

Evidential Pluralism in Philosophy of Economics

In 2007, Federica Russo and Jon Williamson argued that causal claims in medicine are normally established based on both evidence of mechanisms (roughly: understanding how an intervention works) and evidence of difference-making (establishing an association between exposure and outcome). Their claim has been known as the Russo-Williamson Thesis. It undermined the dominance of the evidence-based medicine movement that focuses on the latter kind of evidence and prioritizes randomized controlled trials and systematic reviews thereof over non-randomized studies and observational epidemiology on the ground that they deliver difference-making evidence of higher quality.

Evidential Pluralism is a philosophy of science position that stems from a normative reading of the Russo-Williamson Thesis, i.e., it is committed to the view that causal claims are only justified if supported by both difference-making evidence and mechanistic evidence. Recently, Evidential Pluralism has been applied beyond medicine. In particular, Yafeng Shan and Jon Williamson argued that applying Evidential Pluralism to social sciences might be helpful for the accuracy of causal inferences and the quality of policy decisions.

However, social sciences are broadly divided regarding research methods (study designs). Ethnography relies mainly on participant observation, psychology relies on questionnaires and experiments, while economics employs theoretical modeling and econometric (statistical) analysis of economic data. This differentiation makes importing Evidential Pluralism from medicine to social sciences (construed as a monolithic discipline) difficult. For this reason, this research project focuses on one of the social science disciplines – economics, which has the highest impact on our wellbeing and everyday life among all social sciences.

To establish causality in economics in line with the advice of Evidential Pluralism, several research questions need to be addressed. These questions are concerned with developing tools to assess the quality of evidence stemming from theoretical models, econometric studies of observational data, and laboratory and field experiments. To solve the approached research problem, the team will conduct conceptual analysis and conceptual engineering of the notion of 'difference-making evidence' to adjust it to the context of economics and will work on developing tools for evaluating the quality of evidence for causality using literature review and case study (methodological) analysis.

Developing the tools for assessing the quality of mechanistic and difference-making evidence will develop philosophy of economics discussions, positively affect how causal inferences are established by economists, and, indirectly, on the decisions concerned with economic policy-making.