

CAN THE UNDERSTANDING OF ECONOMICS LEAD TO CONSCIOUS SUSTAINABILITY? THE EXAMPLE OF LOVE

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ABSTRACT

Consideration of the micro-foundations of sustainability, arising from an empirical study of Conscious Corporate Growth in business enterprises, shows the capacity of firms to act as a vehicle to nurture virtue and human well-being. The example of love is used to examine the capacity of individuals and organizations to engage in such activity. We are unable to understand love without direct experience of it. That experience may help us to engage in similar activity, through mindfulness and other contemplative practices, to train ourselves and our organizations in conscious sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainability; love; consciousness; microfundation; nature; self-reflective practice

INTRODUCTION

Herbert Simon argued that ‘nothing is more fundamental in setting our research agenda and informing our research methods than our view of the nature of the human beings whose behaviour we are studying’ (Simon, 1985, p. 303). This paper is the result of an investigation on how the internal states of individuals, and in particular, their various psychological processes (such as subconscious routines, habits and procedural memory), affect their choices, and in turn, an organization’s behaviour.

Overall, extant empirical work in management research shows that there is scope to say more about how individual processes, and in particular, their various psychological processes (such as subconscious routines or habits, procedural memory) affect the extent to which organizational activities are considered sustainable.

Conscious Corporate Growth (CCG) has been defined as the process through which human beings come to understand their own nature and encourage the development of that nature towards virtuous goals, so that not only are the virtues of individual members of the organization enhanced, but the organization itself also comes to more clearly or more closely develop a capacity to contribute to society (Carrassi, 2012; Carrassi & Harris, 2010). This focus on the capacity of the firm to nurture virtue implies a deep investigation on the multi-faceted micro-foundations of sustainability as a combination of individual, relational and organizational dimensions and drivers of sustainability actions (Felin, Foss, Heimeriks, & Madsen, 2012). A qualitative study on Conscious Corporate Growth, although limited to SMEs, has confirmed that enhancement of people’s degree of situation awareness in the organization sheds light on the organization’s level of influence on the environment and on their mutual relationship, improving both individual well-being and organisational performances (Carrassi, 2014). As defined by Endsley (1995, p. 36), ‘situation awareness is the perception of the elements in the environment within a volume of time and space, the comprehension of their meaning, and the projection of their status in the near future’.

From these perspectives, this paper tries to advance the investigation of sustainability observed at an individual or micro-level through the understanding of human behaviours and social and economic interaction, in order to contribute to explaining macro-level outcomes and thereby developing our current understanding of sustainability. Starting from what makes knowledge different from understanding, this paper will focus on the foundation of economic reasoning to expose roots of the original

situation of human need. Special attention will be given to the essential aspects of human beings and to their relationship to nature. Through a self-reflective line of reasoning this paper aims to contribute to re-conceptualize sustainability in the light of aspects of individual conscious behaviour, to the benefit of personal and organisational well-being.

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

We have reached a point in our evolution where knowledge is vast. We know many aspects of our lives but we understand very little. Never in human history have we produced such an accumulation of information as in the last 100 years. But if we look at how we are and how we behave, we can ask ourselves what all this knowledge has really produced, and what we have done with all this knowledge and information.

Financial crisis, environmental crisis, global warming, greenhouse effect, deforestation, political and social crisis, employment crisis, migrant emergency, are all global, highly dysfunctional phenomena, generating stress at the individual, organizational and systemic levels. Certainly, we have started to learn about these phenomena, but full understanding is something else.

What is the difference between knowledge and understanding? Let us try to explain it with an example. We assume we have studied all that is possible to study, in terms of theological, sociological, anthropological, biological and even biochemical aspects of a human phenomenon called love. The consequence is that we will know everything there is to know about the concept of love, but sooner or later we will realize that we will never be able to understand love unless we experience love directly.

What does this mean? That it is possible to understand only what we ourselves become part of. To achieve understanding means to live the experience of knowledge, to integrate the knowledge to a deeper level, not only through intellectual and functional development, but also through the active role of sensations and emotions. Understanding is a 'real-time' thing. To understand is to be right here, right now, well connected with your surroundings. If we fall in love we become much more than the sum of two separate individuals. The process of understanding starts by integrating with the object of our attention. When one separates, splits and breaks up the object of study it is possible to accumulate more knowledge. We can study and learn about the various aspects related to the shape, the material,

the history, technical characteristics, mechanical functioning, biochemical properties and so on. This is the function of science. Science plays its proper function by analytically dividing the items to know, while understanding is rather holistic. As Steiner (1974, p. 106) remarked ‘Analytic thought has in it a strange violence. To know analytically is to reduce the object of knowledge, however complex, however vital it may be, to just this: an object’.

Understanding comes from the integration of knowledge at the moment when the subject and object are reunited in their natural interconnection. As Shklar (1976, p. 41) explains further, ‘if we were to live in a free society the rules of society would not only be “things” out there for us because we would also identify ourselves with them. We would see ourselves in the law and the law in ourselves. That is what Hegel meant by being free’.

So what is preferable: knowledge with no understanding, or understanding with no knowledge? Knowledge without understanding does not get us anywhere. In addition, it makes our conversations automatic and uninteresting. Understanding without knowledge is likely to have little practical sense and prevents us from transmitting the foundations of knowledge. We need both knowledge and understanding are therefore critical to our well-being (Pritchard, 2009).

However, in our (modern Western) culture we have put total trust in knowledge neglecting the value of understanding, or relegating it to an exercise of little use in the management of our experience; perhaps, because knowledge is easier to evaluate and manage. Very often we forget that the true purpose of knowledge is to enrich our innate understanding. Understanding has qualities that make it intimate and at the same time shareable. Understanding means to expand the limits of the mere knowledge of objects bringing the individual parts observed, the observer and the knowledge itself to unity.

Although in the case of love between two people we may appreciate the importance of integrating subject and object for true understanding, we fail to appreciate how the same process is important elsewhere, in particular in our understanding of the natural environment.

This investigation into the relationship between knowledge and understanding can be applied to every aspect of life to grasp some of the nuances of our behaviour upon which our actions and our reactions depend. As one important example, economic stimuli and incentives are undoubtedly related to our behaviour; therefore it becomes interesting to ask, in the light of our previous reflections, what we know and what we understand of all-pervasive economic phenomena.

Knowing and Understanding Economics

Economics is something in which we live: we are inside economics. From the morning when we wake up, until night when we fall asleep, we live immersed in a ceaseless flow of economic events. Having breakfast, washing and dressing, going to work, taking care of the house, using public transport, cooking, eating, studying, exercising, travelling, having fun are just some of the daily activities in which economics is always somehow present and active. We could say that economics never rests, even when we sleep.

Nearly always, when needs or desires emerge, the method employed to satisfy them requires the use of resources which by their nature are scarce. The activity that is intended to meet the unlimited human needs using scarce resources is economic activity. One can therefore conclude that economic phenomena are derived from the incessant research that human beings do to fill their innate sense of limitation (Raskin et al., 2002; Scitovsky, 1976; Wilson, 1972).

In other words, we feel a vacuum and we try to fill it using something that is somehow available either directly or indirectly. We constantly try to meet some need using the resources at our disposal or trying to get new ones. Economics in its essential meaning handles this relationship between unlimited needs and scarce resources useful to satisfy them (Hamilton & Denniss, 2005). It is important to note that in this view money simply acts as a tool that promotes and facilitates trade and it is not at all the end of the economic activity.

If we lived in the Garden of Eden, economics would be of no use because, in the absence of the condition of shortage, each need would find immediate and complete satisfaction. Indeed, in this case not even the need arises. The human being would be perfectly integrated in his divine nature and therefore absolutely free from the limits and vulnerabilities of a physical body.

Out of that heavenly experience, what exactly is quality of life? It is more money, greater quantities of goods or is it something more complex and less tangible? As various studies on happiness show, what makes people happy, above a given standard of living, is more intangible than tangible, and the belief that the more we have, the more happy we are is a myth rather than reality (Seligman, 1992). In other words, we are redefining the concept of well-being beyond the limits imposed by a materialistic point of view and finally integrating it with aspects related to the real experience of feeling good, by understanding ourselves, the others and the nature (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006).

Economy and ecology originate from the same semantic root of Greek origin *Oikos*, meaning home. Ecology refers to the study and understanding of how in a 'home' everything is interconnected, interrelated and interdependent, how everything that is part of the ecosystem is made up of the same elements.

The house Earth is a living system that works in perfect harmony according to its own dynamics of connectivity, imagination, creativity and intelligence. We have often reduced the significance of ecology to the study of some species, losing sight of the fact that the reference of single species is always to be considered as part of the entire ecosystem. Trees, animals, men, minerals, all share the same basic elements and, through the study of ecology, we try to understand the secrets of the intelligence of nature, her creativity. How to handle this marvellous complexity? How to celebrate and respect its rules? How are we connected and related to this knowledge of the common house? The answers to these questions fall within the scope of managing the house (*oikos nomos*) that is economics, understood in its original and essential meaning (Brown & Timmerman, 2015).

However, despite the proliferation of thousands of sub-disciplines, the economics that today is considered conventional or standard is interested only in what essentially is of direct benefit to humans and that is likely to assume a monetary value.

In other words, with time passing the sense of interconnection that is an essential aspect of our common home has gradually been lost. The vital link between the knowledge of the house and its management has lost importance. Therefore, it is easy to imagine why the economic theory that today is dominant is incapable to effectively manage the complexity of social phenomena and the various problems of the ecosystem (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2010). With some straining, we can say that the while classical economists removed from the economy and the physical component, the neoclassical expunged the social dimension.

The dissociation of economics from its environmental and social context is now complete. So economics has lost the ecological dimension of existence (Daly & Farley, 2010). Losing the interconnection, we have lost a sense of authenticity and intimacy with the dimension of being that allow us to live happily and in harmony with the natural world.

On this basis, it is easy to understand why we have become sensitive only to money and why the Earth has become another of the tools to produce and earn more money. The value of a person is today measured by the volume of money that produces and not on his ability to care for and support the common house, that instead originally represented the best way to

lead a meaningful and happy life. Human beings have become the tools to produce and accumulate money in the name of cold mechanical business rules. We should not be surprised if the financial, social and environmental crises are leading us intensely in touch with the evidence that such unconscious behaviour produces intense and irreparable consequences that can put a strain on the very survival of the human species on this planet. Over time, the loss of interconnection, together with the exponential increase in population has generated a big mess in the house and what we see today is just the result of our lack of understanding. We can choose to be aware of this and definitely take care of the system which we all belong, finding ways to complete the economic activities with intrinsic social and environmental meaning which represent the foundation of the sustainability of our house.

However, the most striking feature of the human condition is that of human insecurity and instability (specific characteristics of the physical body), from which flows an uncontrollable need to achieve a more stable and sustainable existence (Brown, 2012). Need is associated with an innate sense of vulnerability, in which the human being feels that the body is exposed to danger and that his life is subject to sudden and unpredictable changes. The more you identify yourself with the physical body and its vulnerability becomes more pressing, the greater will be the impulse to avoid its fragility (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Needs and Resources

Psychological theories, that conceive behaviour in terms of the tendency to equilibrium (homeostasis), consider need as a condition of deficiency which prompts the body to act to regain the lost equilibrium (Goldstein & Kopin, 2007). There is a dual sense of the term: need as a manifestation of imbalance, or deficiency, and need as tension or drive, which will encourage people to action to compensate the sensation of deficiency.

In the world we live in, it is easy to realize that not only an innate and infinite condition of deficiency exists, but the needs that arise from this deficiency are also arranged in a hierarchy: only when the most urgent need is satisfied, will the next one be experienced and, while it is true that it is possible to satisfy new needs, it is also true that a subsequent need will always emerge, without ever reaching a situation of absolute saturation (Wilson, 1972). In essence, needs are unlimited and growing and we can find only temporary satisfaction using resources which by their nature are numerically and qualitatively limited. It is obvious that a scarce resource will never be

able to satisfy an unlimited condition of deficiency, except in a partial and temporary manner (Brown, Kasser, Linley, Ryan, & Orzech, 2009).

This simple observation leads us to understand that the feelings of insecurity and instability shared by all human beings manifest themselves automatically through unlimited and growing needs that we seek in every way to fulfil. However, it is never possible to find fulfilment to the original state of vulnerability (insecurity and instability) from where this need took its origin and that instead is the real root to feed.

On this basis, economics seeks a balance between two opposites and should help us to manage in the best way the seemingly intractable problem of filling an unlimited void by using a finite amount of resources. Economic growth would coincide with an expansion of consciousness that allowed human beings to understand and manage the environment in a harmonious way (Carrassi, 2012). However in our daily activities, we have reduced the noble art of finding the economic equilibrium between the infinite and the finite to aspects related to finance and business management. In other words, the economy is confused with the flow of money (Hsee, Yu, Zhang, & Zhang, 2003). In the consumer societies that characterize much of the civilized world, the individual identity of each citizen is deeply marked and conditioned by money, material wealth and social status (Frank, 2004).

The simplified representation of the economy as a closed circuit of money and resources is quietly deposited in our brain and constructs the dominant thought governing the choices and decisions that are commonly regard as economic, but in fact refer only to measurements of money and financial movements (Dunn & Norton, 2013). The noble purpose of economics to seek a balance between unlimited needs and scarce resources has been confused and inexorably replaced by the accumulation of money which should instead represent only the chosen instrument to measure and facilitate trade, in order to meet our needs. So we have confused the means with the end (Drucker, 1985; Laszlo, Saillant, Cooperrider, & Brown, 2014).

Csikszentmihalyi (1975, p. 4) contends that a clear consequence of this confusion is that 'money and the material possessions it can buy require the exploitation of natural resources and labour. If everything we do is done in order to get material rewards, we shall exhaust the planet and each other The waste begins when these are not used only to meet necessities but mainly as symbolic rewards to compensate people for the empty drudgery of life'. A more careful analysis suggests, in fact, that the welfare of an individual is not made only by the amount of money accumulated and needs met, but also the degree to which he declares himself happy (Diener & Kesebir, 2008; Diener & Seligman, 2002).

Aristotle argues that every community is established with a view to achieving a common good represented by happiness (*Eudemonia*). The human being realizes sustainable behaviour when he manages to find a simultaneous balance between the human dimension and the being dimension. The human dimension is identified with the physical body and it is the area of material wealth, useful to meet needs and desires. The dimension related to the sphere of being is in charge for the perception of an intrinsic fulfilment that is not conditioned by external ‘object’ and that represent the natural limit of material wealth and the source of that common good that is understood as love, inner joy of being or true happiness (*Eudemonia*).

In the search for balance between the human and the being dimensions, the abstract simplification of *homo economicus*, does not allow to include holistic aspects that are useful to express the relationship between limitlessness and scarcity.

The *homo economicus* is by definition extremely rational, interested in maximizing its utility, cold-hearted, closed in itself, one atom amongst other atoms, isolated and independent from the others. Following this approach, it is motivated to pursue its own interests according to a logical model of separation and therefore without considering the permanent connection with others and with the context (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013).

By recovering and integrating the being dimension in the economic reasoning, we add content and substance to the cold vision in which nature and resources are perceived as separate.

In other words, it can be precisely because of the choice to pursue true well-being, and so happiness, that the economic agent can become a part of the totality of the nature. He will put in place actions and reactions that contribute to the care and preservation of the environment and of other beings (O’Brien, 2008). The innate sensation of deficiency, that leads to the recurrence of unlimited needs, is the result of losing the sense of interconnection and can never be compensated with money, but only with the reactivation of our intrinsic ability to live so empathetic and harmonious with others and with nature (Rosenberg, 2004).

CONSCIOUS SUSTAINABILITY

We are part of nature, not separated from it, we do not live in nature or on nature, ‘we are nature’. The etymology of the word nature means to be born; it is the creative force of the universe, nature is also perceived as the

basic order that governs the becoming of things, it is the substance or essence of what appears.

We speak of human nature, because even humans are born and therefore we also are nature, we share with the ecosystem the same creative force. Therefore, we are an integral part of a single expression of life that extends to everything that is manifested, regardless of the awareness that we have of the interconnections and of the intelligence that govern this higher order. Simply put nature is not an object to be known but rather of an experience to be lived and understood.

What we do to nature we do to ourselves. When we pollute nature we do the same to ourselves. We feed the blind conviction of being separated in space and limited in time because we have forgotten our vital essence and we overlook the sensation to be involved in the complex system that includes all forms of life on our planet (Brown & Kasser, 2005).

Gradually but inexorably this forgetfulness generates crises in every sphere of human experience that are reflected on social, environmental, economic and political levels. Not only do these crises produce obvious negative implications on the quality of our lives, but also we feel deeply disconnected from nature and from other human beings and this generates a general sense of alarm and conflict. However, it is nonsense to feel separated from nature if we assume that nature is what we essentially are, simply through being born and so being alive. It is this profound and essential understanding that creates the condition for a holistic realization of the integral equilibrium between needs and resources.

If we understand nature in its essence, we spontaneously take care of the living system of which we are part, and the system will continue harmoniously to take care of the human species. If we continue to reduce nature to a separate object, we ourselves become separate bodies, who experience an existence in which we try in vain to overcome our sense of deficiency through various 'objects'. They may be material goods, social roles, relationships, circumstances, but they will always be temporary and limited with respect to their ability to return the original sense of completeness and simplicity of life that only come when the subject and the object of the experiences are melted into the experience itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

When we can reconnect with nature we reconnect with our essential part. The mind reconnects, the body reconnects, human nature reconnects to the essential nature of the ecosystem and we can experience a high quality of peace, love and joy that spontaneously bloom from this unified consciousness to which we recognize ourselves as belonging. This understanding is conscious sustainability, the result of an experience that

generates a spontaneous and progressive rebalancing of our mental map, of the deep convictions, of the values and ideas that support the paradigm in which we live (Carrassi, 2013). Love is a strange word to use in the context of business and management, but it shouldn't be. For those who maybe find the concept of love too emotive or sentimental, the world conscious sustainability could be a useful alternative.

Sustainability is therefore a way of being aware and responsible that gives us common sense and expands our prospect of a happy and harmonious life, by reducing those compulsive and dysfunctional behaviours that lead to individual, relational and systemic stress. This involves recognizing what we essentially already are beyond our beliefs and ideologies (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). We are sustainable because we were born and we are part of nature. We are 'naturally born sustainable' to the extent that we are naturally connected with the whole creation.

Sustainability can be reconsidered as an intrinsic ability that we can reactivate and cultivate through a change in attitude towards what we often consider external and separated. We can discover that our expanded, deepened self is not impersonal but transpersonal and interconnected. As for true understanding of love subject and object are integrated into the experience of unity so it is for the conscious sustainability. This experience can produce spontaneous joy, compassionate understanding, wisdom, receptivity, intuitiveness, creativity, connectedness, openness and peacefulness. What is needed is the will and the courage to overcome the crises that frighten us; the responsibility, the strength and the confidence to take action individually in order to find the sense of connection with our essential part that is able to experience and to promote the balance of the ecosystem.

Research indicates a relationship among subjective well-being, ecologically sustainable behaviour and mindfulness and other contemplative practices (Haidt, 2006; Jacob, Jovic, & Brinkerhoff, 2009; Layard, 2005; Nettle, 2005). We can therefore train 'sustainability' through conscious and self-reflexive practices aimed to awaken this forgotten capability to feel the connection to nature and the others, so that love, peace and happiness can spontaneously flow and expand from the micro-foundation individual level to the macro systemic institutional level, leading to the common good of everything that is part of the process that connects micro to macro (Barney & Felin, 2013).

Conscious sustainability leads to rediscover the meaning and taste of taking care of the 'home' and then to re-evaluate the meaning of an economy that tends to the common good through a spontaneous and balanced

management of needs and resources, thus restoring the merely instrumental role of money.

Money, technology, and in general all the tools available to humankind can then be used to reconnect to the living system, to treat what has been unconsciously damaged, in order to revitalize the flourishing relationship between man and nature and rediscover the essential unity of what we are.

CONCLUSION

At the present time, it seems that the human race is at war with the Earth. It is evident that global warming, climate change, marine pollution, deforestation, excessive use of pesticides, the intensive exploitation of animals are all consequences of human arrogance that reduces nature to an object and believes that all living species are inferior, sacrificing the Earth in the name of greed. The conquest of nature and the perception of being separated from it also leads to the conclusion that technology can provide useful solutions to counteract the shortage of resources in the interest of the survival of the human species. We imagine ourselves to be able to restore the natural order through our scientific knowledge.

We arrived at this point of crisis as we separated from nature, and science alone cannot help us unless we understand fully that it is also necessary to consciously reconnect with the ecosystem. The etymology of the word crisis comes from the Greek word *krino* meaning to separate, or, in a broader sense, to discern, to judge, to evaluate. In common usage it has assumed a negative connotation, as it identifies the deterioration of a situation. However, if we reflect on the etymology of the word crisis, we can grasp a positive element, as a crisis, that is reflection, evaluation, discernment, can turn into a precondition for improvement, for a renaissance and for a new flourishing.

In the conditions of crisis in which we live today, we can choose to recognize and reflect on the dysfunctions generated in our lives from the feeling of being limited individuals, separated from the others and the world. We can become aware that this sensation of limitation and of separation is what has gradually made us greedy, selfish and basically unhappy and with this awareness we can rediscover the source on which depend our balance and our well-being.

Human beings are characterized by an ability for self-investigation that can bring out and develop their own virtues. They can feel the

interconnectedness of the elements that bind them inseparably to every living creature and to the whole planet; they can hear and recognize the flow of life in every manifestation of existence. Such human beings are certainly complex economic agents, needing great study, but probably they are more able to survive the difficulties caused by the choices made up to now by the too rational *homo economicus*.

The stream of consciousness that connects to the sensation of existing, to be born and alive, and then to nature, is a true source of satisfaction and happiness.

Everyone experiences it to some degree. Every time we fall in love with a person, a pet, a song, a work of art, a job, a role or anything else, we feel this flow of intimate fulfilment. Unfortunately, we have been taught to believe that the source of this feeling is the object of our attention and not in the intimate merging between the subject and the object of the experience. This deeply rooted belief is at the base of suffering and we become stressed whenever we lose our temporary ‘object’; while happiness is always present in the interconnection with nature and with the others, although it is rarely recognized in this simplicity.

Searching for the common good and well-being means integrating our needs with the feeling of existing in a relationship and in connection with the ecosystem to progressively awaken the innate ability to support and take care of the common home. This intrinsic ability to sustain (sustainability) can lead us to reconnect to the wonderful feeling of existing in communion and in reciprocity with other human being and with nature. We can become gradually aware through sensations and perceptions that each human being has a role in caring and in celebrating the beauty of the ecosystem. The establishment of this fulfilling experience spontaneously produces conscious sustainability through balancing human needs and resources in a mature and interconnected economic system, where happiness is not the end but the natural and continuous flow of the equilibrium.

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