

## **Anthropology at home and economics**

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*Abstract.* Anthropologists sometimes tell us about alternative theories for coping with the data of life. It seems to me that going to economics can provide one with similar material to report. I flesh out the proposal in this paper.

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*What strange lenses are these?*

*Everything is difficult*

*That was once ease!*

An anthropologist studies a remote tribe and tells us about that tribe. They tell us that the tribe manage without some concept but they are faced with situations in which we would use that concept. How can they describe or make sense of such situations without that concept? The anthropologist goes on to explain. This is not so unusual in anthropology (e.g. Whorf 1950), though probably the best example for newcomers is from history (Laqueur 1986). But can such anthropology occur “at home,” in England say? Can one do anthropology at home and end up writing a paper like that? It seems to me that there is such a thing as a person who wishes to teach you the facts of life – “This is what people are like, son” – but if you go to the economics department you can find other ways of making sense of those situations, which do not rely on the same concepts. The economist is a kind of life coach even, but a very different kind.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to understand him, with his (or her) advanced mathematics. Below I offer two models of my own, or what I call informal models, to flesh out my proposal for less mathematically versed readers.<sup>1</sup>

*Builders and deadlines.* Why do some builders not do the work they agreed to by the deadline agreed to? (See Gambeta and Origgi 2013: 19 – I think this is not especially Italian.) Mr. or Mrs. Facts-of-Life might say, “They see your face and regard you as very pushy and decide to work to a lower standard.” Then the best you can get before your pushing energies are exhausted is what they initially agreed to, but after the deadline. All the extra things you are otherwise sure to ask for – “Can you now do this?” or “Can you do this slightly better?” – you will probably have to set aside.

But an informal rational actor model would say that it is nothing to do with your fussy face, which perhaps every hirer of builders has. Here are your options if builders don’t quite do what was promised: accepting the partially done work, legal action, and insisting on more work. Legal action is very stressful to take, so for the builder it is always worth not quite doing what was promised, because the chances are that either you are going to accept that – in which case, same money for less work than agreed – or you are going to insist on the agreed work being completed. Given certain assumptions about ends, that builders just want as much money for as little work, it is worth them risking not quite doing what was agreed just in case you take the former option.

*Philosophy students.* Mr. Facts-of-Life might think that the prominent positions of some philosophers and the marginal positions of others in the curriculum of some departments reflects

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<sup>1</sup> Probably there are things the economist finds near impossible to do within his or her framework, but believes he would rather have his difficulties than yours.

nationalism, or some related phenomenon: “These are our people.” But here is another informal rational actor model (see Edward 2022). Assume that every student with a potential to be a successful contributor to academic philosophy can also succeed in another discipline. But then other disciplines are going to try to attract these students by saying, “We can give you some philosophy as well.” How can the philosophy department, or discipline area, survive under these circumstances? It may seem rational for all students to go elsewhere. To avoid this, the department are going to have to accord a prominent position to high quality material which others will not teach. That means David Lewis and various other notable philosophers in the analytic tradition. “You can only get this here.”

## References

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