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François-Régis Mahieu, Freedom, Responsibility and
Economics of the Person, London, Routledge, ebk, 2014, 174
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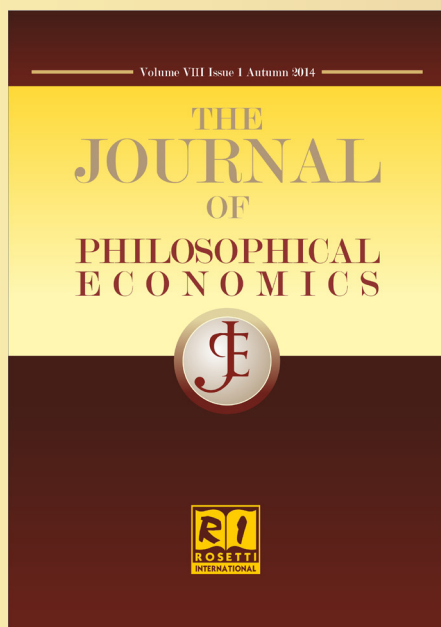
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Part of Routledge's *Frontiers of Political Economy* collection, the present volume gathers the contributions of four French economics professors, on the difficult and sensitive topic of method and methodology in economic science. According to its authors, the book's main goal is to 'present and develop thinking about the concept of the person in economics', i.e. 'to enrich economic analysis with an ethical reflection on responsibility and freedom' (p.1). The central shortcoming of economic theory is, the authors argue, the dehumanization of the person, 'to the extent of only accepting a representative individual, a sort of calculation machine, who is, consequently, predictable' (p.1). For this reason, they propose a methodological reflection on economics, that would 're-humanize the person', embracing human rationality whilst restoring its true place in relation to morality. In their endeavor, Ballet, Bazin, Dubois, and Mahieu draw on European phenomenology, particularly the French contributions of Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Ricoeur and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Although these phenomenological works - with the notable exception of Paul Ricoeur - have not touched on political themes, or economic theory, the four authors do not argue why other traditions - pertaining to law, philosophy, or theology - are not equally or better suited for a reconsideration of economics. Notwithstanding, only few references are eventually made to phenomenological works, as the four authors proceed in their own unique manner to construct the concept of the *person* in economics.

The nine chapters of the volume sketch the economics of the person while simultaneously comparing this view with other similar endeavors, e.g. the capability approach. The first chapter opens with a reconsideration of the idea of freedom, narrowly conceptualized by economics as freedom of choice. The four authors replace it with the idea of freedom understood as power over other people, from which they deduce the necessity of freedom to constrain oneself, that is to set one's own moral law. As a consequence, Chapters 2 and 3 outline the concept of responsibility in the context of freedom and life in society, redefined as an *ex-ante* characteristic of an agent, and not as an *ex-post* relationship of causality. This is so, the authors argue, because 'we consider ourselves to be responsible for our acts because we consider ourselves responsible beings. We assess our responsibility on the basis of the standard of responsibility that we have set ourselves.' (p.39) In like manner, agency and agent are also redefined: agency is the exercise of responsibility, which in turn is an *a priori* characteristic of the agent, who is rationally *accountable* for his/her choices. As the authors write, '[a] responsible agent is therefore an individual who exercises his/her freedom, as power, in a manner that is consistent with his/her judgment and the judgment of others with regard to his/her responsible acts.' (p. 40) These first three chapters are most important, as they represent the foundational part of the book. Their main drawback, however, is the obscure, almost impenetrable language of hermeneutical analysis: as the authors indulge in the phenomenological jargon – e.g. interiorisation, non-interference, thickness of freedom, sameness, ipseity, reasonableness, ascription, pluriactivity, or 'faultivity' – the prose becomes overcomplicated.

Chapters 4 and 5 develop the thread outlined in the first part of the book, and further define the *person* in relation to responsibility and freedom. Since, according to the authors, responsibility is the foundation for freedoms, a person has multiple practical responsibilities and abides by a set of rights and duties. A person cannot deny that values exist, as she/he is born in a world of pre-existing values; however, the person can personalize these values, as well as the world, by *ordering* them – rejecting some values and preferring others. The sets of rights and duties thus created constrain the actions and freedoms of a person, and affect human behavior, including economic behavior. Nevertheless, in defining values, rights, and duties, the authors attempt to contextualize universal morality without '[a]ccepting a moral relativism... Morality can be universal even though it takes many forms. This distinction allows relativism to avoid becoming nihilistic or remaining stuck in the idea that all moralities are equivalent' (p.71). But in doing so, the reader is not offered any criteria for distinguishing between forms of universal morality, and

other non-equivalent moralities. Are there, in fact, no criteria? Or are these criteria the result of a social consensus on Good and Evil, consensus liable to unforeseen change? Whatever the case – and without any arguments provided - it is difficult to see how the contextualized morality that Ballet, Bazin, Dubois, and Mahieu propose can indeed avoid becoming radical relativism.

In subsequent chapters, the four authors turn their attention to the *economic person*, now enriched with responsibility, and the subsequent person-based methodology. As a first step, they identify the vulnerable areas of orthodox economic methods, like the problematic conceptualization of time, or the difficulty of constructing dynamic theories. In trying to fill these gaps, Ballet, Bazin, Dubois, and Mahieu define the economic person as an 'individual personalizing him/herself in his or her choices and actions of an economic nature' (p.60); therefore 'an economy of the person consists of analyzing this economic personalization of the world through the personalization of the person him/herself' (p.60). Throughout the book, the authors are critical of circumscribing human action into mathematical models, as well as of generating quantitative predictions based on these models, and argue that the predictable 'representative agent' is an overt misrepresentation of the complex and unpredictable human nature. However, they appear to contradict themselves when they later devise an equivalence scale to 'measure' the rights and duties of a responsible person, and predict the outcomes of maximizing the social yield of one's moral obligations (p.77) or to calculate the optimum social yield (p.78). This type of approach is analogous to an economic invasion of ethics rather than an ethical addition to *homo economicus*.

In Chapter 6, Ballet, Bazin, Dubois, and Mahieu attempt to show how we could rethink economic analysis with the new *personalized* methodological foundation, offering several case studies on money transfers, time allocation, and informal credit markets from developing countries. These examples are analyzed comparatively, in light of orthodox economic methods and the economics of the person, in order to show how the latter view can avoid the shortcomings of the former. Regrettably, the authors focus on issues such as political redistribution of welfare, inequality, compensation, development aid, and theories of social justice; thus, contrary to what they initially set out to do, this approach is a person-based reconsideration of economic policy rather than of economic theory. Furthermore, the case studies are inaccurately constructed: the existence of informal money transfers (direct or indirect) does not invalidate the law that consumption rises with income (p.80); nor does technological change invalidate the hypothesis that, *absent*

technological change, migration will be a solution to a famine (p.86). Given that economic laws are postulated in *ceteris paribus* conditions, they cannot be proven invalid if all other things do not remain equal, as would be the case of a charitable, socially responsible community of persons (p.90). Finally, Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the fragility and vulnerability of the person, highlighting the impact that internal and external events – such as social and economic policies – can have on human welfare and human suffering. Ballet, Bazin, Dubois, and Mahieu conclude in Chapter 9 with avenues for future research in areas such as 'economic crimes' or the 'social precautionary principle' (pp. 120-28).

The present volume attempts to accomplish two almost monumental tasks in a little more than a hundred pages: that is, to enrich economics with philosophy, ethics, and sociology, as well as reconstruct the core concept of the economic method, the individual. Even though the authors fall short of their ambitious goals – perhaps due to the complexity of the task itself – they set out important food for thought for economists. Generally speaking, the phenomenological reconsideration outlined in this book sheds a new light on whether the dialogue between sciences can indeed prove lucrative for economics. This is a welcome and important contribution to the debate, in the context of the economic science extending its boundaries, and overlapping (fortunately or unfortunately) with other social or natural sciences. More importantly, Ballet, Bazin, Dubois and Mahieu re-diagnose the methodological problem of economics: by underscoring the irreducible complexity of the *person*, they show how the 'representative agent', the mathematical models, or the quantitative predictions of economic interactions are highly problematic. The book inspires reflection that can only prove to be important for the health and development of any science, and demonstrates that the future of economics does not lie in neat models and tidy assumptions, but in approaching the real world with befitting tools.

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