

OTHER THINGS EQUAL

Deirdre N. McCloskey

University of Iowa

Erasmus University of Rotterdam

Some News That At Least Will Not Bore You

Michel Montaigne, the inventor of the personal essay, wrote in 1580 that regardless of what his official subject might be, "it is myself that I portray." (Actually he wrote, "c'est moi que je peins," though Lord knows why he didn't just say so in plain English.) The same could be said of the most "objective" of the economist's scholarly productions. You write a paper filled with math and statistics about the labor market, but if anyone is going to read and use it you have to portray yourself skillfully — as someone worth listening to, for example, someone who knows her stuff. And you tell about yourself in other ways. Bob Solow, the most graceful writer in our field, ends up telling people in every other sentence, "I have command of a classic prose style, and here I am applying it to the dismal science. What a gas. Let's not get too pompous about this stuff."

That's my excuse for making a highly personal revelation here. We may be economists, but we are also human beings, and the two have something to do with each other (believe me, they do). Let's not get too pompous about this stuff.

It is a fact that there is not a single openly (out, avowed) homosexual prominent in the economics profession. This is very strange, one of those rare cases in which Student's-*t* is applicable. Whatever you think of the Kinsey percentage of men or women with homosexual experiences (the old 10% figure) or the more recent, low figures, there must be hundreds upon hundreds of gays and lesbians in our field. Yet no economist of my acquaintance will answer to the question, "Are you married?" with, "No, but my lover and I have been together quite a while." Such a statement would bring the talk over a beer after a seminar to an embarrassed halt.

Straight people and some homosexuals will reply, "What does it matter? It doesn't affect how you take a first derivative," which is true. But the silence oppresses even when it does not intend to (and often enough it does intend to). If every single example of a family in the new family economics is taken from a vision of the heterosexual couple with 1.3 children, someone is being left out. If the sight of two men holding hands in the hallway outside the Econ Dept brings snickers to the lips of colleagues, someone is being stuffed back into a closet, the door slammed.

So is my "revelation" that I am gay? No. Unfortunately, it's rarer. I wish I had as large of a community to relate to. The gay community is not out in economics, but post-Stonewall it is out in the world and widely respected. (Western art would barely exist without the gay contribution; women's literature would be impoverished without the lesbian contribution; philosophy would never have begun without Socrates

and his young men. These observations alone seem to me to be a heck of a strong argument for respect, though not the core one, which is economic: people engaged in Pareto-optimal exchanges among themselves should be respected and left alone, laissez-faire.)

No, I am not gay. I am crossgendered, and at age 53, having been a good soldier for four decades, I am doing something about it. Not to startle you, but I am becoming a woman economist.

That's not precise. You can't in essence "become" a 100-percent woman or man or Italian if you don't start out right. XY chromosomes cannot be changed into XX. More importantly, no one is in essence a woman without having had a girlhood or other female experiences, and similarly for men and boys. (It turns out, surprisingly, that there are about as many female to male transsexuals as male to female; I know personally a decorated San Francisco policeman who three years ago was a decorated San Francisco policewoman). But we do not function in science or life with essences or 100 percents. To the poor extent I can manage it — crossing gender costs about as much as a Mercedes, and at that price I'm buying — I'm going to become a tall, ugly, incompetent but indubitably female economist. I go full-time on January 1, 1996. My legal name is already changed to Deirdre (Deer-druh, nickname "Dee"; in Old Irish it means "wanderer").

Why would anyone do such a thing? The "why" question has the usual answer we give in economics about consumption: stop asking it, since you might as well ask people why they like chocolate ice cream. "Understanding" isn't the issue here. We're not talking about a theorem, but "sympathy" or "moral sentiment." (I take the phrase from Adam Smith, and think women will see the point better than men.) I have realized that I have always felt more naturally a woman than a man, despite my inconvenient plumbing and my normally macho behavior. Trying it out carefully, under medical supervision (your local medical monopoly, I mean), with much advice, I am stunned by how well it fits me.

It isn't about sex, if you mean by that the sexual object. It's about identity, the subject. It's not about who you love but who you are. I've come to realize that economics is weak in thinking about subjects and identity. We're very good at budget constraints, very poor at accounts of utility.

I'm not ashamed of changing into a woman. For one thing I have never regarded being a woman as shameful. For another the gender boundaries of our society should not be any more uncrossable than international boundaries or disciplinary boundaries. I was talking to someone the other day and was saying to him, "You know, it's odd that more people don't do this. After all, our ancestors changed nationality on a massive scale, and that's as fundamental as gender." He laughed and said: "You don't get it, do you Deirdre? Most people don't *want* to change their gender!" Hmm. Oh. I hadn't thought of that.

Nor, as you can see, am I willing to try to hide it, moving to Spokane anonymously and becoming a secretary in a grain elevator. One can hardly hide a new gender from old acquaintances, and if I want to continue the mad career of D. N. McCloskey as teacher and writer I have to come out. Unsatisfactory as it is — you will always know

me as Formerly Don — it's the best I can do with the rest of my life. Montaigne also said, "The greatest thing in the world is to know how to be one's own." Right.

Any among you who is inclined to view this as a moral question has my respect. Economists do not pay enough heed to moral questions, hiding behind the sophomore philosophy of normative/positive. But anyone who takes "moral" to mean "following strictly the lay of Deuteronomy 22:5, 'The woman shall not wear that which pertains unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for all that do so are abominations unto the Lord thy God'" had better be a strictly practicing Orthodox Jew. Six verses later the Lord God says, "You shalt not wear a garment of divers sorts, as of woolen and linen together. Thou shalt make thee fringes upon the four quarters of thy vesture, wherewith thou coverest thyself," among hundreds of such specifications.

One real moral question is how it affects other people. I love my wife of 30 years and my two grown children, for whom this has been hard, very hard: they thought they knew Don. I can only say that I also thought I knew Don, and was equally startled when I figured out he was in fact Deirdre (so to speak: I'm not saying this literally). What they and I and you need is what is lacking in an economic science that studies *The Wealth of Nations* but studiously ignores *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: love.

My university, my community, my friends in economics and elsewhere have been wonderfully loving. St. Paul wrote that love does not vaunteth itself, is not puffed up: love is genial and amused, as Adam Smith was in his life, a character we economists lost with Jeremy Bentham and his humorless ways. There is a great deal of humor in this. After I had finished coming out to the dean of my business school, the economist Gary Fethke, he paused, then said: "Good Lord, I'm relieved. I thought you were going to confess you were converting to *socialism*!" Then he said, "This is great for our affirmative action goals: one up, one down." Then he said, "And look here: I can now cut your salary to 67 percent of the male level." And seriously, he like all my bosses and friends, said: "That's an odd thing to do. How can I help?"

I do not regret having been a man, and in seminars often enough a tough-guy s.o.b. (well, come to think of it, I do regret that, and so should all you guys). But I must say I vastly prefer being a woman, and am going to try not to bring over too many of my nasty male habits to the new role. The way economists of my acquaintance have reacted has been wonderful, and I'm starting to grasp what's special about female friendships. It makes you wonder whether an economics that ignores love and friendship might be a little nuts. I'm going to be very interested to see how all this alters my thinking about economics. Or I could just ask Claudia Goldin or Francine Blau. That would have been a lot simpler.

Other Things Equal, a column by Deirdre N. McCloskey, appears regularly in this *Journal*.