The Lived Economics of Love and a Spirituality for Every Day: Wealth Inequality, Anthropology, and Motivational Theory after Harlow's Monkeys

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Introduction

The current inequality of wealth is at an all-time high, and the best estimates indicate that inequality will only increase in future. This is true not only in North America but globally as well. A recent Global Wealth Report states that less than one percent of the world's adult population own just below forty percent of global household wealth.[1] In America, the top quintile own eighty-four percent of the country's wealth, while the lower two quintiles combined own less than one percent of it.[2] What are we to make of the widening gap between rich and poor? What, if anything, does it say about who we are as human beings?

In *The Heart of L'Arche: A Spirituality for Every Day*, Jean Vanier proposes a spirituality centered on what he calls "the mystery of the poor."[3] All human beings carry a burden of brokenness and deep needs, he argues, which cries out for healing through friendship. The real difference between the rich and the poor, aside from their financial status which is in plain sight, is that the rich are capable of hiding their brokenness from others and from themselves. It is difficult for them to own their own (true) poverty. The poor, by contrast, cannot hide it; they know too well that they are trapped in a broken self-image and stand in need of others. The acknowledgment of their situation—their inability to hide their predicament from themselves—is their gift. The poor, then, have something to give to the rich, and the rich have something to give to the poor; they need each other. For Vanier, the

[1] "Global wealth has soared 14% since 2010 to USD 231 trillion with the strongest growth in emerging markets": https://publications.credit-suisse.com/tasks/render/file/?fileID=F2425415-DCA7-80B8-EAD989AF9341D47E, accessed July 4, 2016.

[2] Michael I. Norton and Dan Ariely, "Building a Better America—One Quintile at a Time," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6, no. 9 (2001): 9-12.

[3] Jean Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche: A Spirituality for Every Day* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

good news of Jesus is that

> [H]e came to gather together in unity all the scattered children of God and give them fullness of life. He longs to put an end to hatred, to the preconceptions and fears that estrange individuals and groups. In this divided world he longs to create places of unity, reconciliation and peace, by inviting the rich to share and the poor to have hope. This is the mission of L'Arche, of Faith and Light and of other communities: to dismantle the walls that separate the weak from the strong, so that, together, they can recognize that they need each other and so be united.[4]

In support of Vanier's claims about the human condition and the vision of Jesus of Nazareth, I will argue that we need each other and that the task is to create places of reconciliation and peace.[5] Problematically, the currently reigning anthropology—*Homo economicus*, which sees human beings as units of production that (ideally) maximize revenue streams by using cost-benefit analysis—supports the resulting inequality between rich and poor; it does not support Vanier's spirituality for every day. This leaves economic theorists, theologians, and ordinary followers of Jesus with a tough choice: either live with a two-worlds dualism between the "real" economic world of every day and the "unreal" spiritual world of a gospel-oriented vision, or concede the dualism by giving up on one of those worlds.

I propose an alternative: if we cannot give up on the claim that the kingdom of God is a possible future reality for all humankind and a present reality for those who orient themselves after Jesus—what James McClendon calls the "baptist vision"[6]—we should look for an anthropology that supports Vanier's claim that the vision of Jesus offers a this-worldly, real spirituality for every day.[7] Therefore I must show that (1) there are problems with *Homo*

[4] Ibid., 26.

[5] L'Arche is not a church but an international movement dedicated to creating and growing homes, programs, and support networks with the intellectually disabled. Its presence suggests that one can take up the task of creating spaces of reconciliation and peace almost anywhere.

[6] James Wm. McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2012).

[7] The significance of this option is that it does not give up on either of the two wor(l)ds, economic or spiritual, arguing they both have a grip on reality. Along the way, however, I will need to shift the definitions of 'economics' and 'spirituality'—that is, I must define what it means to be human differently.

economicus and (2) there is an emerging, alternative anthropology, which I call *Homo caritas*, that is available even if not yet articulated. Much is at stake here. If we change our philosophical anthropology, we may also need to change much more than conceptions of economic theory and spirituality, for the simple reason that philosophical anthropology has inserted itself into our entire way of life.

First, using the insights of Michel Foucault, I will investigate the wide-reaching implications of how we came to think of human beings as essentially economic (*H. economicus*). This view's current pride of place is contingent and in principle open to reconsideration. My choice to follow Foucault may seem surprising, given the ultimate goals of this paper, because he was deeply suspicious of the essentialism and hegemonic politics often accompanying any account of "human nature." Foucault saw, perhaps better than anyone, the socio-political function of philosophical anthropology: its wide network of connections and the way it gets embodied in institutions and policies, becoming an integral part of a regime. As well, he noticed how economic theory takes an empirical turn as it attempts to transform itself into a science even as it simultaneously becomes involved in government policy. This turn is an important constructive path for the latter half of this paper, as it leads to what I call "lived economics."

Second, using Harry Harlow's ethological work with monkeys, I explore the beginnings of an alternative anthropology (*Homo caritas*). This too may seem surprising, because it raises questions about what can be learned about being human from studying monkeys. My sense is that our conception of human nature has become so overdetermined and locked in by the long history of theological and philosophical reflection, and by its role in the order of things, that it is nearly impossible to imagine alternatives. In using Harlow's studies, I hope to bypass much of this over-determination so that we might see ourselves in a fresh light. Like Harlow, we might grasp the importance of the lived experience of love in shaping who we are and how we navigate the world—by looking at monkeys.

By 'caritas,' I mean to signal a loving responsiveness towards each other, such that we experience a facing-of-life-together. According to *H. caritas*, the more fundamental human need than food or possessions is a felt sense of togetherness—to be loved. *H. caritas* suggests that what heals

and restores us—vulnerable as we are to becoming disfigured and to hiding our disfigurement through protective measures—is the dynamic, responsive dance characteristic of friendship. This view of the human being, emerging out of the lived economics of love, lends support to Vanier's spirituality for every day. It also has the great advantage of making contact with current motivation research, neuroscience, and perception studies. Aside from helping overcome a dualism, there are therefore good independent reasons to reject *H. economicus* and adopt *H. caritas*.

Unearthing a Contingent Philosophical Anthropology: *Homo Economicus*

The opening of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* offers a striking contrast between two rituals of punishment merely eighty years apart.[8] The first ritual is enacted before the main door of the Church of Paris on March 2, 1757. Convicted for attempting to kill Louis XV, the king of France, Robert-François Damiens was taken in a cart to the place of execution.[9] Foucault includes a long eye-witness account of the execution, but the short version is that Damiens was theatrically tortured, drawn and quartered, and finally had his limbs consumed by fire. The second ritual also takes place in Paris but inside the protective walls of the House of Young Prisoners. The ritual is a timetable outlining a daily eleven-hour schedule for the young prisoners to follow. It is a sequence of tasks such as dressing, eating, working, reading, praying, and undressing, each announced and initiated by drum-rolls.

Foucault discerns in these contrasting rituals two penal styles, two theories of law and crime, two understandings of the justification of the right to punish. One obvious difference between them is the location of torture. In the old penal style, torture was a public spectacle and it was important that many people see it. In the new style, correction is hidden and very few administer and witness it. Foucault names the new style the *carceral* system, and finds it in places other than the prison: schools, factories, and military academies participate in this system as well (which may explain why those buildings tend to look alike).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault does not investigate what caused

[8] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977).
[9] Ibid., 3.

the shift from one system to the other; he simply shows that one replaced the other, probably to highlight the contingent and arbitrary nature of the shift.[10] This change minimally had to include a different conception of what it means to be human, an alteration in philosophical anthropology. In the old style, human beings found their place and station in the great chain of being stretching from heaven to earth.[11] Heaven and earth were linked by priests and noblemen—most importantly, the pope and the king. To attempt to kill the king was to try to rupture the great chain of being and to rebel against the way *cosmopolis* is fundamentally ordered.[12] Torture and punishment *had* to be public: to instruct all who witness it never to commit such a crime. To be a good human being, you must accept your place in the overall order and be loyal to those above you.

In the new style, there is no such link between heaven and earth. Human beings have no station or inherent place in *cosmopolis*. Instead, they must understand who they are in terms of their property. The fundamental crime, the only one that actually counts as crime, is stealing—taking property that does not belong to you, even if it is someone else's life. This is why military academies, schools, factories, and prisons must proceed according to a timetable: it is the regulated, rule-following discipline that yields productivity. Prisoners work nine hours during their day because they must learn to (love?) work so that they can increase property and thus avoid the temptation to steal.[13] To be a good human being, you must engage in economic conduct—that is, you must understand yourself in economic

[10] This changes in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970), in which the author singles out economic theory and the adoption of *H. economicus* specifically as the reason for the shift. I focus on *Discipline and Punish* and on Michel Foucault, *Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) in order to bring out the contingency of *H. economicus* and its embeddedness in our way of life.

[11] See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1936).

[12] See Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

[13] In his interview with J.J. Brochier, Foucault argues that pointless work—work for work's own sake—was used to shape individuals into the image of the ideal laborer. See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 39-42.

terms. On this view, we are *Homo economicus*; we are what we (usably) own—capital.[14]

It did not take Foucault long to address this complex shift in anthropology. In *The Order of Things*, he discusses the role of biology, economics, and philology in constructing and articulating the modern conception of human nature.[15] In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, he discusses the effects of *Homo economicus* especially as it links with the political theory of liberalism and later neoliberalism.[16] He concludes that *H. economicus* and liberalism come together to form a totalizing vision of everything, a utopian vision for society and a how-to manual for social engineering that manifests itself in institutions and procedures.

What Foucault finds interesting is that in so doing, the discipline of economics itself undergoes a significant transformation: its subject matter becomes human behavior. Economics in Adam Smith and in Karl Marx is the analysis of mechanisms of production, exchange, capital, and labor. However, as economics moves to the center of governmental policy and social engineering, it adopts the task of "analyzing a form of human behavior and the internal rationality of this behavior."[17] Economics becomes the science of what we do and why we do it.

> Analysis must try to bring to light the calculation—which, moreover, may be unreasonable, blind, or inadequate—through which one or more individuals decided to allot given scarce resources to this end rather than another. Economics is therefore the analysis of processes; it is the analysis of an activity. So it is no longer the analysis of the historical logic of processes; it is the

[14] "You-are-what-you-usably-own" becomes a widespread view during the Enlightenment. See Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992) for the way in which forestry changes, and James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1998) for an account of changes in statecraft.

[15] See Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

[16] For Foucault, the feature of liberal and neoliberal statecraft is the government's theoretically informed awareness and involvement with the market.

[17] Foucault, *Biopolitics*, 223.

> analysis of the internal rationality, the strategic programming of individuals' activity.[18]

From an economic point of view, now the only relevant optic, the task is to understand the rationale of a worker's activity. Why does a worker engage in this activity instead of that one? The answer is always a calculation. Economic theory adopts the point of view of the worker, not as an object but as an active subject. Why do people work? They work, so the intuitive answer goes, to earn a wage, an income. Earning an income is now the only reason, the only real motivation, to engage in work.[19] Income is the product of a capital, where capital is defined as anything that can be the source of income. Capital, more concretely, is the total set of physical and psychological abilities to earn a wage; it is the human wage-earning machine that produces an income.

This view effectively sidesteps the Marxist analysis of workers as alienated from their work: workers cannot be alienated from the work, since they work to produce earnings for themselves. Nor can they be separated from their earning-machine, because they *are* that machine. A wage-earning machine produces an earnings stream. The earnings or revenue stream begins low when the machine is first being used, rises over time, and then tails off as the machine ages and becomes obsolete. The entire worker/wage-machine/earnings-stream complex should therefore be thought of as a whole—as an ensemble. An individual worker is consequently best imagined as an "enterprising unit." Foucault says that "an economy made up of enterprise-units, a society made up of enterprise-units, is at once the principle of decipherment linked to liberalism and its programming for rationalization of a society and an economy."[20]

On this view, we are all capitalists, and there is no fundamental difference between owners and workers, haves and have-nots. All face the same economic maximizing problem in life: How can I make the most earnings, given my abilities? This question enables us to conduct a totalizing analysis of the whole environment of a human being's life that measures and

[18] Ibid.

[19] Note that the worker here is understood as being motivated purely by external rewards. This will become problematic later. See below.

[20] Ibid., 225.

calculates that life in terms of costs (investments) and benefits (increase of revenue stream), the potentials and possibilities of investment in human capital. This is the fundamental human task from the economic point of view. It follows from this view and this anthropology that nothing is wrong or deplorable about the current inequality of wealth.[21] Rather chillingly, the present state of affairs makes good sense.

Monkey Business Part I: *Homo Economicus* in Crisis

Our investigation could now go in two directions. We could try to pursue an eventual fit between economic theory and the Kingdom of God along liberal lines, by teasing out how *H. economicus* supports and combines with neoliberalism to create a framework within which Kingdom-of-God-ish social policy could be constructed (a common Protestant strategy). Or we could advocate for a return to an older conception of *H. economicus* grounded in metaphors of gift-giving instead of commodified versions of buying and consuming, and then propose an alternative, sacramental theological view with an accompanying alternative political economy for critiquing the current state of things (a common Catholic strategy). These two possibilities have often been pursued.[22]

I wish to explore an alternative—a possibility opened up by ethology, the science that emerges out of looking closely at the life of an animal engaging its world. The reason for this empirical line of investigation is two-fold. First,

[21] Some economists recognize that there is something wrong. See Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013), and Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).

[22] For an overview of 20th-century theological ethics, see Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). On the side of a common "Protestant" strategy, see Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1930), and Robert Benne, *The Ethic of Democratic Capitalism: A Moral Reassessment* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1981). For a recent example of the "Catholic" strategy, see William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). The two categories do not imply church affiliation, so the Catholic Michael Novak can write *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), and the Methodist Daniel M. Bell, Jr. can write *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

it recognizes the fundamental significance of (philosophical) anthropology. How we think about who we are as human beings plays a central role in the shape of *cosmopolis*, our notion of the order of the universe and society, and how we discipline and punish. Second, it acknowledges that there is something right in new economic theory—looking at the *actual behavior* of an animal (human animal included) in order to understand who and what that animal is. This is the possibility explored by Charles Darwin in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. More recently, it is what philosopher Alva Noë calls "the biological view" as distinct from mechanical and dualist views. It was perhaps first articulated by Aristotle in his dictum that "the best method of investigation is to study things in the process of development from the beginning."[23]

There are many places to pick up that line of exploration. One is the work of Harry F. Harlow, who in the 1940s established one of the first laboratories for studying primate behavior.[24] He constructed two experiments relevant to our discussion: a puzzle-solving experiment and a mother experiment.[25] I will discuss the puzzle-experiment and its relation to economic theory first. Harlow and two other researchers gathered eight rhesus monkeys for a two-week experiment at the University of Wisconsin. They devised a simple mechanical puzzle, a lock on a door, which could be solved using three steps: pull out a pin, undo a hook, and then lift the hinged cover. It may sound simple, but it is not easy for a rhesus monkey. The puzzles were placed in the monkeys' cages to familiarize them in preparation for the tests, but immediately something very strange happened. Unprompted by any reward, the monkeys began playing with the puzzles. They showed determination, focus, and, surprisingly, enjoyment. By day thirteen, they solved the puzzles

[23] Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: John Murray, 1872). See Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads: Why You are Not Your Brain and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); and Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, 2, 1252a24.

[24] We can learn more about ourselves from studying primate behavior than we have thought. For an excellent account of the issues involved, including where and why analogies break down, see Robert Sapolsky, *Monkeyluv: And Other Essays on Our Lives as Animals* (New York: Scribner, 2005).

[25] See Deborah Blum, *Love at Goon Park: Harry Harlow and the Science of Affection* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2002).

in less than a minute.

Why was this surprising? The then reigning conception of animals and humans—of living things in general—was that behavior was motivated by biological drives and environmental stimulation. The biological drive was about food and sex, and the environmental stimulation was about external rewards and punishments. None of these factors was present in the experiment, however, which left the behavior entirely without explanation. The "solution," says Harlow, "did not lead to food, water or sex gratification."[26] The behavior manifested in this investigation, he concludes, "poses some interesting questions for motivation theory, since significant learning was attained and efficient performance was maintained without resort to special or extrinsic incentives."[27] Harlow speculated that perhaps the performance of the task itself provided sufficient enjoyment to explain the behavior. He suggested that the reward was intrinsic to the activity: the monkeys simply enjoyed solving puzzles.

If they enjoyed solving puzzles, Harlow reasoned, perhaps they would enjoy it even more and perform better if there were a food reward at the end, an incentive. But this did not turn out to be the case: the monkeys performed worse, sometimes much worse, when given incentives. Introduction of food into the experiment "served to disrupt performance, a phenomenon not reported in the literature."[28] The monkeys' behavior went strictly against what was predicted by motivational theory, and on this basis Harlow recommended that scientists should "close down large sections of our theoretical junkyard" in order to develop better accounts of motivation and behavior.[29]

The question to be raised here concerns the analogy between the behavior of rhesus monkeys and that of humans: Does Harlow's puzzle experiment tell us anything about what it means to be human? The answer is yes. Human beings consistently behave similarly to Harlow's monkeys—extrinsic incentives have negative effects on performance when engaging

[26] Harry Harlow, Margaret Kuenne Harlow, and Donald R. Meyer, "Learning Motivated by a Manipulation Drive," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 40 (1950): 228-34, 231.
[27] Ibid., 233-34.
[28] Ibid., 234.
[29] Ibid. For a perspective on Harlow's findings and economic theory, see Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009).

in complex tasks. Dan Ariely recently conducted a study in India to test the effectiveness of extrinsic incentives on behavior.[30] Researchers devised several tasks and offered rewards for reaching certain performance levels. They divided participants into three groups, offering each group a different level of reward for reaching performance targets. Theoretically, the group offered the greatest reward would be the most motivated and thus deliver the best performance, but actually it performed the worst. Ariely concluded there is no direct relationship between incentives and performance.

This finding is not isolated. Scholars at the London School of Economics recently analyzed fifty-one separate experimental studies of financial incentives in employment relations. They found "overwhelming evidence that these incentives may reduce an employee's natural inclination to complete a task and derive pleasure from doing so."[31] It gets worse: financial incentives may also "reduce ethical reasoning"—in particular, complying with fairness as a social norm. Current research suggests that whatever directs and motivates behavior, making calculated decisions to acquire more goods (being properly "incentivized") is not at the heart of it. In a now famous paper written forty years ago, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman suggested that many decisions are based on intuition.[32]

The deep challenge here is to the very idea of the human being as *H. economicus*. Economist Herbert Gintis states that as a discipline, economics

> fosters the belief that rationality implies self-interest, outcome-orientation, and time-consistency. If this were correct, we would have to call real-life humans hopelessly irrational.

[30] See Dan Ariely, Uri Gneezy, George Lowenstein, and Nina Mazar, "Large Stakes and Big Mistakes," Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Working Paper No. 05-11 (July 23, 2005). See also Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* (New York: Harper, 2008).

[31] "When performance-related pay backfires": www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/news/archives/-2009/06/performancepay.aspx, accessed July 4, 2016.

[32] Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases" *Science* 185 (1974): 1124-31. For a more recent treatment, see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011). Kahneman is the second psychologist to receive the Nobel prize in economics, an indication of the motivational-behavioral turn the discipline has taken. He argues that we have two systems for decision making: a fast, intuitive system and a slow, calculative one.

> The economist's treatment of rationality, however, cannot be supported. . . . [While] economic theory has much to offer . . . its contributions will be considerably more valuable when *H. economicus* is replaced by a more accurate model of individual choice and strategic interaction.[33]

Some economists, such as Bruno Frey, call for a revision of *H. economicus*.[34] Others, such as Gintis, propose an entirely new human, *Homo reciprocans*, who "comes to strategic interactions with a propensity to cooperate, responds to cooperative behavior by maintaining or increasing his level of cooperation, and responds to non-cooperative behavior by retaliating against the 'offenders,' even at a personal cost."[35] *H. reciprocans* is therefore neither a selfless altruist nor a selfish hedonist.[36]

For roughly the past fifteen years, economists have been disagreeing about the nature of the human being. This is not unimportant, because political theory (neoliberalism), conceptions of rationality (calculative rationality), ethics (rational choice theory), and possibly the entire carceral system (prisons, schools, factories, and military academies) are intricately connected to a conception of the human being as *H. economicus*. If the philosophical anthropology were to change, adjustments would have to be made throughout the web of beliefs. It is a high-stakes game.

Monkey Business Part II: The Chain of Love

For an alternative understanding of motivation and what it might mean to be human, I will return to Harlow and the second, better known, experiment. After the puzzle experiment, he had become suspicious that curiosity might be a more potent motivating force than food. During a delayed response experiment, graduate student Robert Butler added a mirror so he could see

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[33] Herbert Gintis, "Beyond *Homo economicus*: Evidence from Experimental Economics," *Ecological Economics* 35 (2000): 311-22, 320.

[34] Bruno Frey, *Not Just For the Money: An Economic Theory of Personal Motivation* (Brookfield, VT: Edward Elgar, 1997)

[35] Gintis, "Beyond *Homo economicus*," 311-22, 316.

[36] *H. reciprocans* would not be a Platonist either, since Socrates rejects the ethics of retaliation in Book I of *The Republic*. Tit-for-tat is *not* the most successful strategy. See Martin Nowak and Roger Highfield, *SuperCooperators: Altruism, Evolution, and Why We Need Each Other to Succeed* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

what the monkeys were doing during the delay. What he saw astonished him. Butler and the monkeys found themselves looking at each other. The monkeys were so interested in him that they lost their concentration, fumbled through their challenges, and abandoned their food rewards.

Butler devised a box—later named the "Butler Box"—with movable windows. When pushed, a window would slide open for thirty seconds, allowing the monkeys to see their surrounding world. In one experiment, Butler alternated placing food or an electric train making noises outside the window. The monkeys wanted to look at the food, but looking at the train became an obsession. "The windows flew up and down like winking eyelids."[37] In one experiment, a monkey opened the window just to look at the people in the room.

Not long after that, Harlow became interested in the social nature of his monkeys and in mother love. He used the Butler Box in new experiments. Strange trains and strange people in the room evoked curiosity in the animals, but were nothing compared "to the way the baby monkeys would doggedly raise the panel to see their mother's face."[38] They would open the window ceaselessly throughout the day. One opened it for nineteen hours straight. Harlow started calling the box a "love machine."[39]

Harlow then became interested in experiments directed at love and bonding. Can love be reduced to mechanisms (food, sex, reward, and punishment)? Or is it, like curiosity, a separate source of motivation? If so, how does it compare with other sources of motivation in strength? While discussing love in a scientific context was almost impossible in the 1950s,[40] it is still difficult to address love outside of literary, philosophical, or theological contexts and be taken seriously. Harlow had to devise an experiment that was both convincing and conclusive. His now familiar cloth-mother and wire-mother experiment was it. Monkeys were given a choice between a

[37] Blum, *Love at Goon Park*, 110.
[38] Ibid., 111.
[39] Harry Harlow, "The Nature of Love," *The American Psychologist* 13 (1958): 673-85, 680.
[40] There were notable exceptions. See, for example, Pitirim Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love: Types, Factors, and Techniques of Moral Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954). Sorokin's work has been picked up by Stephen G. Post; see his *Unlimited Love: Altruism, Compassion, and Service* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2003). These exceptions prove the rule.

cloth-mother that did not have food to give and a wire-mother that did. If baby monkeys were indifferent to touch, caring only for food, they would prefer the wire-mother. The result was unequivocal: monkeys as young as five days old would instantly go to the cloth-mother. As they got older, they found ways of holding onto her while feeding so as not to lose the felt security of touch. In a 1958 speech, "The Nature of Love," Harlow drew this conclusion: "These data make it obvious that contact comfort is a variable of overwhelming importance . . . whereas lactation is a variable of negligible importance."[41] The need for love is much stronger than the need for food.[42]

The simple experiment could be manipulated in seemingly endless ways to produce significant data. In one variation, researchers introduced a scary object (such as a toy dog barking) into the lab to observe fear response behavior. The monkeys would run, sometimes even fly, to the cloth-mother, "burrowing their faces into that warm fluffy body, closing their eyes."[43] She had become their base camp. They would sleep on her at night, and during the day while exploring the cage they would check that she was still there. This led to an important discovery: the link between curiosity and a felt sense of safety. As long as the cloth-mother was present, the monkeys would confidently explore the room. Without her, they behaved as lost and scared. This link was confirmed by variations in which the wire-mother replaced her. The wire-mother provided no felt sense of safety and was just another scary object, even for monkeys accustomed to being fed by her. They looked and behaved like abandoned children, seeking the wall and corners for safety.

Monkeys raised by the cloth-mother did not, however, grow up to become healthy, thriving adults. While she could provide initial comfort and touch, she was missing a crucial ingredient for their development: interactive responsiveness. Having noticed this, Harlow explored the dark side of love—what its absence can take away. Through isolation experiments lasting up to a year, researchers created monkeys that were emotionally, physically, and socially paralyzed: they did not explore their world or play, and barely even

[41] Harlow, "The Nature of Love," 675.

[42] Harry Harlow and Abraham Maslow were very close friends but fundamentally disagreed about human motivation. See Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954).

[43] Blum, "Love at Goon Park," 161.

moved. In one variation, researchers added hopelessness to the paralyzing emotional mix by placing a monkey in an inverted pyramid chamber from which it was impossible to escape. After only a couple of days, normal healthy monkeys could be turned into withdrawn, depressed, and scared loners.

Harlow wondered whether the loners could ever become healthy, thriving monkeys again. It would be disastrous to re-introduce the loners to peers—they would be instant targets for bullying—but what if he paired them with three-month-old youngsters raised on the cloth-mother? These young monkeys would gaze lovingly at the cloth-mother for hours, they cuddled, and they were just starting to become interested in social play. Harlow found that with these monkeys' help, the loners could very slowly regain their old monkey self. By studying monkeys, he discovered the healing power of friendship and how it can restore a broken sense of self.

The Lived Economics of Love: The Benefit of Holding Hands

The paper began by unearthing the conception of *H. economicus*, which has embedded itself in social policy without interrogation until quite recently when its explanatory and predictive capacities were challenged by research. Some economists have begun looking for an alternative conception of human nature. A clue to such an alternative is found in Harlow's discovery that incentives do not improve problem-solving performance in monkeys. Their confident and curious engagement with the world was related to a felt sense of comfort and social connection, not to food or rewards. It was possible radically to alter their engagement with the world—to shut everything down—through isolation. A monkey's social narrative, what Harlow thought of as "a chain of love" starting with the mother-infant link, profoundly shapes its motivational capacity to engage the world and to solve transactional problems. The deep story of behavior for monkeys and, I suggest, for humans, is a love story.[44]

[44] The conclusion of the vast mother-infant literature is that the need for social interactions characterized by loving responsiveness is even more true for human beings. John Bowlby's work on attachment theory as a theoretical framework is important here. See, for example, John Bowlby, "The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 39 (1958): 350-73. For an attempt to bring attachment theory into conversation with Anabaptism, see Christian and Annmarie Early, eds., *Integrating the New Science of Love and a Spirituality of Peace* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013).

Economic theory has had an inadequate conception of the human, at least partly because it ignores the fact that human beings are mammals, born vulnerable and dependent, who come to every situation with a social love narrative profoundly shaping their motivational capacity to engage the world and thus their behavior. If economic theory were to take this into account, it would begin to give a much more adequate account of human behavior in transactional settings.

Does the idea that human beings are best understood as having a social love narrative spell an end to viewing their behavior economically? No, and I want to explore the reason for thinking so, namely that life together takes less energy than life alone. Life in social community makes good economic sense, if by "economic" is meant the energy it takes to solve the problems of being alive. If life together is good for us, then community maintenance becomes essential, a matter of life and death. The ancient understanding of *oikonomia* is "the rules of the household," which have the ethical and political goal of sustaining our shared life. That life together is less costly, and good for us, because of who we are offers a richer conception of economics that resonates deeply with the good news of Jesus of Nazareth as Jean Vanier describes it.

To show that life together is more economical than life alone, bio-energetically speaking, I will draw on the ethological work of James Coan, who has studied the effects of hand-holding.[45] He sends a person into an fMRI machine, which randomly shows the subject an image (a red X or a blue O). If shown a red X, there is a twenty percent likelihood that the subject will receive a painful electric shock. This scares the brain. The fMRI machine takes images of the scared brain to monitor its level of activity and its location compared to the same brain at rest. Coan does this with subjects in three conditions: alone, holding the hand of a stranger, and holding the hand of a partner. He found that the brain is most active during the alone condition, less active in the stranger condition, and much less active in the partner condition. This is predicted by the "down regulation" model. In this model, when the brain is frightened, it perceives that it has a number of tasks to solve (for example, get the body ready to run), thus regulating activity up.

[45] James Coan, "The Social Regulation of Emotion," in *Integrating the New Science of Love and a Spirituality of Peace*, 42-59.

Social contact, however, activates a parallel system regulating activity down. In this model, the brain responds the same way to a scare prompt, but the social situation may also provide a down-regulation, somewhat like stepping on the brakes and the accelerator at the same time.

However, the problem with the down-regulation model is that after looking for the actual mechanism and the systems involved, researchers have found nothing. Coan argues they are looking for something that is not there. The model seems persuasive because of a presupposition that the alone condition is the normal starting place, the baseline, and that the partner condition adds something to it. But what if it is the other way around, namely that the alone condition takes something away from the social condition? What if the brain gets more active the more disconnected the human being is, because the size of the trouble (the number of problems to solve and their perceived severity) is increasing? Coan calls his model *social baseline* theory. It claims that we are meant to face life being socially connected, because it takes much less energy. Love, in short, is bio-energetically green.

I suggest calling this the "lived economics of love," where "lived economics" describes the real energy cost of solving the problems of life for an organism, and "love" describes the dynamic relational responsiveness between two living beings (parent-child, partner-partner, friend-friend) that creates a felt sense of togetherness rather than aloneness. In real life, to be alone is stressful and dangerous—a condition profoundly shaping how we engage the world and our decisions in particular situations. Our love narrative, the story of the twists and turns of our felt sense of togetherness or aloneness with other living beings, is the most fundamental aspect of who we are and how we behave. It impacts how the world shows up for us and informs everything that we do in it. We are *Homo caritas*.

I must make two important qualifications. First, to argue that the human being is best understood as *H. caritas* is not to signal a new romanticism. Instead, it highlights how vulnerable human beings are and the nature of their vulnerability. It helps explain why betrayal is so devastating, why we do seemingly crazy and convoluted things to try to protect ourselves from it, and how those things make connecting to others so difficult. It allows us to acknowledge the ways things go wrong, ways in which lack of care and protective measures disfigure who we are. It is to see, with Harlow,

the darkness of what a lack of love can take away from us and how quickly it can happen. Second, to call the human being *H. caritas* is not to signal a new idealism. The emphasis is not on avoiding ruptures in the chain of love but on what it takes to repair them. Even from a highly disfigured place it is possible to come back with the help of patient, caring friends and so regain a sense of self. The appropriate mood is neither romanticism nor idealism, but honest and hopeful realism.

Conclusion

I have argued that the conception of *Homo economicus* is inadequate. Economists themselves are realizing this. I have also suggested, using the insights of Harlow's "chain of love" and Coan's "social baseline theory," that a better account of human nature is to think of human beings as *Homo caritas*—vulnerable beings who need a sense of togetherness to thrive—and to understand economics not as capital, production, and exchange but as the lived economics of solving life's problems. This alternative economics-*cum*-anthropology is not fully articulated—it is barely more than a theoretical possibility—yet it seems to cohere with Vanier's interpretation of the vision of Jesus and its embodiment in the L'Arche community.

The prophets of Israel were surely right to cry out against the deep and unjust divides of their world, and we ought to cry out against the divides of our world as well. In Vanier's jubilee vision, the rich have gifts to offer the poor, but there is an important sense in which the rich are destroyed in the unity that Vanier imagines—"rich" understood here as a category defined as separate and above the "poor." As Ched Myers says, "the kingdom of God is simply that social condition in which there are no rich and poor."[46] The reason it is difficult for many rich to enter the kingdom of God is that they want to remain rich—even if it will be their undoing. A *H. caritas* anthropology points with Vanier to the real human need: a sense of togetherness and a sense of being cared for, loved, in the mundanity of life. It is a spiritual ethics, an *oikonomia*, for every day.

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[46] Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Washington, DC: Tell the Word, 2002).