

**Till Düppe**

*The Making of the Economy: A Phenomenology of Economic Science.*

Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011.

241 pages

\$65.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-7391-6419-8); \$64.99 (ebook ISBN 978-0-7391-6954-4)

Given the events of 2008 and thereafter, perhaps no topic is timelier for philosophical scrutiny than the economy. Yet, for the well-read non-specialist, the feat of gaining a basic understanding of economics, let alone a critical one, seems near impossible given the complexity of economic calculus and models. Add to this the fact that economics concerns everyday, practical activities and one cannot help but feel this predicament is not only frustrating, but uncanny in the most disconcerting sense. Should an activity basic to everyday life be so problematic when it comes to acquiring a critical grasp of it?

In *The Making of the Economy*, Till Düppe sets out to explain why this discordance has arisen, choosing to set economics' divorce from everyday life in relation to Edmund Husserl's conception of the life-world. The intended audience for the book consists of both philosophers and economists, with Düppe aiming to construct the book so as to make phenomenology amenable to economists while the discreetness of economic theory is made more transparent to non-specialists. To accomplish this, the book is divided into two main sections that provide a philosophical platform and then an analysis of economic history. Three chapters are devoted to an account of Husserl's phenomenology of the life-world and his criticism of science, which sets the stage for a critical assessment of the history of economics. The six chapters constituting the second section (on history) trace economic science's conflict with the life-world from ancient to present times. They argue that the economy is not only an illusory construction but, more boldly, that its bona fide status as a science in academia is waning—and that this development should be encouraged.

On one level, Düppe's thesis is quite simple: our conception of the economy is the result of a discursive process originating from a conflict present throughout economic history, and this conflict is born of the intentions of economics to 1) assume a scientific authority and yet 2) be "discreet" in explanatory and predictive analyses. Düppe constructs a narrative, from ancient to present times, in which economic discourse, while by no means remaining static, shapes itself according to these two intentions. Some of the most influential economists, as Düppe shows, either willingly adopt these intentions or simply assume them without critical reflection, or what is most apparent in the discipline's "historical dumbness" (196). One can, in this sense, see a typology of method and models where authority and discreetness gain prominence through appeals to natural order (the classical period), general equilibrium (the neoclassical period), and formalism (the post-WWII period). The period after 1970 to the present is what Düppe describes as the "negative closure" (187) of the discipline in which competing theories (e.g., behavioural economics, game theory, neo-institutionalism, evolutionary economics, etc.) are vying for authority without much success. This negative period is thus a denouement in which the limitations of economics become practically visible and from which it cannot recover. Why? Because the intentions to remove itself from a relation to the life-world cannot be sustained.

Those with some familiarity of the history of economics and social sciences will know this most readily in terms of the impossibility to construct a value-free theory of analysis. Today, this failure is only exacerbated, even if it is not readily perceptible.

Thus at another level, Düppe's argument is much more complex and engaged with the nuances of economic history. The problem of being value-free is cast more extensively in terms of a conundrum of immense proportions. Despite the gradual realization of the shortcomings of economics—something which Düppe puts concisely, stating that “The discipline of economics is determined by the commitment to a language that stems from a theory no economist actually believes in” (189)—economists attempting to be critical of their science (Leontief, Galbraith, Balogh, Keen, etc.) remain mired in the trappings of formalism. They propose solutions as equally—if not more—formalistic and discreet in attempting to overcome formalism (202–5). Such attempts therefore remain revolutions within the prison. Düppe's conclusion is that rather than being an independent discipline—whose autonomy was made possible by its appeal to scientific authority and discreetness—economics should be subsumed under other disciplines (216). This is largely because economic analysis is inextricably wed to evaluative methods belonging, for example, to moral philosophy, law, politics, history, sociology, religious studies, etc.

It is indeed no enviable task that Düppe has set out for himself. Interdisciplinary work is persistently fraught with the hazard of ending up uneven; whatever fine balance between disciplines an author might actually possess does not necessarily show in the published work. Düppe is both a philosopher trained in phenomenology and an economist. And one of the greatest virtues of this book, from the perspective of a fellow Continental philosopher interested in but by no means trained in economics, is the historical narrative Düppe constructs and which weaves in and out of general assumptions and minute but substantial points of theoretical detail. He makes it clear at one point that the history he presents is no doubt “old hat” for economists interested in their discipline's history (which I take to be a small number, given the earlier cited comments about historical dumbness); and furthermore, that what Düppe really wants to establish is a new way of showing why the problems economists face today have arisen. These problems are not internal, methodological ones that have technical or theoretical solutions. On the contrary, the problem consists in the so-called first step of political economy's development whose momentum tragically separated itself from concrete life.

It is understandable that given such a project that focuses on the history of economics, Düppe is required to expound without extensive detail his phenomenological approach. The result is that a reader's wish for a more elaborate philosophical account is sacrificed for the aim of achieving a new way of reading this history. There are problems, for example, with the author's identification of pre-modern economic thought (*oikonomia*) with the ethical intellectual virtue of *phronesis* (90) and his subsequent generalization of economics as a matter of ethics (84). At least in Aristotle, it is not clear how this virtue would have figured into those types of activities described as economic. As well, a closer treatment of the relation of the inheritance of natural law by classical political economy would complicate the story the author wishes to tell about the appeal to scientific authority and discreetness via Smith's “invisible hand” (67). There are also several points where lack of support would have benefited from supplementation

(particularly in relation to ancient Greek thinking). Yet rather than catalogue these problems, in the space that remains, I would like to address what I think to be the main philosophical issue.

While the phenomenology of Husserl proves to be an interesting and fruitful approach in describing the emergence and development of economic science, the author's initial account of phenomenology and turn towards the history of economics seems less persuasive as one reads further. One is left to wonder: how much of the book's argument is in fact phenomenological? Since the author employs the notion of life-world as a point of critical departure, it is not clear how his historical account is anything but a re-reading of a narrative, using the life-world as a sort of litmus test. Düppe's historical analysis intends to disclose the separation between the life-world and the autonomous structure of economics, much in the same way Husserl levelled his gaze at the natural sciences. However, the sustained aspects of the author's argument seem more akin to a general, hermeneutical approach. To be sure, Düppe dismisses hermeneutics, or rather the application of it to economics, for a failure to account for how the separation between economic and everyday life arose (19) and for its inability to gain perspective above the historical mediation of understanding (35). This dismissal, I believe, brings to the surface a deficiency in the author's phenomenological approach, for the very reason that it cannot be sustained without adopting a more hermeneutical-styled analysis. In other words, though claiming a phenomenology of economic science, the real contribution of the book lies in its hermeneutical deconstruction and reconstruction of the history of economics. In this respect, Düppe's dismissal of hermeneutics is premature, since as an approach hermeneutics is not confined to a form of questioning that would omit the separation between economics and everyday life. Indeed, there are moments where a Heideggerian suspicion of the scientific worldview and its oblivion to our being-in-the-world seems more apropos when the author criticizes technical rationality, the mathematization of reality, and an ideology of "technocratic empiricism" (196–205). The historical, ontological, and epistemological trappings of the thinking that can be placed generally under "techno-scientific" have been well explored, for example, in the debates between Robert Scharff and Don Ihde.

While the bold thesis of the book might discourage the more traditionally-minded reader of economics, and despite the problems identified above, Düppe's book makes a significant contribution towards a better understanding of the very thing that seems to dominate our lives yet remains furthest from our understanding. Moreover, for any scholar or student wishing to have a competent, critical, and accessible overview of economic history, especially the post-neoclassical, this book remains a much-needed resource.

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