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### The Study of Choice or the Study of Provisioning? Gender and the Definition of Economics

*Adam Smith . . . saw economics as a two-fold problem, one of which was how society was organized by exchange, the other of which is how society was "provisioned," in what today would be regarded as a more ecological sense. Here again, modern economics has gone wholly towards the view of economic life as society organized by exchange, and has largely lost the sense of it being a process of provisioning of the human race, or even of the whole biosphere.*

Kenneth Boulding (1986, 10)

*Faculty members from top liberal arts colleges told the Commission that some of their best students have decided against going to graduate school in economics, or have dropped out during their first year, because of the abstract, technical nature of the core curriculum. It is not economics as they know it.*

Anne Krueger et al., "Report of the Commission on Graduate Education in Economics" (1991, 1040-41)

So what is economics? This is not an idle question when decisions are being made about publications, promotions, and curricula. Does economics include any study having to do with the creation and distribution of the "necessaries and conveniences of life," as Adam Smith said in 1776? Or is it about goods and services only to the extent that they enter into a process of exchange? Or is the core of economics to be found in mathematical models of individual choice, which sometimes leads to hypothetical exchange? There is no doubt that while room exists around the fringes for other sorts of studies, the last definition of economics is the one that is currently dominant in the most highly regarded research and in the core of graduate study.<sup>1</sup> It is my

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1. The reader unfamiliar with contemporary mainstream economics may want to scan a recent issue of a prestigious economics journal (such as the *American Economic Review*, *Journal of*

thesis that this narrowing of the definition of economics reflects particular gender-related biases and that, while significant advances have been made through the mathematical study of exchange, feminist insights can help to reorient the discipline toward a broader and richer economics.

### Gender and the Cartesian Ideal

Feminists have used techniques of literary criticism, historical interpretation, and psychoanalysis "to 'read science as a text' in order to reveal the social meanings—the hidden symbolic and structural agendas—of purportedly value-neutral claims and practices" (Harding 1986, 23). There is now a considerable literature that uses such tools to investigate the historical links between social ideals of science and of gender in Western society. Evelyn Fox Keller's *Reflections on Gender and Science* (1985), Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980), and Susan Bordo's "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought" (1986) and *The Flight to Objectivity* (1987) have described the radical and gendered change in worldview that occurred during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this period, the predominant cultural conception of the relationship between humans and nature changed from one in which humans were seen as embedded in a female, living cosmos to one in which men were seen as potentially detached, objective observers and controllers of nature. In this new conception, nature came to be seen as passive and, eventually, as mechanical.

The identification of science with masculinity, detachment, and domination, and of femininity with nature, subjectivity, and submission, is clear in some of the language early seventeenth-century scientists used to define their endeavor. Henry Oldenburg, an early secretary of the Royal Society, stated that the intent of the Society was to "raise a masculine Philosophy . . . whereby the Mind of Man may be ennobled with the knowledge of Solid Truths" (quoted in Keller 1985, 52). Francis Bacon wrote in his *Temporis Parrus Masculus* (The Masculine Birth of Time), "I am come in very truth leading to you Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave" (quoted in Keller 1985, 39).

Of greater interest for the discussion of the high-status definition of eco-

Political Economy, or Econometrica) or look at textbooks frequently used in the core graduate curriculum (such as Varian 1984) to get an idea of the importance of the mathematical individual choice model. The degree of agreement on the core model may come as a surprise to other social scientists whose disciplines include a more diverse set of research programs. Rival schools in economics, such as institutionalism, Marxism, and the Austrian and post-Keynesian schools, are so much weaker in numbers and influence than the neoclassical group that many, if not most, academic departments feel no compunction about leaving them entirely out of curriculum and staffing plans.

nomics is the literature on the gendered nature of Cartesian thought. In the Cartesian model of the world, the cosmos is split into a "*res cogitans* (a thinking something which has no spatial extension) and a *res extensa* (a spatial something which has no psychic qualities)" (Stem 1965, 76). Science, and knowledge in general, are a part of the *cogito*, seen as radically detached from passive matter. And how does the mind gain knowledge? To quote Descartes, "The long concatenations of simple and easy reasoning which geometers use in achieving their most difficult demonstrations gave me occasion to imagine that all matters which may enter the human mind were interrelated in the same fashion" (quoted in Davis and Hersh 1986, ix). Descartes regarded sensory input from the *res extensa* as deceptive; therefore, he believed that the only true knowledge is that which can be expressed mentally in the form of theorems and proofs. "Cartesianism," write the mathematicians Philip Davis and Reuben Hersh, "calls for the primacy of world mathematization" (1986, 8).

The Cartesian model of objectivity, based on dispassion and detachment, has been interpreted by Susan Bordo and others as related to anxiety created by the loss of the medieval feeling of connection to nature. Karl Stem's book on philosophy beginning with Descartes is entitled *The Flight from Woman*. James Hillman writes in *The Myth of Analysis*, "The specific consciousness we call scientific, Western and modern is the long sharpened tool of the masculine mind that has discarded parts of its own substance, calling it 'Eye,' 'female' and 'inferior'" (quoted in Bordo 1986, 441). The counterpoint to rational, detached "man" is "woman [who] provides his connection with nature, she is the mediating force between man and nature, a reminder of his childhood, a reminder of the body, and a reminder of sexuality, passion, and the human connectedness. She is the repository of emotional life and of all the nonrational elements of human experience" (Fee 1983, 12). In the Cartesian view, the abstract, general, detached, emotionless, "masculine" approach taken to represent scientific thinking is radically removed from, and clearly viewed as superior to, the concrete, particular, embodied, passionate, "feminine" reality of material life.

### The High-Status Definition of Economics

Economics increasingly has come to be defined not by its subject matter but by a particular way of viewing the world. The phrase "the economic approach to" is commonly used to mean viewing a problem in terms of choices, especially the individual welfare or profit maximizing choices of autonomous rational agents. Lionel Robbins's much-quoted 1935 definition of economics as "the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses" (1952 [1935],

16) helped to consolidate this view. "Economic theory" is frequently made synonymous with "choice theory" or "decision theory."

Such a definition is not unrelated to the gendered Cartesian ideal. Defining the subject of economics as individual choice makes the detached cogito, not the material world or real persons in the material world, the center of study. Nature, childhood, bodily needs, and human connectedness, cut off from "masculine" concern in the Cartesian split, remain safely out of the limelight. The emphasis on the "scarcity of means" suggests that nature is static, stingy, and hostile, a view of nature perhaps still based on a conception of man as dominating feminine nature, which, while dominated and passive, is still able to frighten.<sup>2</sup>

While one presumably could attempt to pursue this choice-centered approach in a purely verbal manner, one of the advantages of such an approach is that some aspects are easily expressed in mathematical form. The assumptions of this model and the form the analysis takes have been closely linked ever since economics adopted concepts from eighteenth-century physics (Mirowski 1991). By 1924, W. Stanley Jevons would describe economics as the study of "the mechanics of utility and self-interest" (quoted in Georgescu-Roegen 1971, 40). When economics is assumed to be centered around mathematical models of individual choice, assumptions about human behavior take on the status of axioms (Becker 1976) while nature becomes a mathematical "commodity space" (Debreu 1991).<sup>3</sup> Study of actual markets tends to give way to study of ideal abstract markets or hypothetical games. In fact, the less research has to do with actual economies, the higher its status: purely abstract models are commonly referred to as being "highbrow," "capital T," or "pure" "middlebrow," "small t," economic theory, or "merely applied." Attempts to explain phenomena that do not include a mathematical model of individual choice are not seen as economic theory at all. The "acid test" of articles in economic theory, said Nobel Prize winner Gerard Debreu in his 1990 presidential address to the American Economic Association, comes in "removing all their economic interpretations and letting their mathematical infrastructure stand on its own" (1991, 3). Thus the Cartesian voice echoes down through the centuries.

While the gendered nature of such a definition of economics has not (to my knowledge) been stated as blatantly as in Bacon's and Oldenburg's statements

2. Contrast Robbins's definition with an alternative: "the science which studies how humans satisfy the requirements and enjoy the delights of life using the free gifts of nature." One can appeal to no evidence outside of human prejudice to determine whether this or Robbins's view of the relation of humans to nature is "correct."

3. Debreu's contention that "the concept of the quantity of a commodity has a *natural* linear structure" (1991, 3; emphasis added) has been recently contested by Mirowski (1991, 153–55). In addition, my own research has illustrated the rigidity of the assumptions that must be applied in order to impose such a "linear structure" in empirical studies of actual purchases (Nelson 1991).

about science, "the hidden symbolic and structural agendas" may become apparent when we reread certain texts. For example, the drive toward defining economics in terms of mathematical models of individual choice is institutionally associated with the founding of the Econometric Society in 1930 (Debreu 1991). Consider what sexual imagery may be hidden in this society's statement of purpose (printed inside the back cover of every issue of *Econometrica*):

The Society shall operate as a completely disinterested, scientific organization, without political, social, financial or nationalistic bias. Its main object shall be to promote studies that aim at the unification of the theoretical-quantitative and the empirical-quantitative approach to economic problems and that are penetrated by constructive and rigorous thinking similar to that which has come to dominate in the natural sciences.

Are the terms "penetration" and "domination" really value-free and gender-neutral, or do they indicate something else about the mind-set of the founders of this school?

Not everyone, of course, is happy with the power this definition holds over the contemporary structure of economics. While some feminist economists have been able to stretch the dominant model to address some of their concerns, others believe that the model is too narrow—that forcing the analysis of such issues as discrimination, comparable worth, inequality within the household, and nonsexist policy reforms into this framework leaves many of the most crucial questions unanswered. But feminists are far from being the only group potentially disturbed by this state of affairs. Debreu himself offers a mild caution in his address, in bringing up the concern that the economist may find "the very choice of the questions to which he [sic] tries to find answers is influenced by his [sic] mathematical background." Debreu also notes sociological factors that may have contributed to the growth of this form of analysis, including the "reward system of the profession" and the "esoteric character" and "impenetrability" of this type of theory (1991, 5, 6).

Released just a month after Debreu's address, a report by the blue-ribbon Commission on Graduate Education in Economics of the American Economic Association was somewhat more critical. While rejecting the notion that excessive mathematics is a major problem, the commission expressed serious concern that "it is an underemphasis on the 'linkages' between tools, both theory and econometrics, and 'real world problems' that is the weakness of graduate education in economics." The commission also expressed fear that "graduate programs may be turning out a generation with too many idiot savants skilled in technique but innocent of real economic issues" (Krieger et al. 1991, 1039, 1044–45). More vitriolic is Donald McCloskey's paper—"Economic Science: A Search through the Hyperspace of Assumptions?"—

presented at the same meetings as Debru's address. McCloskey is severely critical of economists who make a "false claim of physics-mimicking scientificity" and who "abandon an economic question in favor of a mathematical one, and then forget to come back to the Department of Economics" (1991, 12-13).

Do these criticisms signal a turning of the tide away from radical detachment from the subject of study? If we can rely on historical evidence as a guide, the answer is probably not. Similar concerns about an overemphasis on mathematical formalism and an underemphasis on relevance to real world issues have been voiced many times before and from equally elevated platforms.<sup>4</sup> Such protests seem to have had no effect on what Debru called "the seemingly irresistible current" of increasing emphasis on mathematics (1991, 5).

Why has it seemed so irresistible? A feminist psychological analysis suggests that an assumption of masculine superiority, coupled with the association of masculinity with the Cartesian ideal, may continue to make a turn toward increasing mentalism and formalism an appealing choice. If an individual researcher refuses to go along with this current, his or her future work may be considered soft or insufficiently scientific and, by implication, inferior. Recognizing the link between gender and scientific prestige, however, does not itself suggest that an alternative approach would be better. The current situation must be compared with the possibilities that might be opened up if femininity were no longer associated with inferiority.

#### Thinking about an Alternative to Masculine Economics

When all we know is masculine economics, it is hard to imagine an alternative. The common ways of thinking about gender suggest that the only alternative to macho economics must be emasculated, impotent economics. Given current conceptions of science and masculinity, there is a tendency to think that the only alternative to a definition of economics emphasizing rigor, scientificity, and rationality would be one that gives in to, say, sloppiness, subjectivity, and emotionalism. Or that if economics backs down from an emphasis on theory of individual choice, it would degenerate into a dogmatic theory of sociological determinism or a practice of prosaic, theory-less potato counting. The masculine is good; the feminine (trespassing into science from its proper realm) can only be bad—or so we are accustomed to thinking.

4. See, for example, the American Economic Association presidential addresses by Wassily Leontief (1971) and Robert Gordon (1976), and the Richard T. Ely lectures by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1970) and Alan Blinder (1988)—not to mention addresses by Richard T. Ely, founder of the AEA, himself (e.g., Ely 1936). Nelson (1993) reviews the notions of scientific detachment contained in the various statements of purpose issued by the American Economic Association and the Econometric Society.

Envisioning an alternative that is not simply weak and mushy requires a new view of gender, value, and knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Ideas from feminist theory, recent work in the philosophy and sociology of science, and research on cognition and language all play a role in constructing this view. Starting with the concepts of gender and value, think of sexism as an unjustified association of masculinity with superiority and of femininity with inferiority at the cognitive as well as social level. But instead of substituting for this the idea that "feminine is good, too," or turning the tables to "feminine is good and masculine is bad," think of breaking apart the association of gender with value. If gender and value are thought of as orthogonal dimensions, then it becomes possible to think about good and bad aspects of characteristics cognitively associated with masculinity in our culture, and good and bad characteristics of what we think of as feminine. *At the cognitive level, then, sexism can also be seen as the selective blocking from view of the strengths of femininity and the dangers of unmitigated masculinity.* A better economics would neither be purged of all of its distinctively masculine characteristics nor simply have feminine-associated characteristics tacked on indiscriminately; in a better economics we would choose carefully from both "masculine" and "feminine" approaches those that result in the best science.

Take, as a simple example, the idea that a "hard" economics is preferable to a "soft" economics. This judgment relies on an association of hardness with positively valued, masculine-associated strength and softness with negatively valued, feminine-associated weakness.<sup>6</sup> However, hardness also may also mean rigidity and softness may also imply flexibility. A pursuit of masculine hardness that spurns association with femininity and hence with flexibility can be thought of as leading to rigidity, just as surely as a pursuit of feminine softness without corresponding strength makes us think of weakness. Would not a more balanced and resilient economics be one that is flexible as well as hard?

#### Alternative Methods

The impression, fostered by the Cartesian view, that only theories that can be proved (à la geometry) constitute knowledge tends to block from view alternatives kinds of knowledge. The devaluation of language, community, the body, and emotion implied by an emphasis on axiomatic, detached truth has been contested in recent work in feminist theory; the philosophy of science, and studies of cognition and language as well as in economics. These works claim that rationality includes reasoning by analogy, by

5. In what follows, I draw on and expand ideas first presented in Nelson (1992).

6. As has frequently been pointed out, the masculine-hard/feminine-soft association may derive from a metaphor of sexual intercourse.

metaphor, by pattern recognition, by imagination, and by, as Einstein once put it, "intuition, resting on sympathetic understanding of experience" (quoted in Georgescu-Roegen 1966, 14). To denote such a conception of reasoning beyond logic, the economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1966) chooses the term "dialectical thinking"; Howard Margolis (1987) uses the term "seeing-that"; the linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher Mark Johnson (1980) refer to "imaginative rationality"; and the feminist theorist Evelyn Fox Keller (1985) writes about the search for "dynamic objectivity."

The crucial advantage of this form of reasoning, whatever the term used to describe it, is that it can deal with overlapping, interconnected concepts because it is experientially or contextually based. Georgescu-Roegen distinguishes what he calls "arithmomorphic" concepts, that is, concepts that are "discretely distinct" and suitable for manipulation by the laws of logic, from "dialectical" concepts, which overlap with their opposites "over a countless penumbra of varying breadth" (1971, 14). Far from being trivial, the latter, he argues, constitute "most of our thoughts."<sup>7</sup> Lakoff and Johnson argue that the elevation of set-theoretic categorization as the basis for objectivist knowledge overlooks important aspects of the way people actually comprehend the world: human categorization is much more flexible, purpose specific, and open-ended, and tends to be based on family resemblances or prototypes (1980, 122-25). Lakoff and Johnson argue that human understanding is based on metaphors, which in turn are based on bodily experience, and that understanding is inseparable from imagination and emotion. This idea of understanding as connected to experience is reiterated in Keller's definition of objectivity: "the pursuit of a maximally authentic, and hence maximally reliable, understanding of the world around oneself. Such a pursuit is dynamic to the extent that it actively draws on the commonality between mind and nature as a resource for understanding. . . . In this, dynamic objectivity is not unlike empathy" (1985, 117). Such reasoning beyond logic makes use of experience and connection rather than suppressing or denying them.

A few examples will illustrate these points. Margolis points out that it is our shared knowledge of language and context that would allow us to make sense of the following statement if heard orally: "Jim Wright, who lives right down the street, to the right of the Kelly's, is a playwright who is studying the Masonic rites, so he will soon have all the rights of qualified members" (1987, 90). In contrast, in formal logic each symbol can have only one meaning, and the very formalism of mathematics makes the reasoning context free. In an example from physics, light corresponds to our understanding of a wave in

7. As another example, Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982) reinterprets the perceived lack of ability of some subjects (largely female in her sample) in studies of ethical development to "appropriately" abstract from the details of hypothetical moral dilemmas in order to apply "logical" "universal" formulas. She suggests that what was perceived as a lack of logic was instead a manifestation of a less rigid and detached, more contextual form of reasoning.

some respects but behaves like a particle in other respects. These two divergent (and metaphorical) understandings of light have been highly fruitful, in spite of the apparent logical contradiction of positing something as simultaneously "A" and "not-A." The experiential, empathetic way in which such reasoning sometimes functions in science is apparent in the words of Nobel Prize-winning biologist Barbara McClintock, who told her biographer of her "feeling for the organism" (Keller 1983).

The point here is not that one way of thinking is peculiar to females and the other to males. Indeed this would be a rather odd conclusion, given the number of males who investigate "imaginative rationality" and the number of females who have worked within disciplines emphasizing formal logic. Rather, gender linkages enter at the level of cultural association: females are stereotypically linked with the intuitive approach, where "intuitive" is taken to mean an effortless, irrational sort of knowledge of mysterious origin. The above analysis suggests that a reevaluation of such different-than-logical (not illogical) forms of knowledge, devalued by descendants of Descartes as intuitive and inferior, is in order.

As Donald McCloskey pointed out in his study *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1985), much economic argument already takes this form, although it does so unself-consciously. Even in the most high-tech, abstract economics lectures or seminars, the presenter is usually asked to give the "intuition" behind the model or result, that is, an explanation using analogies or examples that makes the value of the exercise clear. Nevertheless, the formal model is generally considered to be the substance of the talk and the rest merely supplementary material. The broader conception of reasoning outlined above suggests, on the contrary, that the real reasoning comes in the words: the conceptual framework, the applications, the metaphors, and the determination of priorities, within which the role of logic and abstraction is "to facilitate the argument, clarify the results, and so guard against possible faults of reasoning—that is all."<sup>8</sup> This by no means implies the abandonment or neglect of mathematical, analytical argument—as long as it furthers the investigation.

If the neglected strength of feminine-associated knowledge is in "imaginative rationality," what is the unseen danger of unmitigated masculinity? Georgescu-Roegen calls the enthrallment with discrete, arithmomorphic concepts manageable by logic "arithmomania"; he writes that it "ends by giving us mental cramps" (1971, 52, 80). Sound economic reasoning, including (or even especially) about very applied issues and including (or even especially) argument in largely verbal form, should be no reason for apology in economics seminars. The pitfall of empty logic, just as much as of illogic, should be cause for embarrassment.

8. Knut Wicksell (1954), quoted in Georgescu-Roegen (1971, 341).

### Alternatives in Subject

For Robbins, Jevons, and their followers, the question of choice between alternative ends, given the means at hand, is at the heart of economics. While economic theory and choice theory have become synonymous in recent decades, there are still substantial echoes of an older definition of economics: the study of the basis of human material welfare. According to the older alternative, in the words of Alfred Marshall, "Economics is a study of mankind [sic] in the ordinary business of life; it examines that part of individual and social action which is most closely connected with the attainment and with the use of the material requisites of well-being" (1920, 1). Rather than defining economics as a particular way of looking at human behavior, this definition delineates economics in terms material goods. Of course, as Robbins correctly argued in promoting his definition based on scarcity, the material welfare definition also has its problems. Adam Smith's (and Karl Marx's) distinction between productive labor, which results in the production of a material object, and unproductive labor, which does not, led to interminable and useless debate (Robbins 1952 [1935], 7). Taken literally, the materialist definition implies that nontangibles, even such services as health care, lie outside the scope of economics.

Feminist theory suggests that the definition focusing on choice, which looks at human decisions as radically separated from physical and social constraints, and the definition stressing material well-being, which ignores non-physical sources of human satisfaction, are not the only alternatives. Such a dichotomy merely reinforces the separation of humans from the world, the *res cogitans* from the *res extensa*. What is needed instead is a definition of economics that considers humans *in relation* to the world.

Focusing economics on the provisioning of human life, that is, on the commodities and processes necessary to human survival, provides such a definition. In contrast to Robbins's view of economics as synonymous with choice, consider the following claim by Georgescu-Roegen: "Apt though we are to lose sight of the fact, the primary objective of economic activity is the self-preservation of the human species. Self-preservation in turn requires the satisfaction of some basic needs—which are nevertheless subject to evolution" (1966, 93). Such a definition is not limited to physical concepts. Georgescu-Roegen points out that "*purposive activity and enjoyment of life*," parts of his definition of self-preservation, are not material variables. In addition, when human survival—including survival through childhood—is made the core of economic inquiry, nonmaterial services, such as child care and supervision, as well as attendance to health concerns and the transmission of skills, become just as central as food and shelter. Amartya Sen's (1984) discussion of "capabilities" is also based on such a notion of *relationship* between human needs and the world.

The concept of needs or necessities is, of course, itself dialectical and fluid. This is not necessarily a disadvantage: recognition of this fact guards against a slide into a too-rigid formalism. It requires a honing of exactly those rational skills that much of the current practice of economics has allowed to atrophy. The line between needs and wants is not distinct, and yet one certainly can say that a Guatemalan orphan needs her daily bowl of soup more than the overfed North American needs a second piece of cake. A refusal to recognize such a distinction on the basis of its logical ambiguity leads to an abdication of human ethical responsibility.

Such a definition of economics need not rule out studies of choice or of exchange, but it does displace them from the core of economics. It does not rule out study of the provision of conveniences or luxuries as well as more basic needs, but it does not give them equal priority. Voluntary exchange is part of the process of provisioning, but so are gift-giving and coercion. Organized, impersonal markets are one locus of economic activity, but so are households, governments, and other more personal or informal human organizations. Issues of the organization of production, of power and poverty, of unemployment and economic distress, of health care and education—in short, the "real economic problems" referred to by the Commission on Graduate Education in Economics—become the *raison d'être* of the economics profession, not the further elaboration of a particular axiomatic theory of human behavior. The Greek root of both the words "economics" and "ecology" is *oikos*, meaning "house." Economics could be about how we live in our house, the earth.

### Conclusion

Feminist theory suggests that the Cartesian divisions between rationality and embodiment, and between man and nature, reflect a peculiarly masculinist and separatist view of the world. In this chapter, I have suggested that the Cartesian view underlies the prestige given to mathematical models of individual rational choice in the current definition of economics. A richer economics, while not excluding formal models or the study of choice, would be centered around the study of provisioning and make full use of the tools of "imaginative rationality." Such an economics would be neither masculine nor feminine but would be a human science in the pursuit of human ends.

Least this be misunderstood, I am not claiming or advocating that men do one kind of economics and women do another. Nor do I believe that the problem can be solved by asking economists who want a richer approach simply to remove themselves to sociology (as has been suggested more than once). While economists and sociologists certainly could learn more from each other, sociology as it stands has its own problems (as feminist sociologists

have been quick to point out); moreover, it deals with social phenomena broader than the provision of the necessities of life. The material side of the provisioning definition of economics has roots reaching back to several of our own, including Adam Smith and Alfred Marshall, and has survived as an unrecurrent, if not as the high-prestige current, in economic thought. Rather than keeping high-status economics as it is and pushing all dissidents out, I suggest that the term economics be reclaimed. Let us start by speaking of the mathematical theory of individual choice as "the mathematical theory of individual choice" instead of as "economic theory," of the choice-theoretic approach as "the choice-theoretic approach" instead of as "the economic approach."

Does it seem too prosaic or worldly to define economics as centrally concerned with the study of how humans, in interaction with each other and the environment, provide for their own survival and health? If it does, perhaps such a judgment reveals more about how we feel about our own bodily (and gendered) existence than it reveals about the correct level of prestige to be attributed to different definitions of economics.

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