



HAL
open science

Review of Paul Turpin, The Moral Rhetoric of Political Economy: Justice and Modern Economic Thought, Routledge, London & New York, 2011, pp. 163

Sergiu Bălan

► **To cite this version:**

Sergiu Bălan. Review of Paul Turpin, The Moral Rhetoric of Political Economy: Justice and Modern Economic Thought, Routledge, London & New York, 2011, pp. 163. 2012, 10.46298/jpe.10641 . hal-03705720

HAL Id: hal-03705720

<https://hal.science/hal-03705720>

Submitted on 27 Jun 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - ShareAlike 4.0 International License

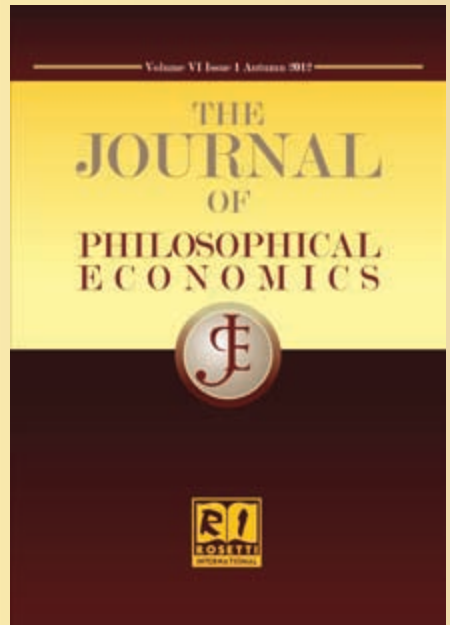
THE JOURNAL OF
PHILOSOPHICAL ECONOMICS

Volume VI Issue 1 Autumn 2012

ISSN 1843-2298

Copyright note

No part of these works may be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except for the quotation of brief passages in criticism.



Review of Paul Turpin, The Moral Rhetoric of Political Economy: Justice and Modern Economic Thought, Routledge, London & New York, 2011, pp. 163

Sergiu Bălan



Review of Paul Turpin, *The Moral Rhetoric of Political Economy: Justice and Modern Economic Thought*, Routledge, London & New York, 2011, pp. 163

Sergiu Bălan

In his 2011 book, Paul Turpin, Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of the Pacific, USA, analyzes the idea of justice embedded in what he calls “the moral rhetoric” that underlies the work of two great economic theorists, Adam Smith and Milton Friedman, both belonging to the liberal tradition.

According to Turpin, the “moral rhetoric” is nothing else than the persuasive discourse that can be found in economic theories, which uses praise and blame in order to (re)enforce certain ideas and norms that constitute the basis of organization and functioning of the economy. The very persuasiveness of these concepts, ideas and norms is the force that keeps the economic system in motion, so “an understanding of the workings of rhetoric helps us understand how language of praise and blame functions to construct a decorum – a set of norms of appropriateness – that creates a picture of how people ought to stand in relation to one another, including what their possibilities for action and communication are in given situations.” (p. 2) The birth of modern economic theory, identified with the work of Adam Smith, means for Turpin the transition from an old decorum, which had at its core a specific idea of justice, namely distributive justice, concerned with what the community owes to the individual, to a new, liberal decorum, centered in the idea of “commutative justice”, or justice in exchange. Consequently, he critically examines three essential works of political economy, Adam Smith’s (1759) *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (in Chapter 2) and (1776) *Wealth of Nations* (in Chapter 3), and Milton Friedman’s (1962) *Capitalism and Freedom* (in Chapter 4), in order to “trace in all three works

the presence of a moral rhetoric: language of praise and blame used to portray character and ascribe motivations." (p. 8)

The persuasive aspect of rhetoric must not be understood as referring to its manipulative force, intended to make people perform some specific actions intended by the manipulator, but rather to the practical function of discourse to help finding solutions for actual problems in conditions of contingent judgement. The critique of Smith's and Friedman's use of moral rhetoric does not mean that Turpin maintains that they are or intend to be manipulative (in the sense that they try to deceive somebody or conceal something), but instead he attempts to discover how they would want their readers to understand certain situations and actions, how to evaluate states of fact and persons, or what *Weltanschauung* they try to construct for their audience. He does so by pointing out that their discourse consists of more than economic science, being "saturated with moral judgments that are essential to the persuasive justifications for trusting the market, justifications that are fundamental to liberal political economy." (p. 8)

According to Turpin, an economic system (such as the self-regulating free market system) can only function if people share an attitude of trust in its fundamental values and principles (as described by both Adam Smith and Friedman), and act as if persuaded by their truth. To share such an attitude of trust means to be part of a discourse community, together with people that have the same *Weltanschauung*, the same way of understanding the (economic) world. In this sense, for Turpin, discourse communities are to be seen not only as including people with the same way of understanding the world (the same "decorum"), that is with identical theoretical concerns and views, but also as communities of interest. The persuasive rhetoric that can be identified in Smith's and Friedman's moral arguments must be seen as an invitation for their readers into a discourse community, not only because they may convince them of the truth of the liberal economic ideas and arguments, but also because they can change their fundamental attitudes and beliefs.

The transition to the modern, liberal economic decorum means also the creation of a new discourse community, where the traditional image of an economy based on distributive justice is replaced by the concept of a market economy grounded in commutative justice. As the new paradigm gained in power and influence, argues Turpin, the idea of distributive justice became increasingly obsolete and irrelevant, and consequently its function of relational coordination of society was left to be fulfilled by the former. That means that people began to understand each other and the fundamental relations between them in society exclusively from the point of

view of the new idea of commutative justice. This new way of thinking transformed the very idea of distributive justice that came to be understood as merely the material distribution of goods. According to Turpin, this transformation has three negative consequences: "(1) it separates material distribution from a relational framework; (2) it puts an undue relational burden on the ordinary social decorum; and (3) it develops a market decorum that increasingly and ironically threatens commutative justice itself." (p. 4)

The first undesired consequence means that if we conceive distribution exclusively through the lens of distribution of material goods, then welfare actions will be accompanied by an attitude of contempt towards the receiver. The second one is that the rules of social behavior came to be structured on the model of market relations, and that fact lowers the standards of what is considered to be appropriate in social relations. The third negative consequence concerns market decorum, i.e. the general rules of what means the right way to do business, rules that have changed under the pressure of the preeminence of the market. That means not only a change in the conception about what the behavior of agents in the market should be in order to meet the standards of appropriateness, but also a change in the criteria of social acceptance and recognition: to be worthy of social praise, one must be successful in the market. Consequently, the market becomes not only the place where people can satisfy their self-interest, but also the context where they gain social recognition, and as a consequence, market principles become the ultimate criteria of guiding one's life.

This situation must not make us think that Turpin believes that market economies are completely evil, or that we should somehow try to switch to a new system, without markets, for this is not possible. He means only that, by making us believe that commutative justice is the only one that is important, the moral rhetoric of market economists has distorted our understanding not only of the market principles, but also of the idea of justice, be it commutative or distributive. The idea of distributive justice itself cannot function normally anymore, because this type of justice is now understood in separation from the context of human relations in society.

Given this situation, what, if anything, can be done to alleviate those bad consequences that can be felt by every member of the discourse (and interest) community built on this moral rhetoric? Turpin believes that we should try to find ways for people to overcome the feeling of social and cultural fragmentation, to

regain social recognition, respect and solidarity, and to rethink justice in relational terms “insofar as those terms invoke attention to people as they are actually situated and are not reduced to admiration for achievement as in the commutative – distributional paradigm. These qualifiers suggest that respect and recognition must occupy ground somewhere between a general respect for people on the basis of their humanity and esteem for a specific achievement, if respect and recognition are to successfully manifest the relational imperatives of distributive justice” (p. 90). According to Turpin, modern people’s feelings of excessive pluralism, fragmentation and alienation were induced by the neglect of relational issues and by denying distributive justice its social importance. The result is that we do not have any more a proper context of recognition of different value orientations. On the one hand, we are taught that we must have respect for humanity as present in every person, and on the other hand we are supposed to have esteem for the excellence of particular persons. But, as Turpin puts it, “recognition as a human being is too abstract. Recognition through esteem is too particular.” (p. 106) We need to understand that recognition starts from real people as they actually are, and ultimately induces in human beings a feeling of belonging, of being members of a community, despite the inherent differences between them. Recognition itself has an inherently rhetorical dynamic, and the way to achieve solidarity in a social community is precisely the rhetoric understood as attitudinal reasoning within the discourse community, but at the same time “for recognition to revive a relational distributive justice, it needs to be of a kind that lets persons be who they are” (p. 106)

Turpin is a professor of communication, so his approach could have been limited to an analysis of discourse and of the elements of rhetoric that can be found in the work of the two great liberal economists, Smith and Friedman. Instead, his book presents a multidisciplinary perspective that proves expertise in both economy and philosophy, and can be a useful reading for scholars in those fields, as well as for those interested in the general problem of justice and its moral, economic, social and rhetoric implications.

Sergiu Bălan is a lecturer in Philosophy and Economic anthropology at the Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences, the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies (sergiub99@gmail.com)