

Arjo Klamer, *Speaking of Economics. How to get in the conversation*, London, Routledge, 2007.

“How to do” books are not often reviewed in academic journals, neither in philosophy nor in economics, perhaps because most of them are aimed at doing things that are of not much relevance for the audiences of these journals. Arjo Klamer’s new book is an exception though. A journal that promotes the mutual enrichment of economics and philosophy surely will attract a number of philosophers interested in engaging in fruitful conversation with economists. Philosophers, though, are just a subset of the vast readership targeted by Arjo Klamer in *Speaking of Economics* (the list covers three pages: xiv-xvi), so they should not expect a preferential treatment. Klamer takes nothing for granted and constructs the book in the best tradition of the “How to” genre. The sections are short, with punchy titles, very few notes and not many more references. Readability is secured by avoiding technical jargon, adding illustrational personal anecdotes and intercalating boxes to clarify or expand difficult points. And it is only 185 pages long: an easy read or, at least, significantly less demanding than most other titles in the “Economics as social theory” series, where it is published. The book is personal, warns the author, and it is written in a conversational style (xvii). This is something that cannot be captured in a review, but may explain the sketchy nature of the following summary.

In chapter one, Klamer reviews the *strangeness* of economics as a discipline, which can be appreciated through the *suspicion* and *derision* it often causes outside academia. Its subject is perceived as strange and its methodology is often considered peculiar. Against this popular view, the author claims that if addressed through the metaphor of the *conversation*, economics does not seem strange anymore: it is as much a conversation as any other. In the following chapter alternative metaphors drawn from the philosophy and sociology of science are pondered (e.gr., “research program”, “logic and mirror”, etc.). The different constraints which define a scientific conversation are then briefly reviewed (from the physical surroundings to its *topoi* and *ethos*) and, in view of these, the strangeness of economics is reinterpreted. For instance, against those who consider it a dubious science, Klamer proclaims: “the scientific tenor of a conversation may be disturbing, but instead of focusing on its unscientific character, it might be better to simply acknowledge a desire to change it, or to participate in another conversation altogether” (35).

In chapter three, Klamer introduces an expansive notion of culture, inspired by Clifford Geertz, that allows the author to address the oddities of academic conversation and its circumstances. “Not convinced that academic culture is different?” —concludes Klamer— “Read David Lodge’s novels”.

In chapter four, with a bit of help from bibliometry, Klamer studies why so few academics get read and cited, the effects that the skewed distribution of attention has on the social organization of scientific communities and how this impinges on their conversations. “The giving and receiving of attention is the mechanism by which the conversation lives and grows” (55). It does so, however, according to a certain normative standard which is stated in the title of the subsequent chapter: “A good scientific conversation, or contribution thereto, is truthful and meaningful and serves certain interests”. These values

are then shortly justified in the form of imperatives. Klamer adds though an appendix to this chapter as a ten-pages primer on philosophy and sociology of science. The message this appendix conveys is, apparently, that there are no better criteria than his imperatives to assess the quality of a scientific conversation.

Chapter six introduces the rhetoric approach through a combination of short sections, a few boxes (often longer than the sections), and a glossary at the end. The chapter covers the usual *topoi* in the rhetoric of economics plus two brief tutorials on the structure of argumentation and the use of metaphors in science. The final section (and the subsequent box) presents divergences among economists in terms of the stories they tell and how these stories contribute to the cogency of their argument.

These disagreements are further analysed in the following chapter. On the one hand, Klamer warns us about the differences between ongoing kinds of conversations in economics and the difficulties to master more than one. On the other hand, conversations change over time and even though the current one is dominated by modernism (defined in eight points in a separate box), it seems to be in a late stage making way, perhaps, to alternative conversations. “The current state is worrisome”, states Klamer, “late modernist economics is aloof from interested in finding out about and making sense of economic processes” (151). Worried as he is with the deconstructive turn in postmodernism, Klamer holds out for a revival of classicism, reintroducing values and virtues, traditions and interpretative approaches in economic conversation.

This revival is not a topic covered in this book, whose eighth and final chapter discusses the gap between mundane and academic conversation. Klamer argues here that the influence from the latter to the former is never direct: the stories will change in the process, and therefore no economist can expect to control them to best serve her purposes. This leads to an epilogue in the form of a *peroratio*: a good ending can save a dull argument, warns Klamer. The criterion to evaluate the success of his own argument: “if going through the preceding pages has produced an *Aha Erlebnis* now and then, or moments of recognition and identification, or the feeling that one’s experience is quite different from the one describe here, the argument has been successful” (183)

For anyone involved in one way or another with economists it will be easy either to identify or to disagree, now and then, with the many stories told in this book. In this respect, the success of the argument is guaranteed, even if a modest one. It would be a bit more impressive, if the metaphor caught on and we all started speaking of economics as a conversation. However the author is well aware that no academic can engineer the adoption of a metaphor by a given community, so perhaps the modesty of Klamer’s goals is justified here.

Yet this awareness may explain a few things about the structure of the book: the author cannot control the fate of the metaphor, but he knows that this reviewer cannot either. Many readers of this journal, such as myself, are using metaphors different from Klamer’s to address economics, and the sort of conversation we are engaged makes it very difficult to accept the arguments advanced in this book. They seem most often quick and inconclusive. But, as I said before, we are just a subset of the audience, quite a small one indeed, and

a negative review pointing out these faults will not prevent the metaphor to catch on if most economists felt moved by Klammer's book and decided to adopt it. So there is no point in trying to please analytically-minded philosophers.

Yet independently of our intellectual inclinations, "How to do" books can be assessed with a very simple criterion: do we learn to do what they teach how to? In this particular case, are we better qualified to get in the economists' conversation after reading it? If a majority in the profession decided to adopt Klammer's metaphor, independently of the merits of his argument, the book will surely be a must. But this is just a *performative effect*, using Donald MacKenzie's terms: if a community reads a certain code and decide to behave according to its prescriptions, it will become a compulsory reading for anyone who wants to interact with its members. If, on the other hand, economists decide to ignore this essay for whatever reason, I don't think it will help us much to improve our communication with them, given that their conversation is currently far from satisfying Klammer's expectations. A better title for the book would then read: "Speaking of economics. How to get in the metaphor of economic conversation". It is up to the reader to decide whether to join Klammer in spreading the word and make the conversation with economists what he wants it to be or find alternative ways to get into it.

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Biographical Note

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