Retrospectives The Ethology of *Homo Economicus*

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This feature addresses the history of economic words and ideas. The hope is to deepen the workaday dialogue of economists, while perhaps casting light on ongoing questions. If you have suggestions for future topics or authors, please write to Joseph Persky, c/ o *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Department of Economics (M/C 144), The University of Illinois at Chicago, 601 S. Morgan St., Room 2103, Chicago, Illinois 60607-7121.

The Origin of Economic Man

When rummaging through the card catalog, one might easily infer that homo economicus¹ will soon appear on the endangered species list. As early as 1939, Peter Drucker warned of *The End of Economic Man*. By 1976, Harvey Leibenstein could see *Beyond Economic Man*. In 1986, David Marsden asked the perennial question: *The End of Economic Man*? And recently Marianne Ferber and Julie Nelson have described the territory *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics*. Despite these warnings, I suspect that the majority of economists remain confident of the survival of their favorite species. In fact, many see economic man as virtually the only civilized species in all of social

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¹Before going any further we should note that Donald McCloskey tells us that *homo economicus* is better translated as "economic human" since a male adult would usually be designated by *vir* in Latin, while *homo* had a broader meaning. For a truly sexist economic man, McCloskey (1993, p. 79) suggests *vir economicus*. However, it is not clear that *homo economicus* preceded "economic man" in usage. See note 3 below.

science. Given such conflicting assessments of his present status, a review of the origins, early character and natural history of economic man may prove useful.

While John Stuart Mill is generally identified as the creator of economic man, he never actually used this designation in his own writings. But the term did emerge in reaction to Mill's work. In its first appearances in the late nineteenth century, "economic man" carried a pejorative connotation reflecting the widespread hostility of the historical school toward Mill's theoretical abstractions. Economic man also raised the indignation of Victorian moralists shocked at the postulation of such blatant selfishness.²

For example, the earliest explicit naming of economic man that I have identified is in John Kells Ingram's *A History of Political Economy* (1888).³ Ingram, an advocate of a broad sociology in the tradition of Auguste Comte,⁴ took considerable pains to disparage John Stuart Mill's political economy, which "dealt not with real but with imaginary men—'economic men' ... conceived as simply 'money-making animals'" (p. 218). Two years later, John Neville Keynes (1890) picked up (and singularized) the phrase in his much more extensive methodological treatment.⁵ Keynes's efforts, though considerably less hostile than Ingram's, still painted "an 'economic man,' whose activities are determined solely by the desire for wealth," and ascribed the origins of this tightly drawn abstraction to John Stuart Mill.

Like most caricatures, those drawn by Ingram and Keynes hardly did justice to their model. While Mill's economic man was admittedly simple, he was not trivial. To understand this economic man, we must turn to Mill's early field notes.

John Stuart Mill's Abstraction

John Stuart Mill's (1836) famous essay "On the Definition of Political Economy; and on the Method of Investigation Proper to It" described a hypothetical subject, whose narrow and well-defined motives made him a useful

²For a description of the historical school, see Leslie (1879). As to the confusion with ethical issues, see Goschen (1893). Of course, the question of the social consequences of self-interested behavior considerably antedates economic man and formal political economy. In this respect, see the insightful essay by Milon Myers (1983), *The Soul of Modern Economic Man.*

³The first use of the Latin homo economicus I turned up is in Vilfredo Pareto's Manual (1906, pp. 12–14), but I haven't done a serious search of continental sources. Schumpeter (1954, p. 156) pointed to B. Frigerio's usage of economo prudente, circa 1629, as a "common sense forerunner of the Economic Man." I suspect the formal christening of economic man late in the nineteenth century required as a prerequisite the major change in the name of our discipline from "political economy" to "economics," which occurred about the same time Ingram wrote.

⁴Comte argued for an unified social science that considered the complete range of human motives. Mill early on had been attracted to Comte's vision, but held that political economy be maintained as a separate discipline.

⁵"Economic man" must have been quite the buzzword around Cambridge that year since Marshall also used it the same year in his *Principles*. See Marshall (1890, p. vi, 26–27).

abstraction in economic analysis. At first glance it might seem that this economic man bears a striking resemblance to Ingram's and Keynes' caricatures. According to Mill (1836, p. 321), political economy:

... does not treat of the whole of man's nature as modified by the social state, nor of the whole conduct of man in society. It is concerned with him solely as a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end.

But on the same page Mill goes on to qualify this proposition strongly:

It [political economy] makes entire abstraction of every other human passion or motive; except those which may be regarded as perpetually antagonizing to the desire of wealth, namely, aversion to labour, and desire of the present enjoyment of costly indulgences. These it takes, to a certain extent, into its calculations, because these do not merely, like other desires, occasionally conflict with the pursuit of wealth, but accompany it always as a drag, or impediment, and are therefore inseparably mixed up in the consideration of it.

Thus economic man has a dash more character than the money-hungry monomaniac described by Ingram (1888). In addition to his underlying drive for accumulation, Mill's subject desires both luxury and leisure. And just a bit later in the essay, Mill (honest Victorian that he was) felt obligated to acknowledge that even at the level of abstract theory, we had better take account of economic man's passion for producing babies as summarized in the "principle of population."

All told, then, Mill's economic man has four distinct interests: accumulation, leisure, luxury and procreation; more than his critics maintained, but less than they might have desired. Mill argued that this number was quite enough, since in his view economic deduction worked best when focussed on welldefined and relatively simple abstractions. In his methodology, Mill did recognize a need to explore for "disturbing causes": forces not included in a theory that might be identified when discrepancies between prediction and empirical observations materialized. But no single theory could reasonably cover the full complexity of human motivation. Such efforts Mill considered both unnecessary and hopelessly indeterminate.

Mill's economic man is surely more complex than Mill's critics alleged. But we make a serious error if we read into this animal the modern identification of economic man with rationality itself. In much contemporary usage, the essence of economic man lies not in what he picks, but in his rational method for making choices.⁶ Whatever the usefulness of such a "rational-man" abstraction,

⁶Kirzner (1960) provides a clear history of the broad shift in economic theory from the classical concern with the production and distribution of wealth to Lionel Robbins's science of choice.

he hardly corresponds to Mill's insistence that the range of economic man's choices be kept quite limited. Only those motives "which may be regarded as perpetually antagonizing to the desire of wealth" are reasonable candidates. And we should note that within this narrow range of motives, Mill countenanced the likelihood that when it came to procreation, even economic man might not be all that rational.

Mill's economic man provides just enough psychological complexity to make him interesting. On the one hand, Mill argued that an expansion of economic man's range of motives risked indeterminacy. On the other, he recognized that without this modest psychological complexity, economic man would have no alternative but to work all day, regardless of incentives. Such a workaholic would behave exactly the same way in any institutional environment. But Mill recognized that a wide range of economic behaviors could be observed across industries, nations and epochs. He reasoned that a large portion of this variation in behavior could be traced to differing economic institutions. Indeed, Mill's central theoretical and empirical project was to use economic man, with his rudimentary but manageable psychology, to prove that institutions did matter.

Mill's Project: Economic Man and Economic Institutions

Mill (1848) began his great work, *Principles of Political Economy*, with a very Smithian discussion of the historical record of the wealth of nations. He observed that among modern societies, wide differences persisted in the level and distribution of wealth. These differences, Mill asserted, could not be traced merely to differences in physical conditions and knowledge. For Mill the key to comparative economics lay in exploring the interactions between human nature and institutions. As soon as we recognize that economic man considers several key tradeoffs in his behavior, we can imagine a society of economic men, each with strong interests in wealth, luxury, leisure and procreation, and attempt to determine the likely effects on them of differing institutions.

Among historians of economic thought, it has often been argued that when Mill came to write the *Principles* he deserted his monotonal and abstract economic man in favor of a broader approach. This interpretation is traceable to Leslie (1879) and repeated in various forms by Marshall, John Neville Keynes and Schumpeter. Along similar lines, several of these authors also accused Mill of deserting the deductive approach he advocated in his methodological writings in favor of an historical or inductive approach. As evidence of this inconsistency between Mill's early essay on economic man and his magnum opus on *Principles*, such critics have often pointed out the host of descriptive details on alternative land tenure structures in the latter. However, I believe that much of this material relates directly to Mill's basic project of exploring the reactions of economic man to alternative institutional regimes.

For example, when Mill discusses peasant proprietors (1848, Book II, chaps. VI–VII), his concern centers on the influence of small-scale ownership as an incentive to work effort and accumulation and a discouragement to luxury and leisure. Acknowledging that there may be economies of scale associated with large agricultural enterprises, Mill's purpose is to determine whether the incentive effects of small-scale ownership are strong enough to act as an offset and raise overall production. His conclusion, based largely on reviewing empirical (and often anecdotal) writings, is that the incentive effects in question are quite strong indeed.

Mill (1848, Book II, chaps. VIII-X) follows a similar pattern in his treatment of metayers (British and French sharecroppers) and cottiers (Irish tenant farmers). In both cases he argues that the more divided the laborer from ownership, the less industrious the laborer. Mill's strong condemnation of cottier tenancy grows directly from this analysis of economic man in differing institutional settings. In considering the situation of Irish tenants, Mill (1848, p. 324) argues: "What race would not be indolent and insouciant when things are so arranged, that they derive no advantage from forethought or exertion." Or again: "It speaks nothing against the capacities of industry in human beings, that they will not exert themselves without motive. No labourers work harder, in England or America, than the Irish."

Even in Mill's famous chapter on the future of the working classes (1848, Book IV, chap. VII) we find that his central concern remains the response of economic man to institutional structures. A case can be made that this chapter, with its utopian schemes of profit sharing and joint ownership, is but an exercise in political sentimentalism at sharp odds with the rest of the Principles and quite distant from Mill's pure theory. But even here, I believe that Mill sticks closely to his basic approach. For him the central question always concerns the interaction of economic man and economic institutions. More specifically, in this chapter, Mill is searching for the best incentive system for manufacturing workers. Consciously echoing his theme with respect to land tenancy, Mill emphasizes the effectiveness of cooperative ownership and profit sharing in raising work effort and hence output. (Mill even suggests such forms might be best for agriculture as well.) Under a wage system, Mill (1848, p. 761) notes, the worker's "sole endeavor is to receive as much, and return as little in the shape of service as possible." Here is a solid economic man indeed. Mill concludes that radical institutional reforms will be needed to motivate such a species.

I certainly do not hold that the *Principles* rigidly limits its purview to economic man. Mill makes more than a few forays aimed at analyzing "disturbing causes." Yet, he repeatedly emphasizes how economic man, freed from oppressive institutional forms, will produce a great deal more wealth.⁷ For Mill, the most promising institutions were laissez-faire in tone, but included radical reforms such as profit sharing. Far from having to make a choice between abstract a priori theory and the forces of historicism, sociologism and institutionalism, Mill demonstrates that much can be learned from considering a simple, but hardly trivial, view of human nature in interaction with diverse real world institutions. This methodology—using economic man as guinea pig in widely different institutional settings—remains an essential tool of modern economics.

Ethology and Character

While Mill often dealt with economic man as a given, he was also eager to analyze the evolution of economic man's preferences and passions. Throughout the *Principles*, Mill's discussions of incentives slipped almost seamlessly into explorations of the social psychology of tastes and character.

Strictly speaking, Mill viewed efforts to analyze the development of character as the proper task of ethology, a science he placed logically subsequent to elementary psychology. Ethology, according to Mill (1843, p. 869), was that science "which determines the kind of character produced in conformity to those general laws [of psychology], by any set of circumstances, physical and moral." In terms of Mill's grander scheme of sciences and arts, ethology (like political economy) produced *axiomata media*, or middle-level theory—logically precise deductions from admittedly shaky first principles that then could be applied in useful arts. Thus, the art corresponding to ethology was "education," or what today might be called "character building."

Working from the base of general ethology, Mill (1843, p. 905) argued that "economic ethology"⁸ would then construct "a theory of the causes which determine the type of character belonging to a people or to an age." Mill thought economic ethology was still in its infancy: "The causes of national character are scarcely at all understood, and the effect of institutions or social arrangements upon the character of the people is generally that portion of their effects which is least attended to, and least comprehended."

Despite Mill's assertion that little was known of economic ethology, in the *Principles* he repeatedly attempted deductions as to the economic ethology of

⁷While Mill often supported such deductions in the *Principles* with empirical data, I would argue that he used these data for the purpose of verification, not induction. However, the line between the two methods can be narrow, and this surely has been the source of the many claims that Mill adopted an inductive approach in the *Principles*.

⁸Actually Mill called this activity "political ethology," thus paralleling the field of political economy. In modern usage our discipline is called economics. Hence I think the term "economic ethology" is faithful to the spirit of the original, while being more easily understood by modern readers.

economic man. At any given time, economic man could be expected to respond differently to different institutions. This was political economy. Over time, continuous exposure to a particular set of institutions could be expected to influence the very tastes of economic man. This was economic ethology.

Thus Mill (1848, p. 286), in analyzing the character of peasant proprietors, argues that small land ownership in addition to developing mental faculties is "propitious to the moral virtues of prudence, temperance, and self-control." Or in a very different context, when discussing inheritance, Mill argues that an early life of luxury predisposes the younger children of the nobility to extravagent consumption.

In many of his examples, Mill applies what might be called a Lamarckian view to the development of character: the notion that more or less rational choices made by one generation predispose the tastes of subsequent generations to reinforce similar choices.⁹ The incentives facing the peasant lead to energetic effort, which becomes a way of life and even a passion. A choice of luxurious consumption by the parents becomes a taste in the children. Mill wavers on precisely how persistent an effect such acculturation has on economic man. At some points he implies that national characteristics rooted in long custom can only be changed gradually. On other occasions he suggests a change of institutional regimes will have almost instantaneous results; for example, in his discussion of Irish character quoted above, he virtually rules out an intergenerational perpetuation of lassitude once individuals are removed from oppressive institutional conditions.

Closely related to this question of the cultural persistence of economic man's tastes is that of his social-historical origins. Virtually no economist in the last half of the nineteenth century claimed that history, or even economic history, could be understood only through the lens of economic man. A common view, championed by Walter Bagehot (1879), held that the motives and tastes typical of economic man were themselves a product of the spread of commerce. Bagehot (p. 106) saw economic man as a product of societies where "the commercial element is the greatest element." Thus, the logic of economic man implicit in political economy could only be applied to such communities: "In so far as nations are occupied in 'buying and selling,' in so far will Political Economy, the exclusive theory of men buying and selling, come out right, and be true." Bagehot (p. 104) thought political economy an appropriate tool for studying England where it might be "exactly true." Yet for much of the world and much of history, economic man played little role. In a military-slave power like Rome or "Oriental nations" fixed in custom, Bagehot (p. 106) wrote: "The

⁹Late in the nineteenth century, J. B. de Monet Lamarck was responsible for the view, now in disrepute, that environment can cause structural changes in animals or plants that are then genetically transmitted to future generations.

money-getting element is a most subordinate one in their minds; its effects are very subordinate ones in their lives."

In places, Mill anticipated this more limited historical and geographic vision of economic man. In his *Logic* (1843), he had suggested: "In political economy ... empirical laws of human nature are tacitly assumed by English thinkers, which are calculated only for Great Britain and the United States." Mill did not have to go as far as Asia or back to Roman history to find the antithesis of economic man. He wrote (1843, p. 906) that those "who know the habits of the Continent of Europe are aware how apparently small a motive often outweighs the desire of money-getting, even in the operations which have money-getting for their direct object."

Such observations remained uncharacteristic of the creator of economic man. More typically, Mill defended the basic psychological construct of economic man as primary for the purposes of political economy and argued that peculiarities of national character at odds with this psychology could be treated as secondary disturbing causes. Moreover, the trend of history was moving in economic man's favor. As Bagehot emphasized, commercial activities occupied an increasingly central position in most countries. If exposure to commerce changed tastes, then economic man might yet be universal.

Soviet Man, Feminist Economics and Parsimonious Psychology

The science of ethology has a quaint nineteenth-century ring, but the questions raised by Mill are still of importance to economics. The origin and persistence of economic motives have striking implications for public policy today. The usefulness of a whole range of public and private bureaucratic reforms, including antipoverty initiatives, welfare reform, affirmative action and foreign assistance all rest on the extent to which changing economic incentives can have rapid and predictable effects on the behavior of the relevant population. Economists who have ventured into these areas of research are carrying out, perhaps unknowingly, Mill's ethological program. For the most part, their results support the broad usefulness of Mill's original conception of economic man.

For example, Robert Shiller, Maxim Boycko and Valdimir Korobov (1992) provide a striking example of ethological research in their recent article, "Hunting for *Homo Sovieticus*: Situational versus Attitudinal Factors in Economic Behavior." In their questionnaire approach they focus on differences in national economic character and especially differences between the United States and Russia. Mill would easily recognize their concern with the tradeoffs people make between work and leisure and between current and future consumption. In addition, they put considerable emphasis on possible national differences in attitudes toward risk taking, a dimension not emphasized in Mill's original discussion, but much discussed in his *Principles*. Shiller, Boycko and Korobov (1992) also explore the tradeoff between fortune and fame, finding significant minority interest in fame across all the countries studied, a finding that might give Mill pause. Their discussion guardedly concludes that situations—constraints and institutions—as opposed to attitudes account for the bulk of the economic lethargy of former Soviet citizens. Much of what they write parallels Mill's own discussion of the Irish.

Shiller, Boycko and Korobov (1992) clearly are doing ethology. Interestingly enough, these modern day ethologists don't seem to require a much wider universe of preferences than Mill made do with. *Homo Sovieticus* appears as a surprisingly close cousin of *homo economicus*.

In a rather different context, much of recent feminist writing can also be viewed from Mill's methodological perspective. Feminists emphasize that traditional economics puts too much weight on men's choices and too little on women's constraints. Feminists have brought attention to the long-neglected role of social and institutional constraints in limiting the economic productivity, achievements and welfare of women. Such efforts, even as they illustrate the influences of patriarchy, draw heavily on Mill's project. Like Mill, at root, they are concerned with the economic implications of oppressive or discriminatory institutional constraints.

None of these feminist arguments should cause problems for consistent nineteenth-century liberals. And surely such liberals must now recognize the hypocrisy of not a few of their comrades. Feminists have done considerable service in pointing out the striking contradictions of liberal economists who repeatedly insisted on excluding women from the domain of *homo economicus*, making a special psychology of economic dependence for them. Michele Pujole (1992) provides fine critiques of the patriarchal views of Edgeworth, Marshall and Pigou. Pujole shows that each of these liberal authors had a double standard for approaching the psychology of men and women, which they used to justify highly illiberal policy recommendations. Even Mill, the author of *The Subjection of Women*, does not escape from Pujole's scrutiny.

Beyond the liberal documentation of enforced constraints, feminist writers have also launched a broad critique of modern economic practice (Strassmann, 1993; Folbre and Hartmann, 1988; Nelson, 1993, and this issue). To an extent, this work has taken Mill's ethological perspective. Like Mill, these writers show serious concern for the process of character building in the development of both women and men. Such concerns are the stuff of ethology. But unlike Mill, some of these modern feminists have generally denied the need for a parsimonious psychology. They have called for a wholesale revision of the psychology of economic persons. Like Comte, they have proposed a virtually universal social science.

The issue here is not the desirability of such a social science, but rather its feasibility. The danger arises not from well-reasoned adjustments to economic man's short list of motives, but from losing sight of Mill's methodological insistence on parsimony. Motives such as status, security, creativity, sociability

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and a concern for social reproduction have all been suggested by feminists as relevant to the economic behavior of men and women. I suspect Mill himself would not have rejected out-of-hand such feminist efforts to reconsider the basic drives relevant to economics. As several of the passages above make clear, Mill at times argued the need for a broader economic ethology. Yet Mill would have counselled that any additions to the list of basic drives be winnowed to a minimum. Fundamental to Mill's methodology was his effort to limit economic reasoning to a significant but manageable set of human motives.

Many groups over the years, starting with the historical school and including American institutionalists, have recognized that humans were a good deal more complex than the economic man Mill had suggested. Like some of today's feminists, these groups have offered a wide range of competing motives and behaviors. But their lists were so long and unwieldy that they virtually excluded tightly reasoned generalizations. Their method could perhaps generate history, but not economics.

The message to derive from Mill's *homo economicus* is not that humans are greedy, not that man is rational, but that social science works best when it ruthlessly limits its range. It is useful and serious work to explore alternative bases. But to compete successfully against economic man, a new ethology must be parsimonious; it must clearly specify the relevant psychological makeup of economic agents; and it must demonstrate that such a system yields better and/or new insights. In models where everything affects everything else, social scientists have little ability to draw inferences. Perhaps the "economic" in "economic man" relates as much to his parsimonious psychology as to his fascination with wealth.

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