Funding the Future

Economic questions: the Richard Feynman question

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This is one of a series of posts that will ask what the most pertinent question raised by a prominent influencer of political economy might have been, and what the relevance of that question might be today. There is a list of all posts in the series at the end of each entry. The origin of this series is noted here.

After the first two posts in this series, the topics have been chosen by me, and this is one of those. This series has been produced using what I describe as directed AI searches to establish positions with which I agree, followed by final editing before publication.

Why have I included Richard Feynman? Probably because he was the subject of discussion in the Murphy household last night, and that was not because he was a Nobel laureate in physics, although he was. Instead, it was because of his pedagogy, or approach to teaching, which is much commented upon, not least on YouTube.

The logic within this is straightforward and yet immensely powerful. His suggestion was that any teacher should write an explanation of what they are seeking to explain in a way that a child might understand. If the writer then finds an area they are unable to explain in this way, they must go back and re-read or research the topic until they can.

In my opinion, the teaching of economics is so far removed from this methodology that his pedagogy provides a devastating technique with which to critique the discipline and all that flows from it.

Richard Feynman was not merely a great physicist; he was one of the most relentless critics of fake knowledge ever to stand inside an academic discipline. His lectures, essays and public interventions were animated by a single principle: you do not understand something unless you can explain it simply and show that it works in the real world.

Feynman distrusted jargon, reverence and credentialism. He had little patience for explanations that substituted formal technique for comprehension, and none at all for disciplines that mistook mathematical elegance for truth. His pedagogy was an act of intellectual honesty: a refusal to pretend to know what was not known, and a refusal to protect theories from failure by hiding behind technical sophistication.

Applied to modern economics, Feynman's standards are devastating.

Hence, the Richard Feynman question: ***If understanding only exists when ideas can be clearly explained, tested against reality and shown to work, why does modern economics so often reward technical knowledge and mathematical technique in place of genuine understanding?***

Knowing the technique versus understanding the phenomenon

Feynman drew a sharp distinction between knowing how to manipulate symbols and knowing what those symbols mean. He repeatedly warned that technical competence can mask conceptual emptiness. One can solve equations, apply methods, and reproduce formal results without understanding the system those methods are supposed to describe.

Modern economics often privileges exactly this kind of knowledge. Students are trained in optimisation, equilibrium analysis and econometric techniques, yet are rarely asked whether the underlying assumptions describe real human behaviour, real institutions, or real power relations. Mastery of method replaces comprehension of reality.

Feynman would have recognised this instantly: technique mistaken for understanding.

Pedagogy as a test of truth

Feynman believed teaching was not a performance but was diagnostic. The act of explanation exposes whether an idea is understood or merely memorised. That is why he insisted on teaching fundamentals: foundations, in his opinion, revealed weakness.

In economics, pedagogy often conceals rather than reveals. Introductory courses present mathematical models as settled knowledge, while debates, failures and empirical contradictions are postponed or omitted altogether. Students are taught how to solve problems before they are taught whether the problems are meaningful or how they fit into economic history and philosophy.

This is not neutral. It trains compliance with technique rather than engagement with truth.

Mathematics as language, not authority

Feynman loved mathematics, but he never treated it as an authority. For him, mathematics was a language for describing reality, not a substitute for it. When equations failed to capture the behaviour of the world, the equations were wrong, not reality.

Economics frequently reverses this relationship. When markets behave unpredictably, when crises occur, when policies fail, models are rarely abandoned. Instead, they are adjusted, extended or reinterpreted so that the formal structure survives intact. Mathematical consistency is preserved even as explanatory power evaporates.

Feynman had a name for this: self-deception protected by technique.

The moral duty not to confuse precision with truth

One of Feynman's most important pedagogical principles was ethical. He argued that the scientist's first responsibility is not to fool themselves. Precision, he warned, is dangerous when it creates unjustified confidence. Numbers with decimal points can give the illusion of knowledge where none exists.

Modern economics often produces precisely this illusion. Highly technical models generate precise-looking outputs that disguise deep uncertainty, contested assumptions and political choices. These outputs then acquire authority in policymaking, not because they are true, but because they look scientific.

For Feynman, this was not an innocent error. It was a moral failure.

Jargon and technique as shields against accountability

Feynman was suspicious of complexity that served no explanatory purpose. He understood how easily technical language becomes a shield, protecting ideas from challenge and their authors from responsibility.

Much of modern economics is inaccessible not because the world is that complex, but because opacity has become a professional defence. Technical mastery becomes a gatekeeping mechanism. Those who question assumptions are dismissed as unsophisticated. Democratic debate is sidelined as a result of appeals to expertise.

Feynman would have recognised this as epistemic authority replacing intellectual honesty.

Education for thinkers, not technicians

Feynman believed education should produce thinkers capable of questioning premises, testing ideas, and admitting ignorance. Technique was a tool, not a destination.

Economics education, by contrast, often produces technicians who are skilled at operating within models whilst discouraging them from interrogating their foundations. The result is a discipline rich in method but poor in wisdom; powerful in influence but fragile in understanding.

This is not accidental. A discipline that rewards technique over understanding reproduces itself without ever confronting its failures.

What answering the Richard Feynman Question would require

To apply Feynman's pedagogical ethic to economics would require rebalancing the discipline away from technique-as-credential and back toward understanding-as-purpose. That would mean:

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Reasserting understanding as the goal of economic education, and not mathematical proficiency alone.

*
Teaching assumptions as assumptions whilst examining their empirical and moral consequences.

*
Treating models as tools and not truths, meaning they can be discarded when they misdescribe reality.

*
Valuing clarity over obscurity, in the process rewarding economists who can explain ideas without hiding behind formalism.

*
Embedding uncertainty honestly in policy advice, resisting as a result the false authority of spurious precision.

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Restoring democratic accountability, ensuring economic claims can be understood and contested by citizens.

These changes would not weaken economics. They would rescue it.

Inference

The Richard Feynman Question exposes a central pathology of modern economics: the elevation of technical knowledge above genuine understanding. Feynman reminds us that the ability to manipulate equations is not the same as knowing what one is doing, and that mathematical sophistication can become a barrier to truth rather than a path to it.

If economics cannot explain its ideas clearly, test them honestly, and abandon them when they fail, it has no claim to authority over society.

Feynman's challenge is therefore devastating in its simplicity: understanding, not technique, is the measure of knowledge, and without understanding, power is unjustified.

Previous posts in this series:

* ***The economic questions***
* ***Economic questions: The Henry Ford Question***
* ***Economic questions: The Mark Carney Question***
* ***Economics questions: The Keynes question***
* ***Economics questions: The Karl Marx question***
* ***Economics questions: the Milton Friedman question***
* ***Economic questions: The Hayek question***
* ***Economic questions: The James Buchanan question***
* ***Economic questions: The J K Galbraith question***
* ***Economic questions: the Hyman Minsky question***
* ***Economic questions: the Joseph Schumpeter question***
* ***Economic questions: The E F Schumacher question***
* ***Economics questions: the John Rawls question***
* ***Economic questions: the Thomas Piketty question***
* ***Economic questions: the Gary Becker question***
* ***Economics questions: The Greg Mankiw question***
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* ***Economic questions: The Nancy MacLean question***
* ***Economic questions: The David Graeber question***
* ***The economic questions: the Amartya Sen question***
* ***Economic questions: the Jesus of Nazareth question***
* ***Economic questions: the Adam Smith question***
* ***Economic questions: (one of) the Steve Keen question(s)***
* ***Economic questions: the Stephanie Kelton question***
* ***Economic questions: the Thomas Paine question***
* ***Economic questions: the John Christensen question***
* ***Economic questions: the Eugene Fama question***
* ***Economic questions: the Thomas Hobbes Question***
* ***Economic questions: the James Tobin question***
* ***Economic questions: the William Beveridge question***
* ***Economic questions: the William Nordhaus question***
* ***Economic questions: the Erwin Schrödinger question***
* ***Economic questions: the Karl Polanyi question***

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