

# The Moral Problems of Economism in an Age of Eco-Crisis

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## **Abstract**

*To make a convincing argument, people are nowadays expected to speak the language of economics. Neoliberalism has become notorious for making an economic worldview dominate politics, yet it offers only a partial and ideologically inclined explanation for the zeitgeist of today. This paper expands upon the term, or ideology, of economism as a critical means for understanding educational politics and the contemporary formation of moral subjectivity. Economism helps clarify the ideological features of mainstream economics that can influence education. Rather than describe the influence of markets and competition as an ‘invisible hand’, this paper envisages it less favourably as an ‘invisible foot’. Philosophers such as Samuel Bowles, Michael Sandel and Robin Hahnel claim that seeing the world through a purely economic lens crowds out certain important features of the human character such as moral obligation. Based on my earlier research I show how competitive ways of thinking are hampering the learning of ecological virtues, such as empathy. The ideology of economism is thus examined as a concept from a primarily moral or virtue-ethical perspective. Rather than examining moral rules or moral obligations as such, virtue-ethics asks what character traits we should adopt to live a morally fulfilling or ecologically viable life. This philosophical paper therefore has two main research questions: (1) What is economism? (2) How does economism affect*

*our moral character? The main conclusion is that economism and competition have a detrimental impact that hardens our moral subjectivity.*

**Keywords:** *economism, moral education, virtues, environmental education, economic policy*

## **Introduction**

To make a convincing argument of just about anything nowadays, people are expected to word their case in a way that is faithful to the jargon of economics. Consider, as but one example, the Finnish national parliament minister who defends publicly subsidized day-care services by claiming it fosters competitiveness and success in the Finnish export industry. Usually, public day-care services would be justified by referring to a child's development, rights, well-being, and equality. But the argument now needs to justify education in economic terms: for instance, day-care is there to ensure the availability of an efficient and reliable workforce for the export industry (Kantola, 2010). Education certainly has a vital part to play in economic wealth, that much is certain, but it is troubling if this then leads to children being treated as instruments of global economic competition. Respecting the uniqueness of every child that comes into the world, is surely vital for any education worthy of the name.

To enable good education in the future, it is essential that we recognise the overly powerful position economic rhetoric holds in today's world. The basis of its power lies in the argument that economic precepts will represent certain truths about the world in an objective and value-neutral manner. As such, economics is often treated as a kind of master discipline of the social sciences (Graeber, 2011, p. 90; Keen, 2001), and anyone managing anything important is

expected to have a training in economic theory (Graeber, 2011, p. 90). Politicians who are to be considered credible thus turn their vocabularies and imaginations to the economic lexicon. Leaders of educational and research institutions might be so entrenched in this economic discourse that they miss the true nature of the institutions they are leading. This seemed to be the case in Tampere, where the University, Technical University, and Polytechnic were merged in 2018 with little regard for the existing university culture of democracy, openness, autonomy, or collaboration between staff members and students (see Tervasmäki & Tomperi, 2018).

Critical educationalists and social scientists are understandably worried about the role economic thinking has gained in the globalized world (e.g., Spring, 2015; Biesta, 2006; Bowles, 2016; Sivenius, Värri & Pulkki, 2018). Economic activity takes place against a range of cultural backdrops, and yet the grey uniformity of market ideology is increasingly crowding out other ways of conceptualizing and engaging with the world (see, for example, Martusewicz, Edmundson & Luppinacci, 2011). The brunt of this criticism is directed at applying economic modes of thought to clearly non-economic areas of life. According to the Dietrich Benner, there are six basic ingredients to life in human society that are of pedagogical importance: (1) the *economics* of recreating human existence through work; (2) the *ethics* of determining rules for cooperation; (3) the *politics* of planning for the future of society; (4) the *aesthetics* of surpassing the present via art; (5) *religion* for facing the issues of mortality and the limits of human existence; and finally (6) *education* to provide the means for new generations to plan their own future (Benner, 2005, pp. 20–23).

When education is increasingly conceptualized in terms of markets, demand, supply, products, clients, efficiency, productivity, effectiveness, and

competition, it diminishes the importance of the other five areas that Benner mentions: ethics, politics, aesthetics, religion, and education (see Spring, 2015). As a consequence, many educational theorists insist that education should thus not tether itself to the external control of economics. It must instead avail itself of the best educational expertise (e.g., Sivenius, Värri, and Pulkki, 2018) and remain vigilant in the knowledge that education is an essential part of reproducing society (e.g., Biesta, 2006; Värri, 2018).

The ideology of economism sheds light on the educational and moral implications – and indeed dangers – of holding a purely economic view of the world. There is solid criticism of neoliberal education (f. e. Hill & Kumar, 2009; Apple, 2000), but neoliberalism is another, and similar, problem. Inequality, standardized testing, limited teacher autonomy, teaching to the test, external control policy, and privatization (among other issues) are often still present even when we take neoliberal ideologies out of the equation. The worldview of humans as *homo economicus* will remain irrespective of neoliberalism, for example. We thus need a broader critical engagement with the ideology of economism to properly acknowledge the moral implications of indiscriminately prioritising economics in the educational sphere. Neoliberalism is a particular social, political, and economic school of philosophy concentrated on freedom (negatively defined), free-market capitalism, the minimal state, and hyper-individualism. It is thus against any publicly funded services such as state schools and health care (Hill & Kumar, 2009). Gary Becker, one of the school's fathers, argued that economic reasoning is relevant to virtually all human interaction, and as this means economics has greater relevance to life in general, the view remains understandably popular in mainstream economics as well (Spring, 2015; see Sandel, 2012).

Economism is seen in the present article as being an ideology (Spring, 2015; Teivainen, 2002; Wallerstein, 2002; Hahnel, 2012) which assesses state policies in terms of their economic value (see Davies, 2017). When applied to educational policy, it provides the means to sidestep questions of values, morals, and politics, even though these aspects are clearly crucial to that particular realm of human existence. In economism, values are treated as yet another area where economic (or microeconomic) expertise can be applied successfully because it remains somehow objective (Wallerstein, 2002, p. xiii). As such, economics and markets are seen as strangely value-free and morally neutral zones of existence (Bowles, 2016, pp. 25-29).

From a virtue-ethics standpoint this seems misleading. Virtues are traits of character that are valued by society in and of themselves (MacIntyre, 2007), while ethics examines the rules and responsibilities that such virtues entail. In virtue-ethics, however, the emphasis is on determining the traits (e.g., altruism, generosity, sharing) which make a person ethical and virtuous. For the study at hand, it is important to see how personal traits can become virtues or vices depending on the history and cultural conditions of a society, which is nowadays affected by the global capitalist economy.

The main questions for this study in educational philosophy are therefore: (1) What is economism? (2) What is its moral educational relevance? This paper argues that economism has a detrimental effect on becoming a moral subject and is therefore problematic for moral growth. The principal source of theoretical inspiration for this philosophical inquiry comes from critical educational and economic researchers, such as Samuel Bowles, Joel Spring, Michael Sandel, Stephen Marglin, John Ikerd, David Graeber, Amartya Sen, and my own studies (e.g., Pulkki, 2017).

### **The ‘dismal science’ and the possibility of moderation?**

After the 2008 economic crisis and depression, there was increasing scepticism that economics could solve social problems. The prevailing faith before 2008 was that financial instruments could be manipulated in such a way as to minimize economic risk and that cornerstone financial institutions were ‘too big to fail’ (Patel, 2009, ch.1). As it was they did, and countless jobs, personal savings, life works, and fortunes were lost. The US government (among others) bailed out their financial institutions, fearing that the whole financial sector would otherwise crumble. Those economic gamblers who had, in effect, caused the global depression were thus rewarded handsomely (Hacker & Pierson, 2011). The voices of those already criticising mainstream economics before 2008 have been joined by many more after these events, calling for a long due overhaul to economic conceptions of human beings and society (e.g., Sen, 1996; Marglin, 2009; Keen, 2002). These criticisms have caused an internal discussion within economics, and become part of a wider societal debate about the role of economics, economic knowledge, and economic power relations on our planet. According to Stephen Marglin, economics and the modern worldview unfortunately rely on essentially the same foundation: ‘the rational, calculating, self-interested individual with unlimited wants for whom society is the nation-state’ (Marglin, 2009, p. 36).

The *homo economicus* presupposed in economics is well known and much-criticized (e.g., Sen, 1996). For example, from the perspective of mainstream economics, human wants and needs are not just ontologically similar, but also potentially insatiable. Basic needs and luxuries are on the same continuum of people trying to acquire something for themselves (Marglin, 2009); and the idea of insatiable demand is equally unrealistic and thus problematic. To address the latter, the Finnish theory of ‘Ecosocial *Bildung*’ emphasizes the virtue of moderation (Salonen & Bardy, 2014) – having enough for a good life, but not

excessive luxury or consumerism for the sake of it and which does not make us happy (Salonen & Bardy, 2014; Joutsenvirta & Salonen, 2020).

Perhaps the biggest problem with economism stems from the assumption that we have infinite wants and needs without taking into account the propensity many of us might actually have towards moderation. Economism effectively renders it impossible to find democratic consensus about taxing fossil fuels to combat climate change if we have little idea of what are basic needs and what is excessive? Clearly a demarcation line between them is needed so that people can see the manifold benefits of moderation over Veblen's 'conspicuous consumption' (Pulkki, 2017; Sivenius, Värri, & Pulkki, 2017). Ecosocial *Bildung* worthy of the name must therefore include some discussion about the virtues of moderation.

The 'dismal science' was first used by Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle to describe the discipline of economics in disparaging terms, due to the unpleasantly materialistic way it quantified human beings and society. Stephen Keen, as a relentless critic of economics, has continued to refer to it as such, drawing attention to the 'educated ignorance' of economics textbooks that present a 'sanitized, uncritical rendition of conventional economic theory'. According to Keen, the way economists are educated usually lacks sufficient historical content as economics is seen foremost as a social science which needs to use only mathematical and statistical analyses to extract its truths. These mathematical models assume there is one kind of human (*homo economicus*) and one kind of society (capitalist free market). Keen goes on to argue more surprisingly, however, that mainstream economics uses only a very limited range of mathematical knowledge, and its deceptive complexity, which often intimidates other social scientists, is actually based on outdated mathematics that many mathematical experts would consider untenable. In Keen's view,

economics therefore needs to recognise other forms of richness, focusing on what really constitutes a good life and makes human beings good and indeed feel good – these things are not value-free and morally neutral, they are intrinsically value-laden and moral. Economics is, therefore, too important to be left to economists alone (Keen, 2002, pp. 5-9).

‘Dismal science’ is especially appropriate from the perspective of virtue-ethics. From the viewpoint of mainstream economics, for example, helping someone for the sake of it is irrational as we are rewarding someone for something they haven’t earned (Ikerd, 2007). The problem of ‘economized education’ is that the goals of education are seen in terms of competitiveness, efficiency, productivity, and so on, without regard to cultivating the richness of humanity in a moral sense; not that moral and economic virtues are entirely opposed – conscientiousness, diligence, and reliability are just as much virtues, for example, in the economic and political spheres as in the religious. However, education has always been linked to creating good human beings, a good society, and a sustainable future that allows us to carry on. Any obstacles to achieving these need to be seriously questioned. In an age of eco-crisis, all education is environmental education, and the field of moral education needs to be ecologized so that human action is considered in terms of its moral impact within a wider ecological setting (Orr, 1992; Värri, 2018; Pulkki & Värri, 2020) or, as David Abram (1997) puts it, the ‘more-than-human world’.

### **Incentivization: sticks and carrots and human motivation**

From the virtue-ethical and educational perspective, one important buzzword in economism is ‘incentivize’. As Sandel (2012) explains, this has meant using financial incentives or punishments to remedy social problems. This word, dating back to the 1970s, was quickly adopted by the highest officials of governments (Sandel, 2012; Bowles, 2016). Incentivization provides a number



of opportunities for economics and education to work alongside each other in the pursuit of social change.

According to Sandel, a typical economist thinks that the world has yet to come up with a problem that cannot be solved by a proper incentive scheme. The incentive can be a lever, bullet, or a key – something relatively small that has enormous power to change a situation. Incentives are applied to procreation, education, child-rearing, criminal punishment, immigration policy, and environmental policy (pollution permit trade for instance), to name but a few. Incentivization is all about market reasoning, creating markets with incentives that encourage us to find a solution to a problem. Sandel gives two examples of how incentives work in educational and moral settings (Sandel, 2012, 86-87; see Bowles, 2016).

School districts across the US have tried paying students for good grades with mixed results. Research into this was started by Roland Fryer Jr. in 2007 in three cities. In New York, students who were offered cash for good grades showed no improvement; while in Chicago, attendance records barely improved with cash rewards. Only in Washington, did some groups fare better in terms of academic achievement. The overall result of this experiment was that children did not behave like the *homo economicus* revenue maximisers that economic theory would have us believe. Bribing children to achieve academically may, in fact, have a corrosive effect on moral education. Similarly, getting paid to write thank you notes may bypass needing to learn the real emotional content of gratitude. As such, monetarily rewarding people for academic achievement may teach them that, first and foremost, studying has an instrumental value (Fryer, 2011; Sandel, 2012, pp. 50-87).

Picking up children from day-care is another example of the effects of economization and incentivization on education. In one Israeli experiment looking at the problem of parents arriving late to pick up their children from day-care, they tried giving parents fines for picking up their children late. The results made no sense to an economist – late pick-ups increased. Whereas beforehand parents felt guilty for burdening the day-care staff with extra work, after the fine was imposed, parents started to see it as a fee to pay for picking up their children late. The economic disincentive of a *fine* for picking up children late had turned into a *fee* for another service that day-care staff had not originally intended to offer. Parents clearly started to care less for the inconvenience they were causing, as paying for the late pickup had somehow exonerated them from any moral obligation they felt towards the day-care staff (Sandel, 2012, p. 64, p. 90; Bowles, 2016, p. 4).

These two examples show how incentivization has gained a firm hold on people's moral imagination; just think how often one comes across the 'stick or carrot' metaphor for human motivation. This metaphor relies on a cultural narrative and caricature of a mule, which is being forced into pulling a cart by either hitting it with a stick or enticing it with a carrot. In many cases, the mule will never get the carrot because it is dangling on a rope from a stick in front of its nose, held tantalisingly out of reach by the rider. But what if the mule was an enlightened mule with satiable wants? This picture of human motivation, although meant to be comical, is in many respects pessimistic, demeaning, and essentially flawed. The carrot and stick approach to human motivation only takes into account external motives, ignoring the more profound realm of internal ones. To say anything meaningful about motivation we must therefore distinguish between these two realms first (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000). Perhaps the biggest distinction is that internal motivation usually refers to our personal motives and is less affected by the social environment than external motivation.

Without going into the vast array of psychological studies on the subject of motivation, it is clear that numerous internal and external motives will depend on various environmental, cultural, personal, societal, and biological factors. The carrot and stick way of thinking seems to overlook the importance of internal motivation, and yet when we are motivated, both internal and external motives are often inextricably intertwined. Philosophically, it is a grave behaviourist error to ignore the importance of internal human motivation, or simply relegate it to a list of subjective needs, wants, or preferences. Even if the carrot and stick metaphor might work in an economic context, it is an oversimplification when it comes to educational theory. Using a carrot and stick form of motivation in education would effectively introduce the ideology of economism to education and it would displace educational with economic expertise.

### **The cynical premise of the invisible hand**

From the perspective of moral education, we should now look more closely at one of the most ‘sacred’ moral justifications of capitalist economics – the ‘invisible hand’ – attributed to Adam Smith, the father of modern economics. He was using the metaphor in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to describe the benefits of enlightened self-interest. ‘By pursuing his own interest’ he argued, a person ‘frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it’ (Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 2002, p. 166). Later economists adopted the initially unassuming references to this ‘invisible hand’ to defend economics against Christian morality in rational and scientific terms (see Ikerd, 2007). So it was that, as the British Empire grew and spread its ideologies of trade, civilization, and other features of western culture (see Rodrick 2016), the politics governing it did not encourage the basic Christian tenets of love thy neighbour, humility, nor actively discourage the sins of greed, lust, and avarice.

The writings of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) are often described as marking the point at which Christian morals started to give way to a more ‘realistic’ view of humanity. He described humankind’s natural state to be that of ‘war of every man against every other’. For Hobbes, a motivation for self-preservation was enough to ensure security, as differences in religious doctrines only seemed to lead to strife. He argued that without a modern organized society, people would steal, fight, and kill one another in a struggle for power, whereas having a sovereign ruler above all subjects could hold a people in check and prevent them from injuring each other. The most basic need for security and self-interest thus forms the mundane basis for peaceful coexistence. One ruler, above all, would settle the disputes between people, and security will follow (Graeber, 2011; Marglin, 2009, pp. 100-115; Hobbes, 1985).

Hobbes’ pessimistic views are understandable in the context of the Thirty Years War – through which he lived. However, the pursuit of enlightened self-interest in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is more problematic (Pulkki, 2017). It underappreciates our moral capacity to show genuine interest not only in other humans but also in the ‘more-than-human world’ (Abram, 1996). It thus discourages, for example, climate action at a very fundamental ontological and moral level. Having such a limited view of our moral imagination is unfortunately the basis for economism. Amartya Sen was the first one to question this *homo economicus* view in his ‘Rational Fools’ article (1977/1990). Sen starts his criticism by noting that economics is founded on the misguided notion that every agent is only motivated by self-interest or egoism (Sen, 1990, p. 25). The problem with this, Sen argues, is that egoism is supposed to ensure rational choices are made when in many cases they are not.

That economics might indeed be a flawed and ‘dismal’ science (Marglin, 2009), with its questionable assumptions about human behaviour (e.g., Sen, 1990;

Keen, 2002), is not surprising, as all scientific endeavours require some assumptions about reality when carried out in situations of incomplete knowledge. Unlike other sciences, however, economic assumptions about market behaviour, *homo economicus*, the cynical premise, capitalism, and incentives are treated as universal truths, not assumptions. Rather than merely describing and evaluating our world, Marglin argues, ‘economists seek to fashion the world in the image of economic theory’ –usually the neoclassical theory of mainstream economics (Marglin, 2009, p. 3). This is why we need to talk about *the ideology of economism* instead of just economics or neoliberalism.

One interesting feature of economics is that it is a science at all. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Adam Smith claimed it as such – separate from ethics and politics – because like Newtonian physics he argued that it had its own specific laws. One of his premises for this was the argument that markets were in existence before society itself. David Graeber and other anthropologists have since refuted this – there is no historical or anthropological evidence to support this according to Graeber. Markets and money are created by kings, emperors, governments, officials, and private banks (Graeber, 2011), yet in spite of this, economics does not limit itself to describing how markets work, but also how to organise the society served by that economy – this is a normative claim because it contains an intrinsic value judgement (Marglin, 2009, p. 3).

Even though economic markets purport to be morally free zones (Bowles, 2016, pp. 25-29), there does nevertheless seem to be an ethical agenda: it is thought a good thing if everything from day-care, schools, and hospitals to food production, utilities, public transportation, and housing is organized so that people can freely pursue their own interests – other ways of organizing these basic needs are considered inefficient. However, according to Polanyi’s *Great*

*Transformation* (1944), the profit motive as a socially accepted ideal only dates as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before then it had never been enough in itself to justify our everyday actions. Polanyi compares the flourishing of the profit motive with the wildest outbreaks of religious fervour ever witnessed (Polanyi, 2009). But as with the case of all outbreaks of religious fervour, there is also something vital missing here too – the crowding-out effect.

### **Markets crowding out morals**

The most educationally important feature of economism is how it crowds out other moral perspectives. As seen in the example of picking up children from day-care, the fine turned into a fee and became a fair price for staff working overtime. The moral perspective of thinking ‘perhaps I should spend more time with my children’ and about whether it might inconvenience day-care staff was simply crowded out. The core of this crowding-out effect is that markets replace moral convictions with ways of thought and action that avoid raising any moral issue (Frey & Jegen, 2001). If economism and incentivization are widening the realm of markets within education at the expense of a citizen’s sense of moral duty, one could argue that the moral state of a whole community will eventually suffer (Bowles, 2016).

One of the most famous examples of crowding out was Robert Titmus’ study of American and British blood donors in *The Gift Relationship* (1970/1997). In the UK blood was given freely and in the US it could be done freely or for monetary rewards. The conclusion was that the monetary rewards turned blood into a market commodity and changed the morals of those giving blood. Blood for money resulted in more contaminated blood being given as drug addicts and alcoholics sold what was now a commodity to finance their addictions (Frey & Jegen, 2002; Sandel, 2012). A society should certainly decide how markets are used and for what purposes (Polanyi, 2009), but rather than free us, economism

atrophies our moral imagination until it is no longer possible to see just what is realistic and what is not.

When someone is paid to give blood, the people who are not paid start to wonder why they were not paid, and if that is right. The moral gesture of giving blood for free is thus undermined by paying blood donors and this stops many giving blood voluntarily. Although Titmus did not use the term ‘crowding out’ himself, Sandel and a number of other contemporary scholars do (Sandel, 2012, pp. 122-125).

This paper shows how the phenomena of commercialization, marketization of human action, and exchange, and the crowding-out effect that follow, are educationally and morally notable. It is socially, politically, and environmentally interesting because markets, commercialization, and consumerism have proliferated in areas not previously considered commercial, and people are thus often distracted from the moral implications of what they are doing.

### **The case of competition and the adoption of vices**

One of the most important tenets of educational philosophy is that education is concerned with unique people whose unknowable mystery should be respected, not homogenized, sanitized, and standardized (Biesta, 2006). In contrast, economics is about standardizing the unit of value – money. Competition creates hierarchies of value through standardized tests and school rankings, which then interfere with the sanctity of the delicate individualization process that allows us to become unique individuals and citizens. This is because competition is a means for separating the best from the rest – not so far from ‘the west and the rest’ ideology of postcolonial theory (see Pulkki, 2017). The aspiration to turn one’s gaze to the top and outdo others becomes a human

virtue, downplaying any qualities the rest may have. This is done via culturally inclined concepts of resources, scarcity, infinite wants/needs, and individual (negative) freedom that has naturalized competition in such a way that many think of it as ‘human nature’ (Pulkki, 2017).

Competition is often thought of as character building and it is not uncommon to see competitive sports cultivating honesty, perseverance, and courage (e.g., Arnold, 1997). However, valuing competition in general society and competition in sports education are two very different things. If competition is valued on the societal level, it will often be taught at school as well as a means for separating the best from the rest in a seemingly value-neutral manner. It is economics and the ideology of economism that convey these competitive metaphors and ways of thought to education and other areas of society as well.

Competition became a cornerstone of economic thought for at least five different ways: it was assumed that (i) human beings have infinite needs and wants which (ii) make scarcity an undeniable fact of nature; (iii) almost everything in nature and society is a potential ‘resource’ for human use; (iv) human beings have the freedom, right, and opportunity to pursue ‘scarce resources’; and (v) competition is thus the natural consequence of resource scarcity, infinite needs and wants, freedom, and (enlightened) self-interest.

In this respect, competition is about people pursuing their interests within a regulated framework of rules, and neoclassical economists would argue that we have little say in the matter. Although there are other economic theories and models with less emphasis on competition (such as ecological economics, see Daly & Farley, 2004) they are not the mainstream. Competition is often justified for stimulating growth in the economy, creating incentives to improve technology and material welfare, and because being competitive is believed to



be an intrinsic part of human nature (Pulkki, 2017; Marglin, 2009; Achterhuis, 1993).

The problem with economism and competition remains: a culturally inclined ideology has been fashioned into a universal truth about humanity, and ‘if the only tool you have is a hammer’, as the old saying goes, ‘you will start treating all your problems like a nail’. If the foremost tool for social transformation is competition and economic incentives, we are treating people as competitive, selfish, and greedy and are educating people as such within our social institutions. The Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1754/2000) noted how competitive, selfish, and greedy people can become once they are forced to live in large groups; an *amour propre* (self-love) drives them to compare themselves to others, breeding competition accompanied by jealousy, envy, greed, hatred, discontent, and even war.

The supposedly value-neutral ‘economization of education’ puts a similar mechanism in place when schools are compared on a larger national scale – in lists ranking them from good to bad (Spring, 2015). Economic efficiency clearly speaks louder than Rousseau’s warnings against cultivating envy, greed, and hatred. When people are assumed to be wholly rational, we don’t have to worry about these irrational and petty vices. And yet the problem is very real if school rankings and school competition breeds teaching towards a test mentality (Spring, 2015). Comparisons and rankings place undue emphasis on the measurable features of education – often the less important aspects – which distract from the more vital task of helping students become moral subjects (Värri, 2018). The development of moral subjectivity is not so easily quantified, measured, or compared; paying for good grades was a good example of this – it evidently requires a more nuanced educational approach. The shallow external motivation of a competitive education policy (and school ranking) might thus be

crowding out individuation and internally motivated moral subjectivity, which are vital for empathy, moral reasoning, and creativity (Pulkki, 2017).

Competition affects our ‘moral perception’ – the way we perceive the world in morally attentive and relevant ways (Pulkki, 2015; see Blum, 1991). People who socially orient themselves to being competitive learn to overwhelmingly focus on the distinguishing criterion for success and failure and the act of comparison that this requires. Attention is focused on seeking success within the rules and values of the competition rather than on any greater moral good that may emerge (see ‘cynical premise’ above). By encouraging people to concentrate less on being generous to others and more on their own performance, the incentive to help is crowded out. Competition shifts our moral perception away from feeling empathy for those who have lost to one where we feel the loss is their just dessert – a competitive notion that losers deserve to lose is thus crowding out compassion (Pulkki, 2017; see de Waal, 2009).

Using competitive teaching methods is a good example of economic values crowding out more altruistic moral motivation. Helping others is usually seen as commendable from an ethical perspective, but in economics it is considered irrational; people should only be rewarded if they have merited it (Ikerd, 2007) so they understandably become used to trying to outdo each other. Establishing a competitive setting in education can thus make otherwise helpful people abstain from helping their fellow competitors. It requires empathy to be suppressed, and a certain callousness to develop, and if this is repeated often enough, it can become socialised as a character trait and, indeed, a moral vice (Pulkki, 2017).

### **Final remarks: the moral problems of economism**

This article had two chief aims: to (i) describe the *ideology of economism* and to (ii) spell out the dangers of ignoring (as many economists do) its moral implications. Firstly, it has shown that economism contains value-laden concepts such as money, markets, competition, and incentives that its proponents take to be universal truths about reality and human nature. Any critics are therefore deemed ‘unrealistic’ or ‘a bleeding heart’. Secondly, the article has shown that, because many economists maintain that economic incentives are separate from moral development (Bowles, 2016, pp. 21-25), economism may well cause our moral imaginations to atrophy through simple lack of use.

In the current age of the Anthropocene, humankind is having a greater impact on the planet’s ecosystems than ever before. As such, we increasingly need to evaluate economic activities in terms of their moral and educational implications. By dismissing the moral dimension of economics, we remain unaware of how economism is steadily moulding our thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and volition. The atmosphere of competition encourages people to ignore the suffering of their fellow competitors (Pulkki, 2017).

Neoliberalism is an ideology which had its heyday in the twentieth century, but the history of economism goes back to the industrial revolution and the birth of modern economics as a scientific discipline. The problem of economism is, as Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) indirectly pointed out, that ‘nowadays people know the price of everything, but the value of nothing’. Whereas previously other values may have had greater importance, present-day straightforward economic theory dictates that the most important values can now be determined by the market price (Patel, 2009). Although markets are certainly convenient for giving

something a value, it would be simplistic to consider markets as the source of all value formation.

Crowding out the intention of doing what one feels to be right with monetary incentives is troublesome for our moral subjectivity. It is unfortunately at the heart of capitalism's cynical premise – rather than rely on people's goodwill, put your faith in their greed and self-interest. According to Erich Fromm (1986), our current moral code pushes us in two opposite directions. On the one hand, we have the right – or even the moral obligation to our community – to act selfishly and competitively to stimulate the economy. On the other hand, we teach our children to be unselfish, sharing, and helpful. For any good education (and for 'a good economy'), these need to be reconciled and a harmony between the two might be found. Moral growth has become stunted by this cognitive dissonance caused by the paradoxical demands of the economy and moral education (Fromm, 1986). We should also question the ontological similarity of wants and needs and have a democratic discussion about moderation, and what is enough. This should allow sufficient room for real moral development in an age of eco-crisis.

How could we overcome the moral lacuna of economism, and change a status quo that is ecologically untenable? In the light of critical pedagogy (Foley et al., 2015), we could begin by seeing teachers as critical and transformative intellectuals. Teachers need to be educated and trained to understand economism and capitalism as historical and cultural features of reality. As such, these features are not sacrosanct, and can therefore be changed. Economism also needs to be criticized from the angle of democracy: whereas the capitalist class in a company benefits from the majority being *excluded* from decision-making, democracy in a society benefits from the majority being *included* (Bowles & Gintis, 2011, pp. 54-55).

As transformative intellectuals who understand economism, democracy, and the eco-crisis, teachers can think of ways to democratize economic life. According to Mariano and Tarlau (2019), for example, the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) has established new forms of economic and social relations in the countryside based on food sovereignty, family farming, agroecology, solidarity, and collective work. MST has provided an alternative to the public school system, where students also participate in the everyday running of the school, helping with tasks such as cleaning, cooking, community projects, and finances. The economic activities of a society are thus learned as a part of grassroots-level community lifestyle, with authentic roots in a history and culture. In MST, economics is just one part of people's holistic development – one in which a moral perspective is encouraged and where there is the necessary space for moral development. The Frommian (1986) notion of harmonizing economic and moral domains is thus already on its way to becoming a reality in MST.

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