

In philosophy of economics, it is tried very often to establish contacts to the general philosophy of science. However, none of the standard philosophies of science (Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos, and Feyerabend) seem to be appropriate for economics. How can this fact be explained?

We propose the following solution. Economics clearly does not feature paradigms in Kuhn's sense. However, economics features something that resembles Kuhn's paradigms which we call "orientational paradigms". Like Kuhn's paradigms, orientational paradigms may be found on a more general and a more specialized level, namely, as broad generalizations or as exemplars in the form of models. In contrast to Kuhn's paradigms, orientational paradigms are not necessarily believed to be correct in the relevant scientific community. Rather, they are reference points that have to be used, be it in agreement or in disagreement with them. We illustrate the use of orientational paradigms in economics by a number of examples. Orientational paradigms set economics apart from all the other social sciences and they provide a special kind of unity to economics.

If general philosophy of science should cover economics, it needs a broader framework. Recently, such a broader framework has been developed, namely, the systematicity theory of science. Its central thesis is that science is more systematic than other forms of knowledge, especially everyday knowledge. In addition, systematicity theory describes an increase in systematicity in nine dimensions as advantageous for the respective discipline. Therefore, the role of orientational paradigms in economics can be understood as advantageous for economics in increasing the degree of systematicity regarding the dimensions "epistemic connectedness" and "critical discourse".

If correct, our analysis also allows responding in a new way to the widespread criticism of the economic discipline after the recent financial crisis. The deep divisions in economics and the unrealistic assumptions have to be put into perspective: although prima facie relevant lines of criticisms, they miss the important function that orientational paradigms play in economics. Our thesis opens up a new self-perception of the economic discipline.