



Integrating normative issues in the principles of economics texts: Introduction to a symposium

David Colander

To cite this article: David Colander (2017) Integrating normative issues in the principles of economics texts: Introduction to a symposium, The Journal of Economic Education, 48:1, 1-2, DOI: [10.1080/00220485.2016.1252295](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220485.2016.1252295)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220485.2016.1252295>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Taylor & Francis. © David Colander



Published online: 16 Dec 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 779



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

CONTENT ARTICLES IN ECONOMICS

Integrating normative issues in the principles of economics texts: Introduction to a symposium

David Colander

Department of Economics, Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT, USA

Moral philosophers believe that economists do a poor job of integrating morality, ethics, and normative issues into economics, and economic textbooks are routinely criticized for failing to integrate ethical and moral issues into the discussion. For example, economist/philosopher John Davis (2014) has called economists' positive normative distinction "indefensible," and Harvard philosopher Hillary Putnam (2002, 2003) has attacked economists for their unacceptable entanglement of facts and values. Thus, I am pleased to introduce this symposium that addresses the question of normative issues in economics with specific reference to how introductory textbooks deal with normative issues. The symposium consists of two papers that raise related but different concerns about how normative issues are treated in principles of economics texts, along with invited comments from three textbook authors: Sean Flynn, a coauthor of the McConnell, Brue, and Flynn principles text; Greg Mankiw, the author of the Mankiw principles text; and Jonathan Morduch, coauthor of the Karlan and Morduch principles text. The discussions are relevant to all economists teaching principles of economics.

In his article, Wight (2017, 15) argues that "the normative elements underlying efficiency are more complex than generally portrayed, and rely upon ethical frameworks that are generally absent from economic classroom discussions." He suggests that for economists' approach to be a palatable normative approach, "society must have in place basic institutions of justice" (p. 15). Because many of the world's societies do not have those institutions in place, he finds economists' approach unpalatable. He further suggests that a more pluralist approach to ethics would be desirable and that such an approach would embolden economics teachers to engage students with critical thinking problems that are more controversial and relevant.

In his article, Stephen Schmidt argues that introductory textbooks teach a simple normative story about the importance of maximizing economic surplus but that they provide little or no defense of the implicit normative claim that maximizing surplus is desirable. He argues that the textbooks should tell a more sophisticated normative story that justifies the moral importance of surplus but also acknowledges that other moral values may conflict with generating surplus. Specifically, he argues that distribution questions are not always separable from efficiency questions, and the texts should make that clear.

The two articles are followed by three responses from textbook authors who take different positions on the issues raised and on how well principles texts deal with normative issues. Greg Mankiw argues that the approach he uses in his text is justified by the need to keep things simple. To reach students, authors must ruthlessly simplify, and he summarizes the five main lessons he believes should be emphasized. Sean Flynn takes a different approach and argues that market equilibria already incorporate normative preferences and that "the interesting issue is not how to get markets to account for normative issues; they already do" (2017, 30). Jonathan Morduch takes a different tack. He agrees with Schmidt and Wight that there are "deep problems with the content of normative economics taught (or implied) in most intro classes" (2017, 31), but he argues that there is an alternative way of achieving the goals. Specifically, he suggests dropping the "outmoded normative claims that are still made in intro classes" (p. 31). After doing

CONTACT David Colander  colander@middlebury.edu  Department of Economics, Middlebury College, Warner Hall, 303 College Street, Middlebury, VT 05753, USA.

© 2017 David Colander

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

so, the texts should highlight that there are inevitably winners and losers from economics changes, and present economists' empirical work exploring who wins and who loses.

As one can see by these three quite different responses, how normative issues are handled in the principles course is an unsettled question, and my hope is that this symposium begins a long overdue discussion of it by the profession.

References

- Davis, J. 2014. Economists' odd stand on the positive-normative distinction: A behavioral economics view. In *The Oxford handbook on professional economic ethics*, ed. G. F. DeMartino and D. N. McCloskey, chapter 11. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199766635.001.0001.
- Flynn, S. 2017. Market equilibria already incorporate normative preferences. *Journal of Economic Education* 48 (1): 29–30.
- Morduch, J. 2017. Bringing winners and losers into the classroom. *Journal of Economic Education* 48 (1): 31–33.
- Putnam, H. 2002. *The collapse of the fact/value dichotomy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 2003. For ethics and economics without the dichotomies. *Review of Political Economy* 15 (3): 395–412.
- Wight, J. 2017. The ethics behind efficiency. *Journal of Economic Education* 48 (1): 15–26.