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Robinson Crusoe, Gender and Epistemic Injustice in Neoclassical Economics

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Abstract

The economic agent as a *rational economic man*, or *homo economicus*, is a core concept in neoclassical economics. The agent is often personified by the literary figure *Robinson Crusoe* from Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel "*The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York"*. Robinson's story came to be a popular textbook example in undergraduate economics courses to discuss various, economically interesting problems and choice scenarios, borrowing and abstracting from Defoe's novel. "Economic Robinson" represents methodological commitments and fundamental premises of neoclassical economics, such as self-interested individualism, instrumental rationality, and utility-maximization. Critical scholars and feminist economists have long drawn attention to possible points of criticism, not only of Robinson-models, but of the neoclassical's conception of the agent in general (Ferber and Nelson 1993, England 1993, Grapard 1995, Hewitson 1999). Considering the novel's assumptions regarding gender and race, they've examined how economists treat the origin and heritage of "their Crusoe" as well as how, if at all, they justify their use of Defoe's literary figure. In this thesis I investigate gendered biases inscribed in Robinson-models from a social-epistemic perspective. I analyze how the framework provided by Robinson-models influences the production, organization and transmission of economic knowledge. I apply Fricker's framework which she develops in "*Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing"* (2007) and argue that gendered assumptions and biases in foundational as well as pedagogically relevant economic theories and concepts, such as Robinson-models, might hinder an adequate incorporation and making intelligible of marginalized positions, perspectives and interests. In the case of Robinson-models, their reliance on certain assumptions and biases marginalizes and misrepresents women's social experiences, economic perspectives and interests, which can significantly challenge an adequate incorporation of these positions and interests. I assume epistemic diversity as a valuable good, especially within educational contexts, which is why the overall project of the thesis is to give an answer to economics students who might ask themselves: *Why Robinson?*

Abstract (German)

Der ökonomische Akteur als *rationaler ökonomischer Mensch*, oder *Homo Oeconomicus*, ist ein Kernkonzept der neoklassischen Ökonomie. Der Akteur wird oft durch die literarische Figur *Robinson Crusoe* aus Daniel Defoes Roman *„The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York"* aus dem Jahr 1719 personifiziert. Robinsons Geschichte wurde zu einem beliebten Lehrbuchbeispiel in Grundkursen der Volkswirtschaftslehre um verschiedene,

wirtschaftlich interessante Probleme und Entscheidungsszenarien zu diskutieren, wobei aus Defoes Roman entlehnt und abstrahiert wird. Der „wirtschaftliche Robinson“ repräsentiert methodologische Grundpfeiler und Prämissen der neoklassischen Ökonomie, wie etwa eigennützigen Individualismus, instrumentelle Rationalität und Nutzenmaximierung. Kritische WissenschaftlerInnen und feministische ÖkonomInnen haben seit langem auf mögliche Kritikpunkte aufmerksam gemacht, nicht nur an Robinson-Modellen, sondern an neoklassischen Modellen des Akteurs allgemein (Ferber und Nelson 1993, England 1993, Grapard 1995, Hewitson 1999). In Rückgriff auf Defoes Roman und seinen Darstellungen bezüglich *gender* und *race* haben sie untersucht, wie ÖkonomInnen den Ursprung und das Erbe „ihres Crusoes“ behandeln und ob, beziehungsweise inwiefern, sie die Verwendung von Defoes Figur rechtfertigen. In dieser Arbeit untersuche ich aus einer sozial-epistemischen Perspektive geschlechtsspezifische Annahmen, welche in Robinson-Modellen enthalten sind. Ich analysiere, wie der von Robinson-Modellen bereitgestellte theoretische Rahmen die Produktion, Organisation und Weitergabe wirtschaftlichen Wissens beeinflusst. Ich wende dabei Frickers Konzept epistemischer Ungerechtigkeit an, welches sie in *„Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing“* (2007) entwickelt. Ich argumentiere, dass geschlechtsspezifische Vorurteile und Fehlrepräsentationen in grundlegenden sowie pädagogisch relevanten ökonomischen Theorien und Konzepten, wie etwa Robinson-Modellen, eine angemessene Einbeziehung und Verständlichmachung marginalisierter Positionen, Perspektiven und Interessen erschweren kann. Im Falle von Robinson-Modellen verfälschen ihre Abhängigkeit von bestimmten, geschlechtsspezifischen Annahmen die sozialen Erfahrungen, wirtschaftlichen Perspektiven und Interessen von Frauen, was eine angemessene Einbeziehung ebenjener Positionen und Interessen erschweren kann. Ich nehme an, dass epistemische Vielfalt ein wertvolles Gut ist, insbesondere im Bildungskontext, weshalb das Projekt der Arbeit auch darin besteht, eine Antwort für Wirtschaftsstudierende zu geben, die sich fragen könnten: *Warum Robinson?*

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Introduction

It might seem puzzling how a prominent literary figure like Robinson Crusoe ended up as a showcase model of the *rational economic man*, one of the most important concepts in neoclassical economics. Being popularized in the 19th century by economists like Carl Menger (1871) or Francis Edgeworth (1881), Robinson Crusoe continues to be a popular teaching device for undergraduate economics courses and a valued, at-hand approach to all kinds of economic issues and problem situations. Most (Western) economics students encounter some sort of *Crusoe Inc.* or *Island Economics* early on into their studies. Noticeably, however, the origins and underlying context of the novel are rarely discussed by economists who make Robinson their utility-maximizing, economizing agent. It is taken as given that students and colleagues are familiar with Defoe's tale, that they have an idea of how the story unfolds and which aspects of it are to consider when modelling the economics of it all. I did not share the intuition as to why Robinson was meant to embody a kind of *homo economicus*, when I was confronted with the story of the shipwrecked man in introductory microeconomics course. Seeing him appear in all kinds of introductory texts, from all kinds of different authors, I missed a justification or at least an acknowledgement as to why Robinson Crusoe had such a central role in illustrating basic economic concepts. I wondered what this shipwrecked Englishman could tell us students (and future economists) about the workings of an economy. I also wondered why nobody else seemed to wonder. And I wondered why the use of Robinson Crusoe started to bother me. I realized it was because to me, it seemed as all of microeconomics was built on a single individual, a man, who lacked many aspects I deemed integral to being human. Robinson's popularity in textbook economics also did not sit quite right with me because for some reason, everyone assumed familiarity with his story and its relevance for economics. I found it odd, that I had to recollect my memory about this *childhood tale* in order to make sense of some microeconomic scenarios (I couldn't remember that Friday was supposed to be a person).

In this thesis I explore how "neoclassical Robinson" emerged from Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York*[1] and came to be the personification of the *rational economic man*. Neoclassical retellings of Defoe's novel are objectionable on many grounds. Feminist economists (see Ferber and Nelson 1993, England

[1] Full title: *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoque; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pyrates.*

1993, Grapard 1995, Hewitson 1999, Samson 2011) have prominently criticized the methodological individualist approach as well as the exclusion of gender and race. In this thesis, I am interested in the epistemic consequences of the neoclassicals' reliance on an individual *man* as the predominant economic agent. Gendered biases and masculinist assumptions in neoclassical concepts and theories have long been exposed. Their Robinson is no exception. He is constructed and treated as a universal embodiment of economic agents or economizing individuals. However, it can be argued that Robinson's construction relies on a devaluing demarcation between his white masculinity and other, non-male and non-white positions. Especially women's social positions and economic interests find no significant place in the tale of *Robinson Crusoe*, neither in Defoe's novel, nor in its neoclassical retellings. This setting seriously limits the scope of questions that can be asked. In other words, the conceptual framework provided by Robinson-models relies on gendered assumptions which distort a proper understanding of diverse economic phenomena, such as choice- and preference formation or accounting metrics like the GDP. I discuss these distortive effects of Robinson-models and argue that they point to an epistemic issue within the discipline of economics. Applying Miranda Fricker's concept of *hermeneutical injustice* (Fricker 2007), I suggest that gendered assumptions underlying Robinson-models contribute to a scientific framework or system of knowledge with significant "gaps" in its hermeneutical resource. These gaps can appear, for example, as a lack of language to make specific social experiences intelligible. Struggling to make social phenomena tied to one's position intelligible also entails a struggle to make them intelligible in a *scientific* sense. Insofar as science benefits from collective efforts to gather an understanding of social processes, mechanisms and phenomena, aiming for *epistemic diversity* might be valuable and possibly improve the quality of science.

The thesis is structured as follows: In the **first chapter** I present popular Robinson-models (1.1) and introduce *neoclassical Robinson*[2] (1.2). This is to show how Defoe's story and setting is used within neoclassical economics, both as a teaching device as well as an illustration of foundational principles. I discuss Robinson's features as a *rational economic man* and explain why his use is so popular among economists (1.3). In the **second chapter** I introduce Daniel Defoe's novel (2.1) and discuss some of its central themes and narrative strategies which undermine the figure of Robinson Crusoe (2.2). In the **third chapter** I analyze the models' implicit or explicit reliance on gendered or otherwise distortive assumptions and show how they

[2] To distinguish novel and models more clearly, I speak of *Robinson* to talk about the neoclassical figure and *Crusoe* to talk about Defoe's literary figure.

obscure and distort the view on economic mechanisms and phenomena. In **chapter four** I argue that the above criticism can be read as an epistemic critique. The marginalization and misrepresentation of the *"economic woman",* as facilitated by the neoclassical concept of the economic agent, points to gaps or theoretical shortcomings within the collective hermeneutical resource, that is, the body of neoclassical, economic knowledge. Finally, **chapter five** concludes.

1. Robinson Crusoe, a Protagonist of Neoclassical Economics

It is widely shared among economists that Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is a central figure and illustrative device in economics. Taken from Defoe's 1719 novel *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York* Robinson is appropriated to illustrate economic principles and methodological commitments, such as self-interested individualism and rational decision-making (Grapard 1995: 99). Within the discipline of economics, Robinson-models and economic versions of Defoe's novel are predominately found within the neoclassical school, as the neoclassicals' methodological approach focuses intensively on the role of the individual. Their micro-level (or "bottom-up") analysis proved to be exceptionally well equipped to adopt Robinson Crusoe's story and setting since it highlights the role of the isolated individual and *his* behavior for further, aggregate analysis. Thus, economic versions of Defoe's tale can be found in many "founding texts" of neoclassical economics, e.g., in the writings of Bastiat (1860: 200), Jevons (1871: 80), Menger (1871: 133) and Edgeworth (1881: 28) (Hewitson 1999: 111, White 1982). Though Robinson-models and appropriations of the novel were more common in the 18th and 19th century (Horwitz, Skwire 2020: 345), the figure and setting can still be found in contemporary microeconomics textbooks (Varian 2010, Starr 2011, Murphy 2011, Rubinstein 2020) and simple course examples or problem sets (McFadden 2003).

Economists generally diverge and greatly abstract from the content of Defoe's novel, but the general theme, the protagonist's isolation and how he overcomes limitations and scarcities imposed on him, is the leading narrative in the novel as well as in its economic retellings. As Horwitz and Skwire remark: "Economists' use of Defoe's Crusoe is frequent, but it is not always accurate. Turning to the novel itself, we find that the Crusoe they analyze is often a construction of their own imaginations rather than of Defoe's" (Horwitz, Skwire 2020: 350). Knowing only a rough outline of the novel's content thus suffices in order to follow the economic problem situation that is embedded: "(1) Crusoe was shipwrecked alone on an island for a long time; (2)

We do not remember if there were any women mentioned in the story; (3) Friday is a person of color; (4) Friday is not a proper personal name; (5) Crusoe is the boss of Friday" (Grapard 1995: 96). Still, having read Defoe's novel at some point in the past might be helpful when engaging with Robinson-models, because it takes away from the absurdity of the (often very abstract but at the same time highly specific) model. However, taking the above points as a refresher to our own memory of Defoe's tale, I now introduce some neoclassical retellings, or exemplary Robinson-models. To get an idea of how economic Robinson is introduced to students and readers and to get an understanding of how his story is appropriated to illustrate neoclassical principles, I discuss models covering the topics *allocation*, *production* and *trade*.

1.1. Island Economics

A "Robinson Crusoe Economy" refers to a model of a basic economy with one, or, at most, two individuals (Varian 2010: 609, Rubinstein 2020: 154) within which various economic activities, such as allocation, production, trade, and its related optimization problems can be analyzed. A simplified version of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is then used to illustrate these diverse problem situations. In introductory microeconomic models, readers are often confronted with a scenario where Robinson has to allocate his time between *leisure* (Being stranded on a tropical island actually has many benefits!) and *labor* to satisfy his needs and "maximize his utility"[3] (Grapard 1995: 101, McFadden 2003). Other models introduce Robinson and Friday as trade- or business partners who enjoy their mutually beneficial relationship because it allows them to catch more fish and gather more coconuts than ever before. But, as Kern states, "almost any microeconomic problem can be, and has been, examined with the use of Crusoe" (Kern 2011: 67).[4]

1.1.1. Allocation

Allocation problems discuss the distribution of goods, services, and scarce resources. The story of Robinson, the isolated individual who has very little available to him, proved to be "a way to understand basic questions of resource allocation" (Horwitz, Skwire 2020: 350).

In his *Principles of Economics*, Carl Menger introduces "our Crusoe" (Menger 2007 [1871]: 134, 135), an isolated individual who has to allocate his water supply. Menger writes: "To begin with the simplest case, suppose that an isolated economizing individual inhabits a rocky island

[3] Leisure also contributes to an agent's utility, so the overarching goal of his allocation is utility maximization of his labor and leisure.

[4] Kern identifies the following application areas within neoclassical economics in which Robinson Crusoe's story and setting is used as an illustration: diminishing marginal utility, capital and interest theory, the equimarginal principle, law of increasing cost, law of diminishing returns, opportunity cost, positive rate of time preference, labor supply (Kern 2011: 66f).

in the sea, that he finds only a single spring on the island, and that he is exclusively dependent upon it for satisfaction of his need for fresh water" (Menger 2007 [1871]: 133). "Our" Crusoe needs water for various purposes: "[…] for the maintenance of his life […] for the animals whose milk and meat provide him with the most necessary means of subsistence […] for the continuance of his health and general well-being", and "[…] for his flower garden" (Menger 2007 [1871]: 133). The reader is then asked to imagine how Crusoe would allocate his scarce water supply. Menger states: "He would certainly choose, from the two satisfactions, the one appearing to him to be the more important, and would neglect the less important one" (Menger 2007 [1871]: 134). Menger's conclusion illustrates a concept known as *preference-ranking*. Given the different purposes Crusoe needs water for, he ranks them according to the satisfaction (or utility) they yield.

Another, more contemporary allocation problem, which already hints at the problems related to *production*, comes from Daniel McFadden. He establishes the following setting:

> "Once upon a time on an idyllic South Seas Isle lived a shipwrecked sailor, Robinson Crusoe, in solitary splendor. The only product of the island, fortunately adequate for Robinson's sustenance, was the wild yam, which Robinson found he could collect by refraining from a life of leisure long enough to dig up his dinner. With a little experimentation, Robinson found that the combinations of yams and hours of leisure he could obtain on a typical day (and every day was a typical day) were given by the schedule shown in Figure 1. Being a rational man, Robinson quickly concluded that he should on each day choose the combination of yams and hours of leisure on his production possibility schedule which made him the happiest" (McFadden 2003 [1975]: 1, Figure 1 see Appendix).

In McFadden's example, Robinson needs to allocate the hours he has in a day between labor (collecting yams) and leisure. Being a *rational,* economizing agent, Robinson runs some calculations and determines the optimum hours of each leisure and labor that *make him the happiest* (or: that maximize his utility).

As these examples show, Robinson Crusoe's situation, being stranded, facing limited options and scarce resources, can be constructed as allocation problems. Both models assume Robinson to be a rational, economizing individual. He is endowed with instrumental rationality, i.e., he is able to calculate how he can maximize the value of all resources available to him in a geographically limited setting, given the different, competing ends and preferences he wants to satisfy (Horwitz, Skwire 2020: 345).

1.1.2. Production

Production problems analyze the production of goods at their proper levels, given the factors of production (land, labor, capital). In his textbook *Intermediate Microeconomics* (2010), Varian builds the entire chapter on production around the story of Robinson Crusoe. In his examples, Robinson is both consumer and producer and there are two goods. "The traditional name for this economic model is the Robinson Crusoe economy, after Defoe's shipwrecked hero" (Varian 2010: 609). Varian introduces Robinson as follows: "Robinson can spend his time loafing on the beach thereby consuming leisure, or he can spend time gathering coconuts. The more coconuts he gathers the more he has to eat, but the less time he has to improve his tan" (Varian 2010: 609f). Similar to McFadden, Varian introduces a preference-ranking system for both coconuts and leisure and builds a figure (Figure 2, see Appendix) to illustrate Robinson's indifference curve and production function. Given his preferences, the leading question is again how Robinson should allocate his time between production (gathering coconuts) and consumption (here: consumption of leisure, i.e., tanning and loafing on the beach) to maximize his utility.[5] To illustrate a more sophisticated form of "island production", Varian introduces the firm "Crusoe, Inc.":

> "Suppose that Robinson is tired of simultaneously being a producer and consumer and that he decides to alternate roles. One day he will behave entirely as a producer, and the next day he will behave entirely as a consumer. In order to coordinate these activities, he decides to set up a labor market and a coconut market. He also sets up a firm, Crusoe, Inc., and becomes its sole shareholder. The firm is going to look at the prices for labor and coconuts and decide how much labor to hire and how many coconuts to produce, guided by the principle of profit maximization. Robinson, in his role as a worker, is going to collect income from working at the firm; in his role as shareholder in the firm he will collect profits; and, in his role as consumer he will decide how much to purchase of the firm's output. (No doubt this sounds peculiar, but there really isn't that much else to do on a desert island.)" (Varian 2010: 611).

This set-up illustrates the different production possibilities of Robinson: how much labor to hire, how many coconuts to produce and what the corresponding profits will be. Varian creates a production plan (Figure 3, see Appendix) for Robinson's firm which visualizes the most efficient combinations of coconuts and labor to maximize profits, given prices and wages. He admits that his discussion is "a little schizophrenic at times", but justifies the absurdity because "that's what you have to put up with if you want to have an economy with only one person" (Varian 2010: 611).

[5] In Rubinstein's textbook *Models in Microeconomic Theory*, there is a similar problem set. Interestingly, he introduces Robinson Crusoe as a woman: "Robinson Crusoe is both a producer and a consumer. She has one unit of time, which she can divide between leisure and work" (Rubinstein 2020: 86). I take up this point again in chapter 3.

Rothbard's *Man, Economy, and State* (1962) extensively utilizes the figure and setting of Robinson Crusoe. To illustrate the merits of investing in capital goods, Rothbard introduces a berry-picking Robinson who invests in a wooden stick to increase his output:

> "[…] Robinson may decide that if he had the use of a long stick, he could shake many berries off the trees instead of picking them by hand. In that way he might be able to step up his production to 50 berries an hour. How might he go about acquiring the stick? Obviously, he must expend labor in getting the materials, transporting them, shaping them into a stick, etc. Let us say that 10 hours would be necessary for this task. This means that to obtain the stick, Crusoe must *forgo* 10 hours' production of consumers' goods. He must either sacrifice 10 hours of leisure or 10 hours of berries at 20 per hour (200 berries), or some combination of the two" (Rothbard 1962: 48, original emphasis).

Rothbard goes on to illustrate how investing in capital goods increases production and functions as an aid for future production. This is the process of *capital formation*.

1.2.3. Trade

In Jevons' *Theory of Political Economy* (1871), Robinson Crusoe appears in his *Theory of Exchange*: "Even Robinson Crusoe must have looked upon each of his possessions with varying esteem and desire for more, although he was incapable of exchanging with any other person" (Jevons 1911, [1871]: 80). Jevons hints at the merits of trade and exchange and establishing economic relations; a setting which is denied to Robinson. Especially allocation models focus solely on Robinson's economic endeavors. Trade models typically introduce a second agent, *Friday*, as Robinson's trade- or business partner. Including Friday allows economists to analyze cooperative production and trade (Horwitz, Skwire 2020: 345). Exchange- or trade models arguably convey a "more realistic" picture of economic processes and mechanisms, when they work with a second agent and incorporate human, economizing interactions (Horwitz, Skwire 2020: 345).

Borrowing again from Varian's *Intermediate Microeconomics*, the benefits of trade and the concept of comparative advantages, can be conveniently illustrated by Robinson and Friday. Varian writes: "Suppose that we add another worker to our island economy, who has different skills in producing fish and coconuts. To be specific, let us call the new worker Friday, and suppose that he can produce 20 pounds of fish per hour, or 10 pounds of coconuts per hour" (Varian 2010: 620). Varian comes up with Robinson's and Friday's production possibilities sets given their skills, and demonstrates how they can maximize their aggregate output if they each specialize in the production of the one good they have a comparative advantage over. "The joint production possibilities set combines the best of both workers. […] If we want to get more fish,

it makes sense to shift the person who is most productive at fish—Friday—out of coconut production and into fish production“ (Varian 2010: 621f).[6] Examples like this are supposed to convey the mutual benefits of exchange and specialization (Hewitson 1999: 125). Robinson and Friday illustrate a “tale of trade”, consisting of two individual agents agreeing to trade with each other because they know they will be better off if they do. In Varian’s example, Robinson’s and Friday’s contractual relationship illustrates these advantages of trade and the benefits of exploiting their respective comparative advantage over a specific sector of production. Their contract allows them to specialize in one sector of production, i.e., fishing or collecting coconuts. Robinson and Friday can then trade their surpluses, which maximizes both of their utility because they end up with more goods available to each of them.

Another, and significantly older example of a Robinson and Friday trade-interaction, is Edgeworth’s theory of the *contract curve*.

> “To gather up and fix our thoughts, let us imagine a simple case – Robinson Crusoe contracting with Friday. The *articles* of contract: wages to be given by the white, labour to be given by the black. Let Robinson Crusoe = X. Represent *y*, the labour given by Friday, by a horizontal line measured *northward* from an assumed point, and measure *x*, the remuneration given by Crusoe, from the same point along an *eastward* line […] Then any point between these lines represents a contract” (Edgeworth 1881: 28, original emphasis, Figure 4 see Appendix).

Edgeworth’s contract curve visualizes the set of points that represent a final allocation of the two goods in the model (labor and wages). All points on the contract curve are Pareto efficient allocations, i.e., allocations from which no agent can deviate in order make themself better off without making the other agent worse off. In other words, the final contract for trade between Robinson and Friday (the amount of labor Friday gives and the amount of wage Robinson gives) must be on the contract curve. Only points that are on the contract curve cannot be further improved without making at least one agent worse off.

The overall theme of Robinson and Friday models is to show that society (even if it only consists of two people) is better off if everyone strives to maximize their utility, thus acting as a self-interested utility-maximizer. According to Hymer, “[t]he allegory of Robinson Crusoe gives us better economic history and better economic theory than many of the tales told by modern economics about the national and international division of labor” (Hymer 1971: 60).

[6] This basic trade-model is also used to illustrate *international* trade. As Hewitson notices, „[…] Crusoe and Friday can exploit their comparative advantage and move, as a “country,” to a higher level of utility by trading with “the rest of the world”“ (Hewitson 1999: 125).

1.2. Neoclassical Principles

These examples of allocation-, production- and trade-models show how Robinson Crusoe is commonly established as an economic agent and how his story and setting is appropriated as an illustrative tool for theories, concepts, and problem sets. The above examples are exclusively *microeconomic* problems, meaning the field within economics, which analyzes the behavior, choices and decisions made by individual agents, i.e., "individual consumers, workers, employers and business firms with given preferences and resources" (Kern 2011: 65). This *micro-level analysis* of economic processes and mechanisms, an analysis that starts at the level of the individual agent, is most popular in the neoclassical tradition of economic thought. As Kern suggests, the neoclassicals' *methodological individualist* approach proved exceptionally well equipped to accommodate the story of Defoe's Crusoe. The novel provides an "ideal context in which to analyze these decisions" (Kern 2011: 65) since it is based on an isolated individual who faces diverse, economically interesting, challenges. The neoclassical's individualist approach to economic analysis is thus one reason why Robinson-models are mostly found within this tradition and continue to be relevant within microeconomics. [7]

1.2.1. Robinson, the rational, self-interested, utility-maximizer

The economic agent as a *rational, self-interested utility-maximizer* is perhaps one of the first concepts that is introduced to undergraduate economics students. As Nelson states, „this model of human behavior is perceived as being the most useful and most rigorously objective starting point for economic analysis" (Nelson 1995: 135). "Economic Robinson" is modelled after these central assumptions constituting economic agency. In other words, he is constructed to be a rational, self-interested, utility-maximizer. Robinson's task is to embody and illustrate these assumptions, to make them comprehensible by applying them to very basic scenarios, as well as justify them[8].

In his[9] simplest form, the neoclassical agent is an atomistic, economizing individual (*homo economicus*), who strives to maximize his utility. The agent is driven, guided and motivated by

[7] Another prominent school of economic thought that is based on methodological individualist analysis is the *Austrian School of Economics*. The neoclassicals as well as the Austrians both assume the individual agent to be the foundation of all economic analysis (Kern 2011:62). Here, I focus on the neoclassicals (though Rothbard is a proponent of the Austrian School).

[8] By justification I mean that Robinson-models profit from the "life or death" scenario of the agent which they adopt from the novel. The way Robinson-models are constructed, the choices and goods that are at question (e.g., the acquisition of food) all make use of the intuition that everyone would behave the same and make the same decisions under these circumstances.

[9] I use male pronouns when referring to the agent to reflect the masculine bias.

his self-interest, which is defined by his preferences (or desires). Preferences, if satisfied, lead to a different increase in utility, which allows to rank them according to their importance. [10] An agent's utility maximization reflects his preference-ranking and consists of „optimizing choices subject to exogenously imposed constraints" (Nelson 1995: 135), i.e., budget-, resource-, time-constraints. The agent participates in all kinds of economic activities: he is buying, producing, exchanging, and trading; actions which all aim at satisfying present of future consumption (Hewitson 1999: 123f). In other words, the agent forms a preference ranking which can be represented by a utility function. It is further assumed that agents are able to rationally think about their specific choice-situation in terms of involved costs and benefits (or *trade-offs*) and act according a logically consistent analysis. In other words, economic agents are "instrumentally rational". This "principle of rationality"[11] is a theory of individual agency, which allows economists to derive hypotheses from individual behavior to aggregate or group behavior, i.e., the behavior of markets, consumers, or producers (Blume, Easley 2008: 1). The principle entails that individuals "act in their perceived best interest" (Blume, Easley 2008: 1) and "will always choose the least cost means of achieving given ends (defined by their preference bundle) – if they did not, they would not be utility maximizing […]" (Hewitson 1999: 124). An agent's utility-maximization is thus an exercise of his rationality and a central requirement of economic agency. Economic agents, especially in introductory courses, are typically modelled in an isolated context, without social obligations or relations that influence their preferences and actions. As Barker suggests, the prototypical agent, that economics students encounter, exists outside any social, political, and cultural influence (Barker 1999: 573).[12]

Robinson Crusoe's social isolation is perhaps the most important theme in Defoe's novel. It is the one aspect which is most likely remembered best by readers who are confronted with economic versions of the tale. From a neoclassical perspective, much can be built upon the theme of isolation and solitude that Defoe's protagonist faces. Most models emphasize this condition by placing their agent on an island or an "idyllic South Seas Isle" (McFadden 2003), which is a central strategy to have Robinson appear as an independent, unencumbered individual. He has no obligations or responsibilities to anyone but himself, and he does not

[10] Preferences need to fulfill specified criteria that mostly highlight the necessity of logical consistency.
[11] In mainstream economics, rationality has at least two meanings. According to Blume and Easley, rationality can be understood as consistency of choice (revealed preference theory) and as intentional behavior, "in which beliefs and desires are meaningful constructs" (i.e., rational choice theory is folk psychology) (Blume, Easley 2008: 4).
[12] That is not to say that it is *generally* impossible to include these influences in modelling agents. I, however, find Barker's suggestion convincing when considering basic, introductory models.

depend on anyone.[13] There are no other people and clearly no societal or economic structures in place. Therefore, Robinson's preferences and decisions appear to be independent of anyone else. Robinson acts upon his own "purely individualistic wants" (White 1982: 17), which reflect his preference-ranking, e.g., the preference to catch fish which yields more utility than improving his tan. Robinson assigns higher utility to having something to eat compared to improving his tan, consequently sacrificing some of his leisure time. Firms act to maximize profits, therefore, Robinson works out a production plan that realizes this aim for "Crusoe Inc.". Though Robinson arguably shows impressive "entrepreneurial spirit" in many models (and ends up CEO of a lonely-island firm), he is still isolated with his needs and his consumption is constrained by his production possibilities (Samson 2011: 187).

Economic Robinson is modelled to be a prototypical utility-maximizer and, as Grapard states, "displays himself as the image of rational, modern economic man" (Grapard 1995: 101). Endowed with instrumental rationality, Robinson is "able to calculate the manner in which alternative combinations of resource and outputs can be allocated in order to maximize satisfaction or utility" (White 1982: 17). In his calculations and cost-benefit analyses, Robinson works within the constraints and limitations imposed on him (technical, resource-, production- and time-wise) and exploits all available resources. He acts according to the logic of the situation he is in, or, in other words, Robinson acts in his best interest given the options and resources available to him. Similar to Defoe's Crusoe, neoclassical Robinson carries out cost-benefit calculations in order to increase his output and maximize his utility (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 46f). That, at its core, is the definition of being a rational, self-interested, utility-maximizer.

Given these assumptions, exercising economic agency is thus defined over having preferences and working towards their fulfillment.[14] The value attached to actions or goods is entirely subjective. Thus, as White argues, "economic behavior ultimately consists in the satisfaction of those things the agent desires or regards as providing utilities" (White 1982: 18). In other words, economic behavior is essentially an agent striving to maximize *his* utility, given *his* subjective preferences and constraints. As discussed above, utility is a subjective measure which entails that interpersonal utility-comparison between agents is not possible.[15] This focus on the individual, White suggests, leads to economics becoming a "subjectivized" science (White 1982: 18), with preferences requiring no outside conditions in order to exist. Defoe's Crusoe is

[13] Defoe's Crusoe shows no altruistic tendencies: even Friday's rescue was motivated by the desire to have a servant.
[14] Even though individual preferences play a central role, their origin is hardly ever analyzed, they just exist.
[15] For a feminist critique on the assumption that interpersonal utility comparison is not possible see England, 2003.

arguably well-suited to embody these premises of a *subjectivized economics* (Grapard, Hewitson 2011: 6). Given his almost complete isolation, Robinson's preferences do not require any "outside or objective reference point" (White 1982: 18).[16] These assumptions concerning preference-formation support the neoclassicals' assertion that an agent's choice psychology and decision-making process holds universal applicability and generalizability, spanning „from the isolated individual through to modern society" (White 1982: 18). Kern concludes, that

> "[t]he isolated Crusoe, with given resources, tastes and technology, secluded from social influences, thus provides a perfect setting for the application of the newly developed neoclassical tools. In this setting, Crusoe now becomes the epitome of "economizing man" […] endowed with the capacity of rational choice […]" (Kern 2011: 66).

The economic agent, as characterized above, is the starting point for much microeconomic analysis, and, for the neoclassicals, the building block of generally all economic analysis. As such, the concept of the agent and the requirements of economic agency are foundational concepts and tools of neoclassical analysis. Assumptions about the agent influence and define the field of microeconomics insofar as they provide the frame for further analysis.

1.2.2. Foundational Individualism

The neoclassicals are generally committed to methodological individualist analysis. Neoclassical economics is a "science of the individual" (Hewitson 1999: 123) and its empirical, theoretical, and methodological foundation lies at the microlevel, the level of the individual agent (Hewitson 1999: 111). Methodological individualism demands that "social phenomena must be explained in terms of individual actions which in turn must be explained through individuals' motivations" (Blume, Easley 2008: 2). The individual agent, his behavior and decisions are thus the primary building block of neoclassical analysis (Kern 2011: 62, Blume, Easley 2008: 1). The corresponding theory of human action is the *rationality-principle* (Blume, Easley 2008: 2). The neoclassicals analyze individual decision-making behavior "to depict aggregate agent behavior in markets" (White 1982: 17). Societal or group behavior is reconstructed from individual decision-making. Social phenomena are modelled and analyzed "bottom-up", starting at the level of the individual.[17] Economic units such as firms, families

[16] The conception of preferences and their formation is a point of disagreement between the neoclassicals and the classicals: Classical Political Economics typically understands preferences and desires as necessarily related to social conditions, while neoclassicals typically analyze the isolated individual without reference to social conditions (White 1982: 18).

[17] That is not to say that individual behavior is "pre-social". Most economists do not claim that preferences and beliefs are formed entirely independent from social structures, but rather claim that the description of the individual is an equilibrium outcome (Blume, Easley 2008: 4). For an overview of the discussion see Blume and Easley 2008.

and whole economies or groups such as consumers and producers are assumed and modelled to be aggregates of individuals (Hewitson 1999: 111, Kern 2011: 64). Therefore, many models start with a "one-person-economy" (or "one-person-household") which is often referred to as "Robinson Crusoe Economy" (see Varian 2010). Economic principles and psychological insights derived from Robinson's actions and decisions „are intended to apply toward an understanding of the behavior of individuals in a market environment" (Kern 2011: 68). This conception of the individual agent assumes to be universal and, as Hewitson adds, "unsexed" (Hewitson 1999: 111) or genderless because it is meant to apply to all individuals alike, independent of gender.[18] In short, given the neoclassicals' methodological approach, the individual agent is a central concept and fundamental building block of economic analysis and inquiry.

1.3. Why Robinson?

The popularity of Robinson's story remains, as can be observed by his continued appearance in economics textbooks and problem sets (Varian 2010, Murphy 2011, Rubinstein 2020). But why do so many economists rely on Robinson Crusoe, a 300 years-old literary figure?

The figure and story of Robinson Crusoe serves at least three purposes in economics. First, he embodies a foundational neoclassical concept, namely the economic agent as a rational, self-interested, utility-maximizer. Second, Robinson-models are a popular teaching device, and, especially in undergraduate microeconomics courses, function as an introduction to the subject (Hewitson 1999: 111). Third, Robinson was appropriated by proponents of the neoclassical school to defend the claim that economic laws are universally applicable (Hewitson 1999: 111, 114).[19] I will be mainly focusing to the former two.

[18] I want to briefly distinguish here between sex and gender; the former referring to "biological sex" and the latter referring to one's "social sex" and corresponding social roles. This comparison is rather simplistic and leaves out many aspects, however a detailed discussion of the subject is beyond the scope of this thesis.

[19] This is often referred to as the "battle of methods" in the late 19th century (Hewitson 1999: 111). The neoclassicals argued that Robinson Crusoe as the rational economic man was a universal figure and what was true for him had to be applicable to every individual, independent of time and location.

Robinson-models are valued for their simplicity. Taken from an online introduction about the gains of trade, which also utilizes Defoe's tale, the author admits:

> "Obviously, we are not saying that an isolated person is an accurate description of a modern economy. Rather, we are saying that *before we can analyze an economy composed of billions of interacting people,* we should start with just *one* person and make sure we understand what makes *him* tick"[20] (Murphy 2010: 50, emphasis in original).

As Varian argues in his microeconomics textbook, to get an idea of basic economic principles, it is necessary to establish them first in an isolated setting with as few agents and goods as possible (Varian 2010: 609, 611). Introducing a "Robinson Crusoe household" or "one-person-economy" (or "two-person-economy" in cases where Friday is introduced) is an easy and convenient way to establish a minimalist setting while still embedding the problem situation in an accessible and somewhat convincing story. Economists use Robinson Crusoe as an agent because the well-known story allows them to comprehensibly model economic problem situations (Grapard 1995: 95, 96). Especially for pedagogical reasons, using a popular figure and story might be beneficial for students to better understand the economically relevant subtext.[21]

As shown above, many assumptions regarding the neoclassical agent can be applied to Robinson Crusoe's character and story. Relying on the popularity of Defoe's novel and selecting very limited aspects for the sake of simplicity also allows economists to leave out the more problematic themes that underline and constitute the tale. Those aspects of the novel, which are used in its economic retellings, do not reflect the full story that Defoe told but leave out some of its central ideas. The primary focus on Robinson's isolation, Grapard contends, allows economists to neglect the interaction between social conditions and the economic phenomena they investigate (Grapard 1995: 97). Economists can model economic phenomena in a social vacuum, without having to address why the agent, "their Crusoe", lacks social relations. Readers do not need to be "convinced" of the absurdity of the model as they are likely familiar with a rough outline of Defoe's novel and accept Robinson's situation. I now turn to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, to give further literary context and go beyond the novel's neoclassical retellings.

[20] Robinson's gender is not addressed, even though the author explicitly points to the significance of understanding the actions of *him*, of this one individual (see chapter 3).

[21] So rather than starting with an abstract setting, without any underlying storytelling or interesting context, economists would start with a tale that many know (at least a little bit). Concrete examples, e.g., a person that fulfills the neoclassicals' criteria for economic agency, might thus be helpful for students and readers to understand these otherwise abstract definitions.

2. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York was published in 1719 by Daniel Defoe. As apparent in the above presented Robinson-models, economists typically work with a very simple setting and stripped-down version of Defoe's novel. For the purpose of the thesis, I now elaborate on their origin in Defoe's novel, outline its content and identify central themes and narratives.

2.1. Crusoe, the Shipwrecked Englishman

Robinson Crusoe is a man from an English middle-class family. Wanting to break with his father, a successful merchant, and, as some interpreters suggest (Grapard 1995: 94), the old order of 18th century England, Crusoe travels the Seas and becomes owner of a plantation in Brazil (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 32). During one of his travels to get new slaves for his successful plantation, Crusoe becomes shipwrecked and finds himself as a lone survivor, stranded on a tropical, and seemingly uninhabited, island (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 36f). Immediately, he is confronted with isolation and the challenges of having to sustain himself within the limitations and scarce resources of the island. Thinking about the life-lessons his father gave him, Crusoe tries to be as rational and mindful as possible in his decision-making and planning for the future. Inspired by his father's profession and his success, Crusoe bases his actions on rational, economic calculations and considerations (Grapard 1995: 100). Crusoe immediately makes a list of things that are available to him on the island and, of the many things that he can luckily recover from the shipwreck (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 46f). Robinson Crusoe spends the years with the acquisition of food (he feeds on his herd of goats and cultivates fields of grain), crafts (he builds canoes, three "houses" (a "country-house", a "sea-coast-house" and a cave; Defoe 2012 [1719]: 98, 162, 189) and various useful things like tables, stools, clothing, even an umbrella) and occasional trips to the shipwreck to recover goods (food, alcohol, guns and ammunition). Robinson Crusoe creates a "one-man civilization on the island" (Cooper 1997: 133) and continually overcomes the "geographical limitations" (Grapard, Hewitson 2011b.: 154) and challenges of isolation he had to face. After Crusoe notices that "savages" sometimes visit the island to perform cannibalistic rituals, he is frightened and works to improve his shelter and self-defense-strategy and, ultimately, tries to stay as hidden as possible. After 26 years alone, Crusoe gets company through *Friday*, a "savage" fleeing from cannibals. Seeing a possible servant in him, Crusoe comes to his rescue and names him after the day of his rescue (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 197, 201). In deep gratitude, Friday kneels before him and swears to be his slave (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 199). Their relationship is marked by this unequal distribution of power

but also by mutual appreciation. Friday, the servant and Crusoe, the master. Friday does all sorts of tasks for Crusoe: he removes the bodies of the dead "savages" that Crusoe killed, builds a canoe and helps in the procurement of food. Crusoe clothes him, teaches him the English language, and the sermons from Jesus Christ (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 201, 203, 205, 211). After three years together, Crusoe and Friday are rescued and are able to travel back to Europe, where Robinson Crusoe is a wealthy man because his plantation was very successful during the years of his absence. Thanks to his trusty business partners, all profits were secured for him. Robinson Crusoe marries and has three children. Unfortunately, his wife dies (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 299). The novel ends with Crusoe going on a voyage to the island where he once got stranded, though this time he comes with provisions and resources for the men that stayed behind and began civilizing the land (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 300).

2.2. Central Narratives

Defoe's novel tells the story of a man who must overcome nature in order to survive. Given its historical context, the story relies on many racist, colonialist, and sexist stereotypes. In the following I discuss these underpinnings of the novel to present a fuller picture of the tale so many economists utilize. I focus on Crusoe's self-sufficiency, his colonial domination over nature and Friday, and the absence of women.

2.2.1. Male Self-Sufficiency

Defoe's novel thrives on the fantasy of the self-made, self-sufficient man (Hewitson 1999: 114). By his reason and rational decision-making and guided by economic considerations, Crusoe manages to survive on the island and become its "master" and "ruler". He overcomes the challenges and scarcities imposed on him and ultimately "tames" the island (Hewitson 1999: 118).[22] The merits of letting rational, economic motives guide one's decision-making are also accentuated at the end of the novel, when Crusoe, even through crisis, turns out to be a wealthy man. Even though he was cut off from civilization for almost thirty years, his business contracts stayed intact: Robinson Crusoe, the adventurer, and successful, modern businessman.

This narrative obscures that throughout his life and in all his professional relations, Crusoe greatly benefits from the labor of others. His plantation is run by slaves and managed by his business partners. On the island, he is not stranded without anything at all, but is equipped with many useful tools from the shipwreck, relicts of civilization, and the capability of rational,

[22] Crusoe quite literally tames nature as he cultivates the land, gets pets (kittens, dogs and a parrot) and a herd of goats for food supply (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 99, 106, 115).

economically guided decision-making. In a strong sense, Crusoe takes his English heritage to the island, which also allows him to distinguish himself from its inhabitants, the "savages" as he always calls them in a derogative way. Crusoe puts himself above them. This is further made explicit by Crusoe's intervention in Friday's cultural habitus: teaching him the English language, introducing (and converting) him to God and Christianity, and clothing him.

Predominately highlighting Crusoe's independence and "perfect self-sufficiency", taking his story as a message of what an individual man can achieve, necessarily leaves out the labor and contributions of others that constitute him as a person in the novel. The construction of Crusoe relies on the stark contrast that exists between him and others. A helpless, uncivilized "creature" like Friday is needed to make Crusoe intelligible as an independent, modern, man, who can master nature and who has the authority to civilize it, in order to fulfill the "fantasy of self-sufficiency". Therefore, Crusoe could not just be *anybody* – it is his specific heritage, his luck and his relations that allow him to survive and be as successful as he eventually turns out to be.

2.2.2. Colonial Domination

Crusoe's domination over Friday is a defining aspect of the novel. As pointed out above, it is his racist distinction to Friday that allows Crusoe to establish himself according a specific, Western, male ideal, i.e., a civilized and god-fearing man. Additionally, it is Crusoe's cultural heritage (eating fruits, vegetables and animal meat instead of humans) that allows him to further distinguish himself from the "savage" others, and civilize the island upon Western ideals: he builds a pasture, cultivates fields and builds structures that resemble traditional Western houses. Crusoe's colonialist and racist domination over Friday and the island's "uncivilized nature" allows him to appear as a rational, modern, self-sufficient man.

Friday is a a person of color. He is among the "savages" who frequent the island for the purpose of killing and eating captives on the beaches. When Friday manages to escape from captivity, waiting to be eaten, Crusoe sees in the "poor wretch" the opportunity of a servant and slave (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 197). Saving Friday's life by use of his gun, killing his pursuers, Crusoe realizes his wish for a servant. He quite literally "creates" Friday, first by saving him and then by naming him after the day he saved his life (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 201). Exercising his authority in the creation of Friday establishes Crusoe as superior, which further undermines their unequal relationship. From the beginning on it is clear that Friday's duty is to work for Crusoe, not as an equal or friend, but as a subordinated and inferior servant. As Hewitson suggests, Friday is Crusoe's *possession* (Hewitson 1999: 120). In the course of their time together, Crusoe "civilizes" Friday, which undermines Friday's racial inferiority: Crusoe teaches Friday the

English language (one of the first words being "Master"; Defoe 2012 [1719]: 201; Horwitz, Skwire 2020: 353), he clothes him, and teaches him how to build commodities and prepare and preserve food. By teaching him these traditional household chores, Hewitson argues that Crusoe "represents the liberal myth of male procreativity" because "he actively creates culture […]" (Hewitson 1999: 118). Crusoe "constructs himself as the patriarch" and "male head of household" (Hewitson 1999: 118). As Crusoe himself remarks: "[…] in a little time *Friday* was able to do all the work for me, as well as I could do it myself" (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 208, original emphasis).

Friday is not the only slave working for Crusoe. Before his shipwreck, Crusoe employed slave labor on his plantation and took part in the slave trade with other plantation owners. It is actually during a voyage to buy more slaves that their ship is caught in a storm, resulting in Crusoe being the lone survivor of the catastrophe. Horwitz suggests that Crusoe's meeting with Friday must be read considering these circumstances. He points out: "His meeting with Friday—which is presented in many economists' discussions as a joyful moment of sociability after years of solitude—is, in Defoe's text, a part of that trade" (Horwitz, Skwire 2020: 353). After all the years of being shipwrecked, on the way to buy slaves, Crusoe eventually got his slave.

2.2.3. Women's Absence

While Crusoe's social relations, his family, and his sexuality are not thoroughly explored in Defoe's tale, Grapard points out that they are indeed essential elements of the novels' narrative and plot (Grapard 1995: 97). On the one hand, Crusoe has important business- or trade relations, his partners are male equals. On the other hand, he has his dominating relationship with Friday, who is a man but still inferior to Crusoe. Women do not play any significant or plot-advancing part.[23] Hewitson identifies women as "the absent presence" (Hewitson 1999: 122) and argues that they serve a central narrative strategy: Femininity, though present in others, is the obvious absence in the story (Hewitson 1999: 118).

Women's absent presence appears in the portrayal of nature and the character Friday. Crusoe portrays the island as feminine[24] and explicitly demarcates himself from Friday. These are both

[23] Women appear as "objects of exchange between the men" (Hewitson 1999: 122) and, at the end of the novel, "women are listed after *people* and other supplies" (Hewitson 1999: 122, original emphasis): When Robinson Crusoe visits the island again after his rescue, he brings all sorts of tools and necessities with him to supply the men that stayed behind. In the novel it is stated that he brings "arms, powder, shot, clothes, tools […]" and "besides other supplies, I sent seven women, being such as I found proper for service, or for wives […]" (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 300).

[24] Hewitson suggests that the island can be read corresponding to the Western theme of a "mother earth" (Hewitson 1999: 119). Crusoe's efforts to cultivate the land, to shape "his island" according to his needs and ideas, could then be read as "controlling the woman".

crucial moments for Crusoe to establish his own identity and subjectivity in relation to uncivilized, uncontrolled nature and Friday's "black, and hence feminized, masculinity"[25] (Hewitson 1999: 122). Friday is the uncivilized and "feminine other" (Hewitson 1999: 121). He is not equal to Crusoe as he often refers to him as "poor creature" (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 200, 209) or "my savage" (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 199) and naturally puts himself above him. Friday's role is to work for Crusoe and "provide the services normally supplied by wives and mothers" (Hewitson 1999: 121). Friday allows Crusoe to establish a traditional household with "feminine housekeeping conventions" (Cooper 1997: 147). Friday becomes the "complement of a man" (Hewitson 1999: 121), the complement to Crusoe the patriarch and head of their island-household. Their respective social roles, as enforced by Crusoe, resemble traditional gender roles.

The physical absence of women and their simultaneous appearance in Friday, is thus important for the construction of Robinson Crusoe's independent self: his masculine identity is self-present while woman can only be understood in relation and opposition to him (Grapard, Hewitson 2011b: 160).[26] Within this binary gender system, femininity is created as subordinate, inferior and irrational (Hewitson 1999: 129). Crusoe's identity is established in relation to others, through a hierarchical demarcation between *male* and *non-male*. He feminizes Friday, positions himself above him by naming and civilizing him (thus negating Friday's cultural identity), which ultimately puts Friday in a subordinate and exploitative position.

Samson suggests that "[t]he process through which Crusoe created Friday as his inferior is indicative of the way in which women and people of color are constructed as others in a sexist and racist society" (Samson 2011: 190f). "Othering", or, "creating the other", is a process where certain traits and aspects that are excluded from the subjective self are projected to this "other". Grapard argues that "[t]his projection produces cultural images that present women and people of color as inferior to the identifying male subject and as being childlike, closer to nature, more emotional and irrational" (Grapard 1995: 104). Women and marginalized groups are "created" within the boundaries of a power relationship (Samson 2011: 191). Consequently, women are gendered (and people of color are racialized) "through the attribution to them of particular

[25] Crusoe's own description of Friday makes him appear feminized: he describes his looks, his features and gestures in a soft and very attentive language. Friday is "handsome […] perfectly well made […]" (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 200). He has "a very good mouth, thin lips […]" (Defoe 2012 [1719]: 201).

[26] Readers are introduced to Friday as a stark contrast to Crusoe himself. While Crusoe is already quite successful in his life-support on the island, Friday appears as helpless, as needing to be saved and needing clear work instructions. As Hewitson puts it: "Woman, and non-white man, are not represented autonomously, since the "other" produces white masculine wholeness and the fiction of self-identity" (Hewitson 1999: 122f).

characteristics, beliefs, abilities, needs etc. on the basis of their sex, color and nationality" (Samson 2011: 191).[27] This process impacts the way women (and other marginalized groups) are articulated in economic processes as well as how their social experiences can be made intelligible (see chapter 3).

The aim of this chapter was to show how and where Robinson-models depart from Defoe's novel; to make explicit which aspects are appropriated in economists' retellings and which aspects are not. The above discussion explains the narratives in Defoe's novel which help create its protagonist as a self-sufficient, modern man. These are the themes of colonial domination, racism and sexism which become visible in the character Friday, whose racial inferiority is crucial for Crusoe's identity formation as a modern, white man. Given these narratives in Defoe's novel, economic versions of the tale, or Robinson-models, arguably carry an implicit baggage. Of course, given their scientific purpose, Robinson-model are necessary idealizations and we cannot demand that they address all problematic aspects of the tale they borrow from. However, I agree with Hewitson that the literary heritage of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe still matters for a number of reasons (Hewitson 1999). Those reasons being the serious gendered repercussions of the models' framework.

3. Interrogating Neoclassical Robinson

Economic versions of Defoe's tale use a fraction of the novel's actual content. Robinson-models select certain aspects and highlight specific tropes which best illustrate the economic problem situation or principle. For an economic model to be suitable and helpful, these abstractions and idealizations are necessary. My criticism thus does not lie with the idealizing character or methodological approach of Robinson-models.[28] What I rather suggest, is that Robinson-models are sometimes *questionable abstractions* or, at least, build on *questionable aspects*. The scientific framework they provide might be useful for a number of economic problem situations but can still, at the same time, distort the view on many significant aspects of "the economy". In other words, I argue that Robinson-models tend to select and highlight aspects of the novel, which result in a distorted account of real-life economic practices and, correspondingly, a

[27] It is important to recognize that the process of gendering or racializing people and groups is universal, but "the content and substance of these processes are not" (Samson 2011: 191). The intersection and interaction of diverse social positions needs to be accounted for as well.
[28] I do not object to the idealizing and abstract character of Robinson-models and agree that models need to be abstract (to some degree) in order to be useful.

limited framework in which economic phenomena can be discussed. Ultimately, these conceptual shortcomings, as I will show, amount to an epistemic issue.

I discuss these distortions or distortive effects along the following issues:

First, Robinson-models formulate their agent, the rational economic man, upon a male hero, who, though fictive, still carries male ideals. Given the neoclassicals' assumption, that the agent's gender is irrelevant, this description hinders an incorporation of diverse constraints and initial conditions faced by different agents. This distorts the picture of how (economic) choices are made and fails to acknowledge the significance of gender for economic behavior.

Second, Robinson-models rely on a gendered distinction between economic and un-economic activities. They lack an account of labor that is not primarily organized through markets but takes place in private, non-market settings. Indirectly, this distinction is omitted by national income accounting metrics such as the GDP.

Third, given that Robinson-models function as an important teaching device and popular introduction to the discipline, I argue that their origin should be addressed and their use justified in *some* way.[29] Especially considering that many Robinson-models rely on the novel's gendered and racialized assumptions and thus carry implicit biases, acknowledging problematic narratives and giving room to discussing them, might be a fruitful strategy to critically reflect upon scientific practices and eventually revise outdated concepts.

3.1. *Genderless Robinson:* Why Robinson Crusoe cannot be a Woman

Neoclassical Robinson functions as a justification for the universal applicability of economic behavior. Robinson is modelled in correspondence to neoclassical principles such as instrumental rationality, utility-maximization and self-interested individualism. He is constructed to be a "radically separate" (Hewitson 1999: 124), independent and unencumbered utility-maximizer, who is predominately motivated by material gain (e.g., more coconuts = more happiness). As the neoclassicals assume, these characteristics are universally applicable and hold true independent of gender, location and time. This entails that Robinson is able to represent "persons of any kind of embodiment" (Hewitson 1999: 126) given that his gender is

[29] Grapard also criticizes the lack of justification when referring to Robinson Crusoe to illustrate economic principles. She points out that "Jevons, Böhm-Bawerk, Wicksteed, Marshall, Edgeworth, Wicksell and J.B. Clark all set up simple, hypothetical models to illustrate the formal marginalist economic choices […] None of these economists attempt to justify their use of Robinson Crusoe […]" (Grapard 1995: 95). Appropriating Defoe's story and characters without justification might give the impression that the model of economic agency, which Robinson embodies, is an objective, value-neutral concept that does not need any justification because it is mutually accepted among a scientific community. This supports the neoclassicals claim to universalizability, i.e., what is true for Crusoe must also be true for an economy (Kern 2011: 69).

assumed to be irrelevant. His identity is supposedly devoid of sexually specific content (Hewitson 1999: 111). His behavior is therefore universally applicable (Hewitson 1999: 124), he is an "unsexed" or genderless agent (Hewitson 1999: 111). Consequently, "Economic man" becomes a gender-neutral term.

To justify Robinson's universal applicability, economists might argue that a woman would behave the same if she were stranded on an island and Defoe's hero could have equally been a woman. Had history been different, had the novel been written differently, economic models could equally contain a female "Robyn Crusoe" (to borrow from Rubinstein). Appropriating the novel's protagonist, so the argument would go on, is thus not tied to Robinson's gender but to his unique circumstances.

According to Hewitson, who analyzed the models' issue of gender at length, this argumentation (i.e., referring to the types of actions for the sake of one's sustainment) is not convincing. She points out that by taking the literary figure of Robinson Crusoe and placing him in an economic model, economists rely on an already existing "masculine archetype" (Hewitson 1999: 123) or even role model. Robinson-models are exclusively built around Robinson and, depending on the problem situation, Friday. Both agents are men. Thus, when economists work with Robinson-models, they exclusively work with masculine agents. When the concept of the rational economic man is personified and "given a concrete identity" (Hewitson 1999: 124) by the figure of Robinson Crusoe (or Friday), the agent's identity "is already meaningful as masculine" (Hewitson 1999: 124). If economists were to create a female Robinson Crusoe (as Rubinstein does; Rubinstein 2020), she would inevitably fill in the shoes of an existing male hero (Hewitson 1999: 123). This would mean that economists would simply represent women as if they were men, as if they were masculine figures: "[A]dding women simply imposes this masculine model upon women" (Grapard, Hewitson 2011b.: 155). Robinson-models completely abstract from gender roles, which play a role in the wider social context. It might be true that a female Robyn would behave the same on a deserted island. In terms of biological sex, Robinson's behavior is perhaps truly universal. The significance of gender, however, becomes apparent only in a wider social context.

The exclusion and marginalization of women, as well as the neglect of gender, supports meanings, conventions and paradigms within the discipline (e.g., the mainstream conception of labor, how choices are made, the causes behind unequal constraints). Arguably though, gender is a relevant factor for the construction and conceptualization of the economic agent. Hewitson contends that economists fail to acknowledge these issues as Robinson's gender, his masculinity, are not questioned or explicitly acknowledged in textbook examples and models

(Hewitson 1999: 114). This tendency exhibits a certain blindness as to how masculinity is effectively inscribed in many economic models.

How is this a distortion of economic activities and processes?

Robinson-models render invisible the significance of (gendered or racialized) difference, resulting in a distorted account of economic processes and phenomena. The neoclassicals assume that economic agents are generally identical. Agents make decisions according to the same principles (i.e., they behave like an instrumentally rational, self-interested, utility-maximizer). These characteristics are assumed to hold independent of the agent's gender. Within the framework of the neoclassical model, agents make free, independent choices given their specific endowments and constraints. The causes behind an agent's "initial conditions" are seldom considered in introductory models. This might have distortive effects when the causes behind an agent's constraints are *structural* (e.g., discriminatory institutions that significantly influence a person's choice set). Likewise, the effects of social conditions and the inequality of constraints faced by different agents (Grapard 1995: 106) cannot be taken into account when the model relies on the assumption that agents are "essentially identical and resemble *Homo Economicus*" (Samson 2011: 188, original emphasis), and "that these individuals possess absolute freedom of choice […]" (Samson 2011: 188). According to Samson, the problem is that:

> "[…] while these assumptions may approximate the reality of some elite white males who are privileged in racist and sexist societies, they do not speak to the experience of working-class women/people of color/immigrants, who are pushed to the margins of the nation and rendered invisible by economic theory" (Samson 2011: 197).

As she further points out, "[a]lthough most people are able to make some choices, the options available to women and people of color are severely constrained by their constructed gender and race roles" (Samson 2011: 193f.). Women and marginalized social groups might face different, gendered (or racialized) constraints and initial conditions compared to men.[30] Consequently, women's economizing behavior might look different. Given that Robinson-models assume that the agent's gender is irrelevant, differences in constraints and choice sets that are explicitly linked to an agent's gender cannot be made intelligible by the model. This significantly limits how economizing behavior can be understood and scientifically investigated. It depends on structural circumstances whether and to what extent people can

[30] The issue is not that women cannot be self-interested utility-maximizer. It is rather that they might face different constraints and choices than a masculine agent; constraints which are explicitly linked to their gender.

behave like a paradigmatic *homo economicus*, like neoclassical Robinson. Of course, economists are also aware of the fact that people do not always behave according selfish, utility-maximizing principles. The problem, however, lies in the fact that the structural reasons for different deviations and initial conditions are obscured by economists' insistence on a universal Robinson. Additionally, it can be argued that Robinson-models rely on the masculinity of their agent even when in rare cases Robinson becomes *Robyn*. Still, by appropriating Defoe's protagonist, economists construct their agent upon an already existing male hero.

3.2. *Economic Relevance:* What can Economists Inquire with Robinson?

Economic Robinson is often confronted with a simple choice-situation: he can either collect any kind of food (berries, yams, coconuts, fish) or go tanning and loaf around on the beach. In other words, the agent either engages in some kind of labor (productive, *market-oriented activities* that amount to some kind of maximization) or enjoys his leisure (*non-market activities*). In most models, these are the only activities Robinson chooses from. The focus lies on productive, market-oriented activities which are economically relevant.

What is distortive about this is the lack of accounting for *non-market labor*, or labor that does not necessarily amount to some typical maximizing strategy. In Robinson-models, non-market activities are always confined to some sort of relaxation: Robinson is either tanning or loafing around. This setting obscures an important aspect of non-market labor and activities: unpaid care-work, housework and reproductive work. In this regard, I suggest that Robinson-models rely on the historical distinction between a *public* and a *private sphere*.

3.2.1. Economic Order as a Gendered Space

A distinction between market and non-market activities, between labor and leisure, does not originate in Robinson-models but reaches back to the political philosophy and social contract theories of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and David Hume (Horwitz, Skwire 2020: 346, Grapard 1995: 99). Their theories were central in defining the modern individual's economic and political position and rights. These writers used "isolated individual stories"[31] to illustrate their theories. The creation of the modern individual, as put forward by Hobbes, Locke and Hume, is based on a gendered dichotomy between a "public" and "private" sphere (Grapard 1995: 99). A distinction which establishes a hierarchical relation between public and private

[31] These early texts do not use Defoe's protagonist as an exemplar of their isolated individual, because they predate the novel. However, interestingly, "[w]hat seems to have happened is that once Defoe's novel became popular, later thinkers used Crusoe explicitly where earlier thinkers had used the "isolated individual"" (Horwitz, Skwire 2020: 346).

activities, marking the public as the realm of market activities and exercise of political rights. The private sphere is defined over covering non-market activities, reproductive- and care work. The labor performed in households traditionally did not generate incomes, it did not contribute to the *wealth of a nation*. Only market activities and public transactions would generate that wealth. (Labor within households is still overlooked; see chapter 3.2.2.) Women, who were pushed into the private sphere, the margins of the economy, were marked as different to men, constructed as subordinate and inferior (Grapard 1995: 99). Men dominated the public sphere.[32] *Domestic woman* stands opposed to *economic man* (Cooper 1997: 135). Consequently, the construction and organization of political and economic order was embedded in a hierarchical organization of gender. It has been constructed as a "gendered space" (Grapard 1995: 100). Economic processes, such as market transactions, the division and organization of labor, trade, and exchange were arguably influenced by gendered dynamics as well. This "gendered template" that helped construct the modern individual and citizen of civil society, Grapard argues, is also apparent in the neoclassical concept of the agent (Grapard 1995: 100). Samson suggests that it is women's "numerous unremunerated tasks in the home that allow men to transcend nature and society (and act like *Homo Economicus*) […]" (Samson 2011: 190).

How is this a distortion of economic activities and processes?

Robinson either performs some kind of labor (pick berries, catch fish, make a contract with Friday to increase their share of coconuts, calculate his production possibilities to increase profits of his firm, …) or some kind of leisure (tan, loaf around, water his flower garden). His activities are divided between those that allow him to advance material-wise and thus correspond to some utility-maximization strategy, and those that do not generate any material gain for him (besides from gaining a healthy tan). Given that Robinson-models focus on either *productive labor* or *unproductive leisure*, they exclude and "idealize away" a significant aspect of economic processes and central contributions to economic welfare. They reinforce a division between market and non-market activities which has gendered repercussions: Robinson-models provide a frame to classify which actions and activities are to be considered *economic* and which are *non-economic*.

[32] The distinction between *public* and *private* was more artificial than strictly separate as Cooper suggests. Production and consumption could not be clearly assigned to either one or the other, because women and men were involved in both areas via the contribution and managing of resources (Cooper 1997: 140).

3.2.2. Limitations of the GDP

The neoclassical conception of economically relevant activities is inscribed in Robinson-models. As foundational models, they teach and illustrate central principles of neoclassical thought. One such principle is the distinction between economic and non-economic behavior, a distinction that is further developed in the concept of GDP.

The GDP, the *gross domestic product*, is a national income accounting metric. It is the monetary value of all goods and services produced in a country. As such, the GDP serves as an aggregate measure to manage economies and internationally compare countries' economic output and overall economic standard. Hence, the GDP is often referred to as an indicator of economic welfare and well-being. The GDP is one of the most popular international standards to assess and compare economies and, as Messac suggests, became the "hegemonic barometer of human welfare and human progress" (Messac 2018: 554). Given that the GDP is predominately issued by governments and based on internationally harmonized, commonly accepted guidelines, it appears, as DeRock argues, as an objective and unbiased metric (DeRock 2021: 20). From its early days on, the GDP has been subject to criticism, especially from environmentalists and feminists.[33]

What is economic activity according to the GDP?

Central to the GDP is the factor *production*. The GDP relies on a so-called "production boundary", which is a "conceptual line drawn between economic and non-economic activity" (DeRock 2021: 22). It establishes a distinction between activities that are relevant to the metric and are included in the national income of a country, and activities that are left out. It is built on the assumption that activities which are not involved with and take place in market exchange settings should not be included in a nation's income accounting. According to Coyle, the production boundary "distinguishes paid-for activities in the market economy from unpaid activities, which are considered outside the productive sector" (Coyle 2017: 8). Given that the GDP only measures *market* production, it is essentially a measure of *economic* well-being (Messac 2018: 553). Activities which do not contribute to the wealth of a nation concern the

[33] Criticism about the content of the GDP and its inherent primacy of economic growth began to appear in the early 1970s (Messac 2018: 565). Critics called for a more nuanced metric; to include environmental aspects and human well-being. A feminist critique appeared first with Marilyn Waring, who argued for the "imputation of unpaid household labour in national income and later for alternative methods, particularly time-use surveys" (Messac 2018: 554). Proponents of the metric typically argue that incorporating household services and care work would be difficult and would comprise the reliability and comparability of the GDP.

production of goods and services provided within households, as these goods and services are (typically) immediately consumed by those producing them. Therefore, they do not contribute to the pool of available goods and services which are open to and available for redistribution (DeRock 2021: 30). Given the GDP's confinement to the production boundary, "certain economic activities are captured while others are rendered invisible in GDP figures […]" (DeRock 2021: 20). That is: unpaid household services (reproductive- and care work and domestic labor). These tasks are disproportionately performed by women and have been neglected from the GDP since its existence. The GDP thus marginalizes large amounts of women's work. Based on its distinction between productive labor (economic activity) and unproductive labor (un-economic activity), the GDP contains a significant gender bias. As DeRock states: "Feminist scholars have demonstrated that the exclusion of unpaid household services from official statistics introduces a major bias into economic analysis and policy" (DeRock 2021: 21; see also Benería 1992, Waring 2003). One aspect is that monetary or fiscal policies are not aimed at these areas:

> "Because household services and care work are not imagined as productive work, they are not considered relevant for these policy areas. In contrast, feminist economists have convincingly demonstrated that gender gaps – including in unpaid work – have far-reaching effects on macroeconomic outcomes" (DeRock 2021: 28, see also Seguino 2019).

Shared ideas of what constitutes "the economy" and economically relevant activities influence the content of the measure. These shared ideas, or principles, are inscribed in foundational assumptions and models. The GDP relies on assumptions that are established in simple models, such as Robinson-models. Folbre also suggests that because economic "mainstream theory shaped the assumptions embedded in national censuses and income accounts, it also influenced data collection" (Folbre 2014: 130). She further suggests that the lack of efforts to include, understand and measure unpaid work can be attributed to the economic mainstream, which showed little interest in these areas (Folbre 2014: 129f). It can thus be argued that gendered assumptions and biases find expression in a theoretical (as in models, theories and concepts) sense; as well as in a practical or applied sense, in metrics such as the GDP. Given that unpaid household services and care work are still, to a disproportionate amount, performed by women[34], DeRock contends that "failing to measure them introduces a gender bias into economic data and analysis" (DeRock 2021: 22, see also Folbre 2014). Gendered biases thus

[34] For statistics on the "gender-care-gap" in Austria, see Achleitner 2024: https://www.momentum-institut.at/news/weltfrauentag-2024-maedchen-leisten-mehr-fuer-familie-und-haushalt-als-buben/ (last access 16.7.24).

transcend pure theory and are omitted in economic data collection and organization which might influence policies.

Regarding the seemingly objective nature of official statistics such as the GDP, DeRock argues, that "the technocratic framing covers up deeply gendered ideas regarding what constitutes productive work and what does not" (DeRock 2021: 30). Similar to scientific models, official statistics aim at communicating objectivity and value-freedom. The depoliticized impression of the GDP masks and obscures the uneven power relations it is built upon. DeRock contends that "as long as this figure remains so important in public life, its biases and shortcomings will lead to distortions in the way we see the economy" (DeRock 2021: 31).[35] Given its content and framework, the GDP is significantly limited in capturing large aspects of economic processes. Activities that are beyond its production boundary are not included and thus implicitly devalued as relevant parameters for economic welfare. Given that it is predominately women who perform these "informal tasks", the metric indirectly reproduces the historical distinction between a public and private sphere and produces a distorted, gendered picture of economic welfare. Messac further suggests that the GDP shows a kind of "epistemological blindness" (Messac 2018: 563) because it significantly hinders an adequate understanding of the subject it aims to make intelligible.

3.3. Pedagogical Considerations

Robinson-models are a popular teaching device or "heuristic tool" (Samson 2011: 188) in economics and a central element in a Western, economic education.[36] It is predominately undergraduate microeconomics-courses, that draw on Robinson-models for an accessible introduction to the discipline (Hewitson 1999: 111). Robinson-models are a "piece of pedagogy" (Horwitz, Skwire 2020: 349) and for many economics students, the tale of Robinson and Friday is one of the first encounters with an economic model, its structure and inherent

[35] Recent aims to shift or expand the GDP's focus to cover non-monetary production and unpaid labor include time-use surveys (though they are carried out on a much more limited scale and are mostly done outside national accounting) and the HDI (= Human Developmental Index) (DeRock 2021, Messac 2018). Their goal is to increase the statistical visibility of women's work and to widen the production boundary to incorporate household services and non-monetary production. Regarding the metric's status quo, Messac points out that *some* efforts to respond to feminist critics have been made however, they still concluded that "national income accounts that included large non-monetary flows would be less useful for analysing such phenomena" (Messac 2018: 569) because non-monetary labor would not have any significant impact on inflation, deflation "or other 'disequilibria' within the economy" (Messac 2018: 569).

[36] Robinson Crusoe stories were used in educational books or "conduct books" in the 18th and 19th century to illustrate the archetype of a rational economic individual (Cooper 1997: 133). The texts establish roles, norms and conventions "prescribing individual conduct for women and men" (Cooper 1997: 140) which was aimed at uncovering and constructing laws that regulate "the organization and functioning of individuals within society" (Cooper 1997: 140).

logic. As an illustrative tool and "neoclassical protagonist", Robinson "produces knowledge of neoclassical economics for students in certain ways. Students too are "produced" as certain types of knowers […]" (Hewitson 1999: 115). The construction and use of Robinson's story might influence how students think about economic problems and principles.

Robinson-models typically have a very simple set-up and do not require extensive knowledge of Defoe's novel. As Horwitz and Skwire put it: "Crusoe's stranding is and has been for so long such a popular story and such a powerful cultural trope that we feel we know it even before we have read it" (Horwitz, Skwire 2020: 350). Nonetheless it can be helpful to have an idea of the novel's content to find some of its economic retellings more comprehensible and plausible. Most Robinson-models start by establishing the scene on an idyllic, sometimes rocky, island. Then they introduce their protagonist, Robinson (they might add Friday if the model requires some sort of trade relation). Students who are familiar with Defoe's novel might be able to fill in some gaps here that help make sense of the schematic setting: Why is the agent on an island? Why is he alone? What kind of person can we imagine when we think of Robinson? What kind of person can we imagine when we think of Friday? Students who know Defoe's novel, or who are familiar with its trope, might find it easier to imagine a coherent story and understand the economic problem situation that is embedded. In other words, familiarity with the story might be beneficial for understanding and imagining the economic problem situation.

Most Robinson-models introduce Friday as just another agent, another "worker" who freely contracts with Robinson for the sake of mutual benefits. Their relationship is constructed around free, consensual trade. Robinson's and Friday's relationship in the novel is marked by racial and colonial domination, unequal power and oppression. While, of course, it would be extremely problematic to use Defoe's colonialist narrative, not recognizing this (indeed central) aspect of the novel might also point some inadequacy or "blindness" surrounding economists' frequent use of Robinson's story.

Zein-Elabdin formulates a postcolonial pedagogical critique regarding the appropriateness of Robinson-models. She points out that they predominately embody many "Western ideals" from the time of its origin (e.g., the rational, modern man who is successful because of his independence and self-interest). Correspondingly, it is mostly within Western traditions of literature and economics that Defoe's novel is popular. In "How does an African student of economics make sense of Robinson Crusoe?" (2011) Zein-Elabdin argues that economic Robinson is an unfit starting point for African economics students[37]. According to her, Robinson

[37] "Africa" stands as a metaphor for cultural contexts that do not embrace individualism and material accumulation as Western social sciences do (Zein-Elabdin 2011: 216).

illustrates a "civilization model", which undermines the superiority and enduring logic of neoclassical theory (Zein-Elabdin 2011: 215). The cultural traditions of many African students focus more on concepts such as sharing, hospitality and communal solidarity. Confronted with Robinson-models, they might lack the intuition about the centrality and seemingly obvious motive of self-interested (economic) individualism compared to Western students.

To summarize the above interrogations of neoclassical Robinson, my criticism lies with the conceptual framework Robinson-models provide. Robinson-models rely on gendered assumptions in at least three significant ways:

First, they assume a universal, genderless protagonist to fit the description of the *rational economic man* (see 3.1). However, as Hewitson has shown, disregarding Robinson's gender and portraying him as a genderless agent is not convincing because he is still modelled after a distinctively male hero, no matter how many or few aspects of Defoe's novel are effectively taken into account (Hewitson 1999). This blindness to the significance of gender and sexual difference renders invisible the differences in constraints and initial conditions faced by diverse economic agents.

Second, Robinson-models rely on and reproduce a gendered distinction between economically relevant activities and economically irrelevant activities (see 3.2). As the discussion about the GDP, and its "production barrier" shows, the distinction is the foundation for much economic theorizing and accounting.

Third, I argued in line with Zein-Elabdin that the educational significance of Robinson-models should be taken into account as well when criticizing their appropriateness (see 3.3). Economic versions of Defoe's tale rarely address their gendered and racialized heritage. However, as a popular teaching device and introduction to the discipline, it might be productive to provide a ground to discuss marginalizing or harmful assumptions that define the protagonist, even though models abstract from the novel. Many scholars have pointed out the lack of justification of economists' use of the novel, without taking its background and heritage into account.

These gendered assumptions built into Robinson-models, distort the view on economic processes and phenomena. In the case of the GDP, the distortions transcend pure economic theory and are omitted in the collection and organization of data. Assumptions supported by Robinson-models might thus influence how people (not only economists) make sense of economic activities and phenomena. Gendered and racialized biases might result in a

misrepresentation of some socio-economic experiences, which, consequently, hinders a proper incorporation of those (marginalized) social experiences within a scientific discourse. These conceptual distortions, as I argue in the next chapter, point to an epistemic issue in neoclassical economics.

4. Robinson-models and the Problems of Knowledge

The aim of this chapter is to investigate how, if at all, the framework provided by Robinson-models, the questions that can be asked within their setting, point to some kind of wrong in the system of neoclassical, economic knowledge. I build on Fricker's account of *hermeneutical marginalization* and *hermeneutical injustice*, which she develops in *"Epistemic Injustice. Power & the Ethics of Knowing"* (2007), to provide a frame for the discussion and application afterwards. The motivation to apply Fricker's framework to Robinson-models, and to read their assumptions through a social-epistemic lens, comes from the observation that their gendered assumptions sometimes transcend pure theory and are omitted in real-life economic practices and the organization as well as the interpretation of (economic) data.

4.1. Epistemic Injustice

"Epistemic injustice" refers to the notion that systems of knowledge can be unjust. They can include a systematic distortion or misrepresentation of someone's knowledge or their contributions as well as undermine and devalue someone's position as a knower. Fricker distinguishes two kinds of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007). I focus on the latter, hermeneutical injustice, because I believe it adequately applies to what I suggest to be problematic about Robinson-models and the specific structure of knowledge they provide.

4.1.1. Hermeneutical Marginalization

In order to arrive at Fricker's concept of hermeneutical injustice, I will first introduce her notion of *marginalization*. Fricker uses marginalization in a moral-political sense. Marginalization concerns social experiences; it is a form of socially coerced powerlessness. Marginalization indicates a form of subordination and exclusion from some social practice. In an epistemic context, marginalization refers to the condition of being denied full hermeneutical participation from a practice that is connected to the production, organization and structuring of knowledge. This means that a hermeneutically marginalized person (or social group) is significantly

hindered or even fully prevented from generating meanings concerning some areas of the social world. Fricker defines hermeneutical marginalization as follows: "[…] when there is unequal hermeneutical participation with respect to some significant area(s) of social experience, members of the disadvantaged group are *hermeneutically marginalized*" (Fricker 2007: 153, original emphasis). Hermeneutical marginalization occurs because interpretations or "interpretive efforts" to make social experiences intelligible (Fricker 2007: 152) are tied to the specific interests of social groups. More powerful social groups might have interpretative sovereignty compared to less powerful or marginalized social groups. Powerful social groups thus might have the power and authority to decide on the selection of research topics and questions as well as structure knowledge according to what is regarded as most scientifically relevant.

4.1.2. Hermeneutical Injustice

Unequal hermeneutical participation can lead to "gaps" in the collective hermeneutical resource, that is a system of knowledge (Fricker 2007: 151, 160). If people or groups are denied full hermeneutical participation in some social experience, a proper interpretation of the experience or phenomena is hindered. Thus, as Fricker argues, their efforts to make sense of their experience are obscured (Fricker 2007: 153). Like missing pieces from a puzzle, the dominant interpretation of a social experience might leave out aspects that would further explain and define it to a fuller extent. Hermeneutical gaps are absences of proper interpretations, or, in other words, appear when there is a lack of language about a collectively shared concept or social phenomena (Fricker 2007: 160). These gaps can appear when groups are hermeneutically marginalized and lack equal hermeneutical participation in some social practice connected to the production and organization of knowledge. When privileged groups have authority over selecting topics, research questions and areas of scientific inquiry in general, some interests and experiences are reflected in scientific practice while others are not (or not to an equally extensive degree). Interests which reflect the experiences and interpretations of more powerful and privileged social groups might thus be more likely to be scientifically investigated, or included in the scientific canon, while others are not.

Hermeneutical injustice is thus "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to persistent and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalization" (Fricker 2007: 154) or, more precisely, "owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (Fricker 2007: 155). Hermeneutical injustice is an injustice because it fulfills the requirements of being harmful and wrongful.

It is harmful because

> "[…] it renders the collective hermeneutical resource *structurally prejudiced*, for it will tend to issue interpretations of that group's social experiences that are biased because insufficiently influenced by the subject group, and therefore unduly influenced by more hermeneutically powerful groups […]" (Fricker 2007: 155, original emphasis).

People who suffer from hermeneutical injustice are at risk to be unable to make sense of their situation and render intelligible their experience. As Fricker argues, it is an exclusion from the "pooling of knowledge" (Fricker 2007: 162), an exclusion from the participation in the spread of knowledge. This is the "primary harm" of hermeneutical injustice: a situated hermeneutical inequality (Fricker 2007: 162).

4.2. Robinson-models as *Hermeneutical Resources*

Robinson-models are significant for the production and organization of neoclassical, economic knowledge. As "isolated individual stories" they produce knowledge because they infer from individual behavior to group and aggregate behavior and formulate predictions upon these observation. Robinson-models organize knowledge insofar as they illustrate the most central premises of neoclassical economics. As a teaching device, they further emphasize the centrality of these methodological commitments (e.g., that agents are atomistic individuals, who act in their perceived best interest to maximize their utility). Foundational scientific concepts, such as the neoclassical's *rational economic man*, can be viewed as an expression and reflection of specific interests. As Fricker argues, it is the interests of privileged or socially powerful groups that define the structure and content of interpretations of social experiences. Taking the issue of gender into consideration, she further suggests that it is "unequal relations of power" which "prevented women from participating on equal terms with men in those practices by which collective social meanings are generated" (Fricker 2007: 152). Arguably, this tendency of women's unequal hermeneutical participation might be a reason why the neoclassical canon is built on many gendered and sexist assumptions (Ferber, Nelson 1993, 2003).

Problem 1: Capturing the Inequality of Constraints and Initial Conditions

Economic Robinson functions as a justification for the universal applicability of economic "laws". Within a neoclassical framework is assumed that, what is true for Robinson must also be true for an economy (Kern 2011: 69, Murphy 2011: 50). However, the alleged universality of the agent obscures the reality of preference formation and choices available to different agents. Structural conditions, powerful stereotypes and harmful social norms can significantly

influence an agent's choice set, that is, a person's available (economic) options. Focusing on the principle of self-interested utility maximization and the predominance of economic motifs to determine one's behavior obscures the gendered dimension of economic realities. Women and marginalized social groups might face different constraints and initial conditions compared to men. To name one example of how powerful gender stereotypes can influence a person's choice set, we might think of companies that prefer male candidates over women because they hold strong stereotypes against women.

By not acknowledging Robinson's gender, how it influences his identity and by assuming that agents are essentially identical and resemble a kind of homo economicus, the models significantly distort the view on economic behavior. Neglecting the implications of gendered inequality of constraints points to a hermeneutical gap within the collective hermeneutical resource: People who experience structural discrimination in an economic context (e.g., in the form of sexist stereotypes in labor markets) might struggle to make sense of their experience given that the predominant neoclassical models assumes that an agent's gender (or race) is irrelevant. In other words, the hermeneutical gap that can be identified within Robinson-models is an account, or a proper language, to make intelligible the significance of gender differences in the constraints and choice sets of agents.

Problem 2: Defining Economically Relevant Activities

Robinson-models rely on a gendered distinction between economic and un-economic activities. Their content relies on what has historically been associated with productive, wealth-generating, economic activities. They develop an account of topics, activities and questions that are part of economic science, its discourse and education. In other words, they rely on and reproduce a gendered picture of what counts as economically relevant labor.

This is not only an issue regarding gender justice and adequate representation, but also an epistemic issue, as the GDP shows. The GDP draws on a distinction between economic and un-economic activities which can be traced back to the classic public-private split of 18th and 19th century political philosophy. As scholars have argued (Grapard 1995: 100), the neoclassical agent is formulated on the same gendered template as the isolated individual of early social contract theories.[38] Official statistics, such as the GDP, are directed at the production of scientific knowledge, e.g., the GDP allows for generating insights into economies, for comparing economies and, insofar, for generating new, economic knowledge. The GDP also

[38] Robinson-models require a specific account of economically relevant activities and labor. If we recall their basic content, it is often a choice between productive labor and unproductive leisure which the protagonist must make.

produces knowledge in a more common, more social sense because it is "directed at the production of a *common language* as a foundation for debate on social issues" (Desrosières 2000: 173, original emphasis). In the case of the GDP, the common language lacks an official account of labor that lies outside the GDP's production boundary. The metric excludes many aspects of labor and economic activities that are not primarily organized through public markets; activities that are *unpaid* (and as such do not generate monetary wealth: housework, care work, reproductive work, …). Given that these kinds of labor are predominately performed by women, large parts of women's economic contributions are obscured and marginalized by the GDP because they are excluded from the national accounting metric.

Hermeneutical injustice is the result of a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource, which effectively obscures a groups social experience. The gendered bias evident in the construction of the GDP and its distinction between economically relevant and irrelevant activities reflects the gendered assumptions underlying what is considered economically significant. To recall, the concept of economic significance is established in Robinson-models. The hermeneutical gap is thus the lack of a proper account of the gendered division of labor. In the case of the GDP, a significant area of a groups social experience is obscured by the framework the metric provides: the experiences associated with the (double) workload and burden of unpaid labor as well as the significance of these kinds of activities for economic welfare. Non-economic activities that lie outside the production barrier are not considered in the discussion and comparison of the wealth of nations or economies, their economic performance and overall economic standard. The collective hermeneutical resource, that is the national accounting metric, thus has a gap: a proper account of and way to incorporate the wide range of activities that contribute to a nation's economic performance (but do not necessarily generate wealth in a traditional, monetary sense). Since the GDP lacks house-, care- and reproductive-work, economists and social scientists cannot adequately inquire how these types of activities behave in relation to the national income economies.[39] Therefore, efforts taking place within non-economic or non-market spheres cannot be made intelligible, accounted for and compared on a global scale. This effectively hinders making sense of what's happening within these areas, pointing again to a lack of commonly shared language.[40] It also devalues the importance and significance of non-economic activities because they do not play an equal part in national accounting compared to economic activities. Given the gendered bias of the metric,

[39] Of course, there are studies that also account for unpaid work and put them in relation to "traditional" economic activities; however, the point is, that these types of activities do not have an equal stance in discussions about national accounting. Eventually, paying attention to the "informal economy" was the result of feminist struggle and explicit demands for recognition.

its hermeneutical resource is constrained by assumptions which marginalize women, women's perspectives and interests.

Language shapes how we make sense of our experiences. We think of GDP as a measure of wealth, as a comparative metric which shows how "far advanced" and wealthy economies and countries are. But the metric relies on and reinforces a gendered distinction of what is regarded as economically relevant activity and economically productive labor (meaning labor counts towards national production and the generation of national wealth). Implicitly, the metric devalues economic activities and labor which do not necessarily and directly contribute to the wealth of a nation.

Problem 3: Students as Knowers

Lastly, I turn to epistemic issues that arise from the educational function of Robinson-models. When students are confronted with Robinson-models, and learn economic skills and tools through the framework they provide, they might carry over biases and gendered assumptions embedded in the model (such as: *Is a discussion of gender relevant for economic inquiry? How do trade relations look like when we consider an agent's social position as a relevant factor? How do agents form their preferences? What activities are economically relevant? What determines economic progress and welfare?*). The conceptual framework and scientific language to discuss these questions is influenced by seemingly basic introductory models, such as Robinson-models. But, as shown in the discussion above, assumptions and underpinnings of foundational models sometimes transcend pure theory and are applied in real-life economic practices. To grasp what might be epistemically troubling about the framework and language Robinson-models provide as a teaching device, it is helpful to view understanding as an *epistemic good* and education as an *epistemic practice*. As such, the way students are educated about economic processes, is epistemically relevant as it defines their understanding of a given phenomenon or process. The selection of what is taught, as well as the focus that is made and the narratives that prevail, is significant. Kotzee argues that "[t]eaching a canon of ideas and works by actors from a particular cultural tradition makes that form of culture accessible to students; conversely, not teaching other cultural traditions forecloses students' understanding of that cultural tradition" (Kotzee 2017: 327). As Zein-Elabdin suggests, women or people from other cultural traditions might find it more challenging to (intuitively) understand and accept those aspects that neoclassical approaches predominately highlight (e.g., the definition of labor, the superiority of self-interested individualism) because it does not adequately reflect their social experience and interpretation of the world compared to the experiences of dominant

social groups whose interpretations and explanations might, to a higher degree, be reflected in the scientific canon (Zein-Elabdin 2011: 215f, 219). Western, neoclassical notions of what constitutes economizing behavior (e.g., agents are self-interested utility maximizers) might be valuable and helpful for all sorts of inquiry. They are, however, not the only concepts available. Reusing and reappropriating the story of Robinson Crusoe reinforces the individualist starting point for economic analysis: that it is first and foremost the actions and behavior of a single man we need to analyze in order to be able to make predictions about economic units and group behavior. Kotzee also points to the tendency of giving unequal hermeneutical credit:

> "On the hermeneutic level, teachers, but, more so, the school's culture, language and ethos may give more credence to such students' perspectives [i.e., students from epistemically privileged groups], engage more naturally with these perspectives and fail to comprehend the perspectives of less privileged students" (Kotzee 2017: 327).

A neoclassical education is the most common approach to economics in Western educational facilities. Perspectives and approaches that try to highlight marginalized positions and introduce heterodox ideas are still not the predominant way of teaching economics. Again, gaps in the curriculum might point to gaps in the collective hermeneutical resource, which might hinder a proper understanding of specific economic processes and phenomena. Considering the lack of representation of feminist economics in curriculums: If there is a lack of feminist interpretations of economic phenomena, there is a lack of (scientific) language to make intelligible aspects of problems (such as how to define, understand and talk about labor). This lack of language, or gap in the hermeneutical resource, leads to a misrepresentation of such phenomena. It might be valuable to promote epistemic diversity in education, as an effort to provide better understanding and fuller interpretations of social experiences and economic phenomena. Kotzee aims for epistemic justice, which

> "[…] requires both that testimony is given the appropriate credit and that our culture's modes of thinking and speaking about the world be so as to give everyone the communicative resources to understand and articulate both their own experiences and those of their social peers" (Kotzee 2017: 326).

Economics is a social science, and as such, teaching economic science to students should account for social factors and aim at making intelligible social experiences and incorporate diverse interpretations of such as to give students as adequate of an account as possible.

Conclusion

Robinson-models are an integral part of economics. Especially in undergraduate microeconomics courses they are a valued educational tool to illustrate neoclassical principles and aim at showing students an "intuitive" approach to economic problem solving. Robinson-models are valued for their simple set-up as well as their accessible and comprehensive way of embedding economic problem situations in a well-known scenario. Taking a closer look at Defoe's novel, we find many narratives and themes that are outdated – to say the least. Robinson-models rarely acknowledge their literary heritage and rarely address the tale which they borrow their protagonist from. Given their importance for mainstream economic education, however, I argued in line with other critics that the use of Robinson Crusoe should be justified in *some* way. Even though Robinson-models are simplifications and idealizations of Defoe's novel, they still carry several gendered assumption and biases. As these assumptions often remain undisclosed, they distort the picture of economic processes and phenomena. These distortions can hinder an adequate understanding of socioeconomic experiences from marginalized individuals and social groups. I argued that Robinson-models lack an account of gender. More specifically, they lack an account of the significance of gender for preference formation and choice sets of individuals. This is because Robinson's masculine identity is not addressed, or, assumed to be irrelevant. An agent's gender can significantly influence their available choices. By neglecting gender as a category and relying on Robinson's universal applicability, this dimension of economic behavior is obscured.

Additionally, Robinson-models reproduce a gendered distinction between economic and un-economic activities, which has significant repercussions as the GDP shows. Gendered assumptions regarding labor and scientifically relevant economic activities determine official metrics such as the GDP, which effectively exclude many aspects of labor that are disproportionately performed by women.

As a final point I suggested that Robinson-models might not adequately fulfill the standard of an important teaching device as they typically do not address their gendered and racialized heritage, and the gendered assumptions they rely on. Though Robinson-models are idealizations, they still rely on Defoe's hero and convey certain ideals. As Zein-Elabdin argues, coming from non-Western cultural traditions, the tale of neoclassical Robinson might not be as intuitive as compared to Western students that grew up with the novel and its trope. As a central teaching device and introduction to the discipline, it might be productive to provide a ground to discuss problematic or harmful assumptions that define the protagonist, even though models abstract from the novel.

These points of criticism, so I argued, can be read through an epistemic lens which points at the issue of possible gaps in the collective hermeneutical resource, the collective pool of knowledge and the ways of understanding economic science. Given these gendered distortions, a full account of a given economic phenomena (e.g., choice formation, labor, economic welfare) cannot be adequately given. Women and marginalized social groups are neglected from the dominant discourse which might result in a lack of language to make certain social experiences intelligible. This is an injustice, namely a hermeneutical injustice.

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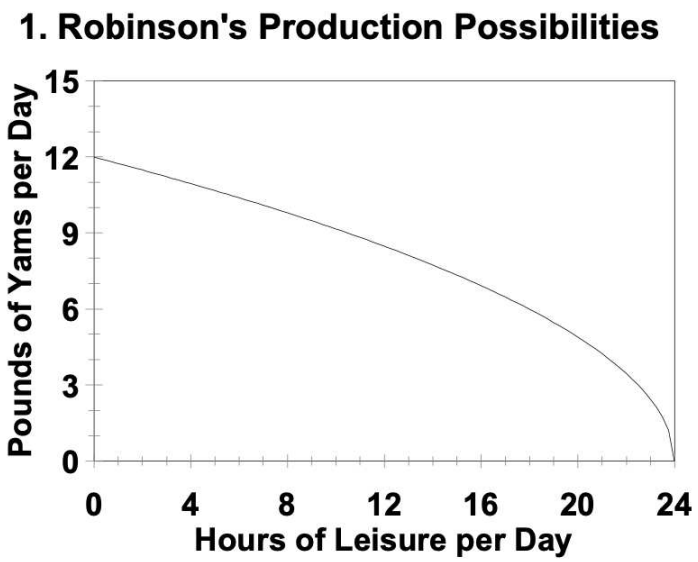
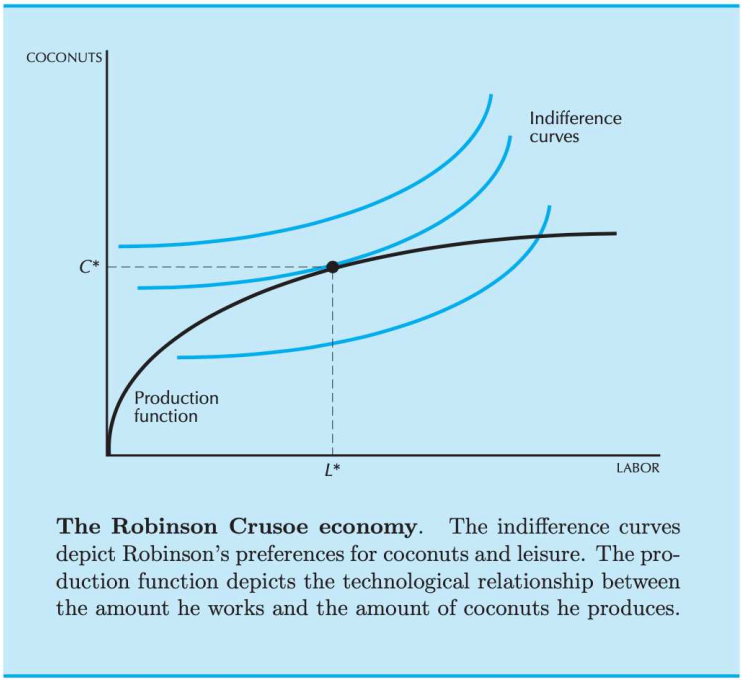
Appendix

Figure 1: Illustration of Robinson's allocation:



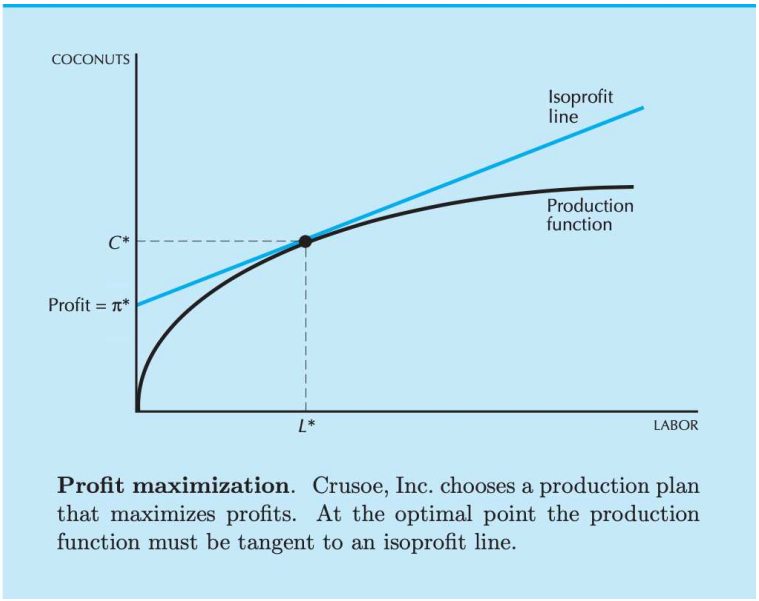
McFadden, Daniel (2003). Robinson Crusoe meets Walras and Keynes. *Department of Economics, University of California*. https://eml.berkeley.edu/~mcfadden/eC103_f03/Robinson2.pdf (last access: 16.7.24)

Figure 2: Illustration of Robinson's indifference curve and production possibilities:



Varian, Hal R. (2010). *Intermediate Microeconomics. A Modern Approach.* Eighth Edition. W. W. Norton & Company. 610.

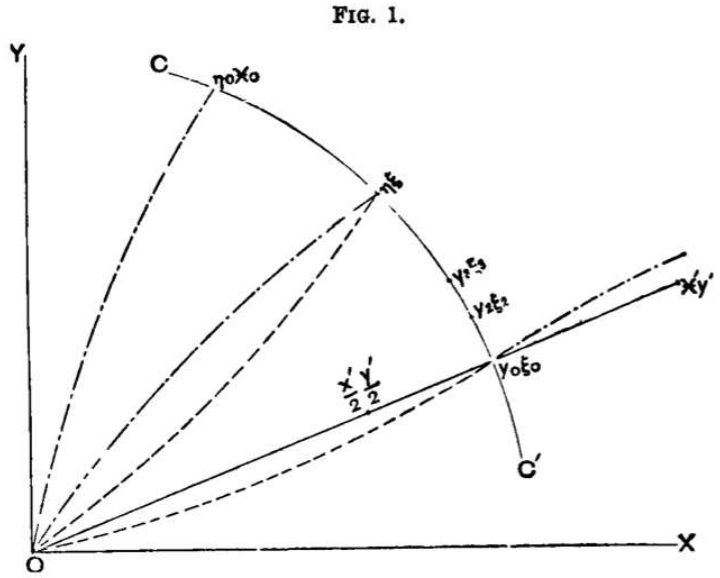
Figure 3: Illustration of Robinson's production plan:



Profit maximization. Crusoe, Inc. chooses a production plan that maximizes profits. At the optimal point the production function must be tangent to an isoprofit line.

Varian, Hal R. (2010). *Intermediate Microeconomics. A Modern Approach.* Eighth Edition. W. W. Norton & Company. 612.

Figure 4: Contract Curve



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