

1: HOMO ECOLOGICUS, HOMO ECONOMICUS, HOMO POETICUS

Homo Ecologicus and Homo Economicus

Ecology: the science of the economy of animals and plants.

Oxford English Dictionary

ECOLOGICAL thinking sees the properties and behaviours of parts as determined by the pattern of the whole. Rather than look at an individual species, we look at the interactions of all the organisms, and how they are maintained by, and themselves maintain, the overall flows of resources. Thus the trees on a mountainside themselves play a part in the formation of the clouds and rainfall that maintain them and that contribute to the viability of other species around them. Lose the trees and the cycle of rain is lost, the heat of the sun dries the ground, and the whole ecosystem moves to a much lower level of fecundity.

Economic thinking is particularly concerned with issues of resources and how they are allocated. Consideration of such issues lies naturally within an ecological framework. However, in our common parlance, ‘the economy’ has come to refer to the pattern of activity that is supported by our use of money, and we generally have money in mind when we refer to ‘economic value’. From this habit of language and thought much confusion arises that this set of essays is trying to clear up. We will be developing the idea of an economy in later essays, but for now, in order to introduce the discussion, we’ll stay with the conventional sense of ‘an economy’ to mean what goes on when we take things to market and trade them for money.

In the case of natural resources it is very clear that the ecosystem ‘works’ without the need for any money to circulate; it is the input of energy from the sun, and the

1: Homo Ecologicus, Homo Economicus, Homo Poeticus

flow of resources such as water through rainfall, and other material exchanges that sustain it. When an ecosystem interacts with the economy then an additional dynamic is set up. If you want to log a forest for timber sustainably then you must understand the ecosystem that maintains its viability, or you will be in danger of taking too much from it, and tipping it into decline.

What is this economic dynamic – what happens when an ecosystem becomes entwined with economic activity? At the simplest level, some components of the ecosystem become detached from their role in the system, in which they and the system maintain each other through their mutual and original properties, and get put to some ‘other’ use which bears no systemic relationship to the health or viability of the original system.



I cut down a tree and take it away to make furniture. Two things happened here: the tree came down, and it was removed. The first would happen naturally at some point, but its removal inevitably changes the ecosystem. The pattern of resource circulation that was a part of the system that produced the tree has been disturbed. The cutting down might also matter because the seeds might not yet have been

Economies of Life

produced; or they might need fire to germinate, and felling may change the undergrowth such that the conditions for fire and germination are lost, etc.

The basic point is that ecosystems do not exist 'for' any purpose – they just are what they are, and they develop along certain paths based on the conditions they are in. Once we start to connect them with economies, in which parts of them are 'for something' that lies outside the ecosystem, then we perturb them, and thereby we become instrumental in their continued viability. We create a mutual dependence between our own needs and the needs of the ecosystem. If we need it for something, to make furniture or whatever, then it also needs us to ensure that our perturbations don't destroy its essential system properties. At the most basic level our responsibility is to ensure we do not draw down too much resource at once, and that we allow the system time to 'recover'; in other words, we rely on some self-maintaining, homeostatic process to put back the things we are removing, or remove the things we are dumping.

A more sophisticated understanding of the mutual relationship between an economy and the ecosystems on which it depends would be to start to think of the economic activity as an integral component of the larger ecosystem, so that the cycles of activity all become mutually sustaining. This is the way of some (not all) traditional cultures of sustainable agriculture, in which resources are returned to the soil in closed cycles. It is a way, too, that is in the vanguard of thinking about the economic sustainability of modern economies under the general notion of 'industrial ecology' which seeks to see all economic activity through the pattern of mutually self-maintaining systems, just like natural ecosystems, and in balance with those natural ecosystems on which they depend.

What ecological and economic approaches share is that they look at our lives as coordinated patterns of activity. Coordination is a useful concept because it allows us to

1: Homo Ecologicus, Homo Economicus, Homo Poeticus

see how patterns arise amongst activities that may be any mixture of collaborative and competitive – the lives of predators and prey are coordinated but competitive, while bees and flowers are coordinated and collaborative. The core of what we have to do is to bring this approach to bear on the entire pattern of our lives, without first splitting it up into a part that we call ‘ecological’ and another part that we call ‘economic’. We only live one life, but we take part in many patterns. How are all these patterns coordinated? How might we view every pattern both ecologically and economically?

To get a sense of this approach let’s start with a book reading circle – a simple component of a healthy ecosystem in which literature circulates. People have got together to discuss the draft of a new book by one of the members. The book itself is the result of a ‘making’ – the sustained use of the imagination on the part of the author to bring forth a world. Each word put in its place brings meanings and echoes of meanings together from the entire cultural context, both private to the author and shared with the surrounding society. As the book is read and commented on, meaning is made in the room, with each participant bringing their unique response to the book into the conversation, bringing shades of meaning into play. Everyone who joins the conversation changes the conversation. Each utterance is itself a fleeting ‘making’ – it brings together strands of meaning and weaves them into the emerging shared pattern in the room. Perhaps one relates the book to a personal anecdote, another hears similarities with the technique of another writer, and a third explores what appears to be a psychological inconsistency in the plot, and so on.

As meaning is made, transformed, woven, the cultural world of each person is further enriched. The next conversation in this or another book circle will be different because of this encounter. The author will have become aware of new ripples of meaning, previously unimagined.

Economies of Life

Perhaps one of the members is a teacher and goes back to the classroom with a refreshed understanding and a new approach to the works to be taught. Another finds the story quite haunting, throwing a fresh light on life, and mentions it to a friend facing a challenge in their life. And so the ripples spread, reflect, interfere, add and cancel, reverberating through the cultural ecosystem of meaning.

We can view this activity through the lens of both ecological and economic language.

Why is it helpful to view this as an ecosystem? Because, in the account we have just given, the meaning both enriches and is enriched by the encounters of all the actors in the system; it circulates amongst them. It is traded in its own terms rather than translated into any proxy. There are several ways to see this.

First, the only way to enhance the conversation was for each member to engage with it as deeply as possible, bringing to it their own capacity to build on and enrich the meaning in the room. The only inputs of importance were their own experience, their own webs of significance and the connections they could make between them and the conversation. Just as you cannot make the flower grow by giving it money – you must give it air, light, water – so you cannot make the conversation grow by giving it anything except the meaning from which it is formed.

Second, although there were ‘outcomes’ in the lives of the people who took part, these were incidental and unplanned to the event itself. No-one could be responsible for these outcomes except the people who created them post facto. This is just like saying that as a flower grows in the garden it is constantly interacting with all the other plants and insects around it, and with the weather, and each interaction plays its part in creating the conditions of growth for this particular plant in this particular place – growth, however, which only it can do.

1: Homo Ecologicus, Homo Economicus, Homo Poeticus

Third, any attempt to turn the meaning into being ‘for’ something will, like taking a tree for wood from a forest, change the basis of the ecosystem. Suppose the author takes the comments and quotes them on their website to promote the book. Or go further, and suppose that the friends were invited round and given a meal to discuss the book just for this purpose. Then there is no reason to suppose they will not have a good and stimulating conversation. However, by connecting the conversation to this extrinsic goal there is a breaking of systemic connections. It is likely that just like taking a tree from a forest, the reading circle can regenerate, but if time after time the circle is used purely as a marketing meeting to harvest promotional quotes, then it will probably degrade and lose its vitality. This process is simply the result of connecting the functioning of an ecosystem to another process that deflects some of the essential circulation of energy and resources for a different purpose.

Looking back at this ecological description we can equally read it as an economic one.

First, there was an activity of sharing and exchanging going on, in that each person brought their own experience to bear, and took away new understandings for themselves. Second, the outcomes in their lives represented the transition from a shared process of the conversation to some sort of ‘use’ value, just as happens when we bring something home from the market. And finally, we do of course move our cultural outputs to and fro between embedding them in the act of making artistic meaning, and promoting them as economic products, and we have found ways to do this that mostly work quite well for us. The issue really is one of ensuring that the relationship between different uses does not damage the integrity of the systems.

Homo Poeticus – making the patterns of our lives

We learn words by rote, but not their meaning; that must be paid for with our life-blood, and printed in the subtle fibres of our nerves.

Latimer, in *The Lifted Veil*, George Eliot

IMAGINE, you enter a room where a conversation is going on. The boundary of the conversation has now shifted, bringing you from outside to inside. Even if you say nothing you have already changed the conversation by being within it. You have changed the significance of what is said, because your own lived experience now interacts with those present to shade the meaning of every word: an innocent joke may now be too near the bone, an opinion may become a judgement, or a serious intent may now seem merely a playful possibility. The integrity of the conversation now has you as a living participant in its creation. Something different will come of it.

Two living systems cannot interact without consequence. Their fields of meaning connect, and each now finds itself laying down a new path in the walking³: will our paths merge, cross, diverge; is that for good or for ill, and who shall say?

Where does the meaning in a conversation come from? What has been traded? Words pass between us, but meaning does not travel from one person to another, like a piece of traded goods in exchange for money; it is made in the moment, borrowing from the lived history of everyone in the room, and it lives on in the new patterns of significance that each person takes away.

We encounter the world through our senses from a particular point of view. We find ourselves within a particular horizon, in a particular place. No matter how hard we try, we cannot see anything from all sides at once. All our sense of the world arises from this embodied, active, self-centred relationship to the world; our awareness of the world

1: Homo Ecologicus, Homo Economicus, Homo Poeticus

and of ourselves arise together, each mutually determining the other.

We communicate about experience in two sorts of language. Turning away from our selves, exploring the physical world, we use our reason to bring order and comprehension to our perceptions, removing our particular, contingent point of view. Although the sun appears to go around the earth, and some of the stars appear to wander erratically through the sky, we find that we can restore consistency by de-centring our perceptions and conceiving of a sun-centred solar system. In such efforts we aim to remove from our conceptions the significance of the world for our own particular selves. What is true is what is true for all people at all times. This is the scientific project. How far we might bring this way of thinking back to the heart of ourselves we do not yet know. This is the language of science spoken by Homo Ecologicus and Homo Economicus.

Turning towards our selves as living, contingent beings, we find life proceeds through many individuals, and each person is both an instance of the old and a birth of the new, enacting new possibilities of life. My particular point of view is of ultimate relevance to me, where I am now: shall I take this path or that, love this person, die for this idea? In each choice I enact meaning in the world for this particular, peculiar contingent self that I am. I explore the possibilities for my life, and in so doing I change not only my path, but the path of the world for all, because I am part of the world. What is true is what is true for me, but also for you, for us, for us all, and is always in motion, never finally resolved.

This is the language of Homo Poeticus – the maker of meaning. It concerns the perpetual dilemma dance of every life between the demands of being for itself and being as part of the whole within which all life goes forward. We share life, but must each live our own. We are part of the pattern, but must determine the possibilities of that pattern for our own self.

Economies of Life

There is no shortcut to finding the meaning of love, pain, happiness, or any other inalienable quality of our lives. They cannot be traded, but they can be brought into shared stories that we tell each other, and that make us what we are. This language must always be in motion, linking one life to another, so that its meaning can be constantly remade through the encounter of each life with the possibilities in front of it, both for itself, and for the whole.

We have banks that coin the currency of trade in those things we can pass among us. We have art that coins meaning that we can share only by living it, bringing it alongside the choices that we must make of which song to sing, which story to join. How can we speak both languages with integrity? That is the subject of the remaining essays.