Searching for the Anthropological Foundations of Economic Practice: Controversies and Opportunities

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Abstract This chapter is a comment on the contribution of Rebecca Klein in this volume, preceded by a conceptual analysis of the argument that is developed in the *Homo Amans* position paper.

The main question that is raised is twofold and concerns the relation between science and worldview on the one hand, and between science and economic life on the other. With respect to the science – worldview relationship, it is doubted that science can play the role the authors of the *Homo Amans* project expect it can have. What they have in mind is that science helps in validating and legitimizing a biblically informed concept of love. This author disagrees, to a large extent. Science can indeed orient itself on ideas and intuitions that are based on one's worldview. But it cannot prove the truth of these intuitions and ideas. To think so, is to commit a naturalistic fallacy.

With respect to the relationship between science and economic life, the author is also not convinced that science and philosophy as academic disciplines will by themselves be able (and should be expected to be able) to transform deeply ingrained, institutionally anchored economic practices. New theories, concepts, and paradigms are a precondition for change, but they do not bring about change by themselves. What is needed is a change in the practices themselves, a change that is both personal and comprehensive. What is needed is a clear, succinct, and encompassing view on the intrinsic normativity of economic interactions between relevant stakeholders in what we call 'the' economy. This is a huge undertaking, that requires painstaking 'phenomenological' analyses of a wide variety of economic practices. The chapter agrees with most of Klein's observations and concerns with respect to the position paper. These observations and concerns gain even more depth and relief given the conceptual distinctions that are made in the chapter.

1. Introduction

In this response I will first focus on the argument in the position paper (Nullens & van Nes, this volume). I will introduce a distinction to be made between four perspectives on economic practice and show its relevance for the conceptualization of the *Homo Amans* project. I proceed by giving some comments on the paper by Rebekka Klein and conclude with a few more general, evaluative comments.

2. The position paper: structure of the argument

The position paper presents itself as "...a modest attempt to encourage a multidisciplinary dialogue on anthropology in contemporary economics by

1. rethinking human personhood
2. introducing the concept of *Homo amans* as a potential alternative to *Homo economicus*
3. exploring some dimensions of human relationality that deserve future study."

The paper builds on well-known oppositions such as that between mechanistic and teleological views of humanhood; and between materialistic and other, richer views on man. Sources of inspiration in the development of a new, relational view on man are critical realism, as developed by C. Smith (2015); personalism, as can be found in the work by Pope John Paul II (Wojtyla, 1993); and the plea for non-reductionism and anti-scientism that, for instance, has been voiced by C. Taylor (1989). Nullens and van Nes quote Smith (2010), when he describes the human person as "a conscious, reflexive, embodied, bodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who – as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible actions and interactions – exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the nonpersonal world." This thick notion of personhood grounds a eudaimonistic ethics, i.e., the understanding that the human good can be conceived as a realization of human nature and a rediscovery of the wisdom of old moral systems that are often already in line with our own intuitions. In other words, the paper builds on the idea that universal traits such as love, justice, generosity, and the like, should be enacted and developed for the benefit of others and ourselves and that this is made possible by the fact that they are in some way already present in us because they are part of our nature.

This anthropological intuition is then undergirded by a wide variety of arguments derived from the Bible, positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), behavioral economics (McCloskey, 2006), insights on religious behavior based on evolutionary theory (Wildman, 2009), neuroscientific insights into the neuroendocrine 'basis' of prosocial behavior (Pfaff, 2015), the psychology of hope (Scioli & Biller, 2009), leadership studies focusing on servant/responsible/spiritual leadership, trust and cooperation; and on a phenomenology of multiple perspectives (economic, philosophical, theological) on love.

3. Four perspectives

Although I sympathize with the general intentions of *Homo Amans* as a theological/empirical program and recognize the relevance of antireductionist findings in contemporary psychology, neuroscience, and (as I now understand) economy, I still have difficulties with (a) the structure of the argument and (b) the lack of clarity of the concept of *Homo amans* itself. To get a grasp on the project *Homo Amans* it is helpful to make a distinction between at least four perspectives: the perspective of one's life- and worldview, the perspective of philosophy (core concepts; conceptual frameworks; paradigms; argumentative structures), the perspective of theoretical knowledge (marked by abstraction and based on methodic reduction), and the perspective of practical (professional) knowledge and know-how. In other contexts, I have added a fifth perspective relating to the lay knowledge and everyday experiences (of a particular topic or situation). Since I will not deal here with lay perspectives, I will continue with the four perspectives mentioned earlier.

Each of these perspectives offers a way of looking at the phenomenon under study. One can, for instance, study empathy as a human capacity (or virtue) and give an account of it in terms of one's *life- and world view* (let us say, as one of the sources of self-surrendering love or as an evolutionary advantageous adaptation); one can study empathy from a *philosophical/conceptual* perspective (is empathy a feeling, a disposition, or a form of behavior?); one may formulate *scientific* hypotheses about empathy (mentalization is a prerequisite for the development of empathy; or: empathy is a capacity that builds on "earlier" abilities such as successful performance of perception-action cycles); and one may approach empathy from the point of view of the *professional* who, for instance, is interested in the empathic capacities of an offender or a person with personality disorder. One of the premises on which my account is based, is that these four perspectives are more than merely conceptual and epistemic and that they are part of, and intrinsically intertwined with, practices of knowing, interaction, and action, that diverge in scope, aim, function, content, and role (Glas 2019, Chapters 6 and 7). Professional knowledge is not just a way of knowing. Professional knowing cannot be defined apart from the practices in which it is embedded. It is, for instance, characteristic of these practices that the relevance of a model, theory, or explanation (rational choice theory, for instance) for the understanding of a phenomenon (behavior of consumers) is weighed, and that different pieces of knowledge (rational choice theory versus, for instance, theories about prosocial behavior) compete for recognition of their relevance. In other words, scientific knowledge needs to be translated into relevant practices. This translation process requires awareness of contexts, the infrastructure, and the interactions between relevant parties. The translation process itself is not scientific, it is not based on methodic reduction and fixing and standardization of boundary conditions. Translation requires, instead, that the relevance of a certain theory for the understanding of a phenomenon is seen and weighed against intuitions about the relevance of other theoretical insights. Recognizing this relevance requires contextual knowledge, practical experience within the field, 'insight', holistic knowledge, and so on.

The context of scientific knowledge is scientific practice, i.e., the world of laboratories, technology, experiments, publishing, texts, libraries, peer competition, fund raising, and so on. The context of economic practice is the market as the platform for real life interactions and negotiations between consumers, producers, and other stakeholders. How relevant

rational choice theory is for the behavior of a group of consumers in a segment of the market depends on the contribution of other possible factors that influence economic behavior. There is, in other words, no logical (deductive, straightforward 'applicative') relation between scientific knowledge and economic practice. There are also no such (logical, deductive) relationships between philosophical views on man and labor and economic theory; nor between the images of man based on life- and worldview and economic theory.

This does not imply, however, that there are no relationships at all between the different epistemic perspectives. There are, for instance, overarching intuitions, analogies, and metaphors that enable communication between the different perspectives. These intuitions and analogies need to be elucidated and tested in the relevant contexts: are they creative fictions or do they really hit the phenomenon under study. Moreover, people learn from their experiences, also in the application of scientific insights to the practices in which they are embedded. Professionals learn when these applications lead to something and when they lead them astray. They build up experiential expertise with the concepts, the techniques, the algorithms, and other implementations of scientific knowledge. This largely tacit expert-knowledge may in turn inform scientists when they reformulate their hypotheses and ideas.

4. The four perspectives in the position paper

Diagram 1 gives an impression of the argument in the position paper based on the distinctions I made in the previous section, i.e., the distinction between life- and worldview, philosophy, scientific theorizing, and professional practice. According to the *life- and worldview* of the authors, man is driven by faith, hope, and love. These and other virtuous are constitutive of human nature (perspective 1, life and worldview). The paper describes how this overarching idea might be supported by philosophical analysis and by insights found in theology, psychology, neuroscience, and sociobiology. This 'enriched' view leads to a relational view of human nature, as *philosophical* paradigm (perspective 2). This paradigm should then be operationalized in terms of new economic *theories* (perspective 3) and lead to better *economic practices* (perspective 4).

However, these expectations are based on mixed and somewhat shaky grounds. There are, as I said, no strictly logical, deductive, or purely empirical grounds to expect that the combined efforts of the empirical sciences will lead to a 'richer', or 'more biblical', philosophical image of man. That is to say, judging a view as richer and/or more biblical is a value judgment that cannot be based on the combination of empirical research and logical reasoning *per se*.

We are dealing with different transitions here, for instance with the transition from philosophy to the sciences (and back); and from the sciences to theology. By viewing these transitions as logical, deductive, or self-evident, the authors run the risk of committing a *naturalistic fallacy.* By this, I mean the error of considering scientific evidence as evidence for a normative position. Views based on, for instance, developmental psychology do not necessarily lead to a better (richer) philosophical theology or anthropology. Such theology or anthropology has obvious normative implications that the sciences will never deliver. Scientific evidence may be consistent or convergent with one's life- and worldview, but it cannot serve as the basis for it. Theories about the capacity to empathize with fellow human

beings may be consistent with (aspects of) certain philosophical views on man, but they don't entail the full spectrum of meanings associated with the notion of man as a relational, virtuous being. Understanding how empathy develops does not necessarily lead to recognition of empathy as moral virtue. The first is an empirical hypothesis or theory, the latter is a normative valuation. There may be moral and religious reasons for thinking empathy is an important phenomenon to understand. But empirical understanding of a phenomenon that we value on the basis of our moral and other convictions, does not add to the normative force of these convictions. Consistency is something other than validity and legitimacy.

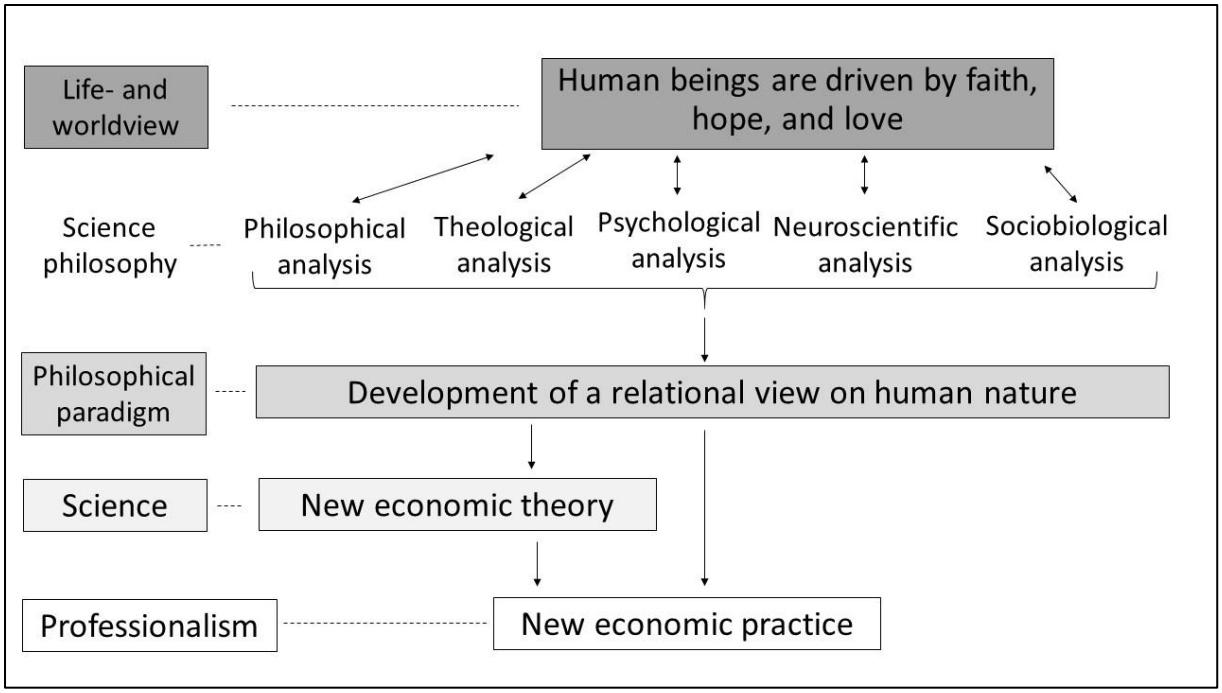

Diagram 1: structure of the argument in the *Homo Amans* position paper

One other problem of this view on the relationship between philosophy/theology and the sciences is the risk of circularity, lack of precision, and pseudotheorizing. The idea of the project is that a richer, relational view on man will lead to better economic theories. However, philosophical accounts of man are typically caught in general and abstract terms. Definitions of these terms are based on theoretical reflection and discussions that are primarily philosophical and that relate to a philosophical/conceptual context. The aim of these definitions is to shed light on and articulate the content of a term or theory in the context of a wide range of competing philosophical theories and ideas. These abstract and general terms are usually not precise enough to serve as a basis for solid empirical hypothesizing and experimenting. They are difficult to operationalize and refer to contexts that are distant from the experimental practice. Using them to support empirical hypothesizing easily leads to circular reasoning, vagueness, and pseudo-theorizing. The philosophical term is defined in terms of the phenomena it is supposed to explain; the *explanans* entails the *explanandum*, then, which is a logical error.

With respect to the transition from *philosophy to professional activities*, the idea of the paper seems to be that a richer, relational view on man will lead to better education, better economic practice, and better working ethics. Surely, overarching ideals and views do guide all kinds of practices. They may serve as legitimation for one's approach, they highlight the general perspective. But there are again a number of risks: risk of ambiguous interpretation of the overarching ideas and concepts; risk of ignorance of differences in the application of these ideas and concepts on varying practices. The umbrella term itself may mean different things in different contexts; but the term may also lead to different practical applications. A more urgent risk is the suggestion of moral superiority that comes along when one's own view serves as touchstone for other conceptions. In short, to say this in a somewhat different formulation, it is crucial to recognize that the implementation, application, and translation of scientific discoveries are not by themselves scientific activities. They presuppose in-depth knowledge and contextual sensitivity. But the search for meaningful application and the weighing of the relevance of scientific evidence within a particular context build on something other than scientific scrutiny.

5. Different routes to 'integration'

All this, I need to say, does not imply that I am negative about the possibility of connecting philosophical discussions with issues in the sciences and professional practices. Earlier, I mentioned that the implementation of scientific insights in applied contexts requires insight and creativity to discern the potential relevance of scientific evidence for a certain practice. This innovative mindset does not primarily consist of deductive reasoning and logic. It does not work with the idea of a linear process from basic research via the applied sciences to professional practices. It does not derive distal changes from proximal causes. The innovative mindset supports the view that successful implementation is based on (circular) learning processes and on socialization into ways of interacting and collaborating that further and enhance insight and creativity.

Let me zoom out and briefly indicate four ways to conceptualize this process of learning, translating, and collaborating. An essential component is building a culture of interaction and collaboration that is sharply aware of the different mindsets of scientists, philosophers, professionals, and designers. Given these differences, there are nevertheless ways to cooperate fruitfully and to gain deeper understanding.

Iain Barbour, for instance, who has written extensively about the interaction between science and religion, discerns four forms of interaction: conflict; parallelism; dialogue; integration (Barbour, 1997). Scientists and practitioners may perceive each other as being in conflict; as operating in different domains without any interaction (parallelism); as being in dialogue with one another; and as operating conjointly and moving toward integration of perspectives.

Jochemsen Hoogland and this author have developed a so-called normative practice approach (NPA) to medicine and healthcare. This NPA has been elaborated for other fields too: media and communication, public administration, military ethics, and philosophy of organizations. The cornerstone of this approach is the idea that practices should be seen as responsive to clusters of intrinsic norms, rules, and/or values. Within these groups of norms

(rules, values), one needs to make a distinction between norms that form the basis for a practice; norms that undergird the (economic, jural, institutional, and political) conditions for a practice; and norms that qualify that practice. Qualifying norms indicate the kind of normativity that guides a certain practice. Economic practices could be evaluated along similar lines as being founded on a variety of norms that are foundational, conditional, or qualifying with respect to these practices. Economic theories function as cognitive artefacts in these practices, in the sense that they highlight certain aspects of the practice. Religious and philosophical anthropological ideas inform one's view on the *Homo economicus*; they may be seen as constructs that help to articulate the ethos or spirit that dominates economic life (Dooyeweerd, 1953-1958; Glas, 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; Jochemsen, 2006; Jochemsen & Glas, 1997; Hoogland & Jochemsen, 2000; Verkerk et al., 2015; de Vries & Jochemsen, 2018).

One other approach that is worth mentioning is the so-called actor-network approach as developed by Latour (1987); and applied by scholars such as Callon, Rip & Law (1986). The actor-network theory is often seen as belonging to social constructivism. It suggests that a practice (technological, medical, social, economic) is not solely determined by the acts and intentions of economic subjects, but also equally by all kinds of contextual factors (from the physical to the political)

In terms of Barbour's four models of interaction between science and religion, what can be achieved with this approach is dialogue between contributions from different fields. The next step could be convergence between the results based on the sciences, philosophy and worldview. This would be no small result: the interaction between the fields would lead to "richer" conceptualizations in each of the interacting practices.

In terms of the normative practices approach, one could start with an attempt to analyze the "intrinsic" normative core of economically qualified practices. From that point on, one could proceed with an analysis of how economic functioning might be opened up by (analogical) references to higher order (jural, social, moral, esthetic) norms and ideals. Another approach could consist in the analysis of qualifying, foundational, and conditioning norms for the interactions between economic subjects and their micro-, meso-, and macro-environments.

In terms of the actor network approach one could analyze how economic practices develop under the influence of technology (ICT), globalization, migration, ecological crises, political leadership, and the like.

6. Response to Rebekka Klein

After these lengthy introductory remarks, it is time to focus on Rebekka Klein's 'What is the Nature of Christian Love? *Homo Amans* and Revolutionary Altruism' (this volume). Let me start by saying that I agree with most of what she says. It will come as no surprise that I agree with Kleins's warning that the *Homo amans* should not be taken as a comprehensive and definitive representation of the reality of human being. That would lead to similar totalitarian implementations, she says, as with the older *Homo economicus* model. Philosophical models should play a role that is different from dictating scientific hypothesizing. The project seems to require too much from scientists in this respect. They are expected "… to prove the anthropological, psychological, societal and political usefulness and the pragmatic and ethical

impact of its insights instead of merely safeguarding the correct methodological fabrication of scientific facts." I agree, that this is simply too much. The idea that science can prove the truth of a prescientific (philosophical, religiously inspired) view on man comes dangerously close to the idea that science can prove metaphysical claims, whatever their content. This view could also easily drive us into the arms of scientism.

There are, therefore, "limits and problems inherent in the argument." I will briefly discuss another five of these limits, problems and issues that are mentioned in Klein's contribution. One of them is that the holism and integrationism implied in notions like well-being and love disregards the fracturedness and ambivalences of the phenomena under study. Man is not the rational calculating being that traditional economic theory has supposed him to be. He is driven by ambiguous, skewed, and sometimes downright contradictory motives and impulses. The things people value and are willing to invest in, emotionally, financially, or in terms of efforts, depend on their individual and collective histories. Identification of the fracture lines, and the active search for issues that evoke tensions and feelings of unease, is a condition for understanding what people avoid or strive for. I am convinced that searching for such fracture lines and areas of unease and tension is crucial for the detection of underlying values in economic life, values that do matter and have proven to matter in the lives of concrete groups and individuals, also and especially in the economic sphere.

Klein's second concern originates from the question of how the proposal takes notice of the independence, objectivity, and cool mood of science? What is left from these? What is the validity and legitimacy of the concept of *Homo amans*? My response is, briefly, that this is a matter of concern for me too. As I have argued above, the transdisciplinary perspective, as such, does not guarantee the wholeness and integration the position paper is aiming at. In the act of abstraction, scientists lose by definition the connection with this wholeness. They may retain, of course, prescientific intuitions about this wholeness and they may try to do justice to these intuitions in their hypothesizing and model-building. But they are not able to reconstruct this wholeness and its inner coherence by scientific means (Dooyeweerd, 1953, Vol. I, p.1). Attempts to do so, for instance in systems theory or (other) computational approaches to a given field of science, will by definition have been colored by the language and the perspective of the supposedly overarching and connecting science (mathematics, for instance).

Third, Klein raises a question about the concept of love. What is love? Can it be equated with prosocial behaviors and attitudes of cooperation and altruism? Like Klein, I am inclined to suggest that this is not, or at best only partly, the case. There exists a huge amount of research on empathy and altruism, suggesting that there is continuity between animal and human behavior. However, the issue here is love in the biblical sense, i.e., self-giving, self-surrendering, altruistic love that doesn't expect to get anything in return for one's "investment"; love of one's enemies; love that is ready to sacrifice oneself and one's own interests. This self-giving love is not instrumental, it is the expression of one's deepest self, of one's giving, caring, and life-preserving motives.

How about love as grounded in a feeling or in a rational choice? Is it a capability? Is love essential or contingent in the definition of who we are as human beings? Is love a remote ideal, or should we conceive it as a fulfilment of a latent capacity, a fulfilment that leads to human flourishing? These are again big questions, that cannot adequately be addressed in a

couple of paragraphs. But let me briefly indicate in which direction I am thinking. With Klein, I am inclined to reject all these options, except the latter, the virtue-ethical approach to love. I feel sympathy for this latter approach, which conceives love as an excellence of human nature and as an important aspect of human flourishing. But there are also important differences between the virtue-based approach to love and the biblical emphasis on love as a form of self-surrender and as a counter-intuitive movement in the presence of often overwhelming suffering and tragedy. Biblical love emerges against a background of broken relations, anger, suspicion, negativity, shame, ambivalence, and deception. Love is indeed central to our existence as human beings, but it is not what we are inclined to do, especially not in situations in which we ourselves feel threatened, devalued, put to shame, and so on. Love is indeed a central dynamic within our existence, a driving force that helps us focus on doing well by our fellow human beings; whoever this fellow human being is and whatever the difference is between their and our situation. But this will to love is always, in a way, in opposition to other inclinations we also have; inclinations that manifest themselves as egotism, lack of trust, misanthropy, lack of self-disclosure, narcissism, and tendencies to grandiosity.

Fourth, Klein expresses as a special worry that the concept of love should be defined by acknowledging the societal context. What love is, can only be identified given the alienation and atomization of individuals and given the liquid society in which we live with its increasingly fluid identities of individuals and groups. By not systematically adopting this perspective of alienation, individualization, and loss of identity, the *Homo Amans* project runs the risk of "dreaming away." I agree, again, and I am inclined to include systematic and institutional injustice as important other contexts against the background of which acts of love gain meaning and prove to be transformative.

Fifth, with Kierkegaard, Klein is inclined to suggest that love is not a virtue nor an expression of human nature, but something in the concrete world, that God has put next to us, in our neighbor. Love is a "middle-term" instead of an end-term (or object), she says. It is that through which we reshape our relationships.

I agree that love is not a goal in itself, but a mediating power with transformative potential. As I said, I see love as a central, transformative dynamic. Love gets shape in the struggle with egotistic and disconnecting forces. It is accompanied by a hidden creativity in finding out what is good for others and for society in spite of all sorts of resistance and animosity.

So, in sum, I agree with most of Klein's observations and concerns with respect to the position paper. These observations and concerns gain even more depth and relief given the conceptual distinctions that were made earlier in the chapter.

7. Final comments and conclusion

Let me finish by summing up my most important hesitations with respect to the *Homo Amans* initiative and the role it is supposed to fulfill in the context of economic theory and economic life.

My main question is twofold and concerns the relationship between science and worldview on the one hand and between science and economic life on the other. With respect to the science – worldview relationship, I doubt that science can play the role the authors of

the *Homo Amans* project expect, in validating and legitimizing the biblically informed concept of love they have in mind. Science can orient itself on ideas and intuitions that are based on one's worldview. But it cannot prove the truth of these intuitions and ideas.

My strictness on this point is not based on the idea that biblical love and love in the mundane economic sphere are completely distinct realities. It is based on the conviction that the epistemic attitude of scientists fundamentally differs from the epistemic attitude of believers (citizens, entrepreneurs, employees, consumers, or experts in a certain profession). Each scientific discipline highlights a different and distinct aspect of a phenomenon; and the combined sum of all these partial insights does not reproduce the original coherence and holism of the phenomenon under study. This also holds for the concept of love. The combined efforts of all the sciences will not deliver us the coherence and holism of the idea of love the authors of the *Homo Amans* project have in mind.

With respect to the relationship between science and economic life, I am also not convinced that science and philosophy as academic disciplines will by themselves be able (nor should be expected to be able) to transform deeply ingrained, institutionally anchored economic practices. New theories, concepts, and paradigms are a precondition for change, but they do not bring about change by themselves. Economy will not be changed by a new model or paradigm about human nature *per se*. Nor can the economy be rescued by implementing legal, institutional, political, or moral innovations alone. What is needed is a transdisciplinary approach guided by an overarching and inspiring view, which is informed by a worldview or worldviews, with contributions from all relevant stakeholders and a set of useful conceptual distinctions. What is needed most of all is a clear, succinct, but also encompassing view of the intrinsic normativity of economic interactions between relevant stakeholders in what we call "the" economy. This is a huge undertaking, that requires painstaking "phenomenological" analyses of a wide variety of economic practices. But this new view and these analyses are worthy of being strived for, given the needs of our time.

The idea that there exists someone like a *Homo amans* or a *Homo economicus* is also vulnerable in a more practical and empirical sense. Does the *homo economicus* actually exist? Is it not a strawman? Are we not tilting at windmills? Does the term refer to essences, attitudes, relational characteristics, or something else? And, has economic theory not already recognized for quite some time the importance of collaboration, a certain measure of non-selfishness, and sustainable interactions? All these questions need to be addressed. The answers will determine which conclusions can be drawn from the *homo* project.

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