. The methodological abstraction by which economics isolates the expedient structure of action remains legitimate within its proper explanatory domain. What must be resisted is the further reduction of human action to that abstraction. The value-free science of action can explain action under its expedient determination; it does not follow that this determination constitutes the complete (i.e. philosophical) form of human agency.

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