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## Reframing economic agency in times of uncertainty

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**Abstract:** The retrospective assessment of the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic has once again shown that humanity is often unable to deal effectively with existential issues until it is (almost) too late. This paper addresses and explains the shortcomings of mainstream economic thinking that contribute to this predicament, and proposes a reframed model of human capabilities. Its primary aim is to improve the scientific assessment of economic phenomena, therefore providing a methodology-oriented case study for the proposed model. In the context of a growing 21st century perma-crisis, such expanded visions of economic agency will prove crucial in various arenas of transformation.

**Keywords:** mainstream economics; economic agency; economic methodology, pluralism; COVID-19; sensemaking.

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## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had many disastrous consequences in many areas of the economy and society but has also offered great potential for transformative action. Both civil society and politics have initially reacted with a mainly positive joint effort and consensus. However, in retrospect, there are serious doubts to whether this co-creative action has translated into lasting change, especially in the economy. In view of further (and ongoing) crises – above all the climate crisis – it seems that transformation is urgently needed: not just ad hoc reactions, but fundamental changes in economic action, especially the shaping of a sustainable and more resilient economy.

But how do new actions actually emerge? And how can they become new economic habits? How can economic actors on different levels of decision-making generate new choice architectures (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) and thus generate new creative normalities more suitable to the dynamics of the present and of the future? How can they change the current *modus operandi* in capitalist economies?

In order to be able to pursue such questions, we argue that a new paradigm of agency within economics is needed. With the old paradigm as metaphorised in the iceberg model and introduced in Section 2 we can only learn how actors follow a fixed logic or how they endlessly reproduce the past unconsciously into the future. Although the model covers important aspects of economic reality, it does not allow for an understanding of *all* economic realities that are being reproduced and gradually altered by people day after day. And, crucially, it does not allow for the assessment of transformative capabilities that inspire and allow for different economic futures to emerge.

Inspired by interdisciplinary research (Beckert, 2016; Castoriadis, 1997; Unger, 2007; Ötsch and Graupe, 2020; Sen, 2003; Claassen and Herzog, 2021), this article will outline a new model of economic agency, a necessary component of the (much) overdue paradigm shift in economics. Only by expanding our analytical vision we can hope to gain an approximation – although never a ‘full picture’ of economic realities as manifest in economic thought, actions, and institutions. And finally, only such a fundamental evolution of economics can put it into a position to help society prevent crises before they ever occur or escalate.

## 2 Reframing agency in economics

Models and theories have always been based on certain ideas about how people in general and scientists, in particular, perceive the world and their position in it. Ostrom et al. (1994, p.25) described a fundamental level of frameworks on which processes of perception are highly specific, but mostly unconscious. It is this level of collective unconsciousness that in economics needs to reconceptualise – both in terms of conceptualising human capabilities and in terms of their scientific assessment.

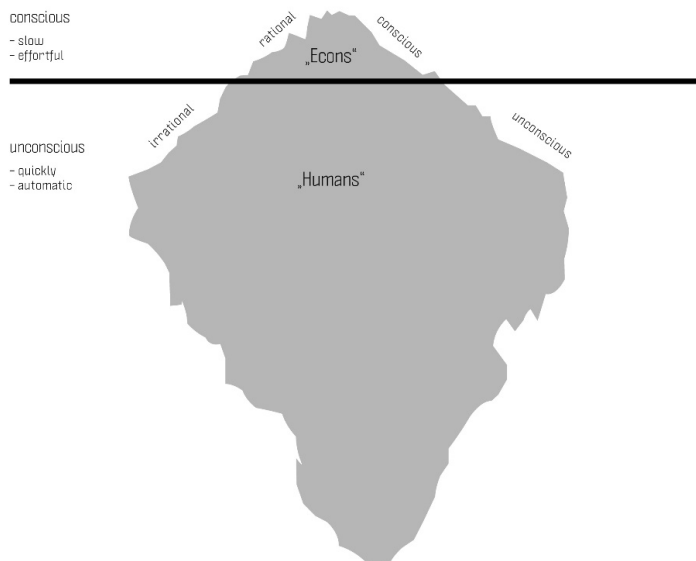
Sen wrote: “The capability of a person [...] reflects the various combinations of functionings (doings and beings) he or she can achieve” [Sen, (2003), p.5; cf. 1977]. Only by expanding our analytical capabilities can we, as economists, hope to achieve insights into the concert of different human capabilities bringing about the economy and its functionings. In this vein, since the global financial crisis of 2007 ff. we have seen the ascendance of behavioural economics and – in parts – its integration into the self-understanding of mainstream economics (Frid-Nielsen and Jensen, 2020, 2ff.).

We welcome this evolution within economics since it broadens the picture of economic action and decision-making. At the same time, we have strong reasons to doubt its sufficiency when confronted with real-world economic processes. Furthermore, we question the suitability of behaviouralist frameworks to strengthen future-fit decision-making in democratic societies. Thus, our proposal to fundamentally extend the conception of human capabilities and agency within economics. We want to enable economists to intellectually cope with the economic world as (re-)produced by living people in historical situations. This framework will be fostering these capabilities, not in answering in advance which specific levels of capabilities are being carried out in the real world. This is a question which must always remain open for empirical investigation.

### 3 The status quo: timeless Mr. Spock and endless Homer Simpson

In mainstream economics after the integration of behavioural economics, human capabilities are constructed twofold, which are closely connected to the methodical capabilities, economists grant themselves to be valid (Davis, 2011). In a sense, this twofold capability set granted to agents is mirroring that of economists themselves [Mirowski, (1987), pp.1005–1006]. The two capabilities have been popularised by the iceberg metaphor (see Figure 1). Accordingly, just as more than 80% of an ice mass floating on the sea is located below the surface, the vast majority of human cognition takes place below the threshold of perception and thus is outside the scope of reflection. As a result, instead of a conscious and actively organised biodiversity of capabilities, only a solidified ('icy') mass of cognitive processes is considered to exist. Within this picture, there is no room for proactive capabilities aiming at the transformation of oneself and/or the world (Graupe, 2021).

**Figure 1** Human capabilities according to the iceberg metaphor/behavioural economics in Graupe (2021, p.245)



Kahneman (2013), for example, describes its meaning more precisely: only rational cognition can be considered to be truly conscious, which embodies the essence of *homo oeconomicus* or Stark Trek's Mr. Spock, coined by Kahneman's colleagues Thaler and Sunstein (2008, p.22). Mr. Spock realises a calculating and quantifying means-to-end way of thinking. His mode of operation can best be compared to a computer whose rules are programmed according to the logic of mathematics, or more precisely, according to the rules of an optimisation model as inscribed into it by the modelling economist. There can be no reflection of the underlying program itself; rational thinkers as modelled by economists simply have no choice when it comes to the rules upon which their choices are being made [Hodgson, (2003), p.170]. They are like Leibnizian Gods, always having to choose an optimum: 'conventional economics is not about choice, but about acting according to necessity. Economic man obeys the dictates of reason, follows the logic of choice' [Shackle, (1949), p.272; as cited in Loasby, (2007), p.190].

Although Kahneman depicts this cognition as *slow* since rational thinking is always costly in terms of time, at least in the neoclassical tradition it fundamentally lacks any historicity. For mathematical models of rational decisions as pioneered by the early marginalists and championed by rational choice theorists do not gain their legitimacy in relation to historical processes. In alignment with the structuralist-objectivist (Daston and Gallison, 2007) and positivist theories of science (Milonakis and Fine, 2009), their legitimacy stems from the inner consistency of logical relationships, deliberately disconnected from historical – and therefore from any human and social – relationships. It is the clear *intention and hope* of rational choice models to find certainty and even truth in timeless principles beyond the flaws of the experienceable life-world (Düppe, 2009).

Yet, we can historicise these possible capabilities for a moment, considering them in their possible application or manifestation in actual real-world decision-making.<sup>1</sup> Tricky at first sight, they are quite easy when having mastered this capability once – for instance, after having studied economics 'for one or two semesters' [Mankiw, (2001), p.vii]. What counts more is the indefinite applicability of the logic. For with a true logic at hand, there does not arise any question of where or when to apply it. It is applicable everywhere and anytime:

"Our primary goal is to emphasize the core economic principles that will endure beyond today's headlines [...] there are a few basic concepts that underpin all of economics [...] We have therefore chosen to focus on the central core of economics – on those enduring truths that will be just as important in the twenty-first century as they were in the twentieth." [Samuelson and Nordhaus, (2010), pp.xviii–xix]

Any situation becomes easily approachable by rational thinking. Hence, these calculations lead to a definite and easy-to-assess answer when considering all sorts of decisions or actions. In fact, from their definite- and preciseness radiates an imperative aura, demanding actors to follow the solutions of rational calculations. This imperative is nothing less than the weak expression of the necessity of imagined agents to execute their formalised terms of decision-making (i.e., in the form of a utility function).

Now, according to Kahneman, Mr. Spock bears little resemblance to real-world people and their decision-making. In alignment with the central tenets of behaviourism as developed almost a century ago, he proposes to view humans as fundamentally unconscious beings. As depicted in the iceberg metaphor, an exclusively dark realm of irrationality is actually hidden below the threshold of consciously calculating cognition. This is where, according to Kahneman, decisions are made quickly and as 'effortlessly as

lightning’. Akerlof and Shiller (2015) write of ‘monkeys-on-the-shoulder’ who, surreptitiously and usually against people’s own well-calculated interests, give whispered instruction about what they should do. This obscure field of subconscious cognition supposedly consists mainly of tacitly internalised habits; the acting individual can barely reflect or even change. Like Homer Simpson [Thaler and Sunstein, (2008), p.22], people are trapped in their habits, reproducing them for the sake of simplicity or outright laziness. On the surface it describes an unreflective conceptual understanding, which in turn is triggered quasi-automatically by likewise unconscious preferences, emotions and ideological convictions.

Hence, in behavioural economics, human cognition is essentially fixed, leading to an endless reproduction of already acquired habits. Homer Simpson continuously reproduces his past within the present into the future. For without being able to consciously address his past, present or future, he is rendered to keep doing what he has always been doing. And exactly this facet of a reproductive kind of cognition makes the behavioural agent highly predictable. Ergo, the simplicity of decision-making as seen from Homer Simpson’s perspective is being mirrored by a simplicity to understand and foresee his behaviour as seen from the outside.

The conceptualisation of human cognition as rooted in past behaviour turned into fixed unconsciousness allows for both: the deciphering of acquired behavioural patterns by means of (experimental) observation as well as the prediction of its continuation in future actions. Furthermore, it enables the tender manipulation of these patterns as facilitated in nudging techniques. For behavioural economists like Thaler and Sunstein, these techniques prove to be essential in order to save the nudged agent from an endless repetition of those patterns deemed harmful by the nudging choice architect. If s/he cannot or will not perform a conscious deliberation about actions being taken, *someone* will have to do it for him or her. This is the basic claim and the moral foundation of libertarian paternalism. At the same time, as Zuboff (2019) has impressively shown, the proactive immersion of predictable routines yielding a ‘behavioural surplus’ is also a lucrative field for powerful *private* interests.

We think that both qualities of human capabilities (and its related forms of cognition) as integrated in behavioural economics certainly do cover a lot of empirically observable social (and therefore also economic) realities. Still, the iceberg model stops short of at least three additional types of human capabilities that in our understanding hold an essential role in any social realm and especially in a fundamentally uncertain and open reality. If this claim held any truth when assessed empirically, subsequently, a decisive paradigm shift in economics far beyond the hesitant integration of a behaviouralist anthropology would follow.

### 3.1 *Acting in the present*

Firstly, we propose a capability that is particularly dominant in acute emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, yet is either completely ignored or viewed with suspicion by economists. It is a spontaneous capability that makes people not only reacts but indeed *perform* in direct relation to life experiences. These spontaneous activities have already been coined as *acting-intuition* in Japanese and phenomenologist philosophies (Uehara and Belgrano, 2020; Johnson, 2017). This capability makes it possible to let go of old

judgements and prejudices, thus suspending their power to guide action while generating new patterns in the face of the concrete demands of the present.

This ‘acting-intuition’ engages with the living world *before* mental stereotypes and calculative imperatives evaluate it in the light of mere past memories. Beyond the workings of the conceptual mind, the acting-intuition performatively detects new, potentially meaningful structures and stabilises them initially through improvisation. Since it can meet the needs of the situation adequately and selflessly, it represents not only a genuinely creative internal sense, but also a moral sense related to a public spirit.

More importantly, an understanding of the working of this capability without an understanding of its context is impossible. The action process unfolds in the interplay of individuals or groups and historical situations to be coped with. Agents neither quasi-automatically reproduce the past, nor rationally execute a timeless blueprint. Due to the ‘acting-intuition’, they are spontaneously coping with a sudden present. Acting in the present is highly experimental in character, for it unfolds and exists only in the very moment of being carried out. Therefore, it cannot be anticipated or projected out of the past. Hence, its assessment can and may not retreat to drawing tables or laboratory settings but in fact has to work in and from lived experience.

Certainly, numerous examples come to the mind when thinking of action-intuition within the COVID-19 context: politics, educational contexts, and the entire public space. Probably the most salient example is that of hospitals around the globe, *having to* reorganise in order to cope with the first wave of infections. In order to safeguard for both the maintenance of general services, as well as those needed to cope with a new disease, potentially affecting the rest of the facility, security protocols as well as treatments and the respective supplies had to be invented and re-established from scratch. With no or an only gradually building body of knowledge concerning the virus’ nature, these intimate actions were highly spontaneous. Being capable to cope with the situation in this very early period heavily relied on the human factor: personnel able to adjust to a ‘prior normal’, despite dysfunctional habits, now spontaneously and proactively engaging with the present highly uncertain situation and actually *did* what seemed most suitable, thereby creating new spaces for action and experimental knowledge.

### 3.2 *Imagining the future*

While the introduction of ‘acting-intuition’ is crucial for economics to attain an understanding of how economic actors engage with a complex and increasingly disruptive present, it will not suffice to gain a satisfactory picture of how economic reality is being produced. Therefore, the realm of imaginative capabilities must be introduced into economic thinking. This is the source of potentially creating the most complete blind spot of mainstream economic theory (Ötsch and Graupe, 2020).

This capability is equally experiential. But it is not bound to the constraints of the actual, not even to those of the most fundamental tenets of logic. Imagination here basically means the ability to form new ideas of the present and, even more importantly, of possible futures (Unger, 2007). Presumptively, imagination does not emerge from the actual (although sometimes related to it), but from the possible. It is the sense of alteration and differences. The presumably simple origin from which it emerges is the certainty that things – social institutions, human-nature relationships, self-concepts, etc. – could *and will* be otherwise. Therefore, there is no fixed list but rather an ever-expanding process of ‘imagined futures’ (Beckert, 2016) or ‘imaginary economies’ (Schröter, 2020)

whose dynamic depends on the imaginative intensity as allowed for by the institutional (i.e., the educational) setting (Bäuerle, 2020).

As Beckert (2016) has impressively shown, imaginations of the future are not just some backwater phenomena, but rather a central aspect of core capitalist processes and institutions, such as money and credit, investments, innovations, and consumption. For instance, in any financial investment, there is embedded an image of how the investment will unfold – what it will achieve in an imagined future which, by definition, is fictitious and therefore uncertain. Beyond all rationalist assumptions, financial markets, then, are primarily a highly imaginative space, negotiating all sorts of possible futures. The question then arises how actors actually form these imaginations and how they are able, individually or collectively, to reshape them. For this would amount to an imaginative capability – rather than just an imaginative capacity as filled by external images.

The certainty of ever-possible alteration, rooted in the human capability to imagine otherness, to relate to an open future, is at first sight a destabilising and therefore fundamentally uncertain force. For it cracks the conventional taken-for-granted and exposes it to a moment of crisis. In always confronting anything with possibilities of being otherwise, it presses forward moments of decision (from the Latin *crisis*, to decide): ‘imagination does the work of crisis without crisis’ [Unger, (2007), p.61]. However, it does not carry out these decisions. This is the facet of a last capability to be considered.

### 3.3 *Realising the possible*

Where both, the ‘acting-intuition’ in its relation to the present, as well as the imagination in its relation to a possible future fail to provide for a long-standing change of social realities, a last capability comes into play. In coping with the present spontaneously or in sketching uncharted territory, possibilities of long-standing social transformation become visible. What was deemed impossible before now becomes a performed reality or an imagined option. It is exactly this point of departure, where a third capability sets in: it starts with a clear insight into social potentiality. It is being characterised in a stage of normalising, or rather: its institutionalising potential. With its power it is possible to push actuality onto its very limits, taking advantage of its fissures and its inherent trigger points as pathways for change. It materialises the possible within the actual. Thus, people can advance from being merely concept or stimulus-driven, reactive beings to creators of their own decision-making spaces and concepts, i.e., their choice architectures. In order for it to manifest, it requires latitude for reflected action in the present paired with a broad knowledge of our social and historical development, as well as transformative insight.

This closely resembles the Aristotelian tradition of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), i.e., the ability to adequately understand concrete situations as well as their potential and to act accordingly. In doing so, this capability is by no means reduced to mere memories and instincts. It also includes cognitive and creative abilities to form judgements in concrete and therefore, experiential situations, to distinguish between the fertile and the harmful, and to attribute existential and practical values and meanings to things and processes. In doing so, it is also responsible for the formation of intentions that are not simply accessible to sensory perception. It is a form of life wisdom with which people can clarify what they really want and should do. In this way, agents acting by means of *phronesis* are able to decide in the present about the effectiveness of the past, while also

creatively altering habits and thoughts for the prospective future. Crucially, *phronesis* is a capability that operates in relation to a present and out of a saturated knowledge in regard to this present, although never determined by it.

When compared to ‘acting-intuition’, it is characterised by an altered level of consciousness, of explicit judgements and of imaginative insight. By practically coping wisely with the present, imaginatively corresponding to possible realities, *phronesis* is rather preparing a desired future. Thus, it sits at the hinge-point between spontaneous and imaginative capabilities. While ‘acting-intuition’ as well as imaginative capabilities operate at the limits of established order and therefore, under the pressure or the inspiration of extreme uncertainty or even chaos, the mediating force of *phronesis* oscillates between stabilising and destabilising contexts. For it both tries to weaken established patterns of thought and action and simultaneously strengthen desired ones. It diminishes the gap between ‘our framework-preserving and our framework-transforming activities’ [Unger, (2007), p.128], gradually pushing for reflexive change.

### 3.4 *Synopsis*

The five human capabilities as outlined in this section can be integrated in an extended iceberg model. Instead of two human capabilities, it now covers five, all represented by different states of water. The two frozen and therefore solidified capabilities above and beneath the level of consciousness are extended by three fluid capabilities: first, a sea of highly dynamic acting-intuition, second, imaginative capabilities as represented by rain or snow falling from imaginative consciousness, ultimately emerging from and potentially reshaping frozen as well as fluid practices and third, a semi-fluid shell around the iceberg, gradually and willingly reshaping its size and contours.

The most interesting task for economists emerging from this extended framework is, in our understanding, the interconnectedness and potential overlapping of the different capabilities. Which combinations in fact cross-fertilise smoothly with regard to which specific issues or economic-institutional settings remains as one of the most important empirical tasks for the discipline. In order to do so, it will need to develop new pathways of empirical inquiry.

## 4 **Operationalising the framework**

The paradigm shift we are proposing by fundamentally expanding the analytical scope of economics is not an end in itself – we propose it in order to allow for fellow economists to build new relationships to real economies ever in the making. These relationships should enable an understanding of real-world economic processes at the very least and caring for them at best (Roos and Hoffart, 2021). In this section, we will focus on the question of what an understanding of economic reality as (re-)produced by living people being granted all of the capabilities of the preceding section actually means in methodical/methodological terms (see also Bäuerle, 2023). We will do so by illustrating a recent research project on ‘new imaginative economies’, uncovering decision-making processes of executive personnel in the context of the COVID-19-pandemic.

Certainly, economists’ methodical equipment to cope with rational and ordinary forms of behaviour is quite advanced. These traditional strengths, mostly resting with quantitative methodologies, will continue to play a crucial role in the future. Being able



to interpret the real world in terms of numbers and mathematical relationships is not sufficient, but an important capability for any social science. Yet, if this toolbox is applied out of tradition rather than insight into actual socioeconomic processes, it threatens to miss the empirically observable events and to perpetuate and inscribe the supposed capabilities into real-world decision-making (cf. Böhme, 2016; Mügge, 2020). Hence, any methodical operationalisation of the outlined framework must carefully develop procedures to enter a scientific dialogue with economic realities that allow for the latter to show themselves in their actual performance. When reorienting economics around the understanding of and caring for actual phenomena, investigations will not start with an ‘one-size-fits-all’ method presumably securing for scientific authority but with the careful calibration of the methodical framework in relation to the specific phenomenon at hand. This will require a methodological pluralisation of economics.

Now, methodical possibilities capable of capturing, for instance, the actualisation of economic reality by means of ‘acting-intuition’ will lead, e.g., to the integration of reconstructive and ethnographic methods (Flick, 2014) into the economists’ toolbox. For if actors realise this capability within and with reference to a fundamentally insecure present situation, economists interested in how ‘the economy’ is actually brought into being in these situations will have to talk to actors, closely watching their performances, spontaneously adopting to the situation as the actors themselves do as well.

Regarding imaginative capabilities, economists will have to find methodical ways to capture both the settled imaginative landscape as well as its never-ending expansion and practical manifestation. Crucially, the actors’ pictures of radically uncertain futures as imagined in everyday operations will have to become a core range of the disciplines’ outreach. Here, methods as developed by future studies (Glenn and Gordon, 2009; Saleh et al., 2008), for instance, may be of help. Finally, when it comes to *phronesis*, economics can rely, for instance, on institutionalist frameworks focusing not only on the institutional structure but the processes of institutionalisations in real-world economic contexts (Ostrom, 1990; Storper and Salais, 1997; Banerjee et al., 2019).

## 5 Case study

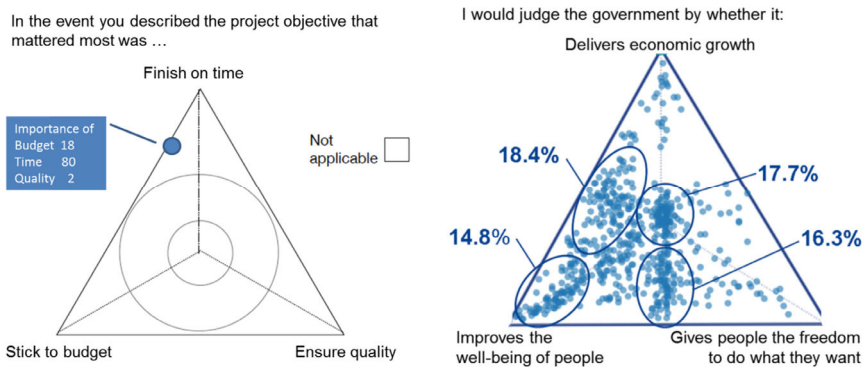
To provide a concrete example of how economics could operate in the future, we will introduce the methodical-methodological design of a research project at Hochschule für Gesellschaftsgestaltung. It is meant to provide *one* but certainly not *the* example of empirical research originating from our epistemological framework. The project ‘new imaginative economies’ aims at empirically exploring how real actors attribute meaning both to imminent situations of extreme insecurity in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as to organisational futures as imagined in the present. It is interested in identifying entrepreneurial cases that actually managed to convert spontaneous innovations as emerging from ‘acting-intuition’ into longer-term institutionalisations. Hence, in the first place, the project aimed at reconstructing whether capabilities as outlined in this paper can actually be found in an empirical sample at all. In a second step we keen to identify agents capable of *both* ‘acting-intuition’ and *phronesis*.

To this end we approached a sample of over 620 managers of companies in Germany and Austria. The sample consists of representatives from different backgrounds and sectors in order to allow for contrasting interpretation techniques. The participants were

asked to contribute to the project by responding to a digital SenseMaker® questionnaire, designed to capture fundamental layers of sensemaking.

The SenseMaker® methodology is a mixed-methods-approach originating from complexity research, originally developed by Dave Snowden (Kurtz and Snowden, 2003; Snowden, 2005; Van der Merwe et al., 2019). It is being applied in myriads of social contexts and is also used for live assessment and consultancy in entrepreneurial, social, and public institutions (cf. Deprez et al., 2012; Mager et al., 2018; Bartels et al., 2019). SenseMaker® facilitates capturing large-scale samples of written or spoken narratives from real-world actors as well as interpretations of these narratives by the actors themselves. This ‘self-signification’ feature not only protects the research process from ‘nostrification’ – the distortion of results by the researchers’ stances [Nohl, (2013), p.272] – it actually provides the central insights into the actors’ sensemaking processes.

**Figure 2** Exemplary triades (see online version for colours)

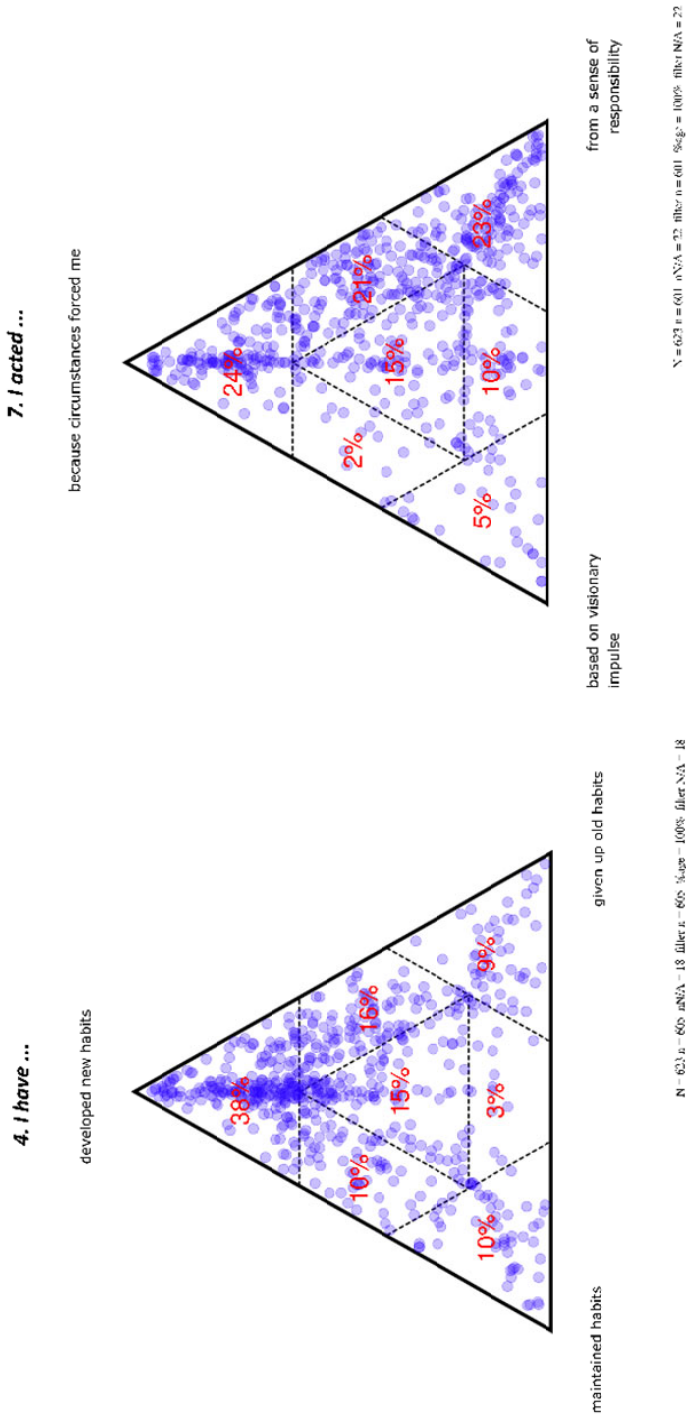


Source: From Van der Merwe et al. (2019, p.7)

**Figure 3** Heatmap as generated from x/y-positionings in Lindeman and McAusland (2020, p.37) (see online version for colours)



**Figure 4** Two example items from our Sensemaker-questionnaire (see online version for colours)



Source: Authors'

The SenseMaker® methodology captures spoken or written narratives by means of a Smartphone app or a browser. The self-significations of these narratives by the agents' themselves are being carried out by intuitively responding to several items (see below). Besides the conventional listing of possible answers to a given question, every framework heavily relies on triades and x/y-positionings.

The graphical as well as numerical representation of the participants' self-significations allow for intuitive as well as stochastic assessments. The researchers' dashboard as provided by SenseMaker® allows for the handling of large datasets. At the same time, as every dot is connected to a specific story and socioeconomic and biographical information, an in-depth analysis in combination with qualitative methods as well as subsequent interview techniques is easily feasible.

Crucially, the digitally supported and decentralised survey method allows for live results and short-term adoption to the field's needs or requirements. In this vein, the SenseMaker® methodology can easily be adopted for transformative matters by enabling participants to work with insights made in the context of workshops. The participatory and dialogical potentials of the methodology are indeed numerous and have been explored by several research projects, especially in the health sector (Iredale and Cooke, 2020, cf.; Lindeman and McAusland 2020).

Our project is one of the first to adopt the methodology in a German-speaking context. In close engagement with the Cynefin Centre and its programme on COVID-19 research (cf. Snowden and Rancati, 2021; Walters et al., 2021) we aim at understanding actual entrepreneurial decision-making processes during the pandemic. We assumed that this specific historic situation unleashed all sorts of spontaneous (re-)actions, without being able to rely on blueprints or even on emergency protocols. That is to say, that within this context it is highly probable to find acting-intuition-narratives when asking executive personnel to share their experiences of the imminent crisis. At the same time, by rendering ordinary routines obsolete, (e.g., working at the office five days a week), new institutional and organisational possibilities emerged that in some cases will cease to exist when former routines have been re-established – yet, in other cases, they will possibly lead to long-term change. This will highly depend on how managers today assess the future and the role they attribute to potentialities as experienced or imagined.

In fact, our results published in detail elsewhere (Schlaile et al., 2023) indicate that in coping in an environment of fundamental uncertainty, executives overwhelmingly reflected their actions as genuinely novel, without, however, aligning them towards an envisioned future (cf. Figure 4). Rather the situational coping and the resulting new action imminently sprang from the situation itself, hence, from a stark orientation towards the present. Executives felt they were driven by values such as honesty, creativity, and justice – as opposed to profit/growth, which ranked last in the survey.

By designing our framework both to present-related as well as future-related narratives, we aimed at identifying those actors who could manage to turn transformative insight into institutionalised change that continues beyond the pandemic timeframe. In redistributing our insights to the participants and discussing them in workshops, the project sought to strengthen transformative signals in the present, so that economic agents can learn from each others' examples and provide for enhanced capabilities and resilience with regard to increasingly uncertain circumstances.

## 6 Conclusions

The capabilities as outlined in this paper are not just reactions to exogenous shocks or uncertain times. They are ever-present human potentials that are very likely carried out in various types of (economic) action day after day. For an adequate assessment of 21st century economic realities, economics will have to acknowledge and methodically incorporate them. To this end, it will not have to jettison its history or strengths, but rather merge them in an expanded framework. This is not only a matter of empirical adequacy, but also a moral question concerning the economists' role in their specific historical setting. Within this setting it has become common in public debates that the continuation of economic routines and institutions stemming from the past will not only sustain the unsustainable but actually deepen our social, political and ecological crises. In a world of imminent, interconnected crises, economists can contribute to the anticipation or solution, maybe even to the prevention of said crises. But in order to be able to do so, it will have to develop a 'genetic account of an unfolding process' [Veblen, (1898), p.388] called 'the economy'. This quest will only succeed if it works on an epistemological as well as anthropological foundations suitable to cope with living people (re-)producing the economies' institutions in everyday practices.

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## **Notes**

- 1 As the performativity studies of economics have shown, the imagination and subsequent communication of people behaving like Mr. Spock have led to myriads of real-world applications (cf. MacKenzie et al., 2007; Boldyrev and Svetlova, 2016). Economics, in these cases, is not investigating but rather implementing a form of cognition in historical time it imagines to be universal.