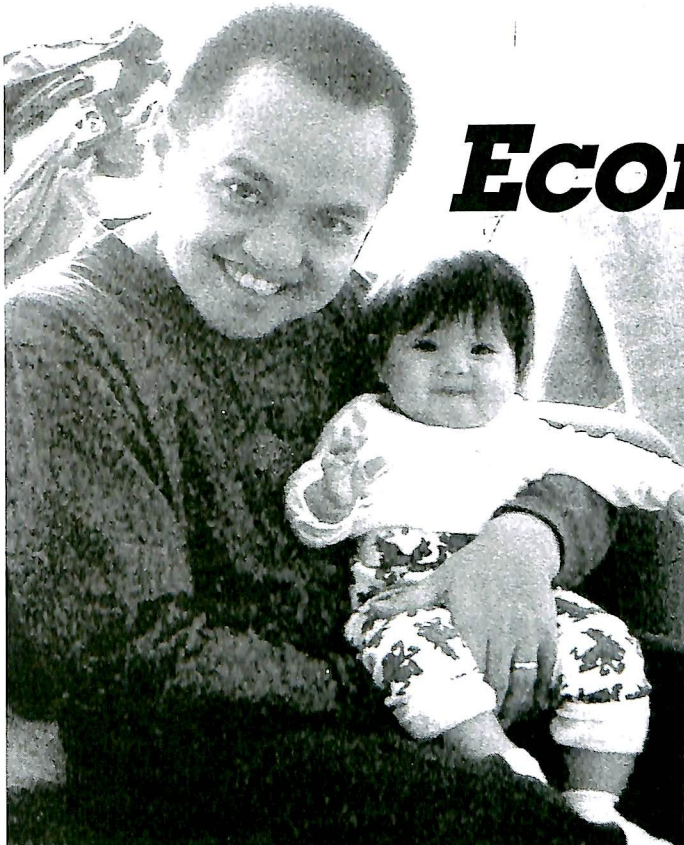


# The Narrative of *Homo* **Economicus:**



By Marvic M.V.F. Leonen

*"The practitioners and practices are part of the performance of an enterprise of knowledge creation which produces its own Real (the economy) and then claims privileged access to it as if it existed already performed—the entity 'economy' or the category 'economic' as itself the production of the very theories that are supposed to reflect it. And this view of economics as a text (of which economists are themselves a part) helps us to appreciate the very particular locatedness of this text. Economics, as a contingent episteme, is an ideological product embodying Western Enlightenment imperial colonial modernity."*<sup>12</sup>

## Neoclassical

**1** economics can be seen as a meta-narrative. As a narrative or a story, it weaves together phenomena, causalities, and facts into a coherent whole, but it is one of many possible interpretations of what may be relevant for reality.<sup>1</sup> From here, it is just a small move into presenting economics as more than "text" to be "read" but as a "*textual productive enterprise*" itself. As Nitasha Kaul explains:

The variability of human interactions and relationships are not the concern of economics. Rather than examining social and cultural context, neoclassical economics assumes that individuals have complete agency. They are not dependent on others. They are autonomous. It further assumes that each individual is faced with a pre-existing set of choices that could be hierarchically arranged. These choices are evolved exogenous to the system

## ... the traits of homo economicus privilege “masculine” traits and background “feminine” ideals.

analyzed by economics. How values, beliefs, and choices are influenced by social institutions or even by the economic exchange itself is not part of the theory. Power, in its multiple forms, does not figure in the arrangement. Autonomy, dominance of exchange, objectivity of choices constitute the individual units in neoclassical economic theory. They make up the *homo economicus*—the rational economic man.

2 Deploying feminist analysis, the traits of homo economicus privilege “masculine” traits and background “feminine” ideals. We borrow, for purposes of this essay, the essentialism (generalization) used by Janet Halley to distinguish feminism/s as a separate discipline.<sup>3</sup> The “masculine” here refers to traits usually imposed by patriarchy on men. The subordination of the “feminine” here results from the failure of neoclassical economics to take into account relatedness, asymmetries in relationships (such as care), and dependency. That this approach is not the only method is acknowledged. At some moments, some *strategic* essentialism would be necessary. As Spivak argues:

*“In deconstructive critical practices, you have to be aware that you are going to essentialize anyway. So then strategically you can look at essentialism, not a description of the way things are, but as something that one must adopt to produce a critique of everything.”*<sup>4</sup>

As an example of feminist analysis of the authors and creators of *homo economicus*, Edith Kuiper used object relations theory to analyze Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS)<sup>5</sup>. She argues that Adam Smith, true to the sentiments of his historical period, focused on the moral sentiments of men effectively excluding women. Reviewing all the editions of this influential work, she discovers that empathy was conceived by Smith more as the product of imagination rather than of relationships. Quoting from the book she highlights

*“Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations.”*<sup>6</sup>

There is no requirement that the observer communicates to the “brother upon the rack” nor to anyone else who has an emotional investment in the scene. The observer “at..ease” simply imagines.

Furthermore, she asserts that Smith’s hierarchy of values dismissed as trivial those traits considered feminine. Discussing attractions to women and love for instance, she quotes Smith as writing:

*“we may think his passion just as reasonable as any of the kind, yet we never think ourselves bound to conceive a passion of the same kind, and for the same person for whom he has conceived it. The passion appears to every body, but the man who feels it, entirely disproportioned to the value of the object [the woman]; and love, though it is pardoned in a certain age because we know it is natural, is always laughed at, because we cannot enter into it.”*<sup>7</sup>

Finally, she notices that the human being's "internal spectator" (introspection) is given more methodological validity in terms of arriving at what is just and right. Dialogue and community were excluded. Again from Smith's work we find:

*"The man of real constancy and firmness, the wise and just man who has been thoroughly bred in the great school of self-command...has never dared to forget for one moment the judgment which the impartial spectator would pass upon his sentiments and conduct. He has never dared to suffer the man within the breast to be absent one moment from his attention...He does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial spectator. He really adopts them. He almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel."*<sup>8</sup>

Smith's account of acceptable moral values for a human being in relations of exchange corresponds to the assumptions of the rational economic man in neoclassical theory. The individual acts alone, autonomous from real world relationships, and makes choices objectively and introspectively. Social phenomena such as community and life partnerships are not taken into account.

Recent studies on male psychology confirm the existence of masculine traits

socially expected of men. Joseph Pleck, for instance, argued in 1981<sup>9</sup> that the reality of social pressures on men to conform to the values of independence and emotional detachment actually results in three types of male dysfunctionalities.<sup>10</sup> Steven Krugman examined the role of social shame in enforcing compliance with masculine norms.<sup>11</sup> Finding resources in relational psychology, Stephen Bergman discusses "male relational dread."<sup>12</sup> Ronald Levant argues that the masculine values of selfless generosity, self-sacrifice, and entitlement could serve as internal resources to reconstruct masculinity in the context of therapy and relationships with empathy.<sup>13</sup> *Action empathy*, similar to Adam Smith's imaginative empathy, as opposed to *emotional empathy* has been established to be more prevalent in men even in cross-cultural studies.<sup>14</sup>

Feminist economics have challenged the assumptions of the economic narrative based on socially constructed or imposed concepts of masculinity.

For instance Susan van Velzen has reexamined the ideas of Hazel Kyrk to expose the concept of waste as central to efficiency rather than simply examining who gets better off.<sup>15</sup> Some have analyzed the concept of gift in contrast to relations of competitive exchange challenging the preoccupation with the latter.<sup>16</sup> Others have analyzed the various motivations and forms of caring labor and their consequences on economic theorizing especially since caring labor presupposes more asymmetry, relatedness, and dependency than neoclassical economics can accommodate.<sup>17</sup>

---

rational economic man . . . acts alone,  
autonomous from real world relationships,  
and makes choices objectively and  
introspectively.

Nitasha Kaul argued that feminism within postmodern/poststructuralist or post-colonialist methods provide rich platforms to viably launch critiques while taking into consideration the reality of multiple identities and varied localities.<sup>18</sup> She notes that these post' isms invite not only an analysis of the impossibility of the claim to universality and generality of current economic theory. These methods also provide avenues for understanding the process of

universalisation and generalisation of a particular form of knowledge (neoclassical economics) based on a specific model of human subjectivity (rational economic man).

---

Marvic Leonen is one of the founders and current chair of the board of the Legal Rights and Natural Resources Centre-Kasama ng Kalikasan (LRC-KSK). He is also Associate Professor of the University of the Philippines (UP), College of Law and UP Vice-President for Legal Affairs.

---

*Note: The paper is drawn from a longer paper submitted in compliance with the final requirements of Feminist Legal Theory under Prof. Katherine Franke at Columbia University in 2003.*

#### Endnotes

- 1.Kaul, N. (2003), p. 202, for instance cites Ward's take that economics is storytelling, defined as "an attempt to give an account of an interrelated set of phenomena in which fact, theory and value are all mixed together in the telling." Kaul, Nitasha (2003), "The 'Anxious Identities' We Inhabit: Post'isms and Economic Understanding." In Barker & Kuiper (eds.), *Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Economics*.
- 2.Kaul, p. 202.
- 3.Cosman, B., Danielsen, D., Halley, J., & Higgins, T. (2003). "Gender, Sexuality and Power: Is Feminist Theory Enough?" *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*, 12, p. 601.
- 4.Spink as cited in Harasym, S. (ed.) (1990), *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, p. 51.
- 5.Kuiper, E. (2003). "The Construction of Masculine Identity in Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments." In Barker & Kuiper (eds.), *Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Economics*, p. 145.
- 6.Kuiper, citing Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 149.
- 7.Kuiper, citing Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 151.
- 8.Kuiper, citing Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pp. 155-156.
- 9.Pleck, J. (1981). *The Myth of Masculinity*.
- 10.This is called the "Gender Role Strain Paradigm" which takes issue with the earlier concept called "Gender Role Identity Paradigm." The latter perspective argues that males must conform to innate qualities and their failure to conform is a dysfunction. Pleck and other psychologists associated with the Gender Role Strain Paradigm model argue that it is the pressure on men to conform to gender constructs that causes dysfunctions. Pleck later on argues that there are three dysfunctions that result, i.e. (1) gender role discrepancy (the trauma from failure of men to conform), (2) gender role trauma (the trauma in the process suffered by men successfully achieving socially expected gender roles), and (3) gender role dysfunction (the trauma from having to perform gender roles successfully achieved). See Pleck, J. (1995). "The Gender Role Strain Paradigm: An Update." In Levant & Pollack (eds.), *A New Psychology of Men*, p. 1.
- 11.Krugman, S. (1995). "Male Development and the Transformation of Shame." In Levant & Pollack (eds.), *A New Psychology of Men*, p. 91. See also Real, T. (2003), *I Don't Want To Talk About It*, for clinical anecdotal accounts of what he calls covert depression resulting from gender role strain trauma.
- 12.Bergman, S. (1995). "Men's Psychological Development: A Relational Perspective." In Levant & Pollack (eds.), *A New Psychology of Men*, p. 68.
- 13.Levant, R. (1995). "Toward the Reconstruction of Masculinity." In Levant & Pollack (eds.), *A New Psychology of Men*, p. 229.
- 14.Levant (1995), p. 238, argues: "Boys do learn a variant of the skill of empathy. Empathy can be defined in cognitive-developmental terms as 'interpersonal understanding', a definition that emphasizes the ability to 'de-center' from one's own frame of reference and take another person's perspective. In this view, boys can be said to learn action empathy, which can be defined as the ability to see things from another person's point of view and predict what they will do. This is in contrast to emotional empathy—taking another person's perspective and being able to know how they feel. Action empathy also differs from emotional empathy in terms of its aim: emotional empathy is usually employed to help another person and is thus prosocial; action empathy is usually (though not always) employed in the service of self." For a more theoretical elaboration of emotional development see Kennedy-Moore, E., & Watson, J. (1999), *Expressing Emotion: Myths, Realities and Therapeutic Strategies*.
- 15.van Velzen, S. (1995). "Hazel Kyrk and the Ethics of Consumption." In Barker & Kuiper (eds.), *Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Economics*, p. 38.
- 16.Ruccio, D. and Anaroglia, J. (2003). "Feminist Economics: (Re)gendering Knowledge and Subjectivity." In *Postmodern Moments in Modern Economics*.
- 17.See for instance Vollbre, N. (1995), "Holding Hands at Midnight: the Paradox of Caring Labor," and Johnson, M. (1995), "Integrating Vulnerability: On the Impact of Caring on Economic Theorizing." In Barker & Kuiper (eds.), *Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Economics*, p. 213 & p. 231 respectively.
- 18.Kaul (2003), p. 194.