



METHODS

Towards a centerpiece for ecological economics

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**Abstract**

This paper offers a hypothesis with cognitive claims for a social theory that is relevant for ecological economics. As background, a fable has *Ego* metaphorically viewed as a horse driven to problematic extremes with the solution becoming an integration and balance of means with the other horse, *Empathy*: the *Ego 'n' Empathy* Hypothesis. Starting with a new root metaphor which is extended with a pre-analytic vision, the main support for the cognitive claims is with a mathematical model and a metaeconomic analysis. Armed with both scope and precision, along with an assortment of corroborative evidence from different disciplines, the paper provides support for establishing a new center. Cognitive claims have ego and empathy apart giving value and possibilities, and together, as ego-empathy, giving an emergent value possibility. This possibility suggests a rallying point for transdisciplinary work and a theoretical centerpiece for ecological economics. Suited as such, the economic ego of *homo economicus* is distinguished from the political ego of *sacro egoismo*. Corroboration with Adam Smith's moral philosophy—political economy is highlighted: the individual person of an empirical ethics stemming from both 'self-interest' and 'fellow feeling' is resurrected to support the Hypothesis. Awareness emerges like a complementary consciousness, an added value, strikingly similar to Smith's 'impartial spectator'. Empirical demonstration concludes this integration of interests with a metaeconomic analysis for the case of soil and water conservation policy in the North American farming population. Taken together, the root metaphor with reasonable scope and precision, corroboration and demonstration help to structure the *Ego 'n' Empathy* Hypothesis.

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**1. Proposing a hypothesis relative to a common goal**

We share a common goal in establishing ecological economics with the implication of a world-wide

scope, and agree with Söllner (1997, p. 196), "it is doubtful whether things will change for the better unless a new social value theory is postulated which is indispensable as the centerpiece..." of that economics. In going for this goal, the primary problem faced is not a strictly scientific one. We do not sequentially develop a single point of view inductively or deductively. Nothing new in science is claimed, nor is a purely scientific, conventional

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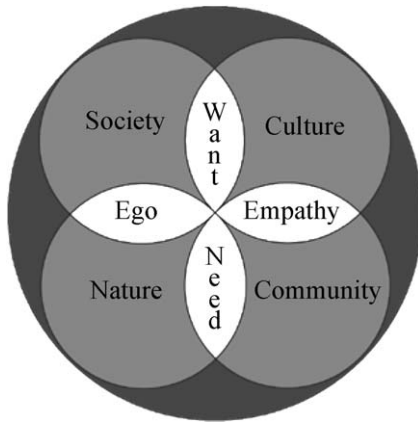


Fig. 1. Vision of the social spheres (from the *Fable of Ego'n'Empathy*, Hayes, 2003) is structured elementally with Society, Community, Nature, Culture; and foreseen with four forces: Need, Want, Ego, Empathy.

hypothesis asserted. The challenge is to find a solution that would simultaneously process a number of views around a pivotal point: negating what is essentially a background world theory and entrenched system—and, on the other hand, knowing how to positively move beyond the entrenchment (continually being excavated by mainstream economics) by structuring a hypothesis with cognitive claims useful to transform theory and further practice.

This challenge was the origin of the authors' partnership and the *Ego'n'Empathy* Hypothesis is its culmination. It asserts that value emerges from ego and empathy apart, and together, as ego-empathy form a third type of emergent value. A root metaphor, pre-analytic vision, corroboration with refined knowledge and the metaeconomic model are the supports that put the Hypothesis front and center on the table of ecological economics.

Hypothetical development encompasses a philosophical method pushing the issue back to the interpretation of evidence to structure the hypotheses. The guide to this method of structuring and accompanying support is Stephen Pepper's *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence*. He uses the "root metaphor method" to develop "relatively adequate hypotheses" taken to account by tests of adequacy with the criteria of "scope" and "precision" (Pepper, 1942/1970, pp. 76–77).

Realizing that a 'true' hypothesis finding full confirmation in a world theory is beyond our reach, we promote a working hypothesis for transdisciplinary usage that takes into account methods, types and adequacies (and inadequacies) relative to 'world hypotheses'. The intention is to take a commonsense hypothesis as a vehicle for economics pack it with corroborative evidence and equip it with a metaeconomic analytical engine. Already, there is much theory that adds support with evidence from the fields of history, philosophy, biology, psychology and neuroscience. Structuring a hypothesis and staking out a territory would be impossible without that groundwork. The Hypothesis is implicit in the *Fable of Ego'n'Empathy* (Hayes, 2003), emergent in the pre-analytic vision (Fig. 1), and made explicit with the mathematics of metaeconomics. It is grounded with empirical support demonstrating value emerging from both ego and empathy, not just from ego as postulated (generally without empirical test) by tough-minded neoclassicists, or from empathy by tender-hearted environmentalists.

## 2. *Ego* as present root metaphor and world theory

*Ego*, in the broad sense of Descartes' famous formula *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) is considered the cornerstone for modern philosophy, as self-interest is to partisan politics, ego is to psychology, *homo economicus* is to neoclassical economics and subtly selfish is to biology. And, "like a rose... ", ego by any other name is still ego (i.e. I, *cogito, das Ich, Geist, self-interest, ...Ego*), the dynamo at the middle of modernism implying a theory worldwide in scope.

In a nutshell, we propose to go beyond the world theory of egocentricity being solely presumed by balancing and integrating empathetic tendencies. As Sober and Wilson (1998, p. 8) note: "The idea that human behavior is governed entirely by self-interest and that altruistic ultimate motives don't exist has never been supported by either a coherent theory or a crisp and decisive set of observations". Rather, there is likely a tendency toward both empathy–altruism and egoism–hedonism at the same time (as suggested in Sober and Wilson, 1998). There is the real possibility

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