ECONOMICS AS SOCIAL THEORY
Series edited by Tony Lawson
University of Cambridge

FEMINISM, OBJECTIVITY AND ECONOMICS

Julie A. Nelson

Social theory is experiencing something of a revival within economics. Critical analyses of the particular nature of the subject matter of social studies and of the types of method, categories and modes of explanation that can legitimately be endorsed for the scientific study of social objects, are re-emerging. Economists are again addressing such issues as the relationship between agency and structure, between the economy and the rest of society, and between inquirer and the object of inquiry. There is renewed interest in elaborating basic categories such as causation, competition, culture, discrimination, evolution, money, need, order, organization, power, probability, process, rationality, technology, time, truth, uncertainty and value, etc.

The objective for this series is to facilitate this revival further. In contemporary economics the label ‘theory’ has been appropriated by a group that confines itself to largely a-social, a-historical, mathematical ‘modelling’. Economics as Social Theory thus reclaims the ‘theory’ label, offering a platform for alternative, rigorous, but broader and more critical conceptions of theorizing.

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GENDER AND ECONOMICS

THE ISSUE

Understanding gender as a cognitive construct, and having untied the knot linking gender associations to judgments of value, we can now examine the influence of gender on the discipline of economics. Economics has been heavily influenced by the confusion of masculinity ipso facto with high value, as evidenced in both contemporary definitions and in the history of economics as a science. This confusion has been to its detriment. The methodology, theories of behavior, definition, and objectivity of economics can be much improved by applying new thinking about the relation of gender and value.

THE DEFINITION OF ECONOMICS

The diversity of endeavors undertaken by economists suggests that there is no easy, definitive description of what economics is, and what projects are outside its realm. I will limit my comments to current mainstream North American economics (often referred to as "neoclassical," in a broad sense) as I am not myself familiar enough with other branches such as Marxism or modern institutionalism. Clearly the central concept in mainstream economics is that of "the market." On this even economists as diverse as Robert Heilbroner and Gary Becker agree. Heilbroner traces the historical beginning of the field of economics to the ascendance of the market system over systems of "custom or command" (1986: 20). Becker (1976) simply carries this conception to its logical extreme in seeing markets in all aspects of human behavior. The idealized market is a place where rational, autonomous, anonymous agents with stable preferences interact for the purposes of exchange. The agents make their choices in accordance with the maximization of some objective function subject to resource constraints, and the outcome of their market interactions is the determination of an efficient allocation of goods along with a set of equilibrium prices. The prototypical market is one in which tangible goods or labor services are exchanged, with money facilitating the transactions, and in which the agents are individual persons. The prototypical scholarly work in economics is an article that studies market behavior using sophisticated mathematics to formalize the model in a "theory" section, accompanied by econometric analysis of data in an "empirical" section. Few works in economics follow the prototype exactly - the "agent" may be a household, firm, or even a country, for example, instead of an individual, or the empirical work may be left "for further research" or be ignored entirely - but for a work to be accepted as "being economics" it must bear a family resemblance to the core model. This definition of economics is wide enough to include research on dual labor markets, intra-firm behavior, satisfying, bargaining, cooperative aspects of markets, the role of government, aspects of finance, the distribution of wealth, human capital, fertility, and many other areas, but some areas are considered more central than others. The less a work has in common with the prototype the more it will be considered to be "on the fringe" or "not economics at all." Discussions of comparable worth (i.e., that jobs primarily held by women might be paid less, just because women generally do them), for example, violate the centrality of the idea that prices are set by market forces, and thus the subject is usually demoted to the realm of politics. Papers that consist of "just words" are rarely recognized as "economics" - you might see them in the American Economic Review as presidential addresses, or in clearly suspect journals such as those that deal with history or philosophy.

While the description of economics according to a prototype covers the wider range of what economists do, an alternative definition of economics in terms of a particular method alone has gained increasing influence. High status is given to the formal, mathematical model of rational individual choice (Nelson 1993b). Work which neglects to use such a model, no matter how "economic" it is in the other senses given above, is dismissed by those who hold this view as mere ad hocery. The common use of Varian (1984) as the core graduate textbook, and the direction taken in much of the recent debate on "microfoundations of macroeconomics," are evidence of the power of this view.1

Table 2.1 lists a number of contrasts that underlie current definitions of economics, and characterize the nature of economic research. In the

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1 The reader unfamiliar with contemporary mainstream economics might want to examine Varian (1984) to get an idea of the status currently given to the mathematical model of individual choice. This book, which requires that the student not only be comfortable with calculus and linear algebra but also with multivariate calculus and real analysis, and which declines to mention any "real world" institutions, is used in most Ph.D. programs in economics as the core text. I believe that such first-year graduate classes play a key role in the selection (and self-selection, since many intelligent students decide that this is not for them) of economists.
top section on the left are the items usually considered to define the core subject matter of economics: the public arena (meaning markets, and perhaps government), individual agents, and efficiency issues. This definition of the domain is not self-standing, however, but implicitly relies on suppression of the nonpublic, nonindividual, and extra efficiency terms on the right: the private realm (meaning the family), society and institutions, and fairness or equity. Similar dualisms underlie the image of economic methods as rigorous, precise, objective, and scientific. Objectivity is assumed to be assured by adherence to positive (i.e., value-free) analysis, an arm's-length detachment from practical or political concerns, the use of formal and mathematical methods, and the search for ever more general theories. This image is defined in opposition to notions of intuition, vagueness, subjectivity, political concern, verbal and informal analysis, and explanations of particular phenomena, all of which are assumed to be less than scientific. The subject of the economist's model world is an individual who is self-interested, autonomous, rational, and whose active choices are the focus of interest, as opposed to one who would be social, other-interested, dependent, emotional, and directed by an intrinsic nature. In many ways, this description resonates with the economist's self-image as well. Clearly, the lefthand-side of this table does not describe all of economics. But it does describe tendencies so strong that any work which deviates from the standards becomes in some way marginalized. Specific examples of the way in which the dominant view blocks out alternative topics and modes of analysis will be developed at great length in Part II of this book.

The definition of economics is not immutable. Some working economists may, of course, see themselves as working in an age-old process of creating ever closer approximations to Truth. The idea that economics is socially constructed should not, however, be novel to anyone with an interest in methodology or the philosophy of science, or who has ever heard of the ideas of Thomas Kuhn (1962). As expressed by economists Bruce Caldwell and A. W. Coats (1984), "realities is everywhere dense. Observation thus requires selection. All description is from a point of view." Economics, as a human endeavor, reflects human limitations in understanding a reality that is always just beyond our grasp. Economics, as a social endeavor, reflects some points of view, favored by the group that makes the rules for the discipline, and neglects others.

THE GENDER OF ECONOMICS

While the intensity of resonance of gender associations with the columns of Table 2.1 - men and masculinity for the left and women and femininity for the right - will vary individual by individual, it is clear that the dominant cultural understanding in the modern United States associates men and masculinity with being public, active, and rational, and women and femininity with being private, passive, and emotional. The role of the conception of gender as a hierarchical dualism in the construction of economics can be elaborated on two different margins: in the way in which economics is defined as being embedded in a multitude of projects that together constitute "science," and in the way in which economics is differentiated from other scientific disciplines, especially the other social sciences.

The historical and contemporary links between thinking about science and thinking about gender have been explored in a plethora of recent works by feminist scholars, including Reflections on Gender and Science by Evelyn Fox Keller (1985) and The Science Question in Feminism by Sandra Harding (1986), as well as numerous articles and anthologies (Blieer 1986; J. Harding 1986; Harding and O'Barr 1987). Harding argues that:

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2 See, for example, Robert Frank et al. (1993), concerning economists' attitudes about self-interest.
Mind vs. nature and the body, reason vs. emotion and social commitment, subject vs. object and objectivity vs. subjectivity, the abstract and the general vs. the concrete and particular — in each case we are told that the former must dominate the latter lest human life be overwhelmed by irrational and alien forces, forces symbolized in science as the feminine. All these dichotomies play important roles in the intellectual structures of science, and all appear to be associated both historically and in contemporary psyches with distinctively masculine sexual and gender identity projects.

(Harding 1986: 25)

That is, science has been socially constructed to conform to a particular image of masculinity. A parallel idea of dualism, though with less emphasis on gender, can be found in Donald McClosky’s work on The Rhetoric of Economics. McCloskey asserts that “modernism” stresses the strict demarcation between scientific and humanistic, fact and value, truth and opinion, objective and subjective, hard and soft, rigorous and intuitive, precise and vague, male and female (1985: 42).

There is evidence of a self-conscious striving for masculinity in the early formation of the ideals of modern science. Evelyn Fox Keller’s Reflections on Gender and Science, Carolyn Merchant’s The Death of Nature, Susan Bordo’s The Flight to Objectivity, and Brian Earle’s Witch Hunting, Magic, and the New Philosophy, investigate the gendered nature of the modern scientific worldview which arose 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, conceived of as mechanical and passive. The identification of science with masculinity, detachment, and domination of nature — and with superiority — and of femininity with subjectivity, submission, and connection to nature is explicit in some of the language used by the early scientists of this period 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.” (Keller 1985: 52). The relation of masculine science to feminine nature is often expressed in terms of domination, as in Francis Bacon’s words, “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” (Keller 1985: 39).

The definition of economics is embedded in the definition of modern science, but economics is also differentiated from science in general. As a social science, economics takes a “feminine” role vis à vis mathematics and the physical sciences. Human behavior would seem to most to be a “softer” subject than abstract math or the study of the physical world, less amenable to quantitative (as opposed to qualitative) description or formulation in terms of “laws.” This presents a problem for those economists who, perhaps in order to maintain a clear-cut gender self-image, need to see their work as consistently masculine. Neoclassical economics is in fact based on the work of nineteenth-century scholars who denied any qualitative difference in subject matter between scientific economics and physics. Stanley Jevons, Leon Walras, Francis Edgeworth, and Vilfredo Pareto were explicit about their emulation of the physics of their time. To quote Francis Edgeworth,

The application of mathematics to the world of the soul is counteracted by the hypothesis ... that Pleasure is the concomitant of Energy ... As the movements of each particle, constrained or loose, in a material cosmos are continually subordinated to one maximum sub-total of accumulated energy, so the movements of each soul whether selfishly isolated or linked sympathetically, may continually be realizing the maximum of pleasure.

(1881, quoted in Mirowski 1988: 15)

While such “physics envy” may be less apparent in the present day, since physics has moved on from its nineteenth-century theories even if economics has not, the quantitative natural sciences are still looked up to by contemporary economists.³ Among social sciences, the masculine identity of economics is more secure. A favorite pastime of economists is dumping on, expressing bewilderment about, or ridiculing the lack of “rigor” in the other social sciences. Classifying a work as “sociology” is an especially quick and surefire way of silencing it by removing it from the territory of serious conversation of economists. The hierarchical relations between the social sciences are especially evident in the ranking of journals within academic culture: having an article accepted for publication in an economics journal seems to be considered a coup for a sociologist or political scientist, but a publication in a political science or sociology journal by an economist (or in a sociology journal by a political scientist) is no harbinger of professional advancement. It may even be seen as an embarrassment.

Why is economics perceived as more masculine? One reason may be that economics is blessed with a natural unit of measure — money — that

³The term “physics envy” has been used by Margaret Schuban (1993). For more evidence about physics wannabes, see Chapter 4. Note that my argument that single-minded physics envy is deleterious does not imply that borrowing wisely from this (or any other field) is harmful.
becoming less one-sidedly masculine makes little sense. But the discussion of gender and value in Chapter 1 was directed at undermining exactly this association of femininity with inferiority.

I propose here an analysis that retains both culturally shared gender constructs, and many common judgments about what is desirable in economics. In particular, I propose that we accept that terms like “hard,” “logical,” “scientific,” and “precise,” are masculine-identified and describe legitimate goals of economic practice. But I also propose that we think of gender and value as orthogonal dimensions as suggested in Chapter 1, and actively seek out what has been excluded from economics by the confusion of masculinity with value. This exercise is not definitive of gender in any sense, nor does it cover every possible term that could be used to describe economics. The idea of orthogonality is simply proposed as an alternative metaphor to the usual hierarchical dualism. As with any metaphor, it hides as well as exposes some aspects of the reality it is meant to describe.

**GENDER, VALUE, AND ECONOMIC METHOD**

The association of economics with formal, logical reasoning can be addressed in the framework of the gender–value compass. In the simple dualistic view, reason is conceived of as identical with formal logic and masculinity; any exposition not explicitly conforming to the laws of logic is identified as being illogical, and, by implication, inferior. Consider how economists’ view of reason bears a resemblance to that of Thomas Hobbes, who wrote,

> When a man Reasoneth, hee does nothing else but conceive a summe totall, from Addition of parcels; or conceive a remainder, from Substraction of one summe from another ... In summe, in what manner soever there is a place for addition and substraction, there also is place for Reason, and where these have no place, there Reason has nothing at all to do.

(Hobbes 1651; emphasis and spelling in the original)

Economics seminars, for example, are often built around a formal model and its formal implications, and bring in as an aside or heuristic device an explanation of the “intuition” behind the result. These “intuitive” explanations (quite in contrast to the alternative meaning of “intuition” in terms of a flash of inspiration) often include long and elaborate chains of verbal reasoning, carefully constructed analogies, and concrete examples. These explanations, however, are considered “softer” than the

*I thank David Seberson for pointing out this reference to me.*
formal models, and, like the proverbial "feminine intuition," unreliable and unrelated to true rationality.

A more sophisticated idea of what it means "to reason" and "to know," suggested in many works on metaphors and cognition (cited in Chapter 1), identifies reason instead with a complementarity of logic, on the one hand, and reasoning by other means, such as analogy or pattern recognition, on the other. For example, Howard Margolis (1987) expresses cognition as a combination of "reasoning why," or step-by-step critical analysis, with "seeing that," which involves a no less important perception of the bigger pattern. Georgescu-Roegen's (1971) distinction between "arithmomorphic" and "dialectical" concepts is helpful in suggesting terms for the missing feminine-positive, masculine-negative diagonal in the gender value compass. He calls "arithmomorphic" those concepts that can be manipulated by formal logic. Most of our thoughts, however (he argues), are concerned with forms, qualities and concepts that overlap with their opposites, and dealing with these requires "dialectical" thought. His examples of dialectical concepts include "good," "justice," "likelihood" and "want" (1971: 45). Another example of the contrast between logical and dialectical thinking is given by Margolis' discussion of the meanings of the word "or" (1987: 94). In formal logic, "or" means "either or both, and not neither." But in common usage its meanings are contradictory: in "cream or sugar?" it means "either, both, or neither"; in a judicial decision of "$100 or 10 days" it means "either, but not neither and not both"; in a waiter's question of "soup or salad" it means "either or neither, but not both." Yet, in context, these are all meaningful and reasonable statements. It is hard to imagine any discussion of economic issues that would not rely heavily on such understanding of context.

The "position that dialectical concepts should be barred from science because they would infest it with muddled thinking," Georgescu-Roegen labels "arithmomania" (1971: 52). Logical reasoning can deal only with the abstract; attentiveness to context and substance requires dialectical reasoning. Such a richer understanding of the nature of rationality can be summarized in a gender-value diagram as

\[
\begin{array}{c|c}
\text{scientific} & \text{humanistic} \\
\hline
\text{inhuman} & \text{unscientific} \\
\end{array}
\]

where I use the term "scientific" in the sense of instrumental, technological ("how to") knowledge, systematically gathered from observation of phenomena "external" to the researchers' own consciousness, and "humanistic" in the sense of affective, introspective knowledge focusing on the "why" and "for what purpose" questions of human existence. Humanistic knowledge without at least a touch of the practical, outward-focusing approach I have labeled "scientific" is at best sterile (because it can have no effect on what actually happens), and at worst the ravings of a lunatic (if unique to a single person). But the elevation of scientific knowledge (implicit in the project of "demarcation" of science) without attention to human values could very well lead to the very efficient destruction of life on earth.

The emphasis on mathematics as the key to "rigorous" understanding in economics, and the downplaying of language as having any importance to the business of knowledge seeking, can be understood using the diagram:

\[
\begin{array}{c|c}
\text{precise} & \text{rich} \\
\hline
\text{thin} & \text{vague} \\
\end{array}
\]
The left side highlights aspects of mathematical language and the right side aspects of common language. The advantage of use of mathematics is the precision it supplies, as opposed to the vagueness or ambiguity that may be associated with words in all their diverse meanings. On the other hand, pure mathematics is precisely content-free; the application of mathematics to problems of human behavior can come only through the explanation of mathematical formulae as metaphors for some real world phenomenon, and this drawing of analogies involves the use of words. In the process, meanings beyond that immediately present in the mathematical analogy will also be suggested. Mathematics can certainly be helpful in overcoming the failings of imprecise words, but, if concentration is put on maintaining the gender boundary rather than on recognizing the value boundary, the failure of thin, empty mathematics may sneak in unobserved. Empty math, or “rhetorical math” in the pejorative sense, is described by Philip J. Davis and Reuben Hersh (1987: 58) as math that neither brings forth any new mathematical idea nor “leads back to the phenomenon being modeled.” “Precision” is a virtue in economics; this analysis suggests we also consider “richness” to be good, too, and furthermore that we recognize the pursuit of precision alone, without richness, as a vice.

**GENDER, VALUE, AND “ECONOMIC MAN”**

While the above analysis can aid in developing a new and broader understanding of rationality, knowledge, rigor, and numerous other concepts that come into play in the definition of economics, this section applies the expanded metaphor for gender and value to the concept of individual agency. The point at issue here is whether or not the assumption of individual agency can lead to fruitful hypotheses: there is no doubt that the assumption of “economic man” has been fruitful, especially as contrasted to the alternative hypotheses that human behavior is completely socially determined, as assumed in my caricature of sociology, or that it is materially determined, as in some variants of Marxism or perhaps in sociobiology. The problem is that when we limit the choices to an autonomy/determinism dualism, we limit ourselves to playing with only half a deck.

The conception of human nature underlying neoclassical economics is of an individual human as radically separate from other humans and from nature; the emphasis is on separation, distance, demarcation, autonomy, independence of self. Economists have carried out more than one suggestion by Thomas Hobbes. In addition to his writings on the nature of reason, Hobbes also wrote, “Let us consider men . . . as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other” (cited in Benhabib 1987). *Homo economicus* is the personification of individuality run wild. “Economic man,” the “agent” of the prototypical economic model, springs up fully formed, with preferences fully developed, and is fully active and self-contained. He has no childhood or old age; no dependence on anyone; no responsibility for anyone but himself. The environment has no effect on him, but rather is merely the passive material, presented as “constraints,” over which his rationality has play. He interacts in society without being influenced by society: his mode of interaction is through an ideal market in which prices form the only, and only necessary, form of communication. *Homo economicus* is the central character in a romance of individuality without connection to nature or to society.

Yet humans do not simply spring out of the earth. Humans are born of women, nurtured and cared for as dependent children, socialized into family and community groups, and are perpetually dependent on nourishment and shelter to sustain their lives. These aspects of human life, whose neglect is often justified by the argument that they are unimportant or intellectually uninteresting or merely “natural,” are, not just coincidentally, the areas of life thought of as “women’s work.” If we grant that connection—to one another, and to nature—is indispensable for human existence, then *homo economicus* appears in a new light. Far from being the rugged individualist whose status as a modeling tool is dictated by rationality and realism, he might well be the projection or dream of a boy who, scared of the powers which might fail to protect his fragile hold on life, denies to himself his own dependence.

The idea that this conception of selfhood as radically separate from our fellow humans could be misleading and indeed dangerous is not unique to feminist scholarship. The way in which it leads us to ignore the sociality of our thought and existence has been pointed out by McCloskey and other scholars who investigate the role of rhetoric (McCloskey 1985). The way it causes us to neglect the physical basis of our thought has been emphasized by Lakoff and Johnson, who stress the “bodily basis of meaning, imagination and reason” (Johnson 1987). Not all criticism of this solipsistic view of individuality is this recent: Alfred North Whitehead wrote about the dehumanizing and self-defeating aspects of the modernist view in 1925, while Martin Buber pointed to its distortions of relationship in 1958.

To the familiar dualistic contrasting of individual to social identity, and individual agency to social or material determinism, the scholarship

\[5\] I use the pronoun “he” intentionally: the gender biases underlying the concept of “economic man” would by no means be overcome by replacing or alternating with the pronoun “she,” in an attempt at cheap gender neutrality. See Frank and Treichler (1989) for the difference between gender-neutral and nonsexist language.
on gender adds contrasts of connection and isolation, “influenced” action and radical autonomy. The various conceptions of human nature, particularly in regard to the relation of the self to other humans and to nature, can be encompassed in a slightly rephrased version of a compass presented in Chapter 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>individuated</th>
<th>connected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>isolated</td>
<td>engulfed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

That is, the conventional idea of identity stresses the northwest–southeast diagonal: the lack of any individuality or differentiation implies the dissolving or engulfing of the individual into the larger whole of nature or society. The gender connotations are “masculine” for the positively valued individuality and “feminine” for the undifferentiated state. But differentiation can go too far, into radical separation or isolation. The message of one strain of current feminist scholarship reviewed in Chapter 1 (and to be elaborated on in Chapter 3) is that connection and relation do not necessarily imply the dissolving of individual identity. The positive complementarity of the upper two terms in the diagram refers to the recognition of selfhood as including both individuality and connectedness or relatedness. Or, in Alfred North Whitehead’s words, we are “organisms” who require “an environment of friends” (1925: 206). The boundaries between oneself and others and oneself and nature are not strict, but neither does this imply that one is therefore swallowed up. The separation of the gender/value dimensions creates a way of seeing that individuality is not definitive of the human condition.

Similarly, for the question of the locus of decision-making, the separation of the dimensions suggests alternatives to individual agency and social or material determinism:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>individually agenic</th>
<th>influenced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>radically autonomous</td>
<td>determined</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The radically autonomous decision-maker admits no influence from society or nature: as the sociopath whose psychological development lacks the interactive aspects shared by the rest of society, or the anorexia nervosa patient who claims that eating is a “lifestyle” habit that she can do without. Or Economic Man, whose behavior can be described purely in terms of individual preferences, without recourse to any description of social context, preference formation or physical need. The feminist approach to economics that I am suggesting is by no means only “more sociological” than current economics, if what is meant by that is a turn to analysis assuming that agency lies entirely outside the individual. Economist James Duesenberry once wrote, “Economics is all about how people make choices. Sociology is all about why they don’t have any choices to make” (1960: 233). To put it in the terms used by Martin Buber in his famous philosophical piece on identity and relation, I and Thou, the economist imagines “the world . . . embedded in the I, and that there is really no world at all,” while the sociologist (or sociobiologist) creates an image of “the I . . . embedded in the world, and there is really no I at all” (1958: 71–2). The view of selfish informed by this analysis means rejecting both radical autonomy and social determinism as paradigmatic stand-alone models of agency.

As an example, consider two extreme explanations of the increasing labor force participation of women over the last few decades. A radical “economic man” formulation takes preferences as given, so that all of the weight of explanation is put on changes in relative prices (arising from, for example, technological and demographic changes). Any apparent change in preferences is explained as epiphenomenal, that is, as an outgrowth of price changes rather than a cause of changes in behavior. On the other hand, a radically social explanation puts all of the emphasis on social and political movements (in this case, feminism) and resulting changes in beliefs and norms, and none on individual incentives or choices. As narrow prior beliefs about the “real causes” of the phenomenon are allowed to constrain the analysis in both cases, neither is an adequate model for social science research. What is needed is research which is open to “both/and,” not just “either/or.”

GENDER, VALUE, AND THE DEFINITION OF ECONOMICS

If we were to change the central character in our economic story from the radically autonomous, isolated agent, who is unneedful of social contact and uninfluenced by physical concerns, to the socially and materially situated human being, what effect would this have on the definition of economics? As pointed out above, the central concept of modern economics is that of the market, the locus of exchange activity.

One direction might be to promote the study of markets with an eye to their social and institutional character, instead of always starting from the view that they are more or less corrupted versions of idealized
(perfectly competitive, perfect information) markets. Arjo Klamer’s (1989) project on “interpretive” economics, for example, captures some of this approach. Another direction is suggested by the dimension of physical connection. Kenneth Boulding (1986) has remarked on the loss of an ecological understanding of economics, as concerned with the biosphere. He argues that part of what he sees as the “failure” of modern economics results from the loss of an earlier understanding of economic life as being about both “how society was organized by exchange” and about “how society was provisioned.”

An understanding of economics as centrally concerned with provisioning, or providing the necessary life, has implications quite different from the idea of economics as centrally concerned with exchange. In the exchange view, the primary distinguishing characteristic of a good is whether or not it can be exchanged on a market, not what human needs or wants it may satisfy or what role it may play in a more global, ecological system. The choice of goods depends only on abstract preferences. This radical conceptual separation of humans from their physical environment implies, among other things, sterility of economics about questions of human welfare. In the provisioning view, on the other hand, there are qualitative differences between different goods and services. Cooter and Rappoport (1984) explain how the pre-1930s welfare school considered needs for survival and health to be more economic than desires for goods more at the luxury end of the spectrum. While the dividing line between “needs” and “wants” may be far from distinct (the concept of “need” being clearly in Georgescu-Roegen’s “dialectical” category), the admittance of a category of “need” implies the recognition of an inescapable dependence of human bodies on their physical environment that is lacking in the modern view. The tie of the deprecation of need to the deprecation of the feminine has been expressed by Muriel Dimen (in another context) as “Wanting, associated with adulthood, active will, and masculinity, is better than need, linked to infancy, passive dependency, and femininity” (1989: 42).

The primacy within market-oriented economics of the focus on “Want,” to the neglect of any consideration of the provisioning-related concept of “need,” suggests the following gender-value diagram:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ability to choose actively</th>
<th>ability to discern what is needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unlimited wants</td>
<td>neediness</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The masculine quadrants suggest interpretation of the world as a world of scarcity, hostile to human purposes, or the standard Lionel Robbins definition of economics as study of human choices in context of unlimited wants and scarce resources (1935). The feminine–positive quadrant, missing from economic analysis, is the sensitivity about oneself and one’s relation to the environment that allows one to determine what is useful, not merely what gives the highest rating on some immediate pleasure/pain calculus. Anyone who has been a parent should recognize the skill involved in this activity in discerning the needs of one’s children: all I suggest is that we also focus such “maternal thinking” (the term is Ruddick’s, 1989) on ourselves. Note also that while resources are defined scarce in relation to wants conceived of as unlimited, resources might (still) be abundant in relation to human needs.

The closest work in economics I have seen to this conception of how humans are actually involved in their natural environment is Amartya Sen’s notion of “capability,” which is “a feature of a person in relation to goods” (1984: 316). An individual’s advantage, according to the capabilities approach, is not judged by his or her subjective, individual happiness, nor by the set of external resources at his or her command, but by what those resources would allow the person to be or to do. Sen further elaborates this approach, distinguishing among “functionings,” like being adequately nourished, which may require various resources because of diversity between individuals; the range of functionings from which a person may choose, that constitutes his or her “capabilities set”; and “agency freedom,” or the freedom to pursue one’s own goals (which may include but are not limited to one’s own functionings or well-being). Advantage, then, is judged according to a relationship between the individual and his or her environment, that recognizes the agency and individuality of the person while at the same time recognizing his or her constitution in physical and social relationships.

Without such an understanding of material connection, we have the scandal of professional economists working out endless theoretical yarns about preferences while a majority of people in the world live in a state of neediness apparent to any observer who has not lost her or his humanity. With an understanding that incorporates both choice and material connection, comes the possibility of abundance and a hospitable nature, if we choose wisely.

In highlighting the connections as well as the distinctions between humans, and between humans and nature, does a wider, encompassing view of economics then imply that economics has to be about “life, the universe, and everything?” (Adams 1983). I do not think so. The relationship of economics with other social sciences could be closer and more cooperative, of course, and based on shared understanding of the multiple dimensions of human experience (rather than imperialistic, based on imposition of the model of radical separateness). But economics
need not be undifferentiated. As a practical matter, I suggest that our discipline take as its organizational center the down-to-earth subject matter of how humans try to meet their needs for goods and services. Economics should be about how we arrange provision of our sustenance. This core corresponds better to the common sense use of the term “economics” (and to the etymological roots of the term in the Greek words meaning “household management”) than does the present central concept of the idealized market. This core grounds the discipline both socially and materially. Economic provisioning and the sustenance of life becomes the center of study, whether it be through market, household, or government action, or whether it be by symmetric exchange, coercion, or gift. This definition dethrones choice, scarcity, and rationality as central concepts, and relegates them to the status of potentially useful tools. It brings previously taboo or fringe subjects like power and poverty into the core.

**FEMINIST, FEMININE, FEMALE: CONTRASTS**

The direction I suggest for economics is “feminist” in that it revalues some of the concepts metaphorically associated with femaleness, and so leads away from masculine bias. It is, however, distinct from what some might call a “feminine” approach to economics, in which one simply emphasizes those stereotypically feminine characteristics that have been neglected in the current construction of science. Such an approach runs the risks of reifying masculine–feminine categories, glorifying feminine–negative aspects, neglecting the task of distinguishing the positive and negative aspects of masculinity, and, just like the current masculine construction of economics, viewing economic phenomena in a one-sided way when an encompassing vision would be more appropriate. For example, it might be considered more “feminine” to model a particular phenomenon in terms of its aspects of cooperation rather than in terms of its aspects of competition or conflict, or to focus on social constraints instead of on individual agency. I would argue, however, that while aspects of cooperation have in general been unjustly neglected, substantial feminist insights into, for example, the understanding of the economics of the household have been accomplished by denying the existence of total cooperation within the household and instead noting the actual presence of conflict, and by rejecting common dictatorship models of the household (mislabeled as “altruistic” in a particularly glaring example of blindness to issues of power) in favor of attributing some form of agency to female actors (Folbre and Hartmann 1988). A feminist approach, while revaluing the positive aspects of femininity, does not then limit one to using those categories of analysis that happen to be in the socially created cognitive category of “feminine.”

**APPLYING THE ANALYSIS**

Progress in this direction may be slow, in part because such progress requires a new vocabulary. The hierarchical dualism that links femininity with all things inferior is so ingrained in our cognition and our language that a feminist writer is often at a literal loss for words to express what she (or he) means. It is much easier to fill in the masculine-positive and feminine-negative quadrants in the gender-value diagram than to think of adequate expressions for the strengths associated with femininity and the dangers of unbalanced masculinity. One example of this problem was given above, where recourse had to be made to special terms coined
by Georgescu-Roegen in discussing the question of rationality; another in Chapter 1, with the terms "virility" and "emasculating."

Economics could be improved by an exploration of feminine-positive ways of knowing and being, and the excising of masculine-negative perversions of the choice of subject and scholarly method. The positive-negative dualism should be the salient schema for judging the adequacy of economic research, rather than the feminine-masculine schema. An approach based on a new understanding of gender and value would incorporate all aspects of knowledge that are helpful in approaching a problem, whatever they may be, and would extend the possible subject matter beyond simply those areas that can be "squeezed and moulded" (the words are Francis Bacon’s, in Weinreich-Haste 1986) into the form of a mathematically tractable model of an idealized market. After a brief excursion into the more philosophical issue of how we define objectivity, Part II of this book lays out several specific examples of how sexist bias in subject, model, and method have distorted economic analysis, and how a broader analysis can lead to richer knowledge and more adequate policy.