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Foundations and Trends® in Entrepreneurship

Published, sold and distributed by:

now Publishers Inc.
PO Box 1024
Hanover, MA 02339
United States
Tel. +1-781-985-4510
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The preferred citation for this publication is

M. McCaffrey *et al.*. *Austrian Economics and Entrepreneurship*. Foundations and Trends® in Entrepreneurship, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 1–108, 2024.

ISBN: 978-1-63828-381-2

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Foundations and Trends® in Entrepreneurship

Volume 20, Issue 1, 2024

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Foundations and Trends® in Entrepreneurship, 2024, Volume 20, 4 issues. ISSN paper version 1551-3114. ISSN online version 1551-3122. Also available as a combined paper and online subscription.

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Austrian Economics and Entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

This monograph surveys the rich history of entrepreneurship research within and inspired by the “Austrian” school of economics. Unlike most schools of the past 150 years or so, the Austrian tradition places entrepreneurship at the heart of economic theory and practice. Understanding the entrepreneurial “function” in society is vital for explaining the real-world market process, but also for a proper understanding of the fundamental concepts and theories of economics. These include action, choice, exchange, prices, supply and demand, money, capital, competition, economic development, and business cycles, to name only a few. In this monograph we survey the development of Austrian theories of entrepreneurship, examining the contributions of leading members of the tradition in addition to those of some lesser-known writers, adjacent scholars, and fellow-travelers. We then explore some ways in which Austrian work contributes to modern entrepreneurship research, especially through the

Judgment-Based Approach. We conclude with a discussion of the professional roles now played by Austrians in the contemporary entrepreneurship discipline.

Keywords: Austrian economics; action; economic calculation; judgment; alertness.

1

Introduction

The modern scholarly study of entrepreneurship began as a branch of economic theory many decades before it emerged as a distinct discipline. It is no surprise then that today, entrepreneurship research continues to draw on economic themes and controversies, even while it also incorporates insights from management, sociology, psychology, organization studies, and many other disciplines and social sciences. Sad to say though, this influence has usually not been mutual, and for decades it has been common to lament the disappearance of entrepreneurship from mainstream economics teaching and research, ever since the subject was shunted aside in order for theoretical economics to become increasingly abstract and formal, trading realism for “rigor” (*mortis*).¹ Indeed, this shift was natural given the way economics developed over the course of the 20th century: there is little room for entrepreneurship in any economics that emphasizes equilibrium over action, statics over dynamics, risk over uncertainty, and mechanistic decision functions over genuine choice.

¹To paraphrase Robert Heilbroner, who was most certainly *not* an Austrian economist.

However, one tradition continues to place entrepreneurship at the center of economic theory and practice: the Austrian school of economics. It has long been a trope of Austrian work to cite Ludwig von Mises's remark that the entrepreneur is the "driving force of the market economy" in order to explain the importance of this role in economic affairs. Yet entrepreneurship is even more significant than this, as it provides a crucial foundation for economic analysis, one that unites and builds upon core concepts like action, choice, exchange, prices, supply and demand, money, capital, competition, economic development, and business cycles. In fact, according to Austrians these concepts can only be properly understood in light of their relation to entrepreneurial behavior.

This Austrian emphasis on entrepreneurship flows naturally from its "causal-realist" methodological standpoint, the view that economics should be concerned with the study of fundamental causal relationships in the existing world. Entrepreneurship is an obvious and profoundly important aspect of this world, and therefore deserves a place at the heart of economics and social science.

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