AN ESSAY ON THE NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL ECONOMICS

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As noted in the Preface, the conception of the present book has from the very beginning been deeply rooted in a point of view that regards contemporary social economics as a highly pluralistic field of inquiry. It would seem, accordingly, that any meaningful attempt to better comprehend it will have to come to grips with its characteristic inner diversity. Today, pluralism is the very key, the nuts and bolts of modern social economics, and even more certainly, the glue that has been holding it together. At the same time, especially in the present context, we need to recognize that there can be some diversity in the concept and meaning of "pluralism" itself. In particular, we will here distinguish between a "strong version" and a more "moderate version" of pluralism. One is epistemological and ontological, the other merely epistemological.

The perspective of a "strong" pluralism can, for example, be found in the work of Warren Samuels, both in this volume and elsewhere (1977).
Diversity in social theory and social economics simply reflects an irreducibly complex and intrinsically diverse social reality "out there." Therefore, Samuels, for example, is led to prefer an "open-ended 'matrix' approach to the study of schools and strands of thought." His is a vision of "let the hundred flowers bloom," and "don't even try to discover the real, true or 'best' principles of anything, including social economics." More specifically, how can we aim at a "reconstruction of society on a sound ethical and moral base," if we ought to doubt that such a base even exists in the first place. There may be none, or there may be more than one. Furthermore, anybody who wishes to deny this in pretending his (or her) chosen approach is better or even "the best" by some supposedly more objective, universal, or (pardon the expression) "absolute" set of criteria, reveals a propensity to differentiate oneself in a way that both depreciates and excludes others (Samuels, 1977, p. 287). Operating on the a priori principle [a discovered truth?] that there are no discoverable universal truths, no pragmatists can be expected to participate wholeheartedly in the hunting down of a phantom. Instead, the "true" principles of social economics would only be a figment of the soul, and so would be any serious proposal recommending criteria for a meaningful evaluation of alternative normative approaches. It would also follow that any attempt to the contrary would never amount to anything more than a counterproductive imposition.

One problem with this view, so it would seem, is that it can be rejected on its own grounds, the kind of internal criticism that it generally recommends. It entails an a priori rejection of a monist (meta-)conception of social economics. It could be argued that such an uncritical preconception makes a pluralism in its strong version unnecessarily dogmatic and one-sided. Another problem would be that there really is no good reason to stop at merely four versions of social economics. On what basis could we rule out even 400 and more?

An alternative, more moderate form of pluralism would be more in line with what Bruce Caldwell calls "methodological pluralism," a plurality of methods in proceeding toward the attainment of knowledge of the one reality "out" there. According to this alternative, there is nothing wrong with a belief that "deep down" and within a particular context, there does exist a true, right, "best" (possible) way to reconstruct society on a sound and ethical base. But, and here we paraphrase Caldwell's view (1982, p. 245) on methodology, even though such a sound basis exists, we can never be sure we have discovered it, even if we have. Still, just because we can never be sure that we are moving in the "right direction"