

Transcript

Upstream Podcast

Episode 9: Debunking the Myth of *Homo Economicus*

Featured Guests:

Bayo Akomolafe — Philosopher, author, professor, and organizer currently based in India

David Sloan Wilson — Evolutionary biologist and a Professor of Biological Sciences and Anthropology at Binghamton University in New York.

George Monbiot — Journalist and author of "Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis"

Kate Raworth — Renegade economist and author of "Doughnut Economics"

Matt Christman — Co-host of the Chapo Traphouse podcast

Peter Fleming — Professor in organization theory and author of "The Death of Homo economicus"

Tom Crompton — Co-director of the Common Cause Foundation

Vas* — Former economics student

Yuan Yang — Founder of Rethinking Economics

*Vas declined to provide her last name

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[Upstream Theme Music - Lanterns]

[River sounds]

Men's and Women's voices: You are listening to Upstream.

Della Duncan: A radio documentary series that invites you to unlearn everything you thought you knew about economics. I'm Della Duncan.

Robert Raymond: And I'm Robert Raymond.

Della Duncan: Join us, as we journey upstream.

Men's and Women's voices: To the heart of our economic system and discover cutting edge stories of game-changing solutions based on connection, resilience, and prosperity for all.

[Fade out music]

Vas [VT1.wav 00:04:30]: Ok, I'm Vas, I go to a school, a private school in the Bay Area, and right now we're outside of the business school on campus about to go in.

Della Duncan: And what's the meaning of this business school to you.

Vas: Um, a lot of libertarians walking in and out, yeah, and my economics classes.

Robert Raymond: You were a major?

Vas: Yeah, when I was a major, yes, I used to have my classes here, probably should have said that first.

Robert Raymond: Let's go in.

Della Duncan: As we entered, we couldn't help but notice that the newly constructed business school was by far the flashiest building on campus...

Vas: So I came into college as an economics student, and I remained so for almost two years. But I think that those two years worth of classes were very alienating and frustrating as I was also being exposed to community organizing and very different ideas of structuring our economy, while in the classrooms capitalism was a given, which is very alienating and again, frustrating.

My first economics class, my lecturer was great for what he was teaching. But, I think there were like these little things happening in the classroom that were very frustrating. For example, I think like Econ 101, you go over price floors and price ceilings and a minimum wage and someone just said, in class, that, "Oh, if you're treating your workers badly, I think customers should just leave Yelp reviews, like that's gonna fix everything because people are not going to go to that restaurant based on Yelp reviews." And that just did not make sense to me. And I was so frustrated and I was trying to say something in class, but I kept getting dismissed. So I think that's where it kind of started, was just lecturers validating a clearly very libertarian point of view and dismissing everything else in class. So I am no longer an economics major. I'm a sociology and math major.

[Fade in background sounds from the tour]

Della Duncan: As we wandered around the “Bank of America Commons” located in the business school foyer, we came across a recruiting pamphlet describing the program that Vas had been enrolled in.

Vas: “The economics major provides a rigorous training in how to analyze important issues based on theory and data and how individuals, firms, and policy makers can use these methods to make good decisions.”

Della: Anything stand out to you from that description?

Vas: Good decisions? I don’t know if a lot of people graduating from this school with economics degrees are making good decisions...

[Elevator Music]

Della Duncan: Vas is not wrong. Several research studies have shown that students who study mainstream economics are likely to graduate making decisions that benefit themselves at the expense of the common good.

One study found that altruism drops among students who study economics. In their first year, economics students ranked values like helpfulness, honesty, loyalty, and responsibility equal to their counterparts, but after just two years in their major, they ranked these values as significantly less important than their peers.

In another study, students of various disciplines came across an envelope filled with money on the ground. Researchers were curious about who would turn in the lost envelope to the front desk. Economics students were the most likely to be deceitful and keep the money AND the most likely to think all others would do the same.

Other studies have shown that in general, economics students have a greater acceptance of greed. In one study, economics majors and students who had taken at least three economics courses were more likely than their peers to rate greed as “generally good,” “correct,” and “moral.”

And it’s not just economics students: economics professors give less money to charity than professors in any other field.

One of the reasons for this is that mainstream economics is based on an ideology that wildly simplifies and in many ways mischaracterizes who we are as humans. And just what is that ideology?

[Homo economicus monage]

[Fade out elevator music]

Della Duncan: The term *Homo economicus*, or economic man, is a core principle in mainstream economic thinking. It's a portrayal of humans as being inherently rational, greedy, and self-interested.

This idea is the main reason why studying economics breeds greed. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. If dominant economic theory tells people that they are selfish, then it's no surprise that they would start acting accordingly. And it's not just affecting economics students — *Homo economicus* is deeply embedded in the DNA of economics as a discipline, but it's also baked into our institutions, our politics, our news — and *our minds*.

Robert and I first got interested in the idea of *Homo economicus* when we started noticing a consistent barrier that many people have with the possibility of imagining a more just, solidaristic, and sustainable economic future, stems from their assumptions about human nature. Time after time, we've heard — “But, humans are naturally selfish, so any system based on trust, equity, and true democracy would never work.”

Where did the idea of *Homo economicus* come from? Why is it so embedded in mainstream economic thinking? And most importantly, is it true? Are we *Homo economicus*? Or are we the opposite — kind, compassionate, altruistic beings whose good nature has been thwarted by a mistaken view of our own humanity? Or is the truth somewhere in between? These are some of the questions we will be exploring in this episode, “Debunking the Myth of *Homo economicus*.”

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Yuan Yang: My journey in economics began as an 18 year old as an undergraduate at Oxford University.

Della Duncan: Yuan Yang, a correspondent for the Financial Times living in Beijing, had a similar experience to Vas while pursuing her undergraduate degree in Economics.

Yuan Yang: I loved my time there, but it became very apparent to me the economics that we were being taught, and this is back in 2008 at the peak of the financial crisis, was not mirroring what was going on in the economy around us.

Della Duncan: After graduating from Oxford, Yuan went on to not only get a Master's but also a PhD in economics.

Yuan Yang: The more that I studied economics and the more that I got interested in politics and the way that economic policy affects society, the more it seemed that there were gaps in our curriculum, huge gaps that couldn't understand the ongoing banking crisis. And not only that, but other crises — crises of the environment, of inequality, and

that the economics we were being taught really was not fit for purpose. It was not training economics students to be able to grapple with the real economy. I would say, “Ok, I understand this model. I’m pretty sure I understand this theory, but can you give us an instance where this theory has helped us understand the real world?” And quite often there wouldn’t be a very good answer to that question.

Della Duncan: Yuan’s experience inspired her to co-found Rethinking Economics, a student-led campaign that’s changing how economics is taught in universities around the world.

Yuan Yang: One crucial economics assumption to rethink is the way that we talk about *Homo economicus* or economic man. And in the modelling that we do, we usually assume a self-interested, rational agent who is able to make quite complex calculations about their lifetime income or lifetime happiness and maximize and optimize over that long time period. There are some strengths to this approach, it’s very, very simplistic, which actually can be a strength in modeling, it reduces problems down to this one issue, and it means you can go quite far, it’s a very powerful tool for analyzing situations.

But we’re not at a stage where we can say these are the fundamental physical laws of nature when it comes to economics, and so long as we follow these laws of motion, we’ll be able to model an economic situation properly. So Any rethinking of the idea of *Homo economicus* takes us out of uncharted territory when it comes to how economic models work because quickly if you start to fill in all these axioms, if you start to, for example, make people not too self-interested but interested in the welfare of people around them, a lot of basic models will not work anymore mathematically.

Della Duncan: We asked Yuan for an example of when the model didn’t match reality.

Yuan Yang: In many developing countries there — economists have for a while been puzzled about why people spend so much on weddings. So you can imagine it as a subsistence economy, say, in rural China, people hardly earn enough income to support themselves, but they’re very willing to go into a huge amount of debt or to sacrifice basic kind of health needs like medicines or food in order to save up to throw a huge party when their son or daughter gets married.

Now, there’s been a lot of kind of very puzzled economics papers written about this phenomenon. And in fact, in some models, economists have pointed out this is not very rational because if you were to save the money that you spent on a wedding and use it to invest in machinery for your farm or a small business or some other kind of small capital investment that would give you a greater lifetime return on your income, you could potentially escape the poverty trap, you could potentially increase your lifetime earnings and your overall health and well-being. So why are poor people being so irrational or, you know, put in other terms, like, why are these people living in Third World countries so dumb? I mean, that’s not how economists present it. But you can see from how I describe that the attitude of the investigator can be very similar to that

kind of that sense of looking down on anything that's not wholly rational, wholly calculating and wholly self-interested.

Della Duncan: If the models that use *Homo economicus* don't reflect reality, why is the idea so deeply rooted within the discipline of economics?

[Fade in 19th century music]

Della Duncan: To understand why, we have to go back to the mid-19th century when the discipline of economics first began transitioning from a moral philosophy to that of a mathematical science. Here's renegade economist Kate Raworth with a lesson in the history of economics.

[Fade out 19th century music]

Kate Raworth: I would say one of the major reasons why economics has been reduced to a very particular kind of diagrams and very particular numbers and algebra is I would say goes back to 1870 when in the UK there was William Stanley Jevons who was an engineer who wanted to become an economist in Switzerland there was Léon Walras, in Austria there was Carl Menges — they wanted to make economics a science as respectable as physics this was the ambition they saw the towering genius of Isaac Newton who had discovered the underlying laws of motion of the world and he could describe the movement of falling apples or rotating planets with his physics and on it had been built incredible empires. And so they took it directly as a metaphor just as a pendulum swings to rest because gravity pulls it down so markets are drawn to equilibrium because prices pull them into position and they think they loved playing with this metaphor they even drew their diagrams in the style of Newton so if you look back at Jevons's diagrams of supply and demand they were drawn in the style of Newton's diagrams of a falling object.

So it was the desire to be like physics which then again drives the mathematization not just from the diagrams resembling physics but than the mathematize ancient to pin this thing down but also to find out the underlying laws of motion and I think that's probably been the most pernicious result of this desire to be like physics to look for the laws of motion as if the economy the way the world works was driven by these laws that we needed to discover and I think that's really led us astray over the last hundred years and has given rise to a very strong neoliberal story that let the market do its work — market forces, again the language of mechanics — market forces will bring the economy into the right position. Don't get in their way, they will sort things out.

Della Duncan: In order for economics to be as respectable as physics, it needed to be consistently mathematizable. The assumption of *Homo economicus* gives economics that reliability. *Homo economicus* comes from a deep desire to view humans in an

atomistic way as cut out figures, to be able to objectify our behavior, and to think that we can “know” life, and thus control it.

But the idea that humans are inherently rational and self-interested is so pervasive in economics not only because it's easy to model, but because there is a group of people who benefit from perpetuating this belief.

Peter Fleming: My name is Peter Fleming. I'm a professor in organization theory, which is kind of a branch of economics and sociology.

Della Duncan: Peter Fleming, Based in Sydney, Australia, recently wrote a book titled *The Death of Homo economicus*.

Peter Fleming: Homo economicus has been around, the idea has been around for many years, of course, and it got picked up as the main driving assumption and what is called mainstream economics, but we could call it neoclassical economics or neoliberal economics, during the 50s and 60s in the US. Mainly the Chicago school, for example, was well known for this and various other theoreticians associated with Austrian neoliberalism. And, that was still reserved to universities and textbooks on economics.

Something strange happened during the 1970s in which it was picked up by policymakers and politicians. And that's an interesting story. And a lot of people have talked about why that happened and why politicians like Ronald Reagan, Thatcher, Roger Douglas in New Zealand. Each country has their own version of a main character in the political sphere, driving home the idea of home economics as public policy. And my theory is that it was really designed to break up and decollectivize the labor movement. And that might sound like a conspiracy theory. But if we go back to the 1970s, labor relations were just in a very, very tense position, especially with characters like Ronald Reagan breaking up various unions, you know, going out of his way to smash unions and just having this major distrust for labor associations — not only the working class, but professional associations, medical professional associations and so forth. And so Homo economicus is an interesting way to do that, because we all of a sudden, individuals are no longer — they're not employees because employees is a collective category, we are human capitalists. And human capitalists — they're really kind of consummate individuals. And we cannot really think about anything to do with collectives to the point in which we only have individual agents.

And I think that this was kind of supported and gained a very positive reception among politicians and policy makers — and the corporate elite, of course — during the 70s, because it was actually a way in which to decollectivize the employee who was causing so many problems for industrialists and business people during that period. Now, that's not the only driving issue for why it got picked up. All sorts of other things were happening, like the global financial crisis, driven by the oil crisis and various other things during the 1970s. But I think a good part of it was very political, very strategic and very tactical. And it worked.

Della Duncan: *Homo economicus* is the foundation of a system that validates the current power structure by justifying extreme wealth and income inequality, the privatization of public resources, and governments that impose austerity measures on their populations instead of prioritizing social welfare.

So how do politicians and economists justify it? Their argument is that neoliberal capitalism is the only economic system that accepts human nature for what it is. And not only that, but they argue that a free market economy actually leads to the greatest common good by channeling our “natural selfishness” into a net positive outcome for society. Because when people are free to make choices that maximize their own self-interest, they negotiate on prices and quantities of a product or service until a happy equilibrium is established.

The idea is that this “natural process” guided by the “invisible hand” is the most efficient and effective way of producing and distributing goods and services and that it leaves everyone satisfied in the end. But is the model working? Are we all satisfied?

Peter Fleming: *Homo economicus*, and this is the dark side of the theory, is an individual who's isolated, economically isolated, and left to really kind of sink or swim within this new societal framework in which economic transactions are the only thing that matters. That stark individualism, if you like, I think is an important negative side effect of redesigning society as *Homo economicus*. And that includes debt. That includes the rolling back of the welfare state. That includes the destruction of unions. You know, it's not only unions that aren't welcome in economic theories perpetuating the myth of *Homo economicus*, it's labor itself. Even labor is seen to be too collective. So we're economic individual agents who are isolated and make decisions purely as individuals.

But also, I think there is another dark side, because one part of the economic theory that perpetuates the myth of *Homo economicus* are theories like principal-agency theory, which suggests that we're not only cash hunting animals and self-interested, but we can't be trusted either. So we will bend the rules, we will break the rules even, to make more money. And that means that we have to design institutions with that assumption in mind. And so they're not friendly institutions. Their institutions around the state, for example, that expect us to be unpleasant people. So there's this element of mistrust that creeps into the employment relationship, for example. You cannot trust anyone because they're out for themselves only and they will cheat you if they can. And it's this ludicrous assumption that really, really creates a lot of suspicion in our major institutions — particularly related to the government in the state. But also in the employment sector. The whole idea of employment and contract law has the supposition that you really cannot trust your employee because they are *Homo economicus*. They're out for themselves, they're self-interested. They will do what they can to maximize their own interests above and beyond anyone else. And that's the assumption that I think is really dangerous and it creates so much disharmony and so much distress, if you like, within really normal institutions that don't really have to act like that.

Bayo Akomolafe: I think the term *Homo economicus* conjures images of Atlas, the archetypal titan holding the world on his shoulders.

Della Duncan: Bayo Akomolafe is a Nigerian philosopher, author, professor, and organizer currently based in India. Atlas, who he's referring to, is a character from Greek mythology who was condemned to hold up the heavens for eternity. In her novel, "Atlas Shrugged," the libertarian author and philosopher Ayn Rand utilized the mythology of Atlas to promote rugged individualism and laissez-faire capitalism.

Bayo Akomolafe: It's man at work. It is man as the ground of being as the rational site of the universe, the rational center of the universe, where everything around this center is de-rationalized, genderized, sexed — made to be less worthwhile. Man — or the figure of the human — becomes this place of generativity, of productivity, of intentionality, of keen self-interest, of self-evident value.

And this also carries the alarming proposition that the world outside of our activity is dead and mute, and just bestial, there's nothing good to it except that which we impose upon it with language, with our work and with our activity. So this idea of *Homo economicus*, as not only the working man, the figure of the lonely man, you know, it's also the separable dissociated man, cut off from gift, cut off from abundance, cut off from community who must now work out salvation.

So that's how I think about *Homo economicus*. It becomes the doctrine, humans are separate, inseparable from the environments, and we are the center of the universe, basically, and we should tether our political systems — and economic systems, of course — for the highest well-being of this individuated creature that we rudely call man. So when I think of *Homo economicus*, it's man hard at work. I just imagine someone spinning wheels and the rude suggestion that it's my spinning of these wheels, that the whole universe, the grandiose universe depends on my activity and my productivity and my rational solutioning attempts to fix things.

Matt Christman: The neoclassical description of the individual that is what is incentivized by the market, and people do better the better they treat themselves as one of those but that is not humanity flourishing.

Della Duncan: Here's Matt Christman, one of the hosts of the Chapo Trap House podcast.

Matt Christman: That's not humanity finding its meaning and purpose — to even suggest that is blasphemous at like a deep level, just evil and demiurgical. Just an enchantment from the brimstone pit to suggest that humanity is somehow more fully felt the more that it's isolated, the more that it's delusionally fixated on satisfying its own ego. Terrifying. A world where people are like that is the world like the one we have now. And economists like to look around and smugly look at that and say see this is

what people are like, and it's like, no this is the system that you are a disgusting, intellectual handmaiden for — this is what it turns people into.

You're an individual self-motivated agent. If that was true why is anyone alive? Why do people raise children? Why does anything exist? Why is there any social fabric to be pulled apart by capitalism in the first place? How was it fixed? How was it built into being? But even if you could be what they want you to be — and of course there's a zillion examples of why no one is rational, and that no one can know their own self-interest well enough to operate from it successfully — beyond any of that, even if you could, what the fuck is your self-interest? What is your self-interest? Accumulating more than other people around you in a world where you're connected and tethered to every other every other human being on earth by deep ties of sharing a mutual ecology and a world together, each of you contributing in your smallest possible way to the full flower of like human civilization and culture. That's all humans rubbing against each other, that's all humans collaborating at every moment and to say i'm going to make my life — and everyone *should* make their life — about accumulating as much material distinction from everyone else as possible. That's a recipe for planetary annihilation. That's a recipe for human beings ending life on this planet

[Music break: Haley Heynderickx — The Bug Collector]

Della Duncan: When we look at the crumbling world around us, it's not hard to see that what economists have been telling us isn't true. An economy based on selfishness doesn't lead to the common good.

David Sloan Wilson: We've been deceived by the orthodox economic narrative to think that everything is based on self-interest, that's the only motivation, all we need to do is monetize it, that kind of thing, is actually very problematic. And we can say so scientifically.

Della Duncan: David Sloan Wilson is an evolutionary biologist and a Professor of Biological Sciences and Anthropology at Binghamton University in New York.

David Sloan Wilson: Neoliberal economics, is predicated on the idea of self-interest as being good for society. That if we just let lower level units pursue their self-interest and that somehow that's all going to work well at the societal level — this is the metaphor of the invisible hand — is something that is profoundly false, and it leads to the decay of society which is what we're seeing. And now we're seeing it happening at an ever increasing pace. It seems almost difficult to stop. So you would call it cancerous in evolutionary terms. Cancer, real cancers, are cells that are proliferating at the expense of other cells within the body. That's another thing that is adaptive in the evolutionary sense of the word. Cancers are adaptive at competition within the body, too bad that they kill the whole organism including themselves. Evolution has no foresight. And so I think what we see today in economics is many cancerous strategies. They're succeeding for some people at the expense of others and society as a whole and

they're causing, ultimately, the outcome of a cancer is that everyone loses. And that is what's happening all around us.

Della Duncan: David's research has found that while competition benefits an individual, cooperation is what benefits a society. Instead of finding that positive human evolution is guided by self-interest and the survival of the fittest, David's research shows that prosociality — behaviors that benefit others, such as helping, sharing, donating, cooperating, and volunteering — is actually a more evolutionarily adaptive trait.

David Sloan Wilson: What sets us apart from all other primates is the fact that we are so cooperative and especially and very distinctively cooperating with genetically unrelated individuals. So basically we're so cooperative because our ancestors found ways to suppress disruptive, self-serving behaviors within groups. If you look at hunter societies, modern hunter societies, you see, and this is true for smaller groups in general, it's just hard to benefit yourself at the expense of others within the same group. Why is that? It's because, first of all, it's hard to do something hidden. What you do is observed by others. Few individuals are so strong that they can't stand up to the collective retaliation of the group.

So much is done by social favor that if you piss people off and they just stop being your social partner then you — so the deck is just stacked against antisocial behaviors and for prosocial behaviors and then that has been reinforced by genetic evolution operating over many thousands of generations

[Knocking on door]

Della Duncan: Hello.

George Monbiot: Hello there.

Della Duncan: Good to meet you.

George Monbiot: And you. Come on in.

Della Duncan: Thank you.

Della Duncan: We're in the city of Oxford to speak with the British author and journalist George Monbiot.

George Monbiot: I was absolutely furious that we'd been told such a pack of lies about what human beings are. That we've been told that we're fundamentally selfish and greedy and self-interested. You know this is what economists tell us all the time and particularly neoliberal economists because actually they think selfishness and greed are good. They think it's good that we're hyper-competitive and individualistic and grab as much as we can because then some people become extremely rich and their wealth will trickle down to enrich everyone. Well, haven't we seen how well that works. You know,

instead of course what we get is a massive accumulation of patrimonial capital. And I just felt we'd been lied to. I was outraged. I was so angry you know to see that everything we've been told about human beings was completely ungrounded in fact and that we'd been given this totally dark view of humanity which was a totally false one.

Della Duncan: George's latest book, *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis*, compiles the latest scientific research to present the case for discarding the idea of *Homo economicus*.

George Monbiot: Over the past 20 years or so there's been an amazing convergence of findings in neuroscience, in psychology, in anthropology, and evolutionary biology, and they all point to this conclusion that, in the words of a paper in *Psychology*, a journal, a psychology journal, human beings are spectacularly unusual when compared to other animals in terms of our altruism. We're spectacularly altruistic.

What the science shows again and again — and it is so well documented now in so many different studies and experiments — is that while we all have a bit of selfishness and greed in us, they are way down the list of our characteristics and our dominant characteristics in the great majority of people are altruism, empathy, kindness, benevolence, and community mindedness.

Della Duncan: Many studies have determined that the classic *Homo economicus* personality is a rare one — and actually traits associated with this personality are medically considered to be those of a psychopath. Most humans are instead marked by a deep capacity for reciprocity, cooperation and selflessness. For example, research shows that at 14 months, children are already beginning to help one other by handing over objects that other children are unsuccessfully reaching for. This empathic behavior only increases as children grow older and begin to share things that they value with others and even object to violations of social norms. These are all early signs of what David Sloan Wilson referred to as *prosociality* — and most importantly, the research shows that this behavior is motivated by a genuine concern for others and not by selfishness.

George Monbiot: You look at people in the street and they step aside for each other, they might open a door for someone, give up a seat for someone. There's just constant tiny acts of altruism which we don't even notice — and mixed in with these are spectacular acts. There are people I know here in Britain who have taken refugees into their homes and treat them as family members — total strangers to them. That's not the most extreme thing. My Dutch mother-in-law, her family were in Holland during the German occupation, they took in a six year old Jewish boy, total stranger to them, and hid him in their house for two years. The next door house was occupied by the local German commandant. There were soldiers and officials in the street all the time and had they been caught the whole lot would have been sent to Auschwitz and murdered. And yet there were thousands of Dutch families doing this — they weren't unique. You know this was a pattern in Holland and in many other occupied countries under Nazi

occupation. I mean what extraordinary creatures do this? I mean this is just an amazing thing.

And there's altruism in some other species which goes beyond immediate sort of kin altruism but it's much less developed than it is in humanity. And the idea of even just having a roomful of people sitting next to each other, of strangers, and not tearing each other's arms off — that's pretty spectacular in the animal kingdom. You know? And so we are — you know all the evidence shows very strongly that we have these amazing socially oriented characteristics and a very strong capacity for mutual aid, helping each other, for cooperation, for standing together in the face of a common threat, and for an altruism that goes way beyond reciprocity. You know, you give money to a homeless person you're not expecting them to give money back to you. You send money to a cause on the other side of the world you're not going to — the starving people in Ethiopia aren't going to come and help you. They can't. You know that. This isn't reciprocity, this is altruism beyond reciprocity.

[Royal British Music fade in]

Tom Crompton: Margaret Thatcher said on the second anniversary of her election — so she was interviewed by The Sunday Times in 1981, two years after her first election, she said, “economics are the method, the aim is to change the heart and soul.”

[Royal British Music fade out]

Tom Crompton: So my name's Tom Crompton and I co-direct a small not-for-profit called Common Cause Foundation which works on human values. What matters to people and what shapes what matters to people.

Tom Crompton: The evidence from the social psychology is that there's what's sometimes called a seesaw relationship between two groups of values — a group of values that we call intrinsic, so these are a values associated with concern for community, or equality, social justice, friendship, helpfulness, on the one hand and on the other hand a group of values that we refer to as extrinsic values. So these are values which are perhaps more aligned with a person's self-interest around financial success, and public image, and social status. And those two groups of values are held in some kind of dynamic tension. Engage one set and you suppress the other and you are likely to reduce behaviour associated with the other.

Della Duncan: Tom's research shows that we humans have both sets of values and that either set can be activated internally or by our environmental conditions. Capitalism, through its operating principles of consumption, wealth accumulation, and competition, activates our extrinsic values — while suppressing our intrinsic ones.

Tom Crompton: Values relate to one another dynamically and that if we hold some values to be important it's difficult for us at the same point in time to hold other values to be important. And this relationship holds between intrinsic and extrinsic values. So at a time when we are attaching particular importance to intrinsic values we're likely to attach less importance to extrinsic and vice versa. There seems to be this antagonistic relationship between the two groups of values, which has been called the see-saw effect. And there's another related effect called the bleed-over effect which is that if you hold one of that palette of intrinsic values to be important, you're likely to hold others to be important. If you hold one of a palette of extrinsic values to be important, you're likely to hold others to be important.

Yuan Yang: As to the question of whether humans are intrinsically selfish and self-motivated or intrinsically altruistic, I think that it really depends on the situation that they find themselves in, and the context — especially the social context — of what's normal.

Della Duncan: Here's Yuan Yang again.

Yuan Yang: Different purposes or values that we have are primed by different contexts of news and the media that people are consuming and the conversations they have with those around them. So at different points, even in a day or in your life, you can be acting out of very different kinds of value based motivations. For example, when you're reading a lot of news that increases your level of anxiety and fear around you, you might have more authoritarian leanings. And then when you're feeling more secure, then your political leaning can actually change in the opposite direction, which is really very interesting in terms of how fluid human motivation is and how difficult it is to capture that just in a kind of in one equation.

Tom Crompton: I think either story can be told persuasively and with integrity. I think what's interesting is which of those aspects of our human nature do we choose to exercise — do we choose to bring to the fore? How do we choose to configure our societies? Do we configure them in a way which validates and celebrates those intrinsic values or do we do it in a way that validates and celebrates the extrinsic. I think they're all there . The question is which do we want to elevate? Which do we want to encourage and celebrate through our social structures and organisations.

[Music break: American Football — Never Meant]

George Monbiot: We're like a bee buzzing behind a window just bashing ourselves against it again and again and again and however hard we hit it that window isn't going to go away.

Della Duncan: Here's George Monbiot again.

George Monbiot: We have to say, wait a minute, this is the wrong approach. There's a door open over there we should be flying through that instead. And that door is our

frame — is our new framing and that is a door that we have to conceptualize. We have to see that's there. It's not like we invent it, it's there ok— it's there to be used. But we have to recognise it. We had to identify it. You know what I'm calling for is not to change human nature but to reveal human nature, , who we really are is what I'm talking about rather than who we've been induced to become. So instead of this uphill battle against what people are like, and saying, "No, let's go with the flow of what human nature is." But we have to actually see it for what it is and we've got these fantastic scientific resources now which show us what it is. And then we discover within ourselves, within our amazing good nature the new frame through which we can pass.

Bayo Akomolafe: *Homo economicus* is really a prison cell. It's an epistemological prison.

Della Duncan: Here's Bayo Akomolafe again.

Bayo Akomolafe: I wouldn't say that *Homo economicus* is a lie because even if I were to say it's a lie, it wouldn't mean it's not real because something is a lie, doesn't mean it's not real, right? In some sense. And yet we cry when we watch Titanic, or at least I did, so the sense here is not a point of accuracy, of finding out which one is true and which one is not. I would say *Homo economicus* is a performance of a certain kind of reality to the exclusion of other kinds of possible realities that are lingering, haunting the apparatus with which we produce our lives, abundance, our notions of wealth.

The *Homo economicus* is not in you, you know. That's another modernist attempt at interiorizing the territory. No, we are part of it. It is participating with us. It is performing us. It's not just you and me. It's a territory of acting. It's a plantation to use that term. And I think it's time to escape this plantation.

Peter Fleming: So what I'm calling for is, first of all, for just to realize how entrenched this idea, and how it's crept into almost everything. Education, family relations, employment, of course, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Della Duncan: Here's Peter Flemming again.

Peter Fleming: So showing how entrenched and how his ideal, which is very dangerous, I think has permeated so many of our institutions very, very deeply, become ingrained in our everyday lives. And calling for different metaphors, you know, beginning a conversation about how we could rethink and reframe what it means to be together and what it means to be needing to make a living and so forth. And we have different ideals that we could be striving towards. We may not meet them, of course, or reach them. But those ideas are, you know, *Homo politicus*, for example, that we are political man, and that we need to begin a debate and rethink how we want to, for example, organize work.

And one of the ways in which neoliberal economics works is that bracket's off any political discussion. It's not a politics, you know, and so we cannot really kind of debate

it. And I think we need to rethink that assumption and bring politics and bring political dialogue back into these issues.

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So I'm thinking also *Homo ludens*. *Homo ludens* is the playful man, you know. What happened to play? I sound like Led Zeppelin no., does anyone remember laughter? And so we have a whole different set of different ideas that we could be with, that we could be using. But I think that reciprocity, trust and a more socially humane way of organizing our economic affairs is definitely something that we should be striving towards. And also realizing how socially constructed these things are.

Bayo Akomolafe: When I think about the human, I want to think about how the human is already rooted and connected with the world, with the more-than human around it, around him or her. My own form of activism, I would say, is to compost *Homo economicus*, to invite the *Homo economicus* to die. That I think in these times, which we summarily, or some of us summarily, note as the Anthropocene —you know, which is another very, very strong correlate with *Homo economicus*. You know, the Anthropocene is this time of industrial activity, deleterious effect on the environment as a result of this *Homo economicus* idea. I feel in this time of the Anthropocene, we need to dismantle the man. We need to invite the man to die. How do we do that? I think that's a whole different conversation. But it might begin, so to speak, with noticing that we are not at the center of the universe.

Yuan Yang: So as to where economics goes from now, I don't think the question should be maths or non-maths. I mean, personally, I love maths, but the question should be more what kinds of maths do you use? What kinds of methodologies do we use and what do we do that's not just the current kind of modelling? So, for example, there are some students in Rethinking Economics who are very interested in complexity economics and new ways of modelling networks in economics, which are very mathematical, but they're just not the kinds of 18th century maths that are currently being taught in the economics mainstream curriculum. There's also a host of historical schools of economics, starting from Adam Smith, who considered himself a moral philosopher onwards, who thought of what they were doing, not as narrowly as current academic economists often think of themselves. And I would really advocate for that to be more mixing of different disciplines, including philosophy into economics. And the benefit of having a more philosophical approach to economics is also that you can ask the question, like, what are we doing in economics and what is the underpinning — what is the theoretical underpinning of our approach to investigating the world? Like, how do we know what you know and how do we evaluate these theories against other theories? And those are questions of methodology, which I think every reflective social science discipline should have.

Bayo Akomolafe: The realization of the recognition that there are other ways to be in the world might be the instigation, the start-off point of different kinds of fugitive systems. But our work now is not to create manifold or totalizing blueprints for new worlds, because I think we tend to repeat the dynamics of the world we're in, in the one we're envisioning. Sometimes the future is just a colonial attempt of the present. So I

would say that what we need to do is to stay with the trouble, meet in places where we can be met by the world in return, hopefully defeated in our attempts to understand it. Where confusion becomes a form of research inquiry. Confusion becomes a philosophy, an epistemology. And maybe there, maybe there, we might learn about the world and about ourselves anew. There is no guarantee. But that's the invitation of the moment.

Yuan Yang: If I were speaking to an 18 year old who was starting to study economics for the first time, then I'd want them to know that economics is not just the textbook economics that's presented in front of them and that they have a huge range of options outside of the curriculum. If there is a Rethinking Economics group in their university or in their city, then I'd really encourage them to get involved and talk to other economics students who have the desire to explore economics more deeply and more broadly. I'd also encourage them to ask their teachers, you know, very straightforwardly the question like, how should I use this to understand the real world? What's the relationship between what we're learning now and what's happening in the news? And sometimes, you know, a good teacher should be able to handle those kinds of questions and actually change the way that they teach to make it more relevant to have debates about whether models are useful or not useful or inaccurate or otherwise. It's only very textbook teaching I think that leads to a real narrowing of the mind. And that is really unfortunate. So I think the overall message I'd want them to know is that if you want to be an economist in any sense, it is important to get credentialed, unfortunately, but also it's important to keep your mind open to the different ways there are of studying the economy. And so to do those two things at the same time is very difficult and in fact is more time draining than just taking the boxes and doing your degree. But I think in the long run, it will lead you to have much more freedom in how you engage with the world.

Bayo Akomolafe: Maybe economics has a lot to learn from a goat herder in India. Maybe professors, you know, up on the skill on their ivory towers should stoop low and learn from bacteria and microbes and coronaviruses. Maybe that is powerful, but from a different point of economics, not just as a discipline, but economics as our ways of relating with each other.

So economics as a discipline needs transdisciplinary approaches, but economics as a territory needs dehiscence, wounds, openings. And I think those openings are opportunities for us to study, for us to ask new questions. What if we didn't send our children to school? What might happen if we think of education, not as what happens in schools, but as what happens all around us? How might that affect what we think of as jobs and access and the future? What if we thought of wellbeing as not just accumulation, but as sharing? What if I decided to share my things with my neighbor? Instead of buying a different vacuum cleaner, I open it up to the neighborhood and say, if you want to use the vacuum cleaner this Wednesday, it's available, and then we gather around that. What would it mean to localize instead of thinking in terms of machinic assemblages of production that stretch beyond the local and go to the global and that proliferate poisoning and the toxic attempts to shield food from being spoiled? To know where food is planted, to plant food in my own backyard and share it with my

neighbors. So this is the invitation at large and I think we can only think about it in small, messianic, but fugitive and modest ways — instead of thinking about it in broad blueprints.

Della Duncan: There are alternatives to market capitalism — and the thing is, they actually align much more closely to the natural human tendencies toward reciprocity and sharing. We have the capacity to activate our extrinsic values of power, domination over, and greed in our classrooms, our organizations, and our cultures, but we also have the capacity to activate our intrinsic values. Our care for others and the planet, our sense of altruism, connection, and kindness. It's our choice to make. The theory of *Homo economicus* underpinning modern economics has left us with a burning planet and with skyrocketing inequality — it's time to reclaim and rethink economics, to re-determine who we want to be as human beings in relation to the web of life, and to embody the more kind, relational, and sustainable economies we wish to see.

[Ending Music begins]

Bayo Akomolafe: If I were asked to teach economics, if I were invited to teach economics and tell people about economics, from my own perspective, I would show up, I think, with my grandmother. And after introducing myself, I would proceed to ask my grandmother or my mother in law about the ways that she takes care of her family, about the ways that she makes dahl and dosa and the care that she gives into sweeping the compound . I would want to give attention to my mother's friends and neighbors and women in Africa who are most of the time ruled out of the equation when economic arrangements are computed. I would want to pay attention to those women that carry pots of water from the river. And are told those are not real contributions, that's not real wealth-making. So I would want to create a moment of transversal truths, if you will, of openings, of trickster openings, where people can learn to have possibly an 'aha moment' and see, maybe we have a lot to learn from mothers around us. Maybe we're not the only ones that are economists. Maybe it's not just degreed people and certified people that have a say in what the economy might look like. Maybe we should turn our attention to our mothers and fathers at home, our grandmothers, especially our grandmothers. And maybe there's a lot to learn here. That's possibly what I'll do.

Della Duncan: Thanks to all of the guests in this show for sharing their time and wisdom. To learn more about them and the references we made, please see our show notes at upstreampodcast.org

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