

Foreword

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Several of the contributors to this volume knew Clarence Ayres over a longer time than I did. All, I think, are better schooled on one or another aspect of his work. My own acquaintance began with his books and articles—I was attracted, like all others, by their independence and solid precision of thought and, above all, by the responsible concern of the author for the world as it is and as it might be.

Then, in later years, as I had occasion to be in Austin, I always called on Ayres, either at the university or at his house. I remember especially the last occasion—a long afternoon visit in the small shady yard back of his dwelling. He was a slight man of kindly expression, in later years a trifle frail, with a sparkling interest in ideas and, as always, in their meaning for practical action. He never said anything that was meant to be fashionable, that was intended to create an impression; he had no interest in the economics that advanced professional position or in-house reputation as distinct from that which advanced knowledge and needed change. I have always found pleasure in enlarging on the errors or absurdities of my professional friends. I don't think Clarence found this line of discussion wholly distasteful. He had much from a lifetime of experience to contribute. But it was not his instinct. He preferred to speak well of people who were useful and who made sense.

He was a liberal in the practical, effective sense—a man, I suppose, of the Roosevelt–New Deal mood as well as vintage. He was also, as numerous comments in this volume attest, a teacher and a leader among scholars. In consequence, during his lifetime he helped make the University of Texas a far more important center for progressive economic discussion than most economists from the parochial east, north, or west have ever quite appreciated. There was a wider range of thought than at more celebrated centers. For a period in the early years of Ayres's tenure there, it was even a place of pilgrimage for Marxists. And all this occurred within a stone's throw of Texas governors and legislators, a category of statesmen that included during Ayres's lifetime some of the most repressive politicians in all the Republic. Most, no doubt, were beyond understanding what Ayres was discussing or urging. But occasionally they did. Sometimes they reacted. Ayres was undeterred.

The essays in this volume are not meant as a monument to Ayres. They are meant to tell what he thought and what he did. They do

show his range of interests, his diligence, his originality of mind and method. If, in addition, a man is a good teacher, is the focal point of an important center of professional and scientific discussion, and all this is accomplished in a scholarly cold climate, he can rightly expect to be honored by his colleagues. Alas, in the case of Ayres, it was not so. Professor Breit has given part of the reason; there is, indeed, a marked snobbishness in American professional attitudes combined, oddly enough, with an inferiority complex. Good economic work is done, *pro tanto*, in the universities of established reputation. The institutions make the scholar. And in the past Americans have always thought it better to have made one's scholarly debut in Vienna, Budapest, a German university, or Cambridge or Oxford. And if he has been a critic of neoclassical orthodoxy, if he is called by some an institutionalist, his case is hopeless.

So it was with Ayres. The conventional honors passed him by. A few years ago, not long before his death, I proposed that he be made a Distinguished Fellow, as they are designated, of the American Economic Association. I noted that Ludwig von Mises had recently been elected—a man who, with Friedrich von Hayek, had showed only how, by sufficiently rigorous process of thought, the irrelevant could be converted into the absurd. My case was dismissed without argument.

Later I asked Ayres to join me at the association meetings that winter in New Orleans in honoring Gunnar Myrdal, an economist whom, for his concern for the practical, useful tasks of economics, one groups naturally with Ayres. He readily and generously agreed. It was the occasion for another talk. It was the last time.