

# Economists, Parsifal, and the search for the Holy Grail

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Abstract:

Modern economists behave like Parsifal. He is a poor and innocent boy who becomes a knight for King Arthur, finds the Grail Castle and eventually replaces the Fisher King as the guardian of the Holy Grail. He has to widen his consciousness and travel beyond his station as a naive fool to discover himself and to reconcile the conflicting aspects of his psyche. Economists should take Parsifal as a model and expand their consciousness to remedy their cynicism and despair, and enliven their field.

Like Parsifal, the modern economist naively blunders about the Waste Land in search of the Holy Grail. Cynicism and despair reign in the discipline. The many versions of Parsifal share a few basic themes that are, at least in part, played out in the profession of economics.

Many students and economists are dissatisfied with this state of affairs. We continue to use standard approaches because this is how one gets published and advances even though we doubt the validity and power of the models. Very often, prominent economists, whether in presidential addresses to their respective associations or in Nobel Prize acceptance speeches, criticize the overuse of math even though they themselves achieved success by using it. Why can't we aim our research at a broader view of the world, one that encompasses history, sociology, philosophy, etc., early in our careers? Why not ask the meaningful questions at the start? It may be the need to publish and society's own emphasis on the rational and quantifiable. The myth of

Parsifal provides a psychological explanation.

## The Myth of Parsifal

Parsifal, a simple, poor, and naive boy, is dazzled by the sight of five knights. Wishing to join, he follows them to the court of King Arthur against the wishes of his mother. He is told he can be a knight if he slays the evil Red Knight. Parsifal kills him and then puts on his armor. But he soon learns that knighthood is arduous and is attained only after much valor and noble work. He must learn a great deal and be versed in knightly arts of battle, learn to live by certain social rules and rituals, and learn as well that it is childish to ask too many questions. He eventually becomes a good knight, defeating others and sending them to serve King Arthur. One day he enters the Grail Castle and meets the wounded Fisher King whose kingdom has become a Waste Land. "The cattle do not produce; the crops won't grow; knights are killed; children are orphaned; maidens weep; there is mounting

everywhere - all because the Fisher King is wounded" [Johnson 1989, 1]. Parsifal sits at a banquet and sees the Fisher King sitting before the Holy Grail. If Parsifal can ask the question, "whom does the Grail serve?" the king will be healed and the kingdom will again flourish. He does not ask and is expelled. He later slays many dragons and defeats many knights until finally, in his middle age, he again earns the right to re-enter the Grail Castle and ask the question. In some versions of the story, he does, the kingdom is rejuvenated, and he takes the place of the Grail King (or Fisher King) as guardian of the Grail.

The Grail symbolizes life, spirituality, youth, health, joy, purity, creativity, the unconscious, and generativity [Jung and von Franz 1970, 114]. It harmonizes the conflicting opposites of male-female, rationality and emotion, dark and light, good and evil, etc. [Jung and von Franz 1970, 194]. The conflict of opposites in Parsifal's psyche needed to be discovered for him to get back into the Grail Castle. He needs to expand his consciousness and travel, psychologically speaking, far beyond the naive fool, to find the Grail Castle and discover himself, to be conscious of and reconcile the opposites in his psyche.

The Fisher King, or the Grail King, represents a limited consciousness, one who is too rational and is incapable of solving the real problem his kingdom faces [Jung and von Franz 1970, 212]. The successor who will free him was prophesied to be a wholly innocent fool who would ask a specific question. "The myth is telling us that it is the naive part of a man that will heal him and cure his Fisher King wound. It suggests that if a man is to be cured he must find something in himself about the same age and about the same mentality as he was when he was wounded" [Johnson 1989, 11].

Although Parsifal must transcend his naivete to re-enter the Grail Castle, it will be his innocence and compassion that inspires him to ask the healing question. His long psychological journey is actually a journey to rediscover his youthful innocence, which he repressed when he failed to ask the question. The second time he enters the Grail Castle, he will know that he is part fool, but he will not be afraid to look foolish by asking questions.

Parsifal moves from a lower to a higher level of consciousness. He slowly becomes more aware of the conflict of opposites within himself but suffers much because of his low level of consciousness.

His quest starts in covetousness, by envying and wanting to be like the knights, and ends in finding the Grail. The Knight symbolizes a higher, more conscious man [Jung and von Franz 1970, 54]. By leaving his mother, he takes his first step toward consciousness, a "male" consciousness of rational thinking and outward achievement that is often alienated from the natural world [Jung and von Franz 1970, 45]. It dominates Parsifal's life.

The Red Knight represents Parsifal's shadow, "the sum of emotion and barbaric thoughtlessness which Parsifal must overcome before he can become a Christian Knight" [Jung and von Franz 1970, 56]. The shadow "brings the energy to live as a human being" and "consists of those aspects of your character that belong to you but that have not been given any conscious place in your life" [Johnson 1991, 59]. Parsifal grows by killing the Red Knight [Jung and von Franz 1970, 57]. The Red Knight's armor becomes his persona, or mask [Jung and von Franz 1970, 59]. He now controls his shadow and can use its energy [Johnson 1989, 24].

After the Red Knight battle, Parsifal meets Gournamond, his figurative godfather. He learns more about knighthood from him but leaves to see his mother. While travelling, he comes upon a castle besieged by an evil knight. He defeats him and falls in love with the mistress of the castle, Blanche Fleur. She represents the anima in his psyche, the animating principle that inspires his knight errantry.

As a knight, Parsifal was expected to help women in distress. He often does, but only to compensate for his overly masculine consciousness [Jung and von Franz 1970, 64]. The women in the story represent different aspects of Parsifal's anima, the creative and feeling part of his psyche. He often decides to leave a woman after only a short stay, symbolizing his difficulty with expanding his consciousness to include this aspect of life [Jung and von Franz 1970, 270]. Rather than seeing women as ends in themselves and as equals, capable of their own contributions and capable of teaching Parsifal, his consciousness is too masculine to see them as anything but a prize to win [Jung and von Franz 1970, 184].

His failure to ask the important question in the Grail Castle was a result of a lack of consciousness. He had not adequately integrated his anima so he could not ask a compassionate, healing question [Jung and von Franz 1970, 181]. He is not capable of assessing what happened and therefore does not understand why he is expelled from the Grail Castle [Jung and von Franz 1970, 182]. He no longer understands himself and is cut off from his inner being. He fails also because he worries too much about his reputation and fears the ridicule of his peers instead of being guided by his heart [Campbell 1976, 454].

Parsifal later learns of the spiritual nature of the Grail from a hermit, someone more focused on the inner world [Jung and von Franz 1970, 222]. The hermit expands his consciousness to include his anima. Around middle age, he sheds a homespun garment worn under the armor of the Red Knight (this represents his mother complex or desire for the world to take care of him) and again can enter the castle to ask the Grail question, a question about raising consciousness and caring about something larger than himself [Jung and von Franz 1970, 292].

### **The Economist as Parsifal**

As we enter graduate school, it is exciting to study important questions about the nature of the economy and economics, questions about the proper role of government and how the good society can be made congruent with human nature. We soon need to undergo arduous study of mathematics and statistics, moving far away from the questions that got us interested. Like Parsifal, we must learn a great deal and overcome great obstacles (such as comprehensive exams and a dissertation). We subdue difficult mathematical theorems and techniques and put them in the service of our careers. We become engaged in the appropriate work in the middle of our lives as Parsifal did after he failed to ask the right question. We are unable to ask the relevant questions about the purpose of the economy and the discipline of economics in our youth.

In fact, formalization crowds out the "self-reflective process that might clarify whether in fact formalization has gone too far" [Wisman 1993, 3]. This is exactly the problem faced by Parsifal. Busy with attaining outer, worldly success, he had very little time to reflect on who he was or what his life meant. There is, however, a "deep

human need that formalism might satisfy" [Wisman 1993, 7]. This is also an "intolerance toward ambiguity" [Wisman 1993, 8]. Parsifal, being a simpleton, sees everything as black or white, right or wrong. Part of the explanation for excessive formalism may be found in sociology and psychology [Wisman 1993, 8]. Myths like Parsifal provide both psychological and sociological messages. One of the sociological reasons for excessive formalism is that scientists do not seek only the truth, but also the approval of other scientists [Wisman 1993, 9]. Good knights do not ask too many questions.

The avoidance of ambiguity also affects teaching. "Because economists are trained in techniques rather than substance, teaching models is easier than teaching institutional complexity or ideas" [Wisman 1993, 12]. This teaching leaves graduate students uncreative and lacking in communication skills [Wisman 1993, 14]. The fundamental parallel is the lack of balance - we know little about economic systems and economic history [Wisman 1993, 25].

Finally, after slaying many figurative dragons (math, difficult research projects, etc.), one may rise to the top of the profession to again have the chance to question the purpose of economics. Why does it take so long? The answer, at least in part, is that we are like Parsifal, having to re-enter Grail Castle. The accumulated knowledge and theories are the Grail for the profession in that they sustain those in the profession. Perhaps the eminent economists mentioned earlier now feel the obligation not just to do good economics, to be good knights, but to watch over or guard the discipline so it may flourish in the future, just as Parsifal became a guardian of the Grail.

The failure of economists to ask important questions early on leads to many problems: businesses are less interested in hiring us, we are unable to advise governments well, good students who enjoy philosophy and history do not go into economics while those who know math do, and we do not understand how institutions work [Wisman 1993, 18]. Also, "graduate students are experiencing an identity crisis - a conflict between their idea of what an economist is and the identity that their graduate training imposes" [Colander and Klamer 1990, 170]. This is in part because of formalization, which the students do not like. They want more ideas and policy relevance [Colander and Klamer 1990, 170].

Students see themselves as the "Intellectual." "This character gets associated with single-minded pursuit of the truth and the love of ideas" [Colander and Klamer 1990, 180]. Like Parsifal, we were dazzled when he saw knights as a boy. The pursuit of truth and the love of ideas are certainly exciting quests for the young. But graduate school downplays this role as well as that of social activist and teacher [Colander and Klamer 1990, 180-1].

The accepted and allowed role for graduate students is that of academic professional. In this case, "the profession was understood to be a calling that could be followed only after intensive training by individuals who had already professed" [Colander and Klamer 1990, 182]. (Parsifal underwent long and arduous training.) The academic professional is a tradesperson who represses their natural exuberance and curiosity for big questions and seeks to not offend their superiors [Colander and Klamer 1990, 182]. Cynicism and a lack of faith result. Academic life is just a game. The discipline, losing its vigor, is a Waste Land, nearly

lifeless and incapable of providing intellectual sustenance for its citizens.

There are other parallels. One is that graduate students learn not to question fundamental assumptions. Parsifal was told that a good knight does not ask too many questions. The second is that in giving up the role of teacher, intellectual, and social activist and accepting that of academic professional, we put on a mask, just as Parsifal did after he put on the armor of the Red Knight. So we lose some of our humanity, which contributes to the Waste Land, although completing a dissertation, which is like a Red Knight battle, is necessary for survival and future work. The third relates to the wound of the Fisher King. Our feeling capacity is wounded because we are too rational. In fact, "generally the more intelligent the person and the more highly educated, the worse is the wound" [Johnson 1993, 27]. We need to ask the question of why we live and why we do economics. There is no rational answer. The fourth is that, in wearing the homespun garment from his mother, he had an immature wish to find safety and security in the world. Perhaps this is why we prefer the safety and security of our models to more holistic and integrative thinking.

We, like Parsifal, need an expanded consciousness in order to overcome our cynicism and despair and to reinvigorate the discipline. We should become less narrow. Leading economists, writing about our future, think we should and will become more interdisciplinary [Economic Journal 1991]. The vitality of our kingdom is at stake.

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