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Anna Horodecka

Warsaw School of Economics

e-mail: ahorod@sgh.waw.pl

**THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN NATURE
AS A DRIVING FORCE FOR CHANGES
IN ECONOMICS EXEMPLIFIED BY FEMINIST
AND NEOCLASSICAL ECONOMICS***

**KONCEPCJA NATURY LUDZKIEJ
JAKO SIŁA NAPĘDOWA ZMIAN W EKONOMII
NA PRZYKŁADZIE KONCEPCJI CZŁOWIEKA
W EKONOMII FEMINISTYCZNEJ I NEOKLASYCZNEJ**

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Summary: The goal of this paper is to present the impact of the concept of human nature alterations on changes in economics. The example is feminist economics, contrasted with *homo economicus*. Therefore, in the paper the differences in understanding of the definition and methodology between these two schools have been explained, as a result of the diverse concepts of human nature. The analysis has proved that main differences in these economic schools may be explained by different understanding of human nature. It encourages further research exploring the concept of human nature as a crucial factor shaping economics. The method applied to this research is mainly a content analysis of representative publications within of those economic schools.

Keywords: Feminist economics, neoclassical economics, concepts of human nature, *homo oeconomicus*.

Streszczenie: Celem tej pracy jest przedstawienie wpływu zmiany koncepcji natury ludzkiej na zmiany w ekonomii, na przykładzie koncepcji człowieka w ekonomii feministycznej, zestawionej z *homo oeconomicus*. W artykule wskazano na różnice w definiowaniu ekonomii i jej metodologii występujące między tymi dwoma szkołami, które są wynikiem różnych koncepcji natury ludzkiej. Analiza wykazała, że główne różnice w tych szkołach ekonomicznych mogą być wyjaśnione przez inne rozumienie ludzkiej natury. To zachęca do dalszych badań nad koncepcją natury ludzkiej jako kluczowego czynnika kształtującego ekonomię. Metodologia zastosowana do tych badań polega na analizie treści publikacji najlepiej reprezentujących wskazane szkoły ekonomiczne.

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Słowa kluczowe: ekonomia feministyczna, ekonomia neoklasyczna, koncepcje natury ludzkiej, *homo oeconomicus*.

*Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries.
Without them humanity cannot survive*

Dalai Lama

1. Introduction

The way we perceive a human being and the world has an important impact on the way we think about science and its disciplines. This is the case when it comes to economics as well. This paper is an attempt to show this connection in a more systematic way. Although assumptions about human nature are a fundament of anthropology, we still do not have any theory of human, as different disciplines dealing with a human being do not cooperate. Although each discipline makes some assumptions about a human being, their impact on the theory is not thoughtfully analyzed.

The main task of this paper is to show the impact of such assumptions about a human being and her/his world on the understanding of economics in a systematic way. The method applied for realizing this task is a content analysis of crucial works, which emerged within discussed schools of economics. The paper presents the impact of the concept of human nature as developed respectively within the neoclassical¹ and feminist economics on their definition, goal, field and methodological issues.

The paper presenting the main differences resulting from the concept of human nature refers to the following² basic dimensions of human being: worldview (relation: humanity–nature/supra-nature), social world (relations within a humanity), individual world with three basic components (“body” – objective level focused on the behavior, “soul” – intersubjective level revealing basic motives, “mind” – referring to the meta-level of meaning of life).

2. The impact of concept of human nature on the understanding of economics – its definition

In the mainstream economics there are various attempts to define economics, but the mostly cited and used is the following definition: “Economics is the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses” [Robbins 1935, p. 15]. This definition includes explicit

¹ For the purpose of the comparison the neoclassical economics is analyzed only in its primary shape, without taking into account the further developments, and “borrowings” from heterodox economic thought.

² Discussed in [Becker 2006; Horodecka 2014] and applied for instance in [Horodecka 2015].

and implicit characteristics of the human nature. Firstly, it reduces human being only to 'body' dimension – human behavior. Secondly, it refers to his fixed motivation structure, assuming that human being takes choices only according to own preferences. Thirdly, it analyses individual decisions but does not consider their impact on other people, replacing this complex issue by the assumed automatism of the invisible hand of the market. The mainstream economics assumes, that solo-taken decisions are the best for the society [Smith 2005].

Feminist economics needed some time to find its way to define economics. In the editorial to the journal "Feminist Economics" we read: "any effort to define feminist economics at this moment would give disproportionate voice to those currently able to participate in these conversations" [Strassmann 1995: 2]. But only nine years later economics was defined as the study of social provisioning and argued that to define it in such a way is to emphasize that at its root, economic activity involves the ways people organize themselves collectively to earn one's living [Power 2004, pp. 6–9]. Such a definition reflects again the main characteristics of human being as introduced through feminist economics – his/her remaining always in relationship to others and motivated by various real needs and not just preferences.

3. The impact of the concept of human nature on the goal and field of economics

Concepts of human nature affect the foundations of particular economic school including its understanding of the field. If human being is analyzed as a part of cultural and natural environment, the economists must broaden their horizon of investigation. If only humans' materialistic and egoistic needs are taken into account, the phenomena investigated would deal only with goods and services handled on market as neoclassical economics is doing.

The neoclassical economics assumes human behavior as based on rationality and as a field of economics considers only decisions which are the result of optimizing calculation.³ The optimization means here trying to reach the highest preference curve by given income, which is a result of actual distribution in the society. Assuming the person is free from dependence on other people, the market provides such circumstances which are not provided by the household and interdependence between elder people or children. On the contrary, the feminist economics due to its view on human as a being in relationship to others focuses primarily on the household.⁴ The feminist economics deals with companies as well, and with different institutions, laws and governments, as soon as they are responsible for laws which affect the process of fulfilling people's basic needs.

³ The rationality is therefore oriented on goals using Weber's classification [Kalberg 1980].

⁴ Doing this step feminist economics goes back to the origin of economics: for Aristotle economics was the science about governing a household (oikos + nomia) [Aristotle, Everson 1988].

The motives of particular decisions in neoclassical economics are not driven by needs, but by preferences which can be modified freely. As a consequence there is no need to deal with wants, because they can be adjusted. It is completely far from the reality, because needs for food, love, sleep, acceptance, safety, and freedom cannot be replaced. Therefore there is no place for intersections with other disciplines as we take preferences as granted and they are not discussed.

On the contrary, feminist economics basing on its assumption of human nature as motivated by various needs, refers not only to material needs but also emotional, political, social, religious and so on. It tries to find out how these needs can be fulfilled in the society in the best way through economics and foremost – for all, not only for few privileged ones. A very helpful concept here is the capability approach by Amartya Sen, who analyses the needs in the whole social context. For this reason it focuses as well on vulnerable groups which cannot realize their rights or needs, guaranteed by the constitution. As the consequence, the interconnection with other disciplines, like politics, social policy or religion, is essential. A detailed program of the research field can be found in the preface to *Feminist Economics 1 (I)*:

- exploring the historical construction of this discipline,
- exploring ways in which important women's contributions have been lost, ignored, or shunted into other disciplines,
- questioning the standard of economic procedures by which economists claim to choose among theories in an objective way,
- directing special attention to economic methodology and rhetoric, often applying insights from other intellectual traditions (such as philosophy, feminist theory, and cultural studies),
- identifying within economic education racial and gender bias in disciplinary training and socialization practices, as well as biased disciplinary conventions in publications, employment, and promotion practices, all of which serve to reproduce the current disciplinary hierarchy [Strassmann 1995, p. 3].

After nearly nine years M. Power [2004] refers to the field of economics emphasizing the central role of gender, social processes and their historical and cultural context and the universal themes.

The concept of human nature affects the way of understanding the goal of economics as well. Neoclassical economics perceives the optimization as the goal of economics by posting a very abstract person at the beginning of economics, restricting people to only one source of motivation – egoism, dealing neither with emotions nor with the impact of others. As soon as neoclassic economists reduce most of problems to the problem of choice between preferences and constraints, there is no need to handle with complex problems in their full extent like unemployment, inequality or poverty. Economic policy is supposed to apply those economic insights and to deal with above referred problems as optimization problem or returning to the steady-state-point.

On the contrary, feminist economics assuming a “close-to-reality” concept of a person sets solving concrete/actual and real problems as a goal of economics. Such understanding is the result of distinguishing basic needs of the agent in economics: social, political (like justice) and economic (i.e. work, and enough resources to live). A broader list [Nussbaum 2003] encompasses ten basic human capabilities⁵ and equality [Sen 1992]⁶, which can be disturbed (affected) by inequality, poverty and unemployment. It is much more promising attempt to capture equality and happiness, than human rights approach⁷. Therefore economics is perceived as an important tool to solve these problems by means of economic policy as well, for which the central concern is the economic growth as a measure of economic success. The economic wellbeing can be acquired only if we put attention not only to aggregate or average distributions of income and wealth, but also to individual entitlements and to the heterogeneity of human needs ([Floro 1995; Aslaksen, Flaatten, Koren 1999; Sen 1999]).

The economics depends on the way of understanding particular goals and ends of the individual as well. The goal of the mainstream economics – explaining human behavior basing on optimization is a consequence of assuming that the aim of human is to maximize his utility. The neoclassical economics does not deal with social relationships, because in its model people are reduced to their utility as production factors or as market participants. On the contrary, feminist economics has assumed that the goal of a human being is happiness, which can be fulfilled within a society and is ensured by common values and norms. Therefore the economics had to focus on finding out what can contribute to this happiness.

4. The impact on the methodology

The way of viewing other people, their capabilities of understanding the world and their goals affects the methodology which tries to answer, what is the aim of knowledge and what are the criteria of defining what is right or wrong. The methods are impacted by these ideas as well – for instance viewing people as machines or programs as fulfilling a predetermined plan leads to the preference of mathematical methods. On the contrary perceiving people in a more complex way requires qualitative researches as well as systemic and humanistic approaches. Theories are

⁵ 1) Life (normal length); 2) bodily health; 3) bodily integrity; 4) senses, imagination, and thought (using them in a “truly human” way by an adequate education); 5) emotions (attachments to things and people); 6) practical reason; 7) affiliation (empathy and self-respect); 8) other species (considering the whole word of nature); 9) play; 10) control over one’s environment (political: participation in political choices, free speech and association; material: property rights and employment on an equal basis with others) [Nussbaum 2003].

⁶ A person in a wheelchair will require more resources connected with mobility than will a person with “normal” mobility, if the two are to attain a similar level of ability to get around [Sen 1980].

⁷ Capabilities approach is close to the idea of human rights [Nussbaum 1997, 2001].

a consequence of methodology used and methods constructed by describing phenomena fitting into a described field of economics, and helping to approach the goal of economics.

From the juxtaposition of key-assumptions about the nature neoclassical and feminist economists (individual-societal; self-and other-interested, autonomous-dependent, rational-emotional, acting by choice-by nature) result the differences in the characteristic of methods by those two economical schools (rigorous-intuitive; precise-vague; objective-subjective; scientific-non-scientific; detached-committed; mathematical-verbal; formal-informal; abstract-concrete [Nelson 2001, p. 94].

Mainstream economics focuses on “subject – object” thinking what is the consequence of treating resources and people as objects employed in order to reach a goal and the result of reducing human nature to the body-level, reducing motivation to the utility and perceiving human as self-directed on the soul-dimension.

On the contrary – taking the relationships into account and adapting the context of social provisioning, which characterizes the feminist economics methodology is a consequence of its concept of human nature as a person with developed personality, embedded in a society, motivated not only by egoistic but also altruist motives, oriented to others as a way of fulfillment.⁸ Basing on the concept of “social provisioning”, the following methodological postulates can be differentiated: (1) incorporation of caring and unpaid labor as fundamental economic activities [Albelda 2002]; (2) use of well-being as a measure of economic success; (3) analysis of economic, political, and social processes and power relations; inclusion of ethical goals and values as an intrinsic part of the analysis; (4) interrogation of differences by class, race-ethnicity, and other factors [Power 2004, p. 3].

The objectivist and positivist characteristics of the neoclassical economic methodology are the consequence of physical-Newtonian worldview. As a consequence, people and nature are treated as means to its goals. The values are taken relatively and the science is proclaimed as value-free. Such positivistic thinking and orienting on physical sciences in describing the processes in the world results in the preference for mathematical methods, and furthermore – in some central theories of neoclassical economics like Pareto-optimum and economic growth theory.⁹

The objective and subjective character of the feminist economic methodology is a result of a worldview characterized by interdependency and interconnections using biological metaphor like web of living beings [Strassmann 1995] and the concept of human nature as a part of the society, with its values and norms. By accepting the fact that human being is impacted by the society and culture, all our expressions are gendered, even those concerning the question of criteria for scientific character

⁸ Thinking in relationships is characteristic for the mind aspect as well, as soon as it refers to common values of human race, see: [Lawson 2003].

⁹ It does not deal with needs or happiness of people. Moreover, it is assumed that increases in well-being are primarily a function of increases in market goods and services [Barker 1995, p. 33, 34]. This is contested in: [Folbre 1993; Folbre, Hartmann 1988; Nelson 1993a; Strassmann 1993].

of the sentences. Using such an attitude ensures even greater objectivity. Feminist methodology disagrees with neoclassical point of view that only objective statements are scientific. Furthermore, feminist methodology contradicts R. Heilbroner's [1994] juxtaposition of science and humanities and opts for making place for meaning and sense in the science [Ferber, Nelson 1993], which results from giving space to this dimension in its concept of human nature. However, it requires a changed attitude to the methodology and expanding male perspective by values characteristic of women. Therefore in feminist economics mathematical methods must be accompanied by other techniques which allow for coping with qualitative data and changing environment to analyze such a broad range of problems. Ethical judgments are considered a valid, inescapable, and in fact desirable part of economic analysis. The broad range of methods results as well from the conviction that economics should enrich their analysis through the use of data sets generated from other disciplines and so called gender/value compass. The main issue is to overcome masculine – feminine juxtaposition and biases in existing methodologies by recognizing that all views of the world arise from viewpoints. Nelson refers to this issue as of “splitting the world” and about “dualism in contemporary economics”.¹⁰

The further methodological issue for feminist economics is the way of looking on the economic system – not from the point of view of neutral observer like neoclassical economics does, but from a specific moral position and viewpoint. This is again the consequence of perceiving human being as a person in relation to others and in the social contest. Such an attitude opens possibilities for applying other methods usually applied in humanities. Some further implications for feminist methodology resulting from its specific concept of human nature are: greater respect for social embedding, material embodiment, values, emotions, institutions, power, interest in qualitative data, language, lived experience, and on-the-ground empirical work [Nelson 2001].

This attitude results also in different ways of perceiving some basic theories in economics. Feminist economics is criticizing GDP-model and all theoretical grounds of it and suggests another solution. Openness to other methods and different view of goal and field of economics leads for instance to supporting the use of the HDI which takes into account a broad array of measures including life expectancy, literacy, education, and standards of living for countries worldwide and their sensitivity to gender problems resulted in introducing of the Gender-related Development Index (GDI). The GDI takes not only the average level of well-being and wealth within a given country into account, but focuses also on how this wealth and well-being is distributed between different groups of the society, especially between sexes.

Further methodological issue, which is prevailing in mainstream economics, is its focus on the utility (as a basic category for preferences), coming from hedonistic, Hobbes' and later utilitarian concepts of human nature. The mainstream economics

¹⁰ According to feminist economists, too many theories, while claiming to present universal principles, actually present a masculine viewpoint in the guise of a “view from nowhere.”

resigned later from using utilitarian argumentation supporting greater redistribution (for the poor one dollar is worth more than for a millionaire). By replacing utility by preferences, it was possible to omit these political questions. This concept is criticized by feminist economics because of the existence of so called “adaptive preferences” phenomenon which women exhibit, because they often adjust to their second-class status [Sen 1990].¹¹

One further methodological aspect is the value issue. Whereas mainstream economics perceives itself as value-free and therefore objective, feminist economics perceives including values in the economic theory as a way towards better objectivity. If we do not know the values, which are the fundamentals of each theory (explicit or implicit), we can easily reach only subjective results, and omit some relevant facts. On the contrary, by considering values, the economics becomes more objective [Harding 1995, p. 14].¹² It means that special methods shall be developed for analyzing them.¹³ This respect of values explains the interest of feminist economics in some theories developed before – like the labor theory of value.¹⁴ T. Veblen’s invidious distinctions [Veblen 1967], A. Sen’s capabilities approach [Sen 1985], the growing body of work on caring labor by N. Folbre [1994], and S. Himmelweit [1995 Susan], as well as the suggestion by J. Nelson [1993b, 2000], and A.L. Jennings [1993], and other writers saying that provisioning can be used as a starting point.

5. Conclusions

The paper analyzed the impact of the concept of human nature on the economics – its definition, field, goal, methodology, methods and main theories. The concept of human nature in the neoclassical economics, focusing only on one dimension of human being (behavior, explained by fixed motives – i.e. individual utility), affects the definition of neoclassical economics. The concept of human nature influences a field of economics (optimization choices mainly referring to material world), and goal of economics (explanation of the economic actors’ behavior and its consequences). The highly abstract image of a man leads to a preference of highly mathematized models and creation of formalized theories.

¹¹ “Thus the utilitarian framework, which asks people what they currently prefer and how satisfied they are, proves inadequate to confront the most pressing issues of gender justice” [Nussbaum 2003, p. 34], and further on this page: “Women’s current preferences often show distortions that are the result of unjust background condition.” For further critique of Utilitarianism and dominant economic paradigms from the point of view of a feminist economics see: [Anderson 1993; Agarwal 1997].

¹² “Thus feminist research does not introduce political assumptions, values and interests into research fields that are otherwise value-neutral; it identifies the ones that are already there” [Novick 1988, p. 1].

¹³ Contextual values and interests, instead of deteriorating the quality of research in the natural sciences [Kuhn 2007], improve it [Harding 1995, p. 1]. Thus neutrality, in the sense of freedom from social values and interests, is neither possible nor desirable.

¹⁴ Most thoroughly developed in Karl Marx’s *Capital* [Marx 1990].

Feminist economists [Carrier 1996; Ferber, Nelson 1993, 2003; Hewitson 2007] focus on a completely different concept of human nature – conditioned by environment, relations and especially by social sex (gender), what opens a way for different ways of thinking about economics – as solving abstract problems (“male” way), or specific issues (“female” way). As a result, the objective of economics is perceived as reaching some neglected goals like happiness for people, by increasing capability of different groups of the society. Feminist economics expands therefore its field including its basic dimension not only the decisions made in the market, but also outside the market (unpaid work, family support). The research methodology [Strassmann 2008] adopts a vision of economics as a “science-with-wonder”, involving the dominance of relational, non-Newtonian thinking, thereby creating space for the humanities, historical, institutional and qualitative analyses and dealing with the issue of meaning in science.

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