

Natural Wealth and Natural Goods in Epicureanism

Post by “Pacatus” of July 21, 2022 at 1:29 PM

Interesting paper. (My academic background is economics – particularly labor economics; though my subsequent professional work was pension economics, first for a labor union and later for a pension trust. But all that was 20+ years ago.)

I do remember well that (neoclassical) economics eschewed any ethical viewpoint (e.g., the Robbins quote in the article). But that was (is) really a kind of deceit, since the single acceptable goal was “economic efficiency” (defined in terms of “Pareto optimality”). That put a real restraint on any discussion of income distribution, for example – or concern about people whose resource constraints kept them out of the market at all (think poverty-stricken households and healthcare). Proposals were often met with the objection: “But that wouldn’t be efficient!”

So, economic rationality was defined as efficient utility maximizing behavior via constrained choice (in the face of resource scarcity). This, of course, contrasts with the ancient Greek view of economic behavior “as rational when it was frugal in its use of means towards what they deemed as worthwhile ends.”

Bottom line: I don’t think that economics really can escape from ethical considerations.

I found it interesting (as a smalltime trader 😭) that Aristotle classed market trading as an “unnatural” wealth activity – apparently because it does not produce any productive, physical (in economic terms “real”) capital (I would include “technological capital”) – as opposed to merely “financial capital”, the accumulation of which may or may not be turned to productive use (“supplying people’s needs”).

As you can see, this paper stimulated some old memories. 😊 I have yet to read Philodemus, but hope to get to it soon.