

Sindbad's character
traits: on
contradicting and
sympathizing with
homo economicu...



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The story of Sinbad the Sailor, found in “The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments” and filled with countless economic transactions, can be understood through the application of different economic models to reveal the motives and driving forces of the principal character. By evaluating the actions of Sinbad in this 10th century collection of tales through an economic lens, and by applying the models of Homo Economicus (economic or self-interested man), Homo Reciprocans (reciprocating or cooperative man), and Homo Islamicus (Islamic man), we are able to infer why characters make certain choices and take certain risks. This allows us to gain a plethora of essential information we would otherwise neglect. The suggestion that Sinbad is the “perfect embodiment” of Homo Economicus is an interesting, although ultimately unsupported statement. By focusing on three main theoretical models, Homo Economicus, Homo Islamicus, and Homo Reciprocans, we can work to characterize the actions of Sinbad, ultimately realizing that he seems to not conform to one specific economic model, but fits criteria of each.

Although Sinbad's self-centeredness and greed fits with the traditional definitions of Homo Economicus, his charitable actions and irrational measures to obtain wealth make this statement unjustifiable. To apply these theories to the tale of Sinbad, we must acknowledge the academic conversation that has preceded this paper, and the opinions of scholars who have thoroughly studied the economics of these stories. It is also helpful to consult economists' definitions of each theoretical model in order to correctly characterize the actions of our protagonist-hero, Sinbad. Kay and Mill are in agreement on the portrayal of Homo Economicus, using descriptive words

such as “ materialistic”, “ self-interested”, and “ pursuit of wealth”. Perhaps most valuable to analyzing Sindbad's situation are Quiggin's words on the Homo Economicus saying, “ moral considerations...have no role to play.” Throughout Sindbad's journeys we are given examples of his egocentrism, with a large focus on his fourth voyage where he kills for personal gain. Another variable that all three scholars agree upon is that the Homo Economicus is “ calculating” and “ capable of judging of the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end”(Mill, n. p.). This is a potential flaw in the sentiment that Sindbad is a perfect example of Homo Economicus. Throughout the book Sindbad's judgment calls can be defined as irrational and risky. Two economists, Gintis and Romer, have helped to break down the character traits of the Homo Reciprocan in “ The Human Side of Economic Analysis”. While many economists such as Mill use Homo Economicus as the general model for today's human, Gintis and Romer argue that, “ a considerable body of empirical evidence contradicts this view.” They argue that many humans fit into the category of Homo Reciprocans. This model helps to explain some of Sindbad's economic choices when he is concerned with the “ well-being of others” and as seen in many of the stories his willingness to, “ cooperate and share with others”, especially when they have helped him. One other important model to apply to this situation would be Homo Islamicus for many reasons, especially focusing on the geographical setting of the story and the religious emphasis that Sindbad places on praising Allah and religion. Timur Kuran argues that Homo Islamicus, based off of laws from the Qur'an and Sunna, describes the man that is able to trade for a profit but is unable to cause harm to others with these activities. He is also forbidden to earn more than he should. The only

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problem with the description is the ambiguity of words such as, “ norms”, “ fair”, and “ reasonable”. We can see parallels to Homo Islamicus as Sindbad's consumption consists of land and charity, rather than adultery, wine, and illegitimate items. When consulting each professionals' definition, the reader may find that Sindbad exemplifies not only one theory, but pieces of them all. When looking at these definitions, it is obvious that Sindbad cannot be the, “ perfect embodiment” of Homo Economicus. To prove these definitions apply to Sindbad and to show his failure at fully representing the Homo Economicus prototype, an examination into his seven journeys must be made to back up this claim. Applying the concept of Homo Economicus to the character Sindbad is an interesting and insightful way to analyze his actions.

The overwhelming consensus on definitions of Homo Economicus points to a man who is selfish, greed driven, and lacking in morals. We find overwhelming evidence of these traits in his ability to sacrifice human lives for his own, and although he constantly reprimands himself for his greed moving him to go onto new voyages, he cannot resist the temptation of riches. The most moving cases of self-centeredness and lack of concern for others are found in the fourth and fifth voyages. Page 162 includes the passage, “ I gave the unfortunate wretch two or three great blows...[and] killed her” and ends with, “ I committed this inhuman action merely for... provisions.” Sindbad ends up killing 3 people for their water and bread. He justifies this by saying he needed their resources to live, but this is an extremely selfish act. To take multiple peoples' lives to ensure one's own is an extreme example of the self absorbed nature of Homo Economicus,

presentation Sindbad as a reliable example of this economic model. In his fifth voyage, he kills an old man by getting him drunk although this is somewhat justified as Sindbad had an immediate risk of death if he did not remove the man from his neck. But, he is undoubtedly more aggressive and violent than his attacker. Although he could have refrained from killing the man, this murder is more acceptable than killing others for their food and water who have never done anything to harm him.

Addressing the other major qualification of Homo Economicus, the drive for greed, we are able to find specific examples of Sindbad's voraciousness. He is driven by greed, to fulfill his sense of adventure, continuing onto seven separate journeys. His sixth voyage starts out with, " I could not but reflect upon myself as the cause of my own ruin, and repented that I had ever undertake this last voyage" (169). He fears he finally has to pay a price for his greed. However, this quote can also be an example of one great incongruity with Sindbad being a Homo Economicus. He proves time and time again that he will let his emotions and greed get the best of him by going on these life-threatening expeditions. We know he regrets these choices, starting most narratives with, " the pleasures of the life which I then led soon made me forget the risks I had run in my two former voyages" (151). After almost dying six times, he still goes on the seventh voyage. This shows that his want for money clouds his judgment. If we take from Mill's definition, we see Homo Economicus is someone who " is capable of judging the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end" and one who knows, " consequence of the pursuit of wealth" (Mill). Although Sindbad returns with sufficient wealth each time, enough to donate to charity and buy

nice estates, he still pursues more. According to this theory, after gaining riches, Sindbad should have discontinued his voyages. Yet, his choice to keep going is illogical, and counter to the principle of rationality in Homo Economicus.

Another line of inquiry is that Sindbad is not Homo Economicus, but rather Homo Reciprocans. Sindbad, gracious to those who help him and obliged to help those who have provided for him, offers jewels to the merchants who aid him in his second voyage, and the king in the fourth voyage. This demonstrates his willingness to show gratitude and give of material possessions to others. Homo Reciprocans share even at a personal cost. Nevertheless, Sindbad cannot be classified as Homo Reciprocans due to his neglect for the "well-being of others." With the multiple murders he commits, his selfishness is a major contradiction to this theoretical model. The last theory we can apply to Sindbad would be that of Homo Islamicus. This theory is especially interesting due to the religious aspects of this book and the setting. It focuses on morality with a special emphasis on charity. Although we find Sindbad to have the selfish characteristics of a Homo Economicus, in his second, third and fourth voyages he says he, "gave a great deal to the poor" (156), and he doesn't spend his money on things such as adultery and gambling. The Islamic man is permitted to "trade for personal profit" so Sindbad's line of work is an acceptable way to receive wealth. However the Homo Islamicus is, similar to the Homo Reciprocans is, "required to avoid causing harm to others", and Sindbad clearly doesn't have much concern for others. Homo Islamicus, "forgoes temptations of immediate gain when by doing so he can protect and promote the interest of

his fellows”(Kuran, n. p.). And although he trades for profit and gives to charity as he is required to, he sometimes does this at the expense of theirs, and it can be argued that he lives in excess wealth that exceeds the amount of riches he should have. Throughout this piece, the evidence for and against Sindbad's characterization as “ the perfect embodiment” of Homo Economicus has been explored and disproven. Although he exemplifies many traits of this economic model, his transactions heavily borrow variables from Homo Reciprocens and Homo Islamicus.

After a review of each of the three main theoretical archetypes, Sindbad appears to not fit into any of these choices. Although the audience pushes to fit Sindbad's actions into one simple model, this is not a realistic way to portray his economic choices and motives. He heavily borrows ideas from all three. When applying economic ideas such as these to a fictional text, we must understand the many limitations that may cause the characters to differ from the models. It is hard to place a character from a 10th century Arabic collection of tales into modern day economic models originating in the West. Although there are limitations to the models, they are helpful in evaluating this tale. Looking to the bigger picture, in the frame story, Scheherazade is very similar to Sindbad. They both tell a new story every night and are trying to entice their listeners to come back and listen every night. Scheherazade is telling these stories of a wealthy man who is surprisingly generous, gaining and giving lots of money, to try to convince King Schahriar to be generous and kind. Sindbad never gives up when bad things happen to him, and only through his perseverance gains riches. If the king gives up hope on women and on kindness because of his wife, he will

never receive anything good. Sindbad helps us to understand the difficulties economists have in classifying consumers. Sindbad's stories exhibit that many people are driven for wealth and can make selfish choices, while also having moral obligations give. Ultimately we learn that human beings are complex, irrational, and hard to classify.

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