

The Economist as Shaman

Revisoning Our Role for a Sustainable, Provisioning Economy

1. Introduction

From Gregory Mankiw's suggestion that non-economists may be 'muggles' to Keynes's famous reference to 'animal spirits' in connection with economic activity, and Hazel Henderson's reference to the economics 'priesthood' we may ascertain that there is something worthy of study in the powerful role held by economists in society. In this paper I take a wide perspective on what the role of an economist might be in an anthropological sense, taking a step back and considering what an economist might be for in a general sense, rather than in the sense of a capitalist society in the early 21st century.

Economics is a notoriously unreflexive discipline. Despite the best efforts of the *Journal of Economics Methodology* and in the midst of the interlinked economic, financial and ecological crises, there is little evidence that the mainstream economics profession has questioned its methods, focus or orientation. Unlike other disciplines, economics is not a contested terrain where different approaches wage more or less seemly academic battles. Rather it is a unified, pro-market, neoclassical majority, whose method is almost exclusively mathematical, against which dissidents launch periodic guerrilla attacks. The failure of the discipline to operate in a reflexive way is best demonstrated by the fact that the accepted wisdom holds that, far from their discipline being in need of rapid and radical revision, what the economic crisis proved was the need for more markets, and more neoclassical economics, rather than a change of focus and more variety of method and theory.

In this paper, rather than launching yet another critical attack on an impervious discipline, I move instead to create the role of economist for a sustainable society using the method of the thought experiment. I begin by taking seriously the reverence with which economists are treated in our society. I create an ideal type of a priest figure, the 'shaman', against whom I explore the role and behaviour of an economist. I suggest that the role of an economist is one of an intermediary between people and the resources they need for survival, a role that in less rationalist societies might have been performed by a priest or shaman. In the era of climate change this role may be expressed in terms of the moral consequences of certain forms of consumption, such as eating meat or using aeroplanes for travel. At a deeper level, the economist may be well-placed to negotiate the liminal space between humans and other species, especially in situations where our survival requires the death of some species. The aim of the paper is to explore what this conception of economists as intermediaries implies for our role in an era where over-consumption is threatening our survival as a species and our lifestyles are threatening the existence of other species, as well as our own.

In the first section I analyse the literature provided by social anthropologists to establish the ideal type of the shaman. In Section 3 I explore to what extent there already exists a myth of economics and a particularly non-materialist role assigned to economists. The paper then includes two sections in which I explore three of the central roles of the economist in the light of the shamanic role of mediating between human

communities and the environment and overseeing human relationships with other species. Finally, in conclusion, I propose two central responsibilities for an economist in a sustainable society: supporting a process of re-embedding the economy in the environment; and negotiating a respectful—even reverential—relationship between humans and non-human species.

2. Establishing the ideal type of ‘shaman’

What precisely a shaman is, and how a religious system accorded the label ‘shamanism’ might be defined, is the source of ongoing debate within the literature of comparative religions. As far back as 1903, when anthropologists were first beginning to take seriously the distinct forms of religious expression that explorers and colonisers were discovering in distant corners of the globe, van Gennep identified the word ‘chamanisme’ as one of the most dangerous of the vague words used to describe spiritual belief systems. Western scholars have struggled with this role for which they have found few examples in their own societies: ‘a great many subsequent examinations of shamanism as a product of Western theorizing, often framed in terms of a Foucauldian notion of discourse and referring to shamanism as a “construct,” “idea,” “notion,” or “metaphor”’ DuBois (2011: 111).

In terms of his or her function, the role of the shaman is one of mediation, of inhabiting the liminal space between species or between natural and supernatural worlds. According to one social anthropologist who has studied shamans in various South American cultures: ‘The defining characteristic of the shamanic practitioner is, of course, his or her direct access to the normally unseen worlds of spirit and divine power, as well as the ability to channel knowledge garnered from these experiences for the good of a human community’ (Glass-Coffin, 2010: 207). Abram shares this view of the shaman as intermediary between human communities and their ecosystem:

‘The traditional or tribal shaman, I came to discern, acts as an intermediary between the human community and the larger ecological field, ensuring that there is an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants, but from the human community back to the local earth. By his constant rituals, trances, ecstasies and “journeys”, he ensures that the relation between human society and the larger society of beings is balanced and reciprocal, and that the village never takes more from the living land than it returns to it—not just materially but with prayers, propitiation, and praise.’ (Abram, 1996: 7).

The shaman is a challenging and intimidating figure: s/he is not to be dismissed by those exercising only temporal power: ‘the shaman is a strategic manoeuvre that represents the spirit of dissent. Invoking the shamanic offers a way out for those struggling to free themselves from dominant narratives that come from somewhere else.’ (Bussey, 2009: 30, quoting Nandy). The role of shaman thus validates dissent and thinking that challenges the dominant paradigm. Bussey quotes Nandy as arguing for the ability of the shaman to step outside the existing paradigm, and thus have the potential for creating the new: ‘[the] shaman has one foot in the familiar, one foot outside; one foot in the present, one in the future; or, as some would put it, one foot in the timeless’ (Nandy, 2007, p. 176).

Bussey draws attention to the emancipatory potential of the shaman as a role and as a metaphor. The shaman is permitted to act in ways that are outside social norms: s/he exists in liminal spaces and can ignore the taboos and systems of etiquette that are strictly enforced for other members of society. S/he is also the possessor of arcane knowledge, which is acquired through bizarre rituals not accessible to other members of the tribe. It is too tempting here not to draw a connection with the use of higher mathematics and economic jargon to exclude mortals from the realms of economic debate. But how else are we to interpret the freedom with which the 'quants' employed by the world's finance houses to create power and value through their CDOs and CDSs? Just as in the world of sorcery, the risks are high because the rewards are great: 'shamans inflict harm, or even kill, in exchange for the powers they impart' (Fotiou, 193).

The characteristics constitutive of the role of shaman thus appear to be:

- A social authority and the accompanying responsibility to provide challenge to existing power systems;
- A close and revered relationship with the ecosystem
- Mediation through an intuitive as well as a material understanding of other species;
- The power to offer healing.

3. Guardians of the Myth of Economism

My proposition of the economist as shaman is a provocative one, and can be considered as a thought experiment. To justify that it is an experiment worth conducting requires some evidence that the perception of economists by themselves and by others demonstrates their occupying a peculiar social position and playing a specific cultural role. In a paper musing on the distance between economists' view of the world and that of 'the general public' Mankiw (prominent pro-market economist, author of an undergraduate textbook studied by millions, and adviser to the Bush White House), refers to the latter as 'muggles', implicitly suggesting that he and his fellow economists are the possessors of supernatural powers (Mankiw, 2009). Another gesture towards the supernatural powers of the financial function is found in the labelling of a plan to gain agreement about future action by British banks as 'Project Merlin'.¹

More critically, and from outside what is often referred to as the 'charmed circle' of finance, Henderson long ago engaged in what she called 'Unfrocking the priesthood' of economists, sarcastically referring to the 'snake oil' salesmen she considered presently indulged in the dark arts of modelling and prediction. More recently, and particularly since the collapse of the western capitalist model in 2007/8, similar critiques have spread in a way it is tempting to see as the overthrowing of a powerful mythological system and its replacement with another—the move from the traditional religious ways to the birdman cult amongst Easter Islanders who found their own survival threatened by the over-exploitation and exhaustion of essential resources, perhaps.

I am not alone in considering how the way economics thinks about itself is important in defining its power, nor in interpreting much of the way economists make their case as including elements of myth-making. In a critique of mainstream economy

theory from the perspective of ecological economics Kallis and colleagues characterise ‘the myths of economism’ as follows:

Let us distinguish between an economy that is “out there” and the complex of myths that people, both individually and in order to act together, have developed to aid them in living within the economy. This distinction is roughly parallel to nature as reality of its own and the complex myths traditional people hold about nature and their relation to nature. In traditional societies, myths provide explanations for natural phenomena, facilitate individual and collective decisions, and give meaning and coherence to life. As people act on their myths, their societies and the natural environment are shaped and co-evolved around them. . . As modern people, we also act on comparable beliefs about our world (a world that is largely economic), that are rooted in the discipline of economics. We refer to this complex of myths as economism, and like traditional beliefs and scientific understanding, economism explains phenomena, facilitates individual and collective decisions, and gives meaning and coherence to our lives. (Kallis, et al., 2009: 18-19).

The authors provide two insights which are supportive of my argument. First, that myths have power and guide human behaviour. While this is a basic understanding in the anthropological literature (for example, the myth of birdman that grew up amongst Easter Islanders as their resources grew scarce, or the cargo cults of the Pacific Islanders encountering greatly more technologically sophisticated cultures) it is, according to Kallis et al., equally true of our intellectually sophisticated, post-Enlightenment society. Secondly, they contend that the dominant myth of our culture is what they term ‘economism’, a suggestion that implies both the centrality and the hegemonic nature of the worldview of economics (they do not make this explicit but they are referring here to neoclassical economics).

Norgaard (another ecological economist) gives his own interpretation of economism in another paper that questions the deep dislocation that the traditional economist has given rise to:

Let me expand on the term “economism” (belief in the primacy of economics) by distinguishing between actual economic activity and the complex of myths we have developed that sustains our trust in the economy and makes it possible to keep it functioning--possible to keep people, capital, and land working together. This distinction is parallel to the one between nature as a reality of its own and the complex of myths traditional peoples held about nature and their relation to it. Just as traditional myths provide explanations for natural phenomena, facilitate individual and collective decisions, and give meaning and coherence to life, so do modern beliefs about economics and the economy, in similar ways, make meaningful, coordinated life in industrial society possible. (Norgaard, 2011).

To a western, rational mind there is no place for the shaman and his very role is difficult to comprehend, as the conflicting terms witch-doctor, medicine man and wise woman testify. Is this person a healer, a wizard, a seer? Where does his or her power come from that he considers herself the equal of the chief and can strike terror into the hearts of his countryfolk? We can imagine that in societies where survival is considerably less secure

that it is in the modern West, people who are considered to have a particular role in controlling the supply of resources are important members of society.

Giddens (1991), suggests that a characteristic of modernity is a process of creating institutions and routines that shelter us from the uncomfortable reality of our own human dependence. We 'sequester' this reality, to protect us from these aspects of our lives that would prevent our optimal functioning within society. Barry (forthcoming) views such sequestration as part as a strategy for dealing with the vulnerability which we, as modern humans, feel incapable of acknowledging. The pressure of modern society requires us to inhabit a realm of performed invulnerability, with our risk of sickness, dependence and eventual death being excluded from everyday life.

Perhaps we can suggest that the role of the shaman is to inhabit this realm of what Barry calls 'the occluded', the aspects of our humanity that are taboo within a modern society. One aspect of this is the vulnerability of our physical selves and another our dependence on the natural world. Thus the sequestration of our dependence is closely tied to our disembedding from the natural world that ecofeminists theorise as central to our environmentally destructive behaviour. The role of a mainstream economist is to reinforce this disconnection by frequent and public statement of the strength and power of the global capitalist economy. Perhaps we see here a deeper explanation of the irrational exuberance that always seems particularly pronounced when market conditions reach their most challenging. In his role as shaman the economist is required to maintain the separation between the everyday and the taboo, between the whole and the polluted. His social role is to protect us from the risk of exposing our destructive and occluded vulnerability.

In traditional societies the role of the shaman was a two-faced one. While s/he was responsible for ensuring the provision of resources s/he also had duties connected with protection and propitiation. Non-rationalist societies that recognise their dependence on the natural world but do not have the scientific understanding that permits an aspiration to control are conscious of the importance of their relationship with the environment and the other species they share it with in a way we are not. An important part of the role of the shaman was to maintain this relationship and to inhabit the liminal space between humans, the environment and other species.

We can find a reminder of how the religious code regulated the use of land in the book of Leviticus, the book of the bible that deals with law. The ancient Hebrews had precisely the kind of reverential and awe-filled relationship with their Almighty that typifies pre-scientific societies. In Chapter 26 (vv. 2-5) we find the Lord's promise of abundance, no doubt communicated to the faithful by a shamanic figure:

'Ye shall keep my sabbaths, and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD. If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. And your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing time: and ye shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely.'

We can interpret this as a divine guarantee of security of resources, so long as religious strictures are maintained.

In the previous chapter we find the linked necessity of sharing this bounty fairly, the concept of jubilee from which modern economists might learn and which

campaigners use to draw attention to the grossly unequal allocation of resources in our modern world. Here, the clear injunction is that land remains in sacred, non-personal ownership and that this shall be made manifest in a reallocation every 50 years (Chapter 25, vv. 8-:

‘And thou shalt number seven sabbaths of years unto thee, seven times seven years; and the space of the seven sabbaths of years shall be unto thee forty and nine years. . . ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family. . . And if thou sell aught unto thy neighbor, or buyest aught of thy neighbor's hand, ye shall not oppress one another.’

The jubilee presents an opportunity to return allocations to a socially determined system, removing unfair distribution that will inevitably develop over time on the basis of luck rather than judgement, but also to recognise that there are sacred constraints on the use of the land and that the relationship between people and their land is a mutual one.

4. Economics, Embedding, and Resource Security

The question of the acquisition and allocation of resources is central to the discipline of economics, and from a sustainability perspective we recognise that all those resources come from the natural environment. Hence the need for a discussion of how we relate to our environment is a necessary precursor to a consideration of how the economist might mediate this relationship.

The turn of the millennium witnessed an extraordinary outburst of enthusiasm and hubris on the theme of globalisation. What else than such a calendrical anomaly could have persuaded us to accept such clearly mythical notions as ‘the weightless economy’ and the idea that we could somehow adopt a timeless, spaceless lifestyle? The high priest of financialised capitalism himself described the continued boom in global stock markets around the millennium as ‘irrational exuberance’. To remind yourself of this time of supreme (and misplaced) confidence I would suggest that you re-read Thomas Friedman’s book *The World is Flat* (2005), whose very title suggests the loss of reality that accompanied our movement from 20th to 21st centuries. And then compare it with his later book, *Hot, Flat and Crowded*, written just three years later (2008). Here we find Friedman coming down to earth with a bump after the millennial party at the end of the universe.

This is a difficult transition and—like many who were both adherents and proponents of the hegemonic two-dimensional myth of finance capitalism and the weightless economy—Friedman has moved rapidly to denial now seeking, as he reminds us repeatedly in his later book, ‘a free, cheap, renewable source of electrons’. The phrase appears more of an invocation or mantra than a realistic argument about how we can sustain our current lifestyles in the face of the reality of climate change and peak oil.

One response to this mass delusion might be to replace its central ideas with more realistic ones; to be, in Doreen Massey’s words, ‘for space’, or in the words of the bioregionalists, ‘for place’ (Cato, 2011). As Gary Snyder has argued, ‘Bioregionalism is the entry of place into the dialectic of history’ (Snyder, 1990: p. 44). The disconnection of people from their places that the bioregionalists critique is not a new process, and can be

linked to the rise of capitalism as an economic system. Karl Polanyi (1944) addresses this issue of the separation of economic systems from the social systems on which they inevitably depend. Polanyi conceived of the economy as 'submerged in his social relationships'. To him the 'market economy' was a utopian myth, since it assumed that economic structures could prevail over social structures. Polanyi used the concept of 'embedding' to describe the need for the economy to be enmeshed within a complex system of social rules and cultural norms. His notion of the 'double movement' posits an in-built pressure to bring the economy back into line with social needs provides a useful counterbalance to the theorising of the placeless, weightless economy.

Ecofeminist theorists have expanded this notion of embedding to encompass the physical embedding of our economic systems within the natural world. Mellor characterises the argument as follows: 'The core argument of ecofeminist political economy is that the marginalisation of women's work is ecologically dangerous because women's lives as reflected in domestic and caring work represent the embodiedness of humanity, the link of humanity with its natural being.' Drawing on the work of feminist economics this is partly an argument about the marginalisation of women's work, much of which takes places outside the market, and the monetised, economy (Mies, 1996; Henderson, 1996). However, at a more fundamental level it is an argument about the distinct nature of women's work in being more closely connected to bodily existence, as in the caring work for human bodies, and particularly the vulnerable human bodies of the young, the old and the sick. Mellor (2006) argues that 'the capitalist market is disembodied and disembedded, carved out of the totality of human existence within the natural world'; a sustainable economy, by contrast, would be a provisioning economy, focused on provisioning for the meeting of embodied needs rather than the production of market goods for sale.

Mellor also draws attention to the temporal disembedding of work, especially to the nature of women's work as relating to the body and being intrinsically related to biological time. The movement to an industrial economy from a peasant economy has meant a parallel movement from the cyclical time of the seasons to the linear time of the clock (Mellor, 1997). According to Griffiths (1999: 165), this has also meant a dislocation of our lives from their natural basis:

'In the thirteenth century, clocks became increasingly important for commerce. The urban commercial population often learned to count money by counting the bells of clocks and then use that arithmetic skill in shops and early businesses. Feudalism conceptually linked money with land and livestock, as language remembers, so stock market comes from livestock, and an annual yield originally meant a crop yield. The value of land rests in its immoveability, its constancy; and as the land was a steady plenty of eternal cycles, so time was considered plentiful in those same everlasting rounds. But the risk of capitalism linked money to time and, in contrast to land, money's value comes from its circulation, not its hoarding. The value of money – currency – depends on its movement: the word currency comes from the Latin currere – to run.'

We can extend Griffiths's consideration by considering physical measures and the extent of their abstraction. Elsewhere (Cato, 2010) I have raised the question of how the abstract metric measure (the metre itself being defined as one ten-millionth of the distance from the Equator to the North Pole as measured by its passage through Paris)

contributed to our disembedding from the natural world. In contrast, earlier measures, were based on specific distances of the human body and hence derived from our interaction with the world, an example being the Medieval cloth measures of spans and bolts, which were both derived from the ell. As its name suggests, this measured the distance between two elbows, hence the (later corrupted) expression ‘Give him an inch and he’ll take an ell’. Ancient China provides an example of these two more abstract forms of (dis)connection with the locale in the form of bronze temple bells. According to Neil MacGregor (2010: 193) their consistency was such that they could be used to measure standard volumes, while their weight was so accurate they could also be used to provide standard weights for the purposes of ‘bringing harmony to commerce as well as society’. Macgregor’s expert witness Isabel Hilton finds this typical of Confucianism whose philosophical aim was to seek balance and perhaps especially balance between people and nature.

According to the bioregionalist critique of modern society, the dislocation of ourselves from our local environment, and the increasing distances between our bodies and the landscapes where the food that nourishes them is produced, has left us physiologically as well as psychologically vulnerable. The proposal of the bioregional economy implies a reconnection of ourselves with our environment via both time and space (Cato, 2011). This embedding—whether social, as proposed by Polanyi, or environmental, as proposed by the ecofeminists—is not a thin, theoretical business: it implies a wholly different approach to our work, which will also be much most strongly embedded in social relations and will bring us closer to the environment—the source of our raw materials—rather than separating us from it.

Let us contrast for a moment the way we know our local place with the way that the Australian outback is known by its people: through a system of spiritually resonant songlines (Chatwin, 1988). The initial interpretation of these songlines, or tracks followed by totemic ancestors as they followed their creative journey across the land, is as a way of making geographical sense of place. They enable native peoples to find their way and to find sources of food and water. But they are also systems of meaning, of myths that enable individual identities, that build communities, and that facilitate relationships between human communities, animal communities, and the resources they share. Taçon identifies in the songlines a process of using landscape to facilitate connection and relationship, concluding that ‘History and archaeology have repeatedly shown that cultures that fail to maintain sustainable connections to large stretches of land do so at their folly. Perhaps if we focused less on computer superhighways and paid more attention to looking after the diversity found along Dreaming Tracks, water courses and resource routes, our own survival would be less threatened.’

Such a deep and spiritually resonant connection between human communities and place is not specific to Australia. Jaye Griffiths (2007) found a similar relationship during her travels in Amazonia:

Under Western eyes, the Amazon is an un-understandable wilderness, an undifferentiated green of undefinable plants, a bewildering forest of obscurity where not only your body but also your comprehension can become fatally lost. It confuses and perplexes and is perceived as almost pathologically pathless for the mind. But indigenous people know how to ‘think’ the forests, know that the paths through this wilderness are songs, the song that each plant has. Song makes a thread of light, a path of the mind; each song tells of one plant’s

relationship to other plants and not only differentiates one plant from another but distinguishes between the uses of, for example, stem or leaf or root of the same plant. There is practical wisdom here but also psychological wisdom: you find your way and learn how to live unlost, not through the wild forest but within it. The songlines harmonize people with environment. There is no divide. Mankind is a full-singing part, not discordant but as necessary—and as beautiful—as a violin to an orchestra.

It is superfluous to point out that this sort of understanding enhances human well-being in a range of ways that are impossible to fully comprehend by those of us raised in the dislocated, rationalist culture of the contemporary West. However, perhaps we might find an inkling of it in the way that urban myths are always located in local places. When we hear about the dog that was killed in the microwave or the escaped, psychopathic lunatic, the story always takes place in a locality close to where we hear the story suggesting a lingering need to pin stories to places. This refusal to allow stories to float free of their geographical settings is reminiscent of what Basso found amongst the Western Apache for whom ‘wisdom sits in places’:

‘Animals, places, and whole landscapes have meanings, sometimes sobering, sometimes uplifting, but always with a moral dimension. . . every story begins and ends with the phrase “it happened at”. . . and this anchoring of narrative to places means mention of a place evokes a particular story, which in turn carries a moral standard, and implication for certain types of social relations.’ (quoted in Pretty, 2007: 160)

There is a risk here of falling into the trap of romanticising or patronising the way of life of people in exotic foreign lands. Yet there are suggestions that we might find traces of a similar embedding in sacred landscapes of our own: Chatwin finds hints of the remnants of European songlines in the Greek myths in the history of these islands.

Perhaps we can find similar hints in some of the Celtic festivals and myths that made aspects of our own landscape sacred. Certainly the worship of natural features persisted until the 20th century, in local well-dressing rituals (Ross, 1967: 107) and the wassailing ceremonies that are still popular as life begins to awaken following the winter. Deakin (p. 122), in his eulogy to our native woodlands, suggests that Wessex demonstrates pattern of Neolithic barrows and stone and timber circles that could represent something similar to songlines: ‘If rituals are a way of enacting a story . . . the narrative of the Neolithic monuments in Wessex is about history, origins and people’s place in the world. The story may well have been a creation myth, a singing up of the songlines on the land.’

5. The Raw and the Cooked

How have we come to be a species which, while capable of minutely documenting its own imminent extinction has lost all sense of our connection with the earth which is the source of all well-being and of the other species we share it with. In this section we will proceed further to address the question as reframed by Abram:

‘how did civilized humankind lose all sense of reciprocity and relationship with the animate natural world, that rapport that so influences (and limits) the activities of most indigenous,

tribal peoples? How did civilization break out of, and leave behind, the animistic or participatory mode of experience known to all native, place-based cultures?’ (Abram, 1996: 137)

Famously it was John Locke, the English ‘empirical’ philosopher—he who is often held responsible through providing an intellectual justification for the ownership of land who argued that ‘beasts abstract not’ and therefore are not deserving of respect equivalent to that accorded to other humans. As is clear from the argument in the previous section, it should be clear that I wish to argue against this on two grounds, of which the first is that abstraction can be considered to be an self-evident proof of intellectual or moral progress. Secondly, what are we to make of his apparently ‘empirical’ conclusion that animals are not capable of intellectual abstraction. More recently a slew of authors emerging from the perspectives of deep ecology and animal rights have vigorously contested this conclusion. Carl Sagan (1977) argues that chimpanzees at least demonstrate the ability for abstract reasoning. Several authors make a distinction between the moral status of animals who have been tamed and whose ‘domestic’ status implies that they owe their lives to human intervention, and wild animals (Callicott and Baird, 1980; Leopold, 1949).

To remove us further still from any possibility of romanticisation it should, of course, be remembered that most meat eaten today is the result of domestic production, and most of it in the inhumane conditions of what are referred to as ‘factory farms’. For Karen Davies (1995), this is a feminist issue. Deep ecologists, especially those of the Iron John variety, are prepared to idealise the wild creatures while denigrating the flesh of the millions of domestic livestock that actually constitute their food. She is similarly critical of the idealisation of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, and in particular of its almost exclusive exaltation of the hunter (male) at the expenses of the gatherer (female).

The argument about the intellectual and moral capacities of animals is only a tangential concern of my discussion here, but the relationship we have with animals, and especially how we negotiate this relationship with other species when our provisioning requirements demand their deaths is of great concern to the economist conceptualised as shaman. Part of the role of the economist as shaman, then, is to overcome the taboo that we inevitably associate with killing other animals who, however irrationally, we experience as our kin. This explains the repeated accounts of indigenous peoples’ ceremonies to accompany the death of animals in the hunt:

‘Animals had souls, of course, so in all hunting societies some form of ritual apology and forgiveness was necessary before the kill: hence the Navajo praying to the deer before the hunt, the Mbuti cleansing themselves by smoke each morning, the Naskapi pledging to the hunted “You and I have the same mind and spirit.” But plants and flowers and trees had spirits, too, every bit as sensate, so almost all early peoples had elaborate ceremonies connected with cutting and harvesting, asking exoneration for the painful removal of some of the Earth’s children, and most had sotires like the Ojibways’, which speak of “the wailing of the trees under the axe”, or like the ancient Chinese tales which mention cries of “pain and indignation” from fallen branches. (Sale, 1991: 6)

Hunting, the killing of our fellow species to meet our need for food, has its myths and what Snyder refers to as its ‘etiquette’ in all indigenous societies. The painful process of

recognising our dependence on our fellow creatures, and the paradoxical realisation that our sustenance requires their death, demanded rites of propitiation and explanatory or sequestering myths. It also required training in appropriate behaviour through myth and story-telling. Abram tells the following story of the Apache people:

Long ago, a boy went out to hunt deer. He rode on horseback. Pretty soon he saw one [a deer] standing by the side of a canyon. Then he went closer and shot it. He killed it. Then the deer rolled all the way down to the bottom of the canyon.

Then the boy went down there. It was a buck, fat and muscular. There he butchered it. The meat was heavy, so he had to carry it up in pieces. He had a hard time reaching the top of the canyon with each piece.

He left the last leg behind. On his way home the boy got dizzy and nearly fell off his horse. Then his nose twitched uncontrollably, like Deer's nose does. Then pain shot up behind his eyes. Then he became scared.

He went back to the canyon to look for the leg but it was gone. He was very sick and nearly died and always had bad luck in hunting.

The moral of the tale is clear, that the sacrifice made by the prey should be respected and not denigrated, and its retelling reminds young hunters that they must kill respectfully and use resources wisely.

We are aware of peoples who have lived and who live today adopting a wholly different relationship to the other creatures with whom they share their ecosystem.

A similar technique to bridge the gap between species was the story-telling connected to metamorphosis between humans and animals. These examples of the interchange between species, whether in physical or narrative form, play an important role in mediating our relationship with the environment:

'By invoking a dimension or a time when all entities were in human form, or when humans were in the shape of others animals and plants, these stories affirm human kinship with the multiple forms of the surrounding terrain. They thus indicate the respectful, mutual relations that must be practiced in relation to other animals, plants, and the land itself, in order to ensure one's own health and to preserve the well-being of the human community.' (Abram, 1996: 121)

We might think that we have developed a long way beyond the system of totemic animals, yet there are hints of this closer relationship with animals in our own names. The Russian president's name, Medvedev, for example, is derived from the Slavic word for a bear (*medved*), as is the familiar English forename and surname Arthur (from the Celtic *ardd*, a bear), while the familiar name Ralph is derived from a Scandinavian root meaning 'counsel of wolf'. These names of people—as well as those of places which abound with animist references, remind us of a time when we knew ourselves to be animals and recognised the horse and bear as our siblings. This connectedness extended so far as enabling an experience of metamorphosis, where the space between different species and between the animate and inanimate worlds could be bridged.

This may be one role for the economist as shaman: to remind us of our commonality with other species and to limit our freedom to exploit them freely and

without any recognition of the reverence due to their life. We might be encouraged to learn our place in the family of creatures, as we are reminded by Gary Snyder:

'The lessons we learn from the wild become the etiquette of freedom. We can enjoy our humanity with its flashy brains and sexual buzz, its social cravings and stubborn tantrums, and take ourselves as no more and no less than another being in the Big Watershed. We can accept each other all as barefoot equals sleeping on the same ground' (Snyder, 1990: p. 26).

This is a hard rather than a soft lesson. An understanding of ecology reduces the risk of romanticising nature, since the food web is a simple illustration of the harsh fact of natural life: we live because others have died. We do not know whether a fox feels guilt as it kills a vole, but for humans who are closely embedded with their natural environment, to live life consciously as part of a family of other creatures, to know that your survival requires the death of your brother or sister, is spiritually challenging. Part of the role of the shaman is to undertake the mediation that makes this daily life-and-death more comfortable. The shaman exists in the liminal space between species, and between the worlds of life and death. S/he therefore has the ability to propitiate and to remove the risk of contamination.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has not been to draw a strict academic parallel between the role of a shaman in a traditional society and that of an economist in a modern society. I would not be equipped to undertake such a comparison, especially in view of the wealth of ethnographic and other studies in the field (DuBois, 2011). Rather I have sought to identify the particular role of the shaman—that of mediation—as one that might usefully be applied to an economist in a sustainable society. In this final section I begin to sketch out how the notion of a shaman might give us a starting-point to consider what the role of an economist might be, taking seriously my suggestion about the necessity of mediation between human communities and the resources of the environments on which they depend suggests one important role for an economist in a sustainable society.

The first role, I would suggest, would be to acquire and exercise the authority to impose the boundaries to the acquisition of resources. As we saw earlier, in traditional societies this was a role of priestly figures, and is a role which we are in dire need of today, when politicians shy away from attempting to persuade us of the hard truth that we cannot continue to consume resources as we have in the past. Once these boundaries are clearly established and maintained, the economist would be required to act as a mediator between humans and their environment, enabling the process of re-embedding which would support our respectful relationship with the planet and our fellow species. Whatever the appropriate rituals might be in a 21st-century society, I would suggest that the role as described by Abram might provide a template: 'The traditional or tribal shaman, ensures that the village never takes more from the living land than it returns to it—not just materially but with prayers, propitiation, and praise.' (Abram, 1996: 7).

What would economists who took seriously their role in terms of the transition to a sustainable society be like? Not, I would suggest, the typical young man with expert statistical and econometric skills but little knowledge of life and no interest in human

relationships or the exercise of judgement. Rather we might expect our economists to demonstrate a courageous engagement with the environment guided by John Ruskin's useful motto: 'there is no wealth but life'. Hence the primary role of an economist in a sustainable society would be changing the relationship with the earth, its resources, and other species from one of exploitation to one of mutual respect and relationship. Far from the computer and the regression model, the training for such an economist would require a direct experience of the wholeness of life, such as that described by Glass-Coffin during her researches into shamanic practices:

There, beneath a waning gibbous moon on a cool Florida winter night, the scene before me was completely ordinary except that every plant, from the tallest coconut palm to the smallest blade of grass acknowledged and honored my presence. . . I suddenly realized, viscerally, what I had been writing about for many years: that all Life is co-created as willing humans interact in reverence with the very Ground of Being that sustains us. This co-creation is reflected and nourished by the ways in which we interact with one another, by the ways in which we care for the material world that provides for us, and by the ways in which we relate to a firmament which both inspires and humbles us as we journey. (Glass-Coffin, 2010: 210).

Note

1. Project Merlin was an attempt by the top executives of some of the UK's leading banks, under the directorship of former Barclay's CEO John Varley, to take control of the public debate over the future of banks and to offer proposals, especially on the subject of bonuses, to assuage public anger following the 2008 financial crisis and public bailout. For more information see the response from the Treasury: http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/press_17_11.htm.

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