

## **Ethical Implications of Scientific Imperialism: Two Examples from Economics**

**Patricia Marino**

This paper discusses ethical implications of scientific imperialism by focusing first on two examples and then exploring more general considerations. In a characterization that sparked much recent discussion, John Dupré says that scientific imperialism involves "[...] the tendency to push a good scientific idea far beyond the domain in which it was originally introduced and often far beyond the domain in which it can provide much illumination" (Dupré 2001, 74).

Drawing on examples from economics and evolutionary psychology, Dupré goes on to suggest that imperialism can result in science that is misguided or otherwise problematic. In a series of papers, Steve Clarke, Adrian Walsh, and Usakli Mäki have agreed that this basic expression of the idea is vague and underspecified, especially with respect to normative considerations, but have expressed a diverse set of ideas concerning how best to clarify it (see e.g. Clarke and Walsh 2009, 2013; Mäki 2013).

I draw my examples from economics. Economics imperialism has been seen as the paradigmatic example of scientific imperialism, often prompting negative reactions such as that of Dupré. But as Mäki has emphasized, evaluation of economics imperialism can be complex, since there are many relevant factors (Mäki 2009). For this reason I begin here with specific cases, exploring some ethical considerations arising in two specific examples. By "ethical implications," I mean practical or epistemic consequences following from adoption of imperialistic ideas that have ethically significant – and often potentially problematic – aspects.

First, in section 1, I discuss the example of economic reasoning applied to domains of love and caring, and next, in section 2, the example of economic reasoning applied to domains of sexuality. In section 3, I discuss various ways of characterizing economics, explicate the sense in which the examples fit Dupré's original formulation, and explain what I take to be the theoretical connection between the mere expansion into a new domain and the ethical implications that result.

In section 4 I discuss what I think we can learn from the examples, focusing on three ideas. The first point concerns assessment and values. Here, it is sometimes thought that when it comes to economics imperialism, ethical considerations have to do specifically with issues concerning value pluralism and the possibility that economic values are incompatible with other values. I argue, though, that there is a way to articulate the ethical disvalue of some economics imperialism without appeal to value pluralism. The second point concerns assessment and epistemic disvalue. It might seem that expansion into a new domain can be evaluated as positive when it represents an appropriate form of unification, leading, for example, to successful explanations of a range of phenomena. But my examples show the potential difficulty of determining what should, and should not, count as a successful explanation; this casts doubt on the possibility of a straightforward criterion. Finally, there is the question of how the proper evaluation of a case of imperialism is related to issues concerning domains and discipline. It's been suggested that domain-only imperialism – where one discipline takes up topics typically studied by another but does interfere with the practices of that discipline – is mere "expansion" and thus might not carry the normative weight that imperialism does. Though there are many

factors to consider in such cases, I argue here that my examples help illuminate some mechanisms through which even domain-only imperialism can have negative consequences.

### **1. Economics applied to love and caring**

The first example is that of applying economic forms of reasoning to domains of love, family life, and caring relationships, and I'll focus first on the work of Gary Becker – to whom Mäki has referred as an "arch imperialist" (2009, 371). The central difficulty of using economic approaches in caring contexts is obvious. Standard economic approaches model agents as having self-interested preferences, while in love and caring relationships people are typically seen as other-regarding or altruistic. Indeed, it is often seen as characteristic of love that one must attitudes that are genuinely other-regarding, that is, concerned ultimately with the good of another (see e.g. Frankfurt 1999; Cave 2003; Stocker 1976).

The difficulty can be finessed in various ways. Becker uses the concept of "altruism": in his basic model, a person is "altruistic" when their utility function depends on that of another. For example, if A's utility is dependent on that of B, so that A's utility goes up when B's does, A is considered to be altruistic toward that person. In Becker's model, when the altruist does something to benefit the target, both are made better off: the target as the recipient, and the altruist as receiving "psychic benefit" from the exchange (1991, 299-300). In Becker's standard model of family life, there is only one altruist per family –this assumption is made partly to allow for the application of more familiar and elegant mathematics (England 1989, 16).

Becker's ideas have prompted a great deal of discussion and criticism, much of which focuses on the question of whether families should be theorized as units or as themselves sites of

conflict and negotiation (see e.g. Sen 1990). But my focus here is a bit different, and has to do with ethical implications of modeling caring attitudes economically by interpreting preferences as possibly other-regarding. Before we get to those implications, it's worth noting that Daniel Hausman's recent work on preferences also understands economic agents as possibly other-regarding. In his recent book *Preference, Value, Choice, and Welfare*, Hausman argues that our understanding of economic preferences should be modified: we should understand them as "total subjective comparative evaluations" (2011, 7). So, for example, if A has a preference for enough food, and a preference for B to have enough food, these preferences would be on a par with one another.

To begin to see some implications of allowing other-regarding preferences in economic contexts, let's look first at the "double-counting problem" in contexts of bargaining and negotiation. In the context of explaining why we might restrict preferences to self-interest in such contexts, the contractarian David Gauthier writes, "[Supposing that] I, considering us equally fond of cake, prefer that each of us get half, not only to your having a larger share but also to my having it, and [that] you prefer more cake for yourself to less, whatever I get, then it seems implausible to suppose that a rational and fair division gives you three-quarters of the cake and me one-quarter" (1988, 214; see Morris 1991). Intuitively, the idea here is that if two people come together, and one person's preferences concern only their own well-being, and another person's preferences concern both their own well-being and that of the first person, then taking all preferences into account means that the first person's preferences get counted twice. So efficient outcomes of preference satisfaction would result in the former gaining over the latter –

at least with respect to exchangeable goods. The more other-regarding a person is, the worse off they will do. This, Gauthier says, seems an irrational and unfair outcome.

A simple example might involve caring work in the home. Suppose A and B live in domestic partnership and A is more other-regarding than B – perhaps by nature, or perhaps through socialization and upbringing. If A and B bargain or maximize preference satisfaction to determine who does the caring work around the home – cooking, cleaning, caring for the other's well-being – and they allow both self-regarding and other-regarding preferences, then a result that is efficient, maximizes preference satisfaction, and is likely to arise through negotiation will be one in which A does more of the caring labor than B. Though the social factors and causes are complex, it's worth noting that one standard explanation of the gender wage-gap –that women earn substantively less money than men – is that women do more caring labor in the home; this is often attributed to caring preferences arising at least in part through socialization. Another example might be found in commercial surrogacy: as Elizabeth Anderson explains, some surrogates are partly motivated by altruism; if they are offered only what "the norms of commerce demand in return," she argues, they are open to exploitation. Again, the more other-regarding are, unfairly, made worse off (1990, 81).

The implication with ethical significance here is that deploying economic models to certain situations in certain ways results in our taking as efficient and appropriate outcomes that are intuitively unfair – that is, outcomes in which other-regarding people end up worse off. Of course, the connection between the use of the model and the ethically loaded conclusion is contingent and rests on certain specifics and assumptions. First, the ethically significant implications arise only when the models are used in a certain way – in connection with ideas

about bargaining, efficiency, preference satisfaction, and well-being. The models needn't be used that way: Hausman, for example, argues for alternative views of well-being that go far beyond preference-satisfaction. But the relevant use of the models is itself one deeply associated with economic reasoning: it encodes the basic idea that if an outcome is efficient and satisfies personal preferences then that is a reason to value that outcome.

Second, the claim that some outcomes are "unfair" because they mistreat those with other-regarding preferences follows only when we embrace certain conceptualizations of concepts like fairness, and these could be challenged. Indeed, Becker's idea of psychic income at least suggests an interpretation in which the inequality that Gauthier finds "unfair" would not be unfair at all. If we count the altruist as gaining through the satisfaction of other-regarding preferences in just the same way they gain through self-interested ones, then there would be no intuitive unfairness. It's worth noting, however, that this way of conceptualizing things leads to its own evaluative conclusions, some of which might be contrary to widely shared ethical judgments. For example, if the satisfaction of caring preferences is evaluatively on a par with the satisfaction of other preferences, then it would seem to follow that the "gender-wage gap" is not a gap and not a problem, even if the asymmetry is a result of patriarchal social norms.

The preceding considerations are conceptual and abstract, so to see how there may be practical ethically significant implications in this example, let's consider a few specific ways in which the economic model could be used in practice. For example, consider first what Becker's model would recommend for the policy maker who wants to increase overall efficiency. As we've seen, if we take seriously Becker's idea that the altruistic gain in "psychic income" is a gain relevantly similar to material gains, then we will see as efficient results that are intuitively

unequal, and the wage-gap isn't a gap at all. A policy strategy that aims for efficient outcomes would then be insensitive to any wage gap. This is an ethical implication because it means evaluating policies without regard to whether they decrease or increase the wage gap, a gap often thought to be an unjust manifestation of sexism.

Second, we might think about what the model recommends as rational for the person who believes the model is apt and has the goal of increasing their own preference satisfaction. One possibility is that a less altruistic person will rationally exploit the altruism of others by trying to increase it at no cost to themselves. For example, a non-altruist who wants to do less housework might try to instill a social value of altruism in others. Indeed, though it's hard to say how the causal relations function, this has a certain coherence with the way patriarchal norms have historically propped up a social norm that women should be nurturing. Once caring relationships are understood in the context of bargaining and negotiation, the less altruistic can use these tools to exploit the more altruistic. There's some evidence of this happening in the surrogacy debate. In a study of Indian surrogate mothers, Amrita Pande points out how the surrogates are encouraged to see themselves as altruistic, as engaging in a helping and caring activity. Among other things, this may make them easier to control and exploit. One counselor and hostel matron tells her surrogates: "... don't treat it like a business... Don't be greedy" (Pande 2014, 978). Again, any conclusions about exploitation rest on assumptions about how that concept should be understood, but the idea here is that when an individual deploys a Becker-style model to figure out what is rational for them to do, the consequences can be intuitively exploitative.

Third, we might think about what the model recommends for the person who believes the model is apt and wants to use the model to further their own interests in light of the factors

mentioned in the first and second points. In her work arguing that economic models can serve feminist ends, Ann Cudd recommends withholding caring labor when others fail to do their fair share. Sensitive to the "double-counting problem," Cudd explains how we can distinguish "self-interested" from "selfish" and avoid the difficulty. Rather than taking other-regarding people as having preferences concerning the preferences of others, we can take them as having preferences concerning the well-being of others: no preferences are then "double-counted." Cudd argues that women who are doing an unfair share of caring labor can use rational choice theory and game theory to strategically withhold caring labor so others will do their fair share. She writes,

If we understand caregiving behavior as, in Gauthier's terms, constrained maximization and noncaregiving behavior as straightforward maximization, then game theory tells us when it is rational to be a caregiver and when it is rational to increase the penalties against non-caregivers in order to increase their numbers in the environment. Game theory suggests that one's disposition is a choice to be caring or to be selfish, and thus that the relative number of caregivers and noncaregivers might be affected by how the collective of the caregivers treats the noncaregivers. (2001, 412-13)

Interestingly, Cudd talks about a disposition as a choice to be caring or selfish, suggesting that a person subject to inequality as the result of other-regardingness might try to cultivate in themselves a less caring, more selfish, disposition. While it is possible that others will respond by cultivating in themselves more caring dispositions, other results seem possible as well. The total amount of caring labor required is not fixed: perhaps people will respond by having fewer children, so that less overall caring labor is required. Also, as we've seen, the person who wants to increase their own selfish preference satisfaction can also use the model to develop strategy: if

the targets of this proposal want to continue doing less caring labor, why won't they cultivate in themselves a less caring disposition as well? In this case, we would see a kind of arms race of selfishness. Using the economic model in this way may well help feminist ends, but may also lead to the ethically significant outcome that it's rational for each person to cultivate a less caring disposition in themselves.

## **2. Economics applied to sexuality**

The second example concerns rationality, preference attribution, and sexuality. For a long time it's been standard practice in economic reasoning to assume that people are rational – in the sense of acting to maximize their utility or preference satisfaction. Preferences are typically understood through "revealed preference" theory, so that what a person does is taken to reveal what their preferences were. As long as a person's preferences fit the formal criteria of rational choice theory – such as transitivity – those preferences are considered rational.

Over the last few decades this picture has come under sustained attack from psychologists, neuroscientists and others who have pointed out that it's false to the facts: people aren't always rational; in fact they have identifiable patterns of irrationality and biases. Behavioral economists point to examples like "endowment effects" – where we come to value goods more when we already possess them. In a classic paper on the subject, Christine Jolls, Richard Thaler, and Cass Sunstein set out a range of ways in which people fail to act according to the standard theory: they have "bounded [epistemic] rationality" – that is, they don't always reason well; they have "bounded willpower" – that is, they sometimes act contrarily to what they

know is best for themselves; and they have "bounded self-interest" –that is, they sometimes behave according to norms of morality, fairness, and altruism" (1998).

Against this, however, defenders of the classical approach have pointed out that it is often possible to interpret a person's behavior so that it is rational, by ascribing certain preferences to them. For example, in response to the claim that a person is irrational to eat lobster contentedly if he doesn't see it when it's alive, but not if he's asked to pick it out of a lobster tank, Richard Posner writes, "an alternative interpretation is that this person simply has different preferences for two different goods: One is a lobster seen only after being cooked, and the other is a lobster seen before, in his living state, as well as after" (1998, 1553). He says the behavioralists approach "[fails] to distinguish between impediments to clear instrumental reasoning and preferences that we enlightened observers may think silly" (1998, 1553). With respect to the claim that the classical model can't help us understand self-destructive preferences like drug addiction and unsafe sex because it requires that people "choose what they prefer," Posner says, "Not so: in fact, the standard conception will "assume that people do not want to become addicted or to contract AIDS... [then explore] the conditions under which the costs of such behavior, steep as they are, are nevertheless outweighed by perceived benefits" (1998, 1557). In response to reasoning like this, behavioralists argue that the rational preferences attributed by the standard approach will be artificial and ad hoc – as if the possibility of finding an explanation that makes a behavior rational shows that this explanation is the right one, when it obviously does no such thing (Jolls, Sustain and Thaler 1998, 1595).

The basic epistemological problem here is that when a person does an unexpected thing, we do not know whether the person acted anomalously in satisfying expected preferences or

whether they acted rationally in satisfying anomalous preferences. In his 2012 book *A Defense of Behavioral Economics*, Erik Angner discusses the epistemological problem this way:

We have seen that some of the empirical results invoked by behavioral economists might be possible to accommodate within the standard framework, either by redescribing the choices available to the agent or by admitting additional arguments into the utility function. And it is important not to attribute irrationality to people when their behavior is better described as consistent with standard theory. That said, neoclassical economists frequently bend over backwards to accommodate empirical results in a manner that is both artificial and ad hoc. It is often simpler and more plausible to infer that people are sometimes in violation of standard theory. (2012, 210)

This passage suggests that when it's possible to describe someone's behavior as rational or irrational by attributing to them different sets of preferences, and we're trying to decide which description best fits the case, among the factors we ought to consider are overall plausibility and whether the attribution of one set of preferences seems "ad hoc." Scientifically, these are good norms. But, as I'll argue, in some domains – like that of sexuality – it is difficult to judge when one set of preference attributions is more artificial and ad hoc than another. And in those cases, because we must appeal to judgments about whether a preference attribution is ad hoc or artificial in making our evaluation, we must rely on intuitions or background judgments about how anomalous a preference attribution is – that is, on judgments about what it makes sense to prefer.

I think there are many fascinating examples of the relevant difficulty, but I'll focus here on sexuality. In a much-discussed book originally published in 1975, Kristin Luker presents and

analyzes the results of an in-depth study she performed interviewing women about their decisions to abort their pregnancies (1975). For the purposes of the study, she selected women who knew and understood the risks of getting pregnant through unprotected sex and also knew how to use contraception.

On the face of it these seem like paradigm cases of irrational behavior. But classifying the behavior this way would require making assumptions about what agents prefer. If we reason analogously to the lobster example –and in accordance with what Posner says about unsafe sex– we get the following analysis. We assume the women do not want to get pregnant, and then we attribute to them preferences for "perceived benefits" that outweigh this preference and make their behavior rational.

In her own analysis, Luker argues that the women are rational, not by assumption but on the basis of preferences she ascribes to them from her interviews. Luker offers several considerations for how we might understand the costs and benefits involved. She points out that for the women in the study there were many costs associated with using contraception. For some women, using contraception meant admitting to themselves that they were sexually active, which conflicted with powerful social norms. Some women had internalized religious norms against using contraception. Some women, in relatively stable relationships, resisted discussing contraception with their partners because of possible friction over the implied suggestion of couple-dom. Some women assumed contraception was a man's responsibility. Some women resented the pill because it seemed to give their partner's worry-free access to their bodies, so their partners could use them for sex and without having to take them into consideration in a

deeper or more long term way; stopping the pill felt like a way of restoring equality to the relationship.

But even with all of this information, personal and painstakingly gathered, it's unclear whether the preferences are rational. Elizabeth Anderson points out that Luker's subjects often acted in what seem like paradigmatically irrational ways. They ignored the fact that they could get pregnant, they engaged in wishful thinking, they were passive when they could have acted, they judged risks incorrectly, and they procrastinated talking things over with their partners. Anderson adds, "Luker mistakenly supposes that every motivation against doing something is capable of counting as a reason against doing it [...] but some motives repel action without supplying reasons –that is, considerations that can survive conscious scrutiny" (2001, 385).

Anderson summarizes this way:

While it is true that, for any observed behavior, one can construct a rational choice model that generates it, it doesn't follow that the model identifies the actual causes of that behavior.

[Furthermore], what counts as a good explanation of a phenomenon depends on what aspects of that behavior one wants to understand. (2001, 389)

Even with of information directly from the people in question, we're still not sure when they acted rationally and when they didn't.

Now, recall the proposal that when we must make a decision from among different ways of ascribing preferences we ought to consider which approach is overall more less artificial and ad hoc. I claim that in this kind of context, such a strategy may introduce certain risks. A theorist trying to decide which of two preference ascriptions is more plausible and less ad hoc overall is likely to appeal to their own judgment and life experience about what it makes sense to want.

Even in the relatively simple case of the lobster preferences, how are we to decide? Is it more plausible and less ad hoc to attribute irrationality to a person, or to attribute to them a set of condition-specific preferences? To some, the latter approach –in which we say the person preferred lobster if they haven't seen it alive and something else to eat if they have– might seem to introduce a complexity. To a person who does not experience changes of preference from similar factors often, the preference ascription may seem ad hoc. But to a person who experiences such changes in preferences often, it may seem plausible and true to life.

The danger is that judgments about rationality will involve projections of the attitudes of the person making the judgment. In domains like sex, people's preferences vary widely and there is deep disagreement over which sexual preferences make sense and which seem like outliers. This means that when it comes to sexuality, we are especially in danger of attributing to others the preferences we think are intuitively likely. For a person with one sexual history and context, a decision not to use contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancy might seem obviously irrational. For a person with a different history and context, the decision not to use contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancy might seem familiar and intuitive, a result of the very pressures Luker points to.

The ethical implications of the epistemological problem are complex, but there are several I find particularly significant. First, policy makers may rely on judgments about rationality in thinking about appropriate interventions. Thaler and Sunstein have used their behavioral theory as a basis for their "Nudge" proposal: that we should exploit persistent mistaken biases to make people do what's really in their interest and to increase efficient outcomes (2008). This is an explicit attempt to influence behavior in favor of rationality and

against irrationality. Conversely, Posner and his followers have argued that we have reason think that consensual exchanges generally make everyone involved better off, since no one would rationally choose to make the exchange unless they preferred the outcome. But this implicitly rests on an assumption that behavior generally involves a rational reflection of a person's preferences. Both approaches are problematic because they rest on ungrounded assumptions about what people prefer.

With respect to nudging, notice that if we try to nudge people toward behavior that is seemingly more rational when we've attributed that rationality based on misjudgment about a person's preferences, we're nudging them in the wrong direction. Suppose Luker is right when she says that the women in question were choosing rationally because of complex preferences. To nudge them toward more rational behavior would be to nudge them toward unprotected sex, even when children are unwanted. This seems a peculiar conclusion.

The peculiarity of this conclusion helps to illustrate, I believe, that if nudges sometimes do seem appropriate, this is because of background beliefs about norms, values, and what it makes sense to want, and not because of rationality and irrationality. From one normative perspective –that abortion is bad but contraception is not– nudges might include reminding people of the possibility of pregnancy or making contraception more visible and available. There are, of course, people who believe that abortion is bad and contraception is also bad, and from this perspective, appropriate nudges would push people who don't want children not to have sex at all. The point here is that when it comes to influencing people's behavior, judgments about rationality are never sufficient for justification: there are always ethical or socio-political value judgments in play. The ethically significant implication, then, is that when we try to use

economic models intended to nudge people toward rationality, we do so on the basis of implicit and thus unexamined pre-theoretical judgments about what it makes sense to want.

Ethical implications also arises from taking up Posner's classical strategy. The classical strategy –assuming that people do not want the adverse consequences then exploring the conditions under which the perceived benefits outweigh the costs– excludes the possibility that Luker's subjects were not better off for having chosen as they did. We would, contrary to Anderson's analysis, have to conclude that those subjects were increasing their own well-being. A policy based on assumptions that behavior can be explained as the rational satisfaction of preferences leads us to evaluate choices as good for the choosers, even when they may not be.

Posner's broader theorizing about sexuality in his book *Sex and Reason* provides an another interesting example of how assumptions about preferences in economic theorizing can have ethically significant implications (1994). Posner's book is an attempt to explain patterns of sexual activity (and legal regulation of that activity) through economic analysis. Posner takes a broadly sociobiological account in which sexual preferences are biological, men have a strong drive for sex and women don't, and the trade-offs men make to satisfy their preferences as best they can drive much of the explanation of sexual behavior. Among other things, it follows that the diversity of sexual behavior often thought to be evidence for the socially constructed and variable nature of sexuality is attributed instead to variation in circumstances: distinguishing between "real" male homosexuality and "opportunistic" male homosexuality, Posner argues that seeming "diversity" in behavior can be explained through situational trade-offs that opportunistic men make.

Here, necessary background about what people prefer is provided by the sociobiology. Though Posner argues that the biological aspect of his account is inessential to it, I agree with Gillian Hadfield when she claims that this is not so. Hadfield writes,

If sex drives are not biological but rather are the product of social factors such as deeply ingrained sexual mores or the nature of the erotic lessons that a person learns during the development of a sexual self, if "sex drive" itself is socially constructed, then it is no longer possible to take sexual preferences as given and explain sexual practices and morality as a function of substitution among options of varying costs in order to satisfy these fixed preferences. (1992, 490)

That is, the mode of analysis requires making assumptions about the preferences in order to derive explanatory conclusions, and seeing them as biological and fixed is a way to do that. As several commentators have argued, this way of proceeding introduces several factors with normative and ethical dimensions. The sociobiological account in which men's sexual pursuit of women is fundamental and paramount has come under criticism in part for its sexist assumptions and methodology (see Hadfield 1992). The reification of "real" versus opportunistic male homosexuality is incompatible with Foucauldian ideas about social construction and also with the idea that recognizing the fluidity of desire and orientations might be essential to political progress (see e.g. Rich 1980; Eskridge 1992, 374). Finally, whole categories of people are erased from view: as Hadfield says, lesbians are essentially invisible in Posner's theory, since female desire isn't seen as relevant to the analysis. Hadfield concludes, "Posner's biology sets the stage for an economic theory in which men are economic actors and women are economic objects; in which men are rational and women are, essentially, rationed" (1992, 491).

Ethical implications of applying economic analysis to decisions about sexual activity, then, can include the following. Because of epistemological problems, we must make assumptions about preferences and rationality. Partly because of the widely varying and socially complex nature of sexual preferences, it's easy to get these wrong: theorists risk importing their own judgments about what things it makes sense to want, or relying on inappropriate generalizations: e. g., that men are sexual aggressors and women are sexual providers. As in the nudge and contraception example, the use of the theory in policy can obscure the operation of values and normative beliefs in judgments about which nudges are good ones. Some generalizations erase from view people and phenomena we think are important, such as female sexual agency, and by extension, same-sex activity between women.

### **3. Economics and its domain**

Let me now consider some issues related to the definition and domain of economics and how our examples bear on these (see Backhouse and Medena 2009, on definitions of economics discussion). First, as I explain below, I believe that the examples nicely illustrate Dupré's rough characterization of an idea being "pushed" beyond a certain "domain."

In the early phases of its development, economics was often understood as the study of a certain domain or certain restricted aspect of human behavior. Focusing on economics as a branch of the science needed to lead and legislate, Adam Smith concerned himself with the wealth of various nations – thus a certain domain. Writing in the late nineteenth century, Mill described economics as "concerned with [persons] solely as [beings] who [desire] to possess wealth," and defined it as "the science which traces the laws of such of the phenomena of society

as arise from the combined operations of mankind for the production of wealth, in so far as those phenomena are not modified by the pursuit of any other object" (2000, 99). With respect to assumptions and domain, Mill says that economics proceeds by investigating "[...] laws [...] under the supposition that man is a being who is determined, by the necessity of his nature, to prefer a greater portion of wealth to a smaller in all cases, without any other exception than that constituted by the two counter-motives already specified. Not that any political economist was ever so absurd as to suppose that mankind are really thus constituted, but because this is the mode in which science must necessarily proceed" (2000, 98). Even Robbins' famous definition of economics in the 1930s as "the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses" – which is scope-expanding in one sense – characterizes economics with reference to a certain domain (1932, 15).

Though modern definitions of economics are famously varied, taking any of these early definitions we can see how my examples concern economic forms of reasoning being applied beyond the domains mentioned by these early theorists. Love and sex are not only different from wealth, they resist description as "scarce resources" that can be used for other ends. Love and caring are not fixed in amount and their degree of scarcity just depends on us and our feelings for one another; in addition, love is often thought to be essentially particular and thus ill-suited to serving a variety of alternative ends. Sex is not a commodity to be exchanged, and is also not a scarce resource; in fact, it's often thought that mutuality, in which sexual desire and pleasure are mutually interdependent and increasing together, is a kind of ideal for sexuality.

Furthermore, the examples illustrate some mechanisms through which expansion beyond a domain can be related to implications with ethically significant aspects. One of these

mechanisms has to do with the way that simplifying and universalizing assumptions that seem innocuous when applied in one domain can lead to problems when applied in another. When Mill says that economics concerns itself with only one aspect of human behavior, falsely assuming for the purpose of progress that people are subject only to the limited range of motives concerned there, because "this is the mode in which science must necessarily proceed," he is aptly prefiguring contemporary thoughts about the importance of idealizing assumptions in science. The assumption that people are rational self-interested maximizers of preference satisfaction can be seen in this light: a universalizing and generalizing assumption about people that is not always true but that works well for some purposes in some domains. Looking at wealth and its acquisition, or more broadly at human behavior concerning ends and scarce means, it may be functional and innocuous to assume that people are self-interested rational maximizers of their own preferences. But in domains like sex and love the assumption is an odd fit: here, people are often other-interested and potentially irrational, the goods are not scarce resources that can be used for other ends, and questions about givenness and diversity of preferences are hotly debated.

#### **4. Implications for imperialism**

In this section I consider three ways the discussion so far bears on debates about scientific imperialism. The first concerns the expression of values. As part of evaluative assessment of imperialism, Clarke and Walsh mention the possibility that imperialism may cause us to "fail to appreciate the irreducibly pluralistic nature of human values" (2009, 203). They cite the work of Margaret Radin, Elizabeth Anderson, and others as showing how expansion of economic

thinking leads us to value things in the wrong kind of way: family relationships, for example, represent values that are not reducible to, and not commensurate with, market values.

Of course, in some ways my analysis echoes these concerns. But in my opinion, the examples I've discussed importantly extend Walsh and Clarke's expression of the relevant idea. In both examples, I have aimed to draw out ethically significant considerations associated with the application of economic reasoning: that some models of other-regardingness lead to unfairness or a decrease in caring, that some models of sexuality risk incorrect judgments about preferences in ways that lead to problematic conclusions. While I believe it is apt in a general way to characterize these conclusions as cases in which the "expression" of certain values is prevented, I think the mechanism goes beyond considerations related to "irreducible plurality of values" and does not rely on theses about plurality or incommensurability. Judgments about which ethical implications are problematic, and how they are, depend on what ethical judgments we come to the table with, but for anyone who thinks those ethical implications are problematic, the relevant concerns will carry over –whether they believe the problems have to do with plural values and incommensurability or not. For example, a person might think the gender wage gap unfair, and might find it objectionable to theorize away the existence of women with same-sex desires, without any particular commitment about the values supporting their beliefs or whether those values are plural or incommensurable.

Next let me turn to epistemic disvalue. With respect to the epistemological issues, Clarke and Walsh note that Dupré's thought about ideas being "unilluminating" when used in the target discipline raises questions. If uses of ideas in new ways were obviously unilluminating, they'd be unlikely to catch on or be seen as successful –so what is the concern? In a related vein, Mäki

points out that expansion into new domains can sometimes exemplify a salutary attempt at unification. Since scientific unification can sometimes be a form of progress, we should try pursuing unifying projects subjects to certain constraints –trying, for example, to find ontologically unifying explanations as long as those explanations are successful (2013, 336).

With respect to the question of "unilluminating" new approaches that are nonetheless seen as successful, Clarke and Walsh propose that researchers may make a "subtle error": they may "fail to appreciate that such methodologies bring with them a way of approaching their subject matter that sheds light on some aspects of the subject of study but obscures others" (2009, 202). In response to Mäki's idea about unification, they note that the question of what constitutes a good or successful explanation can be complex:

An economics imperialist, such as Becker (1991), may believe that he has successfully discerned and then explained a range of social phenomena, when in fact he has been able to explain these phenomena, to his own satisfaction, only by abstracting away from social reality and rendering himself oblivious to aspects of human behaviour that are not well explained by economics (2012, 348)

I take this to mean: since what counts as a good or successful explanation can be contextually sensitive, the proposed constraint would not function to rule out the proper examples.

I believe my two examples bring to light several ways that the relevant sorts of complexities about explanation can arise. First, in the case of love and caring, from the point of view of Becker's style of analysis it comes out as axiomatic that when a person acts altruistically toward another, it is because they preferred to do so: in a sense, then the theory allows us to "explain" altruistic behavior. But from other perspectives, the causes of altruistic preferences are

complex, and can include cultural and social factors, factors typically left out of the economic approach. Judgments of whether the new more unified explanations are successful may reflect practitioners' judgments over the significance of these aspects of human behavior. From a theorist steeped in an economic approach, the new explanations may seem more successful. From a theorist steeped in a sociological one, they may seem less successful.

Another example of complexity in evaluating explanations has to do with the gender wage gap. If women do more caring labor because they are more likely to have altruistic preferences, in one sense this "explains" the wage gap: people are simply doing what they prefer to do. Again, this leaves out potentially relevant factors: if women face reduced ranges of options from which to choose, this bears importantly on the wage gap, but insofar as the theory takes preferences as basic, this level of analysis becomes irrelevant. Again, whether we see a more unified explanation as successful may depend on pre-theoretic commitments over whether these other factors are important to consider or relatively trivial.

In the case of rationality decisions about sexual activity, we've seen how both the classical approach and the behaviorist one can "explain" the decision to have unprotected sex when children aren't wanted: the classical theorist by attributing rationality and asking which preferences would cause the person to act this way, the behaviorist by subsuming the behavior under one of a range of exceptions like "bounded willpower." But as we've seen, knowing what why people do what they do is complex and it is possible that neither theory is getting the right explanation. How would we determine whether the new more unified explanation is an improvement?

These are all examples where what seems like a good explanation is discipline-specific: an explanation might seem like a good one from within the imperializing discipline, but be importantly lacking when viewed from colonized ones. Among other things, in these kinds of cases assuming the superiority of the imperializing explanation may be a form of epistemic injustice to those in the colonized discipline (see Rolin, this volume). These factors complicate attempts to evaluate attempted unification, and this shows how the "subtle error" mentioned by Clarke and Walsh is a real possibility.

The final issue has to do with what Mäki calls "domain-only" and "disciplinary" imperialism. While disciplinary imperialism involves intrusion into other disciplinary cultures and practices, "domain-only" imperialism involves explaining phenomena in target disciplines while "ignoring those disciplines themselves" (2013, 334-5). While acknowledging that different cases raise different issues, Mäki characterizes domain-only imperialism as generally the "weakest" and "most innocent" imperialism of scope. If what I've said so far here is on the right track, though, it seems to me that these ethical implications –and the epistemic disvalue mentioned above – arise primarily from expansion into new domains, and that any wrongs arising from disciplinary issues would be additional to these.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I've used the specific examples of economics applied to love and sex to show how economics imperialism can have ethically significant implications, and I've used the results to remark on issues concerning assessment and epistemic disvalue. With respect to assessment, I've suggested that negative aspects of economics imperialism can go beyond

disciplinary matters and may concern large scale socio-cultural implications. With respect to epistemic disvalue, I've argued that knowing what counts as a successful explanation can be a contextually sensitive and difficult matter. In broadest terms, I've aimed to show how the use of assumptions appropriate for more traditional economics domains lead to problems with applied in other domains, such as love and sex, where they do not fit well.

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