



Methodological and Ideological Options

On sustainability and materiality. Homo faber, a new approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper explicitly engages with recent debates in Ecological Economics on what mode of humanity and person the sustainability project requires (e.g. Becker, 2006; Siebenhüner, 2000) and responds to calls to widen our understanding of the human being beyond homo economicus (e.g. Bina and Guedes Vaz, 2011). Using the example of the increasing attention to well-being, both within policy and academic circles, we seek to contribute to current critical considerations of 'the sustainable person' (Becker, 2010, 2012). We do this by incorporating often neglected perspectives from disciplines rooted in the Arts and Humanities – specifically anthropology and philosophy – introducing to debates on sustainability the notion of 'homo faber'. Our aim is threefold: (1) to invite creative thinking about the role that materiality and practice play in the constitution of alternative notions of 'being'; (2) to soften the anthropocentrism of western worldviews by considering the possibility of a different mode of humanity based upon "connection rather than separation, interdependence rather than autonomy" (Gibson-Graham, 2011:2), and (3) to encourage deeper reflection about the need for, and the challenge of interdisciplinary sustainability research.

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"[T]he environmental crisis forces upon us the insight which Descartes expelled from view, that the human subject, with its bundle of concepts, anxieties and aspirations, is recursively interfused with the planetary landscape".

[Hornberg, 1999: 145]

1. Introduction

This paper explicitly engages with recent debates in Ecological Economics on what mode of humanity and person the sustainability project requires (e.g. Becker, 2006; Siebenhüner, 2000) and responds to calls to widen our understanding of the human being beyond homo economicus (e.g. Bina and Guedes Vaz, 2011). Using the example of the increasing attention to well-being, both within policy and academic circles, we seek to contribute to current critical considerations of 'the sustainable person' (Becker, 2010, 2012). We do this by incorporating often neglected perspectives from disciplines rooted in the Arts and Humanities – specifically anthropology and philosophy – introducing to debates on sustainability the notion of 'homo faber'. Our aim is threefold: (1) to invite creative thinking about the role that materiality and practice play in the constitution of alternative notions of 'being'; (2) to soften the anthropocentrism of western worldviews by considering the possibility of a different mode of humanity based upon "connection rather than separation, interdependence rather than autonomy"

(Gibson-Graham, 2011:2), and (3) to encourage deeper reflection about the need for, and the challenge of interdisciplinary sustainability research.

The paper begins, in Section 2, with a brief critical review of current well-being research which, arguably, is premised upon a specific notion of 'what it means to be human'. Following this in Section 3, we discuss how the concept of human beings as rational economic actors is a reflection of Western and OECD realities, informed by homo economicus and informing the divide between Humanity and Nature. We demonstrate, therefore, that current well-being scholarship is similarly influenced and therefore contributes to perpetuating the unsustainability of contemporary society. Building upon this critique, and drawing on interdisciplinary debates on 'materiality' as well as data from craft research, in Section 4 we outline our novel conceptual framework, and discuss the importance and relevance of materiality and practice in the human experience. We do this by exploring 'making', which we define as the creative process of manual skill intimately bound up with materials and tools; and of 'practice', defined as "the repeated exercise or performance of an activity or skill so as to acquire or maintain proficiency in it" (Oxford online Dictionary).² Both making and practice, we suggest, are privileged modes of engagement with one's surroundings. In this discussion, we draw upon recent debates on materiality that typically lie outside the boundaries of Economics. Specifically, our paper is informed by an understanding of materiality arisen from a refusal to concede that only matter or materials are what make up life; rather, the idea of materiality reflects discussions which argue that the material and immaterial (body, intellect, senses, emotions, feelings) co-evolve and as such are inseparable.

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E-mail addresses: ef21@st-andrews.ac.uk (E. Ferraro), lar9@st-andrews.ac.uk (L. Reid).¹ Tel.: +44 1334 463912.² For a review and discussion of different theoretical understandings of practice, see Gherardi (2009).

Bringing our paper to a close in Section 5, we reflect on the importance of this new way of thinking for sustainability, and outline an emerging research agenda.

2. Well-being Research

Well-being is an area which has recently attracted significant political and academic interest. A variety of disciplines have tried to conceptualise, define, understand, and measure individual and countries' well-being (MacKian, 2009). In UK policy circles, such interest is symbolised by France's Stiglitz Report (Stiglitz et al., 2009) and the UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) 'Measuring National Well-being' Programme (ONS, 2012), with several other countries also having commissioned similar reports on national well-being (Atkinson et al., 2012a,b).

The terms objective, subjective, physical, mental, personal, social, and planetary, are common prefixes to the word 'well-being' and testify to the diverse and growing projects which have sought to explore, measure, and understand the term. However, the concept remains ill defined, contested and problematic. Indeed, the predominantly Anglophone and psychological scholarship on well-being lacks a single definition of the concept. Far from having a unitary framework, there are a variety of approaches that fit within the umbrella term 'well-being', each approach involving different conceptualizations in terms of scale, scope, and responsibilities (ibid; Cf. also Sointu, 2005). Whilst there is no single common definition, many of the approaches towards understanding well-being can be traced to ancient philosophical discussions related to hedonia and eudaimonia. Very briefly, since these concepts are well discussed elsewhere (Ryan and Deci, 2001), the former refers to the pursuit and experience of pleasure or happiness whilst the latter emphasises human flourishing and life satisfaction over time. Both approaches feature in the economic literature, exemplified by the work of Richard Layard (2005) on happiness and its determinants, and by Max-Neef (2010) and Thompson et al. (2013). In ecological economics specifically, but more widely in sustainability research, evidence from the studies framed within eudaimonic approaches, influenced by Easterlin's "paradox of affluency" (1974, 1995), are leading away from policy understandings of well-being as welfare, acknowledging that economic growth and material wealth should be seen as the means to a flourishing life, rather than an end in itself (Thompson et al., 2013). As many have already highlighted, human happiness and welfare are only partially an outcome of material pursuit and therefore a function of economic growth (e.g. Bina and Guedes Vaz, 2011; Frey, 2008). Instead, empirical studies show not only that after a certain level, continuous economic growth does not lead to 'happier' individual lives (Easterlin, 1995; Jackson, 2010), but that material pursuit and consumerism can produce more life dissatisfaction than satisfaction. This has also been confirmed by evidence from well-being research that demonstrates, amongst other things, that a lifestyle of 'voluntary simplicity' informed by 'intrinsic' values, i.e. non-materialistic values that guide individual choices, can enhance both personal and collective well-being (Warren Brown and Kasser, 2005).

A second feature of current well-being research is its emphasis on subjective well-being (SWB), defined as "a person's evaluation of his or her life. The valuation can be in terms of cognitive states such as satisfaction with one's marriage, work and life, and it can be in terms of on-going affect" (Diener et al., 1998:34, quoted in Conradson, 2012:17). This emphasis on personal and individual well-being is relatively recent. Sointu (2005), for example, provides a useful empirical chronology of changing well-being discourses in UK, from the 'body politics' to the 'body personal', exposing a transition to more individualistic understandings of well-being that place responsibility with the individual ('self-help', 'self-health'), inflating the importance of acting in one's own interest. Such individualistic emphasis, Sointu explains, gradually took place with the implementation of neoliberal economic policies that encouraged both the rise of consumer culture and a change in the perception of subjectivity from 'subjects as citizens' to 'subjects as consumers'.

Hence, Sointu writes, "...creating contentment is the responsibility of the individual, who is required to self-regulate and self-reflect in the production of this personal well-being" (2005:261). Yet, increasingly, empirical studies show both the limited impact of consumption on individuals' well-being and happiness (Bauman, 2007; Giddens, 1991) and the limits of GNP as an effective indicator of well-being (e.g. Spratt et al., 2009; Stiglitz et al., 2009).

The increasing scholarly debates and political interest in the 'economics of happiness' (cf. Frey and Stutzer, 2005), and the growing field of 'happiness studies' (with its own journal) typify an emerging area of scholarship dissatisfied with the pursuit of well-being as a utility maximising experience. Increasingly, and in reaction to the dominant psychological discourse around subjective personal well-being, well-being is being reframed as a holistic conception of positive human functioning that goes beyond materialist achievements and physiological or biomedical notions of health to encompass the emotional, social, spiritual dimensions of what it means to be human. However, even in such approaches where well-being is defined not by the absence of illness and disease, but by the positive qualities of life experiences, well-being is still considered as a quality that inheres to the individual and that is in itself individual in scale (Atkinson et al., 2012a,b). Thus, collective and planetary well-being do not typically enter mainstream debates on the topic (cf. Thompson et al., 2013).

Over the past thirty years, also debates about sustainability have shifted from an almost exclusive concern with how political actions can sustain economic growth (whilst simultaneously protecting the environment), to the acknowledgement that the current model of economic development, with growth at its core, is incompatible with the protection of the Earth's resources (Bina and La Camera, 2011; Jackson, 2010). The argument that human well-being can be maximised mainly through economic growth is thus further undermined and empirical data demonstrate it is fundamentally incompatible with planetary well-being (e.g. Jackson, 2010). Such scholarship highlights that any long-term strategy for the sustainability of the Earth needs to move beyond a critical reconsideration of the dominant economic paradigm to include an evaluation of the underlying belief system, ideology and key concepts that drive growth beyond the biosphere's capacity (Bina and Guedes Vaz, 2011; Jackson, 2010; Max-Neef, 2010). Indeed, it has been argued that "as individuals pursue aims they find satisfying or pleasurable, they may create conditions that make more formidable the attainment of well-being by others" (Ryan and Deci, 2001: 161).

It is our contention that the emphasis on subjective personal well-being is the outcome of the predominance of a specific view of human beings as autonomous and rationally acting individuals. Such mainstream conception of humanity has led to an emphasis on individualism with negative implications for the environment. In Section 3 below, we proceed to elaborate on these two points, by critically discussing the origins of the specific view of human beings as individuals and individualistically oriented, which we attribute to the notion of homo economicus. With the aim of situating our thinking, specifically showing the situated nature of the ideals that drive the economic growth paradigm, in the section below we trace a 'potted' history of mainstream economic thinking as we, an anthropologist and a human geographer, understand it.

3. Homo Economicus: A Brief Critique

The discipline of Economics, defined as "the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses" (Robbins, 1932:15 in Howson, 2004:413), has a long and complex history. Accordingly, Economics can be understood as assuming that all individuals are universally motivated by the aim of making the most of scarcely available resources. Since available means are scarce in relation to human wants, individuals must decide how best to use such resources. The capacity to take decisions that guarantee the maximum individual benefit, determines the

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