**Abstract:** Ludwig von Mises’s methodological apriorism is frequently attributed to the broader Austrian School of economics, of which, of course, Mises was a prominent member. However, there is considerable controversy concerning the meaning of Mises’s various attempts to justify his apriorism. There are *prima facie* inconsistencies within and across Mises’s methodological writings that engender massive confusion in the secondary literature. This confusion is aggravated by the fact that Mises’s apriorism cannot be straightforwardly interpreted as an artifact of his historical milieu. Indeed, the two prevailing families of interpretation both treat Mises’s apriorism as radically anachronistic, albeit in different senses. According to “extreme” interpretations, Mises’s apriorism reflects an epistemology several decades, if not centuries, beyond its expiration date. According to “moderate” interpretations, however, Mises’s apriorism anticipates ideas that would not appear in the epistemological literature for several decades to come. Finally, there is evidence to suggest that Mises’s actual methodological beliefs are not reflected in his writings, that Mises either obfuscated or exaggerated his methodological position, for whatever reasons, making it seem more radical than it was in fact. I conclude that we have no idea what justification Mises actually intended when he asserted the *a priori* nature of the fundamental propositions of economics. If this is right, then, whatever method(s) they follow, Austrian economists cannot (deliberately) follow *Mises’s* apriorism.

**Keywords:** Ludwig von Mises, apriorism, praxeology, Austrian economics, F. A. Hayek

**Introduction**

Austrian School economists are regularly described as *methodological apriorists*. Mises’s interpreters often move from their own interpretation of his methodological writings to unwarranted assertions that it both expresses the historical Mises’s true intentions and reflects the Austrian method of economic analysis.[[1]](#footnote-1) Both of these inferences, from a particular interpretation of Mises’s methodology to the claim that the interpretation represents 1) his true intentions and 2) the actual practice of Austrian economists, are dubious.

The epistemology upon which Mises’s apriorism is founded has long baffled commentators, both friends and foes of the Austrian School. Many mutually inconsistent positions have been inferred from Mises’s methodological commentaries.

To be an apriorist about some proposition *P* is to argue that, for one reason or another, *P* can safely be exempted from empirical testing. Various justifications have been offered by different economists for exempting particular propositions from such testing.[[2]](#footnote-2) According to one such justification, *P* is known independently of sensory experience, e.g., the truth of *P* is “self-evident” or easily recognized by reflecting upon it using nothing more than the human faculty of reason. Justified in this way, apriorism is a variety of epistemological *rationalism*, the theory of knowledge according to which human rational faculties are, under appropriate conditions, sufficient for knowledge of circumstances external to these faculties. Conversely, this way of justifying the exemption of a proposition is an abomination to epistemological *empiricism*, the theory of knowledge according to which, on its own, pure reasonis impotent with regard to knowledge of the world of experience and that, therefore, insists on the necessity of sensory experience for the acquisition of such knowledge.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is of course common to think of modern science as primarily an empiricist exercise in using sensory experience to discover, develop, and justify explanatory theories of natural and social phenomena. True, the exact nature of the relationship between empiricism and science is and will likely remain a knotty problem, but most would agree that any rationalistic approach to science, any attempt to spin explanatory theories out of one’s head about the world of experience without said experience, is an artifact of a pre-modern conception of science.

Any attribution of Mises’s apriorism to the Austrian School, whether it comes from their intellectual opponents or their defenders, should be understood against this background and recognized, and probably decried, as the dialectical gambit it usually is. Such claims are often leveled at Austrians by their adversaries, who, for some of the reasons just mentioned, consider the accusation of apriorism to be an insult. If Austrians are apriorists, or if important people can be convinced that Austrians are apriorists, then, these intellectual opponents seem to believe, the scientific status of Austrian economics is undermined, and Austrians are revealed to be little better than dogmatists about economic and related (i.e., political) phenomena. Unsurprisingly, this is a popular argumentative tactic of those who wish to challenge the liberal politics typically associated with Austrian economics. What is more surprising, given the latter tactic, is to find a few Austrians explicitly defending something like Mises’s apriorism (see, e.g., Rothbard [1957], Maclean [1980], and Hoppe [1995]). How can a methodological position that their opponents consider a cudgel with which to beat them be embraced by these Austrians as a shield against said beating? A short and unsatisfactory, if basically correct, answer to this question is that some of these Austrians are simply confused about what methodological apriorism does and does not allow them to accomplish.[[4]](#footnote-4)

On the other hand, there are Austrians (see, e.g., Machlup [1955], Leeson and Boettke [2006], and Zanotti and Cachanosky [2015]) who interpret his methodology as more moderate. Indeed, these interpreters ultimately ignore, downplay, or otherwise explain away Mises’s seemingly extreme rationalistic justification, and emphasize instead certain of his suggestive references to a kind of pragmatism or conventionalism (see Scheall [2015]). These epistemologies are varieties of empiricism that deny the possibility of *a priori* knowledge as conceived as a product of pure reason. If there are pragmatists or conventionalists among Austrian economists, they are not rationalistic apriorists.

I have previously suggested (Scheall [2017a]), albeit without offering much of an argument in defense of the claim, that we ultimately do not know what justification Mises intended when he asserted that the most basic assumption of economic theory is known *a priori*. Mises did not provide the material necessary to determine the correct interpretation of his apriorism—or rather, more exactly, such material as Mises provided in this regard points in so many different directions that a conclusive determination of its intended justification is impossible. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there is something of an effort in Mises’s methodological proclamations to both eat cake and keep it. The end result is a muddle. As I have put the point previously,

“Any proposition can be inferred from a contradiction. The fact that many mutually impossible epistemological propositions have been inferred from Mises’s writings is an abductive warning that there may be nothing of substance—no ‘there’—there […] Ultimately, we simply do not know what the historical Ludwig von Mises believed about epistemology” (Scheall [2017a])[[5]](#footnote-5)

My goal in the present paper is to further develop and defend this thesis.

As exemplified in the tendency to draw unjustified conclusions about both Mises’s intentions and actual Austrian practice from nothing more than a particular interpretation of his apriorism, there are several distinct issues that are frequently conflated in the literature on Mises’s methodology which, in the interests of clarity of thought, are better kept separate. The present paper is also an effort to delineate distinct issues that have previously been insufficiently distinguished.

**The problem of the primary literature, part 1: The apparent inconsistency of Mises’s writings on economic methodology**

As I have shown in previous work (Scheall 2017b), the chief issue at stake in the literature on Mises’s apriorism concerns not the *extent* of his apriorism – i.e., not how many or how few of the fundamental propositions of economic theory he thought to be *a priori* – but the *epistemological status* of the so-called “action axiom” that constitutes the theoretical foundation of praxeology, Mises’s general science of human action, the “best-developed part of” which is economics (Mises [1949] 1998, p. 237). The action axiom states that *human action is purposeful behavior* (Mises [1949] 1998, 11). Mises made several claims about the epistemology of human action that have struck many readers over the decades as extreme and dogmatic, if not unscientific.

I have described two of these extreme epistemological claims elsewhere as the “Reason without Experience” and “Greater Certainty” theses (Scheall 2017b). According to the first, our knowledge of human action is due entirely to the faculty of reason, i.e., to pure reason, intuition, introspection, or reflection on “inner experience,” entirely unaided by prior sensory experience. According to the Reason without Experience thesis, our engagement with the world of “outer experience” is impotent with respect to this knowledge; the external world neither leads us to nor can undermine our knowledge of human action.

“[W]hat we know about our action under given conditions is derived not from experience, but from reason. What we know about the fundamental categories of action—action, economizing, preferring, the relationship of means and ends, and everything else that, together with these, constitutes the system of human action—is not derived from experience. We conceive all this from within, just as we conceive logical and mathematical truths, *a priori*, without reference to any experience. Nor could experience ever lead anyone to the knowledge of these things if he did not comprehend them from within himself” (Mises [1933] 2003, 13-14).[[6]](#footnote-6)

According to the second thesis, the “Greater Certainty” thesis, in virtue of being introspectable, intuitable, etc., our knowledge of human action is more secure, more certain, than knowledge acquired through experience of the external world.[[7]](#footnote-7) Indeed, according to Mises, our knowledge of the purposefulness of human action is *absolutely* secure or “apodictically certain.” Theorems validly deduced from the action axiom “are not only *perfectly certain and incontestable*, like the correct mathematical theorems[, t]hey refer, moreover, with the full rigidity of their apodictic certainty and incontestability *to the reality of action as it appears in life and history. Praxeology conveys exact and precise knowledge of real things*” (Mises [1949] 1998, 39; emphasis added).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Putting these theses together, we get the outlines of a rationalist epistemology according to which it is possible to possess apodictically certain and incontestable knowledge about “real things” – that is, about human actionin the external world of outer experience (“in life and history”) without any contact with, or input from, this same world. It is not necessary to excavate far below the surface of Mises’s methodological writings to find what seems a fairly radical rationalist epistemology.

This being said, however, there are other places in relevant texts where Mises made subtle gestures toward more moderate epistemological stances. It is here that the problem of finding an internally consistent reading of Mises’s methodological writings is manifest, for these elusive hints of more moderate epistemological attitudes do not sit comfortably with his strong statements of the Reason without Experience and Greater Certainty theses.

Mises ([1949] 1998, p. 35, pp. 85–86; 1962, pp. 14–16) made comments which seem to imply that human knowledge might be subject to evolutionary processes over historical time. Yet, he never explained how his seemingly rationalistic justification of the apriority of the action axiom fit within this sketch of a proto-evolutionary epistemology. If human knowledge evolved over time, it is not immediately obvious how the part of it that concerns human action “in life and history” could have been exempted from the effects of experience.

I do not mean to suggest that a consistent story is impossible to tell here, merely that combining the Reason without Experience and Greater Certainty theses in an evolutionary epistemology is not *obviously* consistent and, therefore, requires some explanation. Indeed, given the creative ways that intelligent thinkers often find of unifying their seemingly inconsistent ideas, the problem is more that Mises provided no guidance for determining which of the many ways his claims might be made consistent he intended.

Or, again, consider the fact that Mises made strong assertions of human epistemic fallibility (Mises [1949] 1998, p. 68), yet never explained why his fallibilism stopped short of the action axiom. Anyone who thinks his knowledge of human action is apodictically certain is manifestly nota fallibilist about *this* knowledge.

Similarly, Mises seemed favorably inclined to a sort of pragmatism (Mises [1957] 1985, p. 248; 1962, p. 96), but rejected a pragmatic interpretation of the apriority of the action axiom—it was not, according to Mises ([1949] 1998, pp. 39-40, p. 85; 1962, pp. 17-18), merely an assumption made for reasons of scientific convention, ease and convenience, or practical utility.

Thus, the evidence from the primary literature indicates that Mises said some things that suggest a fairly radical rationalism and some other things that undercut to some degree the extremeness of this rationalism. However, these things do not – or, at least, do not obviously – all sit comfortably together. The combination of claims for *a priori* “*exact and precise knowledge of real things*” due to pure reason with evolutionary or pragmatist epistemology is somewhat unusual in the history of ideas. Most epistemological fallibilists are fallibilists about *all* of human knowledge. Limiting his fallibilism, as Mises did, to everything but the action axiom is a non-standard epistemological stance. Some elucidation is in order. Unfortunately, Mises never explained how his radically rationalist statements were, in his mind, consistent with his more moderate statements.

Internal consistency might seem to be the least we can reasonably expect from a theory of knowledge, but I want to suggest the possibility that Mises’s epistemology fails to meet even a weaker criterion: taken in its entirety, Mises’s epistemological commentary is so unclear and, relatedly, as we will see below, the personal circumstances that informed it so uncertain that, ultimately, we do not know what his theory of knowledge was, and cannot even tell whether it was internally consistent or not. Mises’s epistemology fails to meet even a criterion of minimal clarity required to discern its internal consistency.

**The problem of the secondary literature: Recapitulating the inconsistency of Mises’s writings on economic methodology**

The most prominent line of interpretation in the secondary literature reads the epistemology at the core of Mises’s apriorism as a kind of extreme rationalism. Such a reading can be found in Hutchison (1938, 1981), Rothbard (1957), Samuelson (1972), Blaug (1980), Maclean (1980), Caldwell (1982, 1984), Hoppe (1995), Lagueux (1998), Hands (2001), Milonakis and Fine (2009), Schulak and Unterköfler (2011), and Scheall (2015). Most, but not all, of these interpretations are negative: Rothbard, Hoppe, and Maclean defend, rather than criticize, the apparent extremeness of Mises’s apriorism and, in varying respects and to differing degrees, the Kantian epistemology upon which it seems to have been founded.[[9]](#footnote-9)

It is, of course, precisely those strains of moderation mentioned in the previous section – Mises’s gestures toward evolutionary epistemology, fallibilism, and pragmatism – that interpreters take up who wish to save him from accusations of extreme rationalism. Mises’s apriorism has been variously interpreted as assimilable in some degree to Popperian falsificationism (Champion [manuscript]; Di Iorio [2008]), Imre Lakatos’s (1968) methodology of scientific research programs (Machlup [1955]; Rizzo [1983]; Zanotti and Cachanosky [2015]), and W. V. O. Quine’s (1951) epistemological holism (Leeson and Boettke [2006]). Alexander Linsbichler (2017) reads Mises as *almost* a conventionalist.

Unfortunately for these interpreters of Mises as a merely moderate apriorist, as noted above, he explicitly undercut several of these readings elsewhere in his writings. Those moderate readings that are not explicitly undercut are implicitly undone by extreme statements like the Reason without Experience and Greater Certainty theses.

Indeed, I have argued that moderate readings of Mises’s apriorism can ultimately be sustained only if the most prominent criticisms that have been set against it in the secondary literature are simply ignored (Scheall 2017b). Interpreters of Mises’s apriorism as moderate do not so much confront and counter these criticisms, or provide a moderate reading of Mises’s extreme statements of the Reason without Experience and Greater Certainty theses, as pretend they do not exist.

Nevertheless, those furtive hints of a more moderate Misesian epistemology *are* present in his writings. It is no more legitimate to ignore them simply because they might seem to be dominated by his more rationalistic comments than it is for the interpreters of Mises as moderate to ignore the latter.

We are obligated by the *principle of interpretative charity* to assume that Mises had some clarifying idea in mind which unified his seemingly inconsistent epistemological statements. However, Mises did not provide this explanation himself. The task of unifying Mises’s apriorism was left to his descendants in the Austrian tradition. “Unfortunately, these scions have never agreed among themselves on a single understanding of the epistemology of the action axiom. Mises provided no criteria for choosing between secondary interpretations. Thus, the apparent inconsistency of the primary literature is recapitulated in the secondary literature” (Scheall 2017a). The variety of conflicting interpretations adds to, rather than diminishes, the confusion surrounding the primary literature. Anyone who sought to understand Mises’s methodology and who found frustration in the master’s own writings would find no solace, and probably only additional frustration, in the commentary upon these writings. In this regard, the secondary literature on Mises’s methodology decidedly fails to fulfill its function of clarifying the primary material.

The evidence from the primary literature suggests the possibility of internal inconsistency. The fact that the secondary literature exhibits such varied and mutually inconsistent interpretations, each supported to varying degrees by reference to Mises’s own texts (or, as we will see below, to certain of his extra-textual remarks), reinforces the impression of the possible internal inconsistency of his epistemology without bringing us closer to a definitive determination. It is of course perfectly normal to find tension between different interpretations in any body of secondary literature, but Mises’s epistemology offers an especially egregious example. Tension in the secondary literature is normal; it is not normal to find in the secondary literature of a coherent thinker *mutually exclusive interpretations each more or less equally supported – and undermined – by the relevant texts (or by some extra-textual remark)*.

We are left in the awkward position of granting to Mises the charitable notion that some unifying conception underlies his seemingly inconsistent assertions, even though the clues we possess regarding this explanation are themselves inconsistent, leading in multiple directions at once. This is another way of saying that, if there is an internally consistent reading that unifies the whole of Mises’s methodologically-relevant writings – i.e., an interpretation that does not just emphasize this or that aspect of his writings while ignoring other aspects that undercut the interpretation – we do not know what this interpretation might be.

**The problem of the primary literature, part 2: Making sense of Mises within his milieu**

If it could be shown that Mises’s epistemology was an artifact of his milieu, there might be hope for understanding it by considering the circumstances from which it emerged. This is not possible in Mises’s case. It is difficult to recognize Mises’s methodological arguments as artifacts of the historical and geographical context in which they were propagated. The two leading families of interpretations in the secondary literature both treat Mises’s apriorism as radically anachronistic, albeit in opposite senses.

In its extreme interpretation, Mises’s apriorism is, as F. A. Hayek (1978b, p. 137) put it, a relic of “almost eighteenth-century rationalism.” Mises seemed to have missed much of what the nineteenth century added to the history of philosophy and science, at least, outside of economics. Mises penned his methodological writings at around the same time and almost literally across the University of Vienna quadrangle from the room in which the members of the Vienna Circle of Logical Positivism were, at around the same time, rewriting the philosophy of science. Yet, Mises’s writings on economic methodology reflect a near complete ignorance, or innocence, of the scientific and philosophical problems that led the Viennese Positivists (and many other philosophers of the era) to deny the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge and to reconceptualize the epistemological significance of analyticity.

This is not the place to recount this history in detail. Suffice it to say that such was the impact of Kant’s ideas that the status of *a priori* knowledge, analytic or synthetic, became one of the central intellectual problems of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, occupying philosophers, mathematicians, logicians, and physical scientists. Over the course of the sesquicentenary that separated Kant from Mises, various claims that Kant had made for the apriority of particular domains of knowledge were successively whittled down to, by the time Mises was writing, effectively nothing. First, in the 1830s, the mathematician Bernard Bolzano showed the inadequacy of Kant’s arguments for the synthetic *a priori* nature of arithmetic (Coffa 1991, 22-40). Around the same time, several scholars – the Hungarian János Bolyai and the Russian Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky (1829-1830), and, a bit later, Bernhard Riemann (1854) – established the possibility of non-Euclidean geometries. Not long after, that giant of nineteenth century science, Hermann von Helmholtz, showed that these possibilities call into considerable doubt Kant’s claim for the apriority of the Euclidean nature of our spatial perceptions (Coffa 1991, 47-60). Einstein’s writings on relativity in the first decades of the twentieth century called such claims into further doubt (Coffa 1991, 317-320).

Mises’s methodological writings do not engage with these developments. There are passages in Mises’s writings that indicate he was either not privy to or did not appreciate the significance of many recent (and often local) developments in contemporary philosophy and natural science. It is not that Mises-the-rationalist argued for the possibility of (synthetic) *a priori* knowledge against the many arguments that had been advanced against it in the previous century and a half; he simply ignored (or was unaware of) them.

Mises ([1949] 1998, pp. 72-91) argued against the possibility of multiple logics long after polylogism was a well-established empirical fact. This ignorance or negligence is particularly odd given the contributions of his Viennese colleagues, Karl Menger ([1932] 1979) and Kurt Gödel (1930; 1931; 1932), to the relevant literature. Mises knew Menger, in particular, very well. In addition to being a professor of mathematics at the University of Vienna and a member of the Vienna Circle, Menger was the son of the founder of the Austrian School of economics, was active in Viennese economic circles throughout the 1920s and early 1930s (Mises left Vienna in 1934, Menger in 1937), made scholarly contributions to the School, and, in one of these (K. Menger [1936] 1979), even warned Mises that his loose approach to deductive logic failed to meet modern standards of mathematical logic. “Mises wrote me that he learned a great deal from the paper” (K. Menger [1936] 1979, p. 279). Despite this, Mises ([1949] 1998, pp. 72-91) seemed to think that his rejection of racial- and class-based relativizations of logic sufficed to counter polylogism. However, this is an obvious non-sequitur: though it was perhaps an admirable stance to defend in the wake of Nazism and Stalinism, it does not follow from the fact that logics are not relative to race or class that they cannot be relative to anything at all.

Recall that, in apparent ignorance or innocence of the dubiousness of making such an assertion *in 1933*,Mises’s statement of the Reason without Experience thesis includes the claim that, “[w]e conceive all this [i.e., the action axiom] from within, just as we conceive logical and mathematical truths, *a priori*, without reference to any experience” (Mises [1933] 2003, 13-14). That Mises saw no problem with trying to justify the (synthetic) apriority of the action axiom by referring to the apriority of logic and mathematics, and saw no need to explain the latter claim in light of relevant historical circumstances, i.e., Bolzano, Menger, et al, does not support the notion that he was familiar with recent developments in these fields. Similarly, as late as his last methodological work, 1962’s *Ultimate Foundations of Economic Science*,Mises (1962, 12-14) argued for Euclidean geometry as an example of the Kantian synthetic *a priori*, a position undermined by Helmholtz’s work *in the nineteenth century* (Caldwell 1984, p. 368 makes a similar point). Finally, Mises ([1949] 1998, p. 35) claimed that “[m]an acquired…the logical structure of his mind in the course of his evolution from an amoeba to his present state” right after asserting that the “character of the logical structure of the human mind” was “essential and necessary” (Mises [1949] 1998, p. 34), a conjunction of propositions that suggests confusion, either about the highly contingent nature of evolutionary processes or the multiple meanings of necessity by then common in the philosophical, logical, and scientific literatures.

On the other hand, in its moderate interpretation as a kind of evolutionary epistemology, Lakatosianism, or Quineanism, Mises’s apriorism is a foreshadow of philosophical ideas that emerged later as potential resolutions of the very same debates over the possibility of *a priori* knowledge of which, if the extreme interpretation is sound, he was seemingly either ignorant or unaware. The German-language literature on evolutionary epistemology is typically dated from Konrad Lorenz’s (1941) “Kant's Doctrine of the *A Priori* in the Light of Contemporary Biology,” but there is no evidence that Mises was familiar with this work (in any case, his conception of *a priori* knowledge ignores Lorenz’s arguments).[[10]](#footnote-10) The field of evolutionary epistemology really burgeoned with Karl Popper’s (1962) *Conjectures and Refutations* and the work of Donald T. Campbell in the 1960s. Other moderate readings try to make Mises’s methodology out to be a foreshadow of proto-Lakatosian conventionalism (Machlup [1955]; Rizzo [1983]; Zanotti and Cachanosky [2015]), or proto-Quinean holism (Leeson and Boettke [2006]), several decades before Lakatos (1968) or Quine (1951) made their seminal contributions to philosophy of science and epistemology. Such readings implicitly attribute remarkable prescience to Mises as a prophet of philosophical change.

The difficulty of understanding Mises’s methodology as an artifact of its time and place is complicated by the fact that the personal circumstances from which it emerged are largely obscured. It is not obvious from his writings which contemporary philosophers and scientists he had read, or with whom he might have argued, that could have encouraged the development of his seemingly unique epistemology. The rediscovery in the 1990s of much of Mises’s Vienna library, long thought lost, in a Soviet state archive has not brought clarity to this issue.

It is difficult to square the Mises whose epistemology seems to reveal an almost eighteenth-century rationalist with the Mises who both gestured at the possibility of an evolutionary epistemology and defended (albeit in a limited way) fallibilism and pragmatism. More to the present point, it is hard to understand why Mises would have advanced his seemingly extreme statements of the Reason without Experience and Greater Certainty theses at the time and place that he did, namely, Vienna in the early 1930s. It is difficult to square the notion, implied in the latter anachronism, that Mises was ahead of his time in matters epistemological with some of the seemingly naïve things he said about the same fields from which mid-century conventionalism would eventually emerge. Mises did not seem to appreciate the significance of the problems in mathematics, geometry, logic, epistemology, physics, etc., that led scholars in (and philosophers of) these fields to modern conventionalist philosophy of science.

In short, Mises’s epistemological arguments are so incongruous with his intellectual environment and our grasp on his philosophical understanding is so weak, that we cannot rely on knowledge of relevant intellectual circumstances either historically or geographically local to its development to help understand Mises’s epistemology. Whether one reads his methodology as extreme or moderate, Mises’s apriorism is an anachronism, out of time and place.

Given the inconsistencies in both the primary and secondary literatures, and the impossibility of using knowledge of his historical or personal circumstances to reconstruct Mises’s understanding of epistemology, whatever Mises really thought about the theory of knowledge and philosophy of science is mostly lost to us. This thesis is further strengthened by the possibility, considered in the next section, that Mises’s methodological pronouncements may not have truly expressed his actual beliefs about economic methodology.

**The problem of the historical Mises: A rhetorical shell game?**

Unfortunately, the problem of the primary literature cannot be taken to be identical with the problem of what the historical Mises believed about epistemology. It is possible that Mises’s writings do not accurately reflect his actual beliefs about pertinent issues.

What are we to make of Israel Kirzner’s claim (2001; quoted in Leeson and Boettke 2006, p. 248, fn2) that Mises “told him [Kirzner] that the action axiom was derived from ‘experience’”? Assuming the veracity of Kirzner’s testimony, what are we to make of Mises’s epistemology? If the historical Mises actually believed that knowledge of human action is due to experience, it is far from obvious how to interpret those several passages in his methodological writings in which he explicitly denies precisely this. Did Mises come later in life to change his mind about Reason without Experience and Greater Certainty in favor of some kind of empiricism about the action axiom? Were his statements of Reason without Experience and Greater Certainty mere obfuscations designed to conceal (for whatever reason) the empiricism he always accepted and eventually revealed to Kirzner? If so, why did he not make clear that he had come to reject his earlier rationalistic pronouncements? Or was he merely shining on Kirzner about his seemingly newfound empiricism? Was Mises just confused about various epistemological notions? Did he fail to recognize the tensions in his epistemological statements? Did he use the word “experience” differently in unique contexts such that what seems a contradiction is in fact not?

I do not know the answers to these questions. Indeed, I do not even know which the right questions are to ask. (And, I submit, neither do you.)

Hayek – who, of course, knew his “mentor” very well – occasionally suggested that Mises exaggerated his own methodological views. In reviewing Mises’s ([1933] 2003) *Epistemological Problems of Economics*, Hayek ([1964] 1992, 148; emphasis added) claimed, without providing an explanation, that Mises’s “emphasis on the *a priori* character of theory sometimes gives the impression of *a more extreme position than the author in fact holds*.” In his introduction to Mises’s (1978) *Notes and Recollections*, Hayek ([1988] 1992, 158; emphasis added) asserted, again without much explanation, that “considering the kind of battle that he had to lead, I also understand that *he was driven to certain exaggerations, like that of the a priori character of economic theory*, where I could not follow him.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Combined with the problem of the primary literature, the possibility that Mises was in fact an empiricist and the methodology seemingly expressed in his writings merely some kind of rhetorical shell game, would seem to force the conclusion that “Ultimately, we simply do not know what the historical Ludwig von Mises believed about epistemology” (Scheall 2017a).

Again, more carefully, I am not denying that there might be a reading which makes everything that Mises wrote (and/or believed) about epistemology both internally consistent and contextually respectable relative to the historical and geographical circumstances in which it was propagated. I am saying that it is unlikely, if such a reading exists, we will ever both know what it is and discover anything approaching univocal grounds for attributing it to Mises.

If this is right, then any interpreter who moves from his own reading of Mises’s apriorism to the claim that this reading represents Mises’s intentions has traveled a bridge too far. If the evidence from the primary and secondary literatures is so confused that we do not know what Mises actually believed about epistemology, then attributing some position to him, be it extreme, moderate, or in between, is only so much wishful thinking on the part of the interpreter.[[12]](#footnote-12) Such interpretations may well, for all we know, say more about the methodological disposition of the given interpreter than they do about Mises. Mises’s apriorism seems to be less a coherent position than a cipher upon which generations of Austrian sympathizers and antagonists have written their methodological fever dreams.

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1. According to Murray Rothbard (1976), Mises’s praxeology is “*The* Methodology of Austrian Economists” (emphasis added). Although Robert Nozick (1977, 361) connects apriorism only with “[o]ne branch of Austrian theorists (Mises, Rothbard),” the title of his paper identifies it with “Austrian methodology.” According to Mark Blaug (1980, 91-92), Mises’s apriorism is the methodology of “Modern Austrians…a small group of latter-day Austrian economists…numbering among its adherents such names as Murray Rothbard, Israel Kirzner, and Ludwig Lachmann[.]” Terence Hutchison (1981, 214) also associates Mises’s apriorism with “modern Austrians,” except “Hayek II” and Kirzner (against Hutchison’s delineation of multiple Hayeks, see Caldwell [1992] and Scheall [2015]). Bruce Caldwell (1982) associates apriorism with “Austrian methodology.” According to David Gordon (1994), “The Philosophical Origins of Austrian Economics” support an Aristotelian version of Mises’s apriorism. Hans-Herman Hoppe (1995) describes Mises’s apriorism as “*The* Austrian Method” (emphasis added). According to Peter Leeson and Peter Boettke (2006, 247-248), “to the Austrian economists who trained with Mises during his New York University period (1944-1969), like Murray Rothbard, adherence to methodological *apriorism* is *the* distinguishing characteristic of the Austrian school, and alternative methodological positions are interpreted as undermining Mises's strong claim about the nature of economic reasoning” (emphasis in the original). Gabriel Zanotti and Nicolás Cachanosky (2015) identify “Austrian epistemology” with Fritz Machlup’s (1955) attempt to align Mises’s epistemology with a moderate kind of proto-Lakatosianism (against this, see Scheall 2017b). Alexander Linsbichler’s (2017) *Was Ludwig von Mises a Conventionalist? A New Analysis of the Epistemology of the Austrian School of Economics* associates Mises’s epistemology (whatever it may have been) with the Austrian School itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a survey of some of these justifications, see Scheall (2017b) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is important to be careful here. As we will see, there are empiricist (or, perhaps better, *phylogenetic*) versions of apriorism. Indeed, F. A. Hayek ([1952] 2017) explicated and defended a naturalized, evolutionary, conception of *a priori* knowledge (Scheall 2020, 122-123). Thiskind of apriorism is harmless on empiricist epistemology as it conceives *a priori* knowledge as a consequence of the epistemic subject’s (or its species’) interactions with the environment, i.e., of *experience*, in some sense, rather than as due to the subject’s pure, experientially-unleavened, rational faculties. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I agree with Alexander Linsbichler (2017) that Mises probably adopted apriorism as a way around the problem of induction. But, if Mises adopted rationalistic apriorism as a way to protect the laws of economic science from the problem of induction, then he grasped a poisoned chalice. Rationalistic apriorism does not solve the problem of induction as much as ignore it. Rationalistic apriorism is not a way to establish the veracity of economic laws, but a rejection of the need to support such laws with empirical evidence, which thereby leaves the source of our knowledge of economic laws opaque. It denies sensory experience as a source of our knowledge of economic laws and replaces it with a vague promise that this knowledge is already there, somehow, in our heads. If you ask, “How did it get there?”, the rationalistic apriorist can only answer that either some higher power placed it there or the human mind possesses some *sui generis* faculty for the discovery of truths about the world of experience without access to this world. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This comment appears in a review of Linsbichler (2017). Though he does not develop the point – indeed, Linsbichler’s conclusion is that Mises was *almost*, but not really, a conventionalist – Linsbichler seems sympathetic to the notion that, because Mises did not provide the material to determine its significance, we are simply ignorant of the intended justification of Mises’s apriorism: “Mises repeatedly and vehemently insists on the aprioristic character of praxeology. However, as a closer look shows, it is not clear what exactly he claims by stating ‘Praxeology is *a priori*’ (Mises 1962, 45), and how his scarce arguments therefore are to be interpreted” (Linsbichler 2017, p. 73). It should be noted, however, that, unlike several other authors cited here, Linsbichler (also see Lipski 2021) is more concerned to provide a reformist agenda that preserves what is interesting and valuable about praxeology than with defending a moderate interpretation of Mises’s epistemology against critics of its seeming extremeness. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mises reiterated this thesis several times over the course of his career. For substantively similar statements in later writings, see Mises ([1949] 1998, 64 and 1962, 71-72). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I have argued (Scheall 2017b) that the Greater Certainty thesis, which has been accepted to some extent in one form or another by many economists, is a non-sequitur. Those who defend the thesis tend to argue from the premise that rational reflection is an easier and more convenient method than experimentation, empirical testing, etc. to the conclusion that, *for this reason*, knowledge delivered via introspection is more secure than empirical knowledge. But, it does not follow from the fact (if it is a fact) that knowledge of the action axiom is “within” us, as Mises ([1933] 2003, p. 137) put it, that this knowledge is any more certain than knowledge acquired from without. It may be relatively easy and convenient to introspect, but this does not *per se* make knowledge acquired through introspection more epistemically secure. As I have noted previously, this is a bit like thinking that pyrite must be more valuable because it is easier to find than gold. Defenders of the Greater Certainty thesis need, but have not provided, an argument that pure intuition, introspection, etc., is, if not infallible, at least relatively less error-prone than observation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Again, this is a thesis that Mises put forward several times across the decades. He asserted it both before ([1933] 2003, p. 18) and after (1962, p. 45) the passage quoted above. Rather oddly, however, amid these assertions of the absolute certainty of purposeful human action, Mises ([1957] 2005, p. 165) claimed it was “impossible to demonstrate satisfactorily by ratiocination that the alter ego is a being that aims purposively at ends.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Kantian interpretation of Mises’s epistemology can be found, e.g., in Rothbard (1957 and [1973] 1997), Milford (1992), Radnitzky (1995), Hoppe (1995), Prychitko (1998), Hands (2001, p. 41), Otter (2010), and Schulak and Unterköfler (2011, p. 139). Kurrild-Klitgaard (2001, p. 127) and Koppl (2002, p. 33) doubt the connection between Mises’s epistemology and Kantianism. Barrotta (1996) argues that, if Mises meant to be interpreted as a Kantian, then he misunderstood Kantian transcendental idealism. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Lorenz (1941, 231-232)

“The biologist convinced of the great creative facts of evolution asks of Kant these questions: Is not human reason with all its categories and forms of intuition something that has organically evolved in a continuous cause-effect relationship with the laws of the immediate nature, just as has the human brain? Would not the laws of reason necessary for *a priori* thought be entirely different if they had undergone an entirely different historical mode of origin, and if consequently we had been equipped with an entirely different kind of central nervous system? Is it at all probable that the laws of our cognitive apparatus should be disconnected with those of the real external world? Can an organ [‘or more precisely the functioning of an organ’ (Lorenz 1941, 233)] that has evolved in the process of a continuous coping with the laws of nature have remained so uninfluenced that the theory of appearances can be pursued independently of the existence of the thing-in-itself, as if the two were totally independent of each other? In answering these questions the biologist takes a sharply circumscribed point of view...[S]omething like Kant’s *a priori* forms of thought do exist. One familiar with the innate modes of reaction of subhuman organisms can readily hypothesize that the *a priori* is due to hereditary differentiations of the central nervous system which have become characteristic of the species, producing hereditary dispositions to think in certain forms. *One must realize that this conception of the “*a priori*” as an organ means the destruction of the concept: something that has evolved in evolutionary adaptation to the laws of the natural external world has evolved a posteriori in a certain sense,* even if in a way entirely different from that of abstraction or deduction from previous experience.”

To the extent that Mises addressed these questions, the evidence suggests his confusion, e.g., Mises’s conjunction of the claim that the “character of the logical structure of the human mind” was “essential and necessary” (Mises [1949] 1998, p. 34) with the notion that “[m]an acquired…the logical structure of his mind in the course of his evolution from an amoeba to his present state” (Mises ([1949] 1998, p. 35).

Readers of Hayek’s *The Sensory Order* ([1952] 2017) are likely to note similarities between Lorenz’s “*a priori*” and Hayek’s naturalized, evolutionary, “*a priori*.” This may be no accident. Hayek knew Lorenz and his work well (see Vanberg 2017, 42-44). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hayek’s assertions here are rather odd. Why Mises would have exaggerated his views or what possible benefit he might have expected to redound to himself, or to the broader Austrian School, by portraying his methodological position as more extremely rationalistic than it was in fact, is far from obvious. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It is of course possible that an interpreter might blindly stumble upon a statement of Mises’s apriorism as he intended it, but I am discounting the possibility of such blind luck here. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)