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The Changing Concept of Human Nature as the Answer to the Actual Problems of the Economics: the Neoclassical vs. Feminist Economics

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Szkoła Główna Handlowa w Warszawie

THE CHANGING CONCEPT OF HUMAN NATURE AS THE ANSWER TO THE ACTUAL PROBLEMS OF THE ECONOMICS: THE NEOCLASSICAL VS. FEMINIST ECONOMICS¹

Abstract

This paper focuses on extracting main features of the concept of human nature in feminist economics and comparing it to the homo oeconomicus basing on some crucial works developed within those disciplines. Therefore the method applied to this research is mainly a content analysis of representative of those economic schools. In order to evaluate main differences between the anthropological assumptions of those economic schools, the tool to this comparison is developed. This tool is effect of research on the meaning, role, functions, and main elements of concepts of human nature. It allows for differentiate within the concept of human nature main levels and dimensions, and look for them while conducting a content analysis of representative writings.

Keywords: concept of human nature, neoclassical economics, feminist economics, economic anthropology

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Introduction

The contemporary orthodox economics is widely criticized by economists and scientists coming from other social sciences for its insufficiency in providing

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explanations for current problems, for their prognosis power, and sometimes for contributing to economic crises. One of the criticized elements of this economics is its concept of human nature – homo oeconomicus. Heterodox economists look for ways of developing a concept, which will be closer to the reality, mark good start for developing the economics on more sound basis. Such an attempt is made as well by the feminist economics.

The concepts of human nature are so central for the whole discipline because the way we perceive a human being and the world has an important impact on the way we think about science in general and particular disciplines². However, although assumptions about human nature are a fundament of anthropology, we still don't have any theory of human, as different disciplines, dealing with a human being don't cooperate³.

The goal of the paper is therefore not only to show the major differences of the concepts of human nature between both of mentioned schools, but to suggest an anthropological model of human being, which can be used to make such comparisons and to prove their impact on the foundations of the economics.

1. Basic dimensions of human being

In order to introduce the complex frame for the concept of human nature, it's worth to analyze it on three following levels⁴. The first level encompasses the view on the world and a place of the human race within it. It is the question about the human's relation to nature, and to other living creatures. Generally there were two principal differentiations within the philosophy: treating all of them hierarchically or equally.

The first hierarchical tradition (ladder-of-beings) born in Medieval Tomist philosophy by putting human between God and the Nature points to some higher order, beyond human power. It gives the human being the direction and in this sense sets all creatures under one law, ensuring in a deeper sense unity and equality of creation. The second hierarchical tradition was born in the Enlightenment, and put man (!) in the center of the world – as the ruler and the norm maker who doesn't have to respect any moral obligation. The basic value – the rationa-

² R. Bartkowiak, *Historia myśli ekonomicznej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2008, p. 37.

³ M. Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, Bouvier, Bonn 1991, p. 9.

⁴ See: A. Horodecka, *Komponenty obrazu człowieka w ekonomii* [Components of the concept of human nature in the economics], „Kwartalnik Historii Myśli Ekonomicznej” [Quarterly History of Economic Thought] 2014, 5/1, pp. 117–139.

lity lost its Categorical Imperative meaning and was reduced to the calculator of utility, which automatically produce a best result for all.

The equally tradition perceives the human being as equal to all the animals and plants. It assumes that all norms and values are relative and there is no possibility to compare them, therefore science can't deal with them. Although Adam Smith didn't refer in his *Wealth of Nations* to ethical aspects of economic behavior, he did that before in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*⁵. These two books mark the beginning of thinking about human being as a subject to two different spheres – objective, subordinated to the science and the second – more subjective, based on individual faith and values – an ethical one. But the neoclassical view has quit these spheres from its analysis at all for over hundred years.

The next step in understanding a human being encompasses relations within the humanity – with other people and the society (social world), which can base on independency or dependency.

According to the independent view on society, the more power (for example: social, cultural and political) a person has, the more respected he/she is. The implicit valuation of independence, leads therefore to high esteem for rich, good positioned, well-educated and emotionally not connected people – white, well educated, men. Women, because of their dependency due to physiological (baby caring), and psychical (greater emotionality) reasons aren't esteemed so much, what can be seen in their economical and political status.

The dependent view on social relations, the person is shaped by the interdependent society, culture, time and place⁶. The dependency is not only a fact but, it is valued positively. Being embedded in the human society, sharing its values and norms is regarded as more important as “a personal success”. This understanding of social world is characteristic for capability approach for example⁷ as well as communitarianism⁸, and has its sources in Marxism⁹. The society is a necessary precondition for individual development¹⁰ and enables human to have values/norms and communicate them to others by language¹¹. The next assumption

⁵ A. Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005; A. Smith, *The theory of moral sentiments*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY 2000.

⁶ T. Lawson, *Ontology and Feminist Theorizing*, “Feminist Economics” 2003, 9/1, p. 127.

⁷ A. Sen, *The possibility of social choice*, “American Economic Review” 1999, 89/3, pp. 349–378.

⁸ A. Etzioni, *The Essential Communitarian Reader*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 1998; A. Etzioni, *New Communitarian Thinking*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville 1995; A. Etzioni, *Rights and the Common Good: The Communitarian Perspective*, St. Martins Press, New York 1995; A. Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community*, Crown Publishers, New York 1993.

⁹ K. Marx, *Capital*, Penguin, New York 1990.

¹⁰ Originated in Aristotle, S. Everson, *Aristotle, the Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988.

¹¹ See: T. Lawson, *Ontology and Feminist Theorizing*..., pp. 119–150.

is about the equal character of humans. This characteristic is connected to the previous one as soon as independency is often connected with highly hierarchical and functional view on society – in the sense of positivist realism or of Parson's functionalism in his view on the social system. On the other hand, the dependency gives more open view on the society, based on the equality thought, understood as a net of different communications which occur within the society (social communication¹²).

The third level of the concept of human nature encompass the dimension of the body, soul and mind. The body dimension of human being is directly observable and can be described by descriptive statements fulfilling the positivist ideal of science. This encompasses visible human behavior in relation to objects, nature and other people. Usually this perspective is applied by most social sciences, like sociology or economics, but until the reasons (motives) of the human behavior are considered in a limited way, it is not sufficient. Therefore social disciplines deal in very reduced extent with motives¹³. The soul (*psyche-soul*) dimension is a place for emotions, the sphere of a psyche, and therefore the realm of psychology, and reveals human motives influencing the behavior. The mind – dimension (“Geist” as it's called in the philosophy) is a level of reason and language and spirituality. It includes an ontological question, assuming, that there are some structures, some systems, which are common to whole humanity¹⁴ and delivering a set of conditions under which the “certain generalized features of widespread experience were possible”¹⁵, like language or common ideas (for instance: Spirit, God, Oneness). Out of this level we deal with the question of meaning of life and give meaning to our emotions and feelings, therefore this is the realm of philosophy, religious systems and the spirituality. Although answers to those questions are different, due to the culture we leave in, the language we operate, the experience we have, there are some common norms, basic values in the society¹⁶ like

¹² N. Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1994.

¹³ For instance: the power in politics, the conformity in social science and the utility in economics – are some examples.

¹⁴ T. Lawson, *Ontology and Feminist Theorizing...*, pp. 119–150; T. Lawson, *Feminism, Realism, and Universalism*, “Feminist Economics” 1999, 5/2, pp. 25–59; D. Barker, *Emancipatory for Whom? A Comment on Critical Realism*, “Feminist Economics” 2003, 9/1, pp. 103–108; S. Harding, *The Case for Strategic Realism: A Response to Lawson*, “Feminist Economics” 1999, p. 5; J. Nelson, *Once More, With Feeling: Feminist Economics and the Ontological Question*, “Feminist Economics” 2003, 9/1, pp. 109–118; F. Peter, *Critical Realism, Feminist Epistemology, and the Emancipatory Potential of Science: A Comment on Lawson and Harding*, “Feminist Economics” 2003, 9/1, pp. 93–101.

¹⁵ T. Lawson, *Ontology and Feminist Theorizing...*, p. 120.

¹⁶ See for instance the works of World Parliament of Religions, which succeeded in finding these norms in different religions, D.J. Johnson, J. Douglas, *Parliament of the World's Religions*, Council for a Parliament of the Worlds Religions, 2009.

dignity of human being and its search for meaning in life. Not only the philosophy, but psychology and psychiatry starts to deal with this issue more and more¹⁷.

2. Feminist and neoclassical model of the human nature

The concepts of human being in mainstream economics and feminist economics¹⁸ cannot differ more. Although there is plenty of literature referring to those aspects, this is a new attempt to analyze this issue in three levels – worldview, social world and micro-view on a person including dimensions: body, soul and mind.

Worldview

The world of mainstream economics is a physical, Newtonian world, consisting of separate atoms, which create relations according to some universal rules, to which people and objects are subordinated. In orthodox economic this rule is called “tending to the equilibrium”. This world consists of different markets of goods and services, which aren’t affected by time and place. It makes historical and cultural perspective irrelevant.

Feminist economics represents a completely different view. According to this view the world is primarily social, embedded in nature. The relationship – societies vs. nature is a very important aspect, as soon as social injustice is often a result of nature devastation. Sustaining social and ecological harmony is crucial; therefore the economic world shall be subordinated to society, ecology and ethics and treated as a subsystem of a social structure with its basic values and rights in a sense of capabilities.

As to the place of a human being in such a world for both economic schools – according to mainstream economics, a human being is generally superior to the world (on the top of the ladder of beings, or in the center of the world) and it’s independent, governing the world by means of power. Therefore the mainstream economics loves to explain economic regularities and laws on the example of Robinson Crusoe – an independent solo-man living on an isolated island. The

¹⁷ The question about the meaning of life which was primarily answered by philosophers and religious systems was eventually picked up by the psychology, Logo therapy is a whole direction in psychiatry and psychotherapy – basing on this concept, V.E. Frankl, *Man’s search for meaning*, Pocket Books, New York 1997.

¹⁸ G. Hewitson, *Feminist economics as a Postmodern Moment*, “Review of Social Economy” 2007, 65/2, pp. 187–193; J.G. Carrier, *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics*. Marianne A. Ferber, Julie A. Nelson, “American Ethnologist” 1996, 23/1, pp. 147–147; M.A. Ferber, J.A. Nelson, *Beyond economic man: feminist theory and economics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1993; M.A. Ferber, J.A. Nelson, *Feminist Economics Today. Beyond Economic Man*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2003.

use of this metaphor and its consequences are pictured in a marvelous way by Ulla Grapard¹⁹.

According to feminist economics, the human being is just one among many living creatures on this planet and shall live in harmony with them. It can govern the world not by power but in a “democratic” way – by respecting other participants – nature, plants and animals to ensure the harmony.

Social world

Both economic schools – mainstream and feminist have a very contradictory view on the human being within a society.

In the mainstream economics the society is perceived as a sum of egoistic individuals, following the hedonistic concept, developed further by utilitarian's²⁰. According to them each person chooses an action bringing the highest utility²¹. Therefore the members of the society are ruled by competition²².

Feminist economics opposes such a view by assuming the dependency of human on the society and its values. It is manifested especially in some phases of life, like childhood, illness, old age. In other phases a person seems to be less dependent, but still remains interdependent. In the center of analysis are human actors, which are interdependent, interconnected, cooperative and collaborative²³. Individuals can't separate themselves from the society and its values, which are gendered. The further difference concerns the approach to a gender: whereas mainstream economics is not discussing the differences between men and women, adapting a masculine image to all population, feminist economics shows that each person reflects his/her gender. As the next one – the view on the impact of the society on the individual, the mainstream economics assumes that the person was created and formed once and hasn't been shaped by time (Kantian

¹⁹ U. Grapard, *Robinson Crusoe: The quintessential economic man?*, “Feminist Economics” 1995, 1/1, pp. 33–52.

²⁰ J. Bentham, J.S. Mill, *The utilitarians*, Anchor Press, Garden City, NY 1973.

²¹ Or the utility of all people affected by the decision, what is a more sociable version of utilitarianism.

²² The background of this idea is delivered by: T. Hobbes, C.B. Macpherson, *Leviathan*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1987.

²³ This is a starting point in the economics. Already Aristotle assumed that the household organization where all persons are interdependent and cooperate is the centre of economic analysis, M.A. Ferber, J.A. Nelson, *Beyond economic man...*; N. Folbre, *Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint*, Routledge, London 1994; S. Himmelweit, *The discovery of “unpaid work”: the social consequences of the expansion of “work”*, “Feminist Economics” 1995, 1/2, pp. 11–19; A.H. Akram-Lodhi, *You Are Not Excused From Cooking’: Peasants and the Gender Division of Labor in Pakistan*, “Feminist Economics” 1996, 2/2, pp. 87–106; J. Gideon, *Looking at Economics as Gendered Structures: An Application to Central America*, “Feminist Economics” 1999, 5/1, pp. 1–28

philosophy) and the society consists of these completely and rationally shaped persons. Economic theorists develop “conceptual representatives in their own image: autonomous individuals, privileged and free to choose”²⁴. Disabled, children and dement aren’t considered here, therefore this theory reflects interests of the privileged group only. Feminist economists oppose this concept as well, by assuming that the person is in the process of development from childhood to the old age²⁵, what can be traced back to Aristotle and Karl Marx. People are not born rational, some got mentally disabled and therefore feminist economics perceives rational people only as a part of the society.

Therefore whereas a mainstream economics represents a view that human being is only governed by rationality, feminist economics looks wider admitting that rationality may play an important, but not crucial role, as affiliation may be a force much more significant for explaining the human behavior.

Another aspect is the place of emotions and values in describing relations within a society in a scientific way. Mainstream economics focuses on the world without values, with no place for empathy, what is criticized by feminist economists²⁶, which emphasizes the importance of them for understanding all social processes.

Individual world: body-soul – mind

The closer look on different dimensions of human being in mainstream economics and in feminist economics shows deeper differences.

The mainstream economics reduces its view on human to body-behavior level, as only this level of human nature can be described in an objective way, and the objectivity is treated as the imperative of the science. Behavior is assumed to be the result of preferences, which are representing needs in the economic models. Human decisions are always treated as based on optimization calculi. Again the feminist economics is critical about this view on the human nature and assumes that human behavior is governed by many different motives and is shaped not only individually, but by the society (its rules, values and norms) and circumstances.

²⁴ D. Strassmann, *Not a Free Market: The Rhetoric of Disciplinary Authority in Economics*, in: M.A. Ferber, J. Nelson, *Beyond Economic Man...*, pp. 54–68.

²⁵ M. C. Nussbaum, *Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and Social Justice*, “Feminist Economics” 2003, 9/2, p. 54.

²⁶ D. Barker, *Economists, social reformers, and prophets: a feminist critique of economic efficiency*, “Feminist Economics” 1995, 1/3, p. 34.

Speaking about the level of soul, which comprises various motives and emotions, the mainstream economics reduces human being here to the basement, not giving him/her any right to have different, various motives and needs. People are subordinated to the logic of preferences, built on the assumption that the greater utility is better. Egoistic motives are the only force, which drives people. This is contradicted by the feminist economics, which assumes that persons have various motives and needs (as opposed to wants)²⁷, and among them some basic needs ('social provisioning'), common for all people, which are main drives for individual and group activities. Moreover it adapt from Amartya Sen²⁸ the term of capabilities, in order to acknowledge the different ability of human beings to fulfill needs.

At the level of mind we encounter further differences between mainstream economics and feminist economics view on the person. Mainstream economics isn't interested in mind level or its main functions at all, reducing it to the ratio, which is making optimization calculi in every situation (provides answers to meaning of life, to existential questions, spirituality, or common norms and values). Homo oeconomicus doesn't have any instance which lets him to communicate, and share his thoughts with others unless through the market. And at the market there is a place only for one norm/value: efficiency.

Feminist economics looks at this dimension totally differently, assuming that people search for the meaning of life by communicating with others and sharing meanings, what results in many common values and norms. Happiness is not perceived completely individually and independently, but in having common values, captured by the concept of social provisioning, like fulfillment of human potential, postulated mainly by humanistic approach²⁹. Ethical norms and rules play an important role on the way to achieve happiness. They can't be reduced to personal moral preferences and give the direction of the development of the society helping to reach its goal – happiness for the whole society.

²⁷ M. Power, *Social Provisioning as a Starting Point for Feminist Economics*, "Feminist Economics" 2004, 10/3, pp. 3–19.

²⁸ A. Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities*, North-Holland, Amsterdam 1985.

²⁹ M. Power, *Social Provisioning as a Starting Point...*, p. 15 states "I believe that social provisioning is a fruitful beginning for an economic analysis that has at its core a concern with human well-being, with the empowerment of subordinated groups, and to return to Beneria's words, with 'the fulfilment of human potential in all its dimensions – for each and everyone', L. Beneria, *Gender, Development, and Globalization: Economics as if People Mattered*, Routledge, London 2003, pp. 167–168.

Conclusion

The paper analyzed the concept of human nature in mainstream economics and in feminist economics in such aspects as its relation to worldview, to other people and on three main dimensions: body-soul-mind. The concept of human nature in mainstream economics focuses primarily on human behavior, explained by fixed motives (individual utility), independent of the society and is highly abstract. Feminist economics³⁰ bases on a completely different concept of human nature – conditioned by environment, relations and especially by social sex (gender), what indicates different ways of perceiving reality by women and men. It also leads to two different ways of thinking about economics – as solving abstract problems (“male” way), or specific issues (“female” way).

These differences may have grave impact on the way of understanding economics – its goal, field and methodology. The neoclassical concept of human nature influences a goal of economics, understood as an explanation of the economic actors’ behavior and its consequences both for economy and methodology. The highly abstract image of a man leads to a preference of highly mathematized models and creation of formalized theories. For instance such a view on human nature as is proved by the feminist economics contributes to the fact that 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 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 deal with the issue of meaning in science.

Such influences of concept of human nature on the economics (demonstrated by other papers of the author) may evoke in future more interest in models of man within economists society and contribute to the more profound basis of economic anthropology as a discipline which can predict the changes in economics.

³⁰ G. Hewitson, *Feminist economics...*; J.G. Carrier, *Beyond Economic Man...*; M.A. Ferber, J.A. Nelson, *Beyond economic man...*; M.A. Ferber, J.A. Nelson, *Feminist Economics Today...*

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ZMIANY W KONCEPCJI CZŁOWIEKA JAKO ODPOWIEDŹ NA AKTUALNE PROBLEMY EKONOMII: EKONOMIA NEOKLASYCZNA A EKONOMIA FEMINISTYCZNA

Streszczenie

Niniejsze opracowanie skupia się na wyodrębnieniu głównych cech koncepcji natury ludzkiej w ekonomii feministycznej i porównaniu ich do *homo oeconomicus* na podstawie istotnych prac stworzonych w ramach tych wyróżnionych szkół ekonomicznych. Dlatego metoda stosowana do badań jest przede wszystkim analizą treści dzieł napisanych przez przedstawicieli tych szkół ekonomicznych. W celu oceny głównych różnic między tymi antropologicznymi założeniami ekonomicznymi zostało utworzone narzędzie do ich porównania. To narzędzie jest efektem badań nad znaczeniem, rolą, funkcją i głównymi elementami koncepcji natury ludzkiej. Pozwala na wyróżnienie w koncepcji natury ludzkiej głównych poziomów i wymiarów oraz na ich odnalezienie w trakcie przeprowadzenia analizy treści dzieł reprezentatywnych dla szkoły ekonomicznej.

Tłumaczenie Anna Horodecka

Słowa kluczowe: koncepcja natury ludzkiej, ekonomia neoklasyczna, ekonomia feministyczna, podstawy ekonomii, ekonomia heterodoksyjna, antropologia ekonomiczna, *homo oeconomicus*