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2 The Epic of Gilgamesh

3 On Effectiveness, Immortality, and
4 the Economics of Friendship

5 *Gilgamesh, wherefore do you wander? The eternal life you are*
6 *seeking you shall not find. . . . Always be happy, night and day.*
7 *Night and day play and dance.*

8 The Epic of Gilgamesh

9 The Epic of Gilgamesh dates from more than four thousand years ago¹
10 and is the oldest work of literature available to humankind. The first writ-
11 ten records come from Mesopotamia, as do the oldest human relics. This
12 is true not only of our civilization but of humankind in general.² The epic
13 served as an inspiration for many stories that followed, which dominate
14 mythology to this day in more or less altered form, whether it is about the
15 motif of the flood or the quest for immortality. Even in this oldest work
16 known to men, however, questions we today consider to be economic
17 play an important role—and if we want to set out on a trail of economic
18 questioning, we can go no deeper into history than this. This is the bedrock.
19 Only a fraction of the material relics survive from the period before
20 the epic, and only fragments remain of written records relating mainly to

¹ The oldest Sumerian version of the epic dates from the third Uru dynasty, from the period between 2150 and 2000 BC. The newer Akkadian version dates from the turn of the second millennium BC. The standard Akkadian version, on which this translation is based, dates from between 1300 and 1000 BC and was found in a library in Nineveh. For the rest of its chapters, the Epic of Gilgamesh is thought of as its “standard” eleven-tablet Akkadian version, which does not contain Gilgamesh’s descent into the underworld, later combined with a twelfth clay tablet, and at the same time includes the meeting with Utanapishtim on the eleventh tablet and the conversation with Ishtar on the sixth tablet. Unless otherwise noted, we will use the Andrew R. George translation from 1999. The story plays out on the territory of what is today Iraq.

² The oldest writings come from the Sumerians; writings from other cultures (such as the Indian and Chinese) are from newer dates. The Indian *Vedas* come from the period around 1500 BC, as does the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. The older parts of the Old Testament were written between the ninth and sixth centuries BC. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* come from the eighth century, and Plato and Aristotle’s writings from the fourth century. The Chinese classics (such as Confucius) date from the third century BC.



1 economics, diplomacy, war, magic, and religion.³ As the economic historian
 2 Niall Ferguson (somewhat cynically) notes, these are “reminders that when
 3 human beings first began to produce written records of their activities
 4 they did so not to write history, poetry, or philosophy, but to do business.”⁴
 5 But the Epic of Gilgamesh bears witness to the opposite—despite the fact
 6 that the first written clay *fragments* (such as notes and bookkeeping) of
 7 our ancestors may have been about *business and war*, the first written
 8 *story* is mainly about great friendship and adventure. Surprisingly, there is
 9 no mention of either money or war; for example, not once does anyone in
 10 the whole epic sell or purchase something.⁵ No nation conquers another,
 11 and we do not encounter a mention even of the threat of violence. It is a
 12 story of nature and civilization, of heroism, defiance, and the battle against
 13 the gods, and evil; an epic about wisdom, immortality, and also futility.

14 Despite being a text of such great importance, it seems to have com-
 15 pletely escaped the attention of economists. There is no economic literature
 16 on the Epic of Gilgamesh. At the same time, this is where we encounter
 17 our civilization’s very first economic contemplation; the beginnings of
 18 well-known concepts such as the market and its invisible hand, the prob-
 19 lem of utilizing natural wealth and efforts at maximizing effectiveness.
 20 A dilemma appears on the role of feelings, the term “progress,” and the
 21 natural state, or the topic of the comprehensive division of labor con-
 22 nected with the creation of the first cities. This is the first feeble attempt
 23 to understand the epic from an economic standpoint.⁶

24 First, though, let’s briefly summarize the story line of the Epic of
 25 Gilgamesh (we will develop it in greater detail shortly). Gilgamesh, the
 26 ruler of the city of Uruk, is a superhuman semigod: “two thirds of him god
 27 and one third human.”⁷ The epic begins with a description of a perfect,
 28 impressive, and immortal wall around the city that Gilgamesh is building.
 29 As punishment for the merciless treatment of his workers and subjects,
 30 the gods call on the savage Enkidu to stop Gilgamesh. But the two become
 31 friends, an invincible pair, and together they carry out heroic acts. Later,
 32 Enkidu dies, and Gilgamesh sets out in search of immortality. He overcomes

³ Kratochvíl, *Mýtus, filozofie a věda* [Myth, Philosophy, and Science], 11.

⁴ Ferguson, *The Ascent of Money*, 27.

⁵ Just as in (our own) modern epic (myth, story, fairy tale)—in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien—money plays no role. The “transaction” takes place in the form of a gift, battle, fraud, trick, or theft. See Bassham and Bronson, *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*, 65–104.

⁶ No search is ever totally complete, but despite some relatively comprehensive searching in the conventional EconLit archives (which is the most widespread and certainly most respected database of economic literature of our time), the author did not manage to find any book, or even a chapter of a book or academic article, that examined the Epic of Gilgamesh from an economic point of view. We are therefore aware that this attempt to analyze one of the oldest writings from a heretofore unexamined angle is predestined to all the failures, simplifications, contradictions, and inaccuracies of a first excavation.

⁷ The Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet I (48), 2.



1 numerous obstacles and pitfalls, but immortality eludes him, if only by a
 2 hair's breadth. The end of the story returns to where the epic began—to
 3 the song in praise of Uruk's wall.

4 UNPRODUCTIVE LOVE

5 Gilgamesh's effort to build a wall like no other is the central plot of the
 6 entire story. Gilgamesh tries to increase his subjects' performance and
 7 effectiveness at all costs, even preventing them from having contact with
 8 their wives and children. So the people complain to the gods:

9 The young men of Uruk he harries without warrant,
 10 Gilgamesh lets no son go free to his father (. . .)
 11 Gilgamesh lets no girl go free to her bridegroom.
 12 The warrior's daughter, the young man's bride.⁸

13 This has a direct relation to the emergence of the city as a place that
 14 manages the countryside around it. "The village neighbors would now be
 15 kept at a distance: no longer familiars and equals, they were reduced to
 16 subjects, whose lives were supervised and directed by military and civil
 17 officers, governors, viziers, tax-gatherers, soldiers, directly accountable to
 18 the king."⁹

19 A principle so distant and yet so close. Even today we live in Gilgamesh's
 20 vision that human relations—and therefore humanity itself—are a distur-
 21 bance to work and efficiency; that people would perform better if they
 22 did not "waste" their time and energy on *nonproductive* things. Even
 23 today, we often consider the domain of *humanity* (human relations, love,
 24 friendship, beauty, art, etc.) to be *unproductive*; maybe only with the
 25 exception of *reproduction*, the only one which is literally(!) productive,
 26 reproductive.

27 This effort to maximize effectiveness at any cost, this strengthening of the
 28 economic at the expense of the human, reduces humans across the breadth
 29 of their humanity to being mere production units. The beautiful, originally
 30 Czech word "robot"¹⁰ perfectly expresses this: The word is based on the
 31 old Czech and Slavic word "robota," which means "work." A person reduced
 32 to being only a worker is a robot. How well the epic would have served
 33 Karl Marx, who could have easily used it as a prehistoric example of the
 34 exploitation and alienation of the individual from his family and himself!¹¹

⁸ The Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet I (67–68 . . . 77–78), 3.

⁹ Mumford, *The City in History*, 41.

¹⁰ The term "robot" was first used in 1920 by the Czech author Karel Čapek in his science-fiction drama *R.U.R.* [Rossum's Universal Robots] about an uprising of artificial beings built for the purpose of taking over human labor. Čapek originally wanted to call them *labori* (laborers), but his brother Josef (an outstanding artist) thought up the more suitable "robot."

¹¹ Marx expresses this reduction of man even more emphatically: "[the workman] becomes an appendage of the machine . . ." Rich, *Business and Economic Ethics*, 51 (originally published



1 Governing people reduced to human-robots has been the dream of
 2 tyrants from time immemorial. Every despotic ruler sees competition to
 3 effectiveness in family relations and friendships. The effort to reduce a
 4 person to a unit of production and consumption is also evident in social
 5 utopia or more accurately dystopias. For the economy as such needs nothing
 6 more than a human-robot, as has been beautifully—albeit painfully—
 7 shown in the model of homo economicus, which is a mere production and
 8 consumption unit.¹² Here are some examples of this kind of utopia or
 9 dystopia: In his vision of an ideal state, Plato does not allow guardian
 10 families to raise their children; instead they hand them over to a special-
 11 ized institution immediately after birth.¹³ This is similar to the dystopias
 12 in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. In both
 13 novels, human relations and feelings (or any expressions of personality)
 14 are forbidden and strictly punished. Love is “unnecessary” and unproduc-
 15 tive, as is friendship; both can be destructive to a totalitarian system (as can
 16 be seen well in the novel *1984*). Friendship is unnecessary because indi-
 17 viduals and society can live without it.¹⁴ As C. S. Lewis puts it, “Friendship
 18 is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art. . . . It has no survival value; rather
 19 it is one of those things that give value to survival.”¹⁵

in German: Rich, *Wirtschaftsethik*). We notice that today in economic models, we perceive a person through their work (L) or as human capital (H). In companies, human resource departments (HR) arise on a common basis, as if a person truly was a resource, the same as a natural resource or financial resource (capital).

¹² Homo economicus, or “economic human,” is the concept that humans act rationally and are self-interested actors who make judgments so as to reach their own subjective ends. The term was originally used by the critiques of the economist John Stuart Mill as a simplification of broad human behavior. For he argued that political economy “does not treat the whole of man’s nature as modified by the social state, nor of the whole conduct of man in society. It is concerned with him solely as a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end.” Mill, *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy*, 1874, essay 5, paragraphs 38 and 48 (Mill, *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy*, 1844, 137). The model of homo economicus is a very controversial simplification of human behavior and was criticized by many, including economists.

¹³ “[A]s children are born, they’ll be taken over by officials appointed for that purpose . . . children of inferior parents, or any child of the others that is born defective, they’ll hide in a secret and unknown place, as is appropriate” (Plato, *Republic*, 460b). Children were not to know who their real parents are and they should be bred deliberately to produce the best offspring (“best men must have sex with the best women,” see Plato, *Republic*, 459d), as if they were a pack of hunting dogs (459a–d). Only when they are no longer (re)productive, when “women and men have passed the age of having children, we’ll leave them free to have sex with whomever they wish” (461b).

¹⁴ See Lewis, C. S., *The Four Loves*, 60. The economist Deride McCloskey frequently quotes C.S. Lewis in her book *The Bourgeois*.

¹⁵ It must be noted that in the most modern stories and myths, in films such as *The Matrix*, *The Island*, *Equilibrium*, *Gattaca*, and so forth, people are robotized (frequently more or less unconsciously), enslaved to a certain production function, and emotions are strictly forbidden, which is probably best expressed in Kurt Wimmer’s film *Equilibrium*.