Introduction

The Metastatic Logic of the Incentive

> Economists, the prophets of incentives, quite logically respond to their own incentives to service their various constituencies, and as they never cease to insist, life is nothing but a sequence of trade-offs. Whenever they make reference to the 'public good' or 'general welfare' in the course of their endeavors, they frequently mean nothing more than the brute fact of *caveat emptor*.
>
> —Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*[1]

This book is a story about a magic word. To say it at a business roundtable, a Congressional hearing, during oral arguments at the Supreme Court, inside a workplace, or during a faculty meeting, indicates a special knowledge—a shortcut to understanding what motivates people. It is a word that cuts across the social field. It is universally applicable, promiscuous even, and promises a simplified way to render a chaotic world sensible. It is a word that summarizes an entire approach to human behavior. It is a word invoked by the powerful, the well connected, the true believers. Its enthusiastic proponents have won Bank of Sweden prizes in economic sciences, have been appointed to presidential administrations, have written for top news outlets, have become influential federal judges, and have testified in front of—and elected to—the United States Congress. This is also a book about an extremely ordinary word. Chances are, you have said it aloud to children, coworkers, students, and friends. It springs to mind whenever you need to induce a behavior you desire. When signing up for a health insurance plan, or weighing options for a car purchase, the word has flickered across your computer screen, enticing you to act. The word is incentive. It acts as a charm, an incantation, a word that "sets the tune" of its listener's behavior. As *Freakonomics* authors Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner emphatically put it, "*Incentives are the cornerstone of modern life*."[2] To be "incentive-driven" is the human condition: we satisfy our desires within a universal system of rewards and penalties, in accordance with our unique individual preferences. While the term originated from economic theory, it now describes all manner of social interaction, from love to healthy eating. Incentives purport to explain how businesses motivate workers, when people turn off the light at night to sleep, and even how courts come to their rulings. Former Federal Circuit Court Judge Richard Posner, the most widely cited US legal authority, relied upon incentives as part of his judicial philosophy, informed by the precepts of neoclassical economics. For Posner, "The 'economist's basic analytical tool for studying markets' can be used to study other behavior."[3]

Despite its neutral appearance, there is nothing innocent about the appearance of "incentives" in matters of social importance. The incentive framework smuggles in a quintessentially economic view of society to noneconomic domains. When a mother incentivizes her daughter to run errands by promising a visit to a taco truck, when a criminal justice reform activist looks to "change the incentives" for prosecutors, or when a sports journalist casually remarks that "like all human beings, major league players respond to incentives," they are not simply selecting from an available set of equivalent terms to describe the world around them.[4] Rather, utterances like these represent the colonization of common sense by the discipline of economics by applying an individualized, conscious, cost/benefit analysis to the complexities of social life. The seepage of economic thought into these formations is neither natural nor inevitable; its deployment is no impartial description of social reality. Incentive rhetoric embodies the leading edge of the economization of everyday life—the reduction of social complexity to a knowable set of assumptions about what motivates people and what causes their actions. To be sure, not all incentives are created equal: the legal system incentivizes individuals to refrain from murder by harshly punishing the act, while a public radio station incentivizes individuals to make charitable donations by offering canvas tote bags and window decals. My aim is less to provide a framework for adjudicating one's own comfort with its various appearances in society but to index what is symbolically exchanged in its adoption. This work addresses the consequences when a diverse vocabulary for motives is traded for a single signifier that is, without exception, yoked to the discipline of economics and foregrounds a quintessentially "economic" vision of the social bond. The specific content of any one incentive is less socially important to me than the form that has metastasized into entirely new domains. In other words, I am concerned with why a food bank and the World Bank use the same exact term to explain people's actions.

What makes incentive rhetoric so powerful, so pervasive, and so present in our lives? The answer concerns economics' own account of its causal claims and what specific type of insights it generates in its way of seeing. Economics, Hoover contends, originated as a "science of causes," whose conceptions of causality from Hume and others "remain implicit in economics today."[5] Incentives work as an account of causality—by incentivizing behavior, one can elicit any manner of result, be it rational economic activity or positive public health outcomes. The power of the incentive framework is also its universality; its insights operate identically in the other direction. Some economic policies, social policies, and workplace policies produce "perverse incentives" that contravene not the precepts of economic thinking but the supposedly rational and efficient outcomes promised by the ideologists of capital. In the tradition of rhetoric, metastasis is the trope that denotes an expansion, and a transfer of cause from one domain to another, and understanding incentives as a metastatic vocabulary helps explain why they appear unavoidable. Metastasis is the tropic engine for incentive discourse in these ways: by curving alternative explanations for outcomes toward those intrinsic to economic analysis, the field of what economics can explain expands.

This version of economic causality, however, is not simple or straightforward. Thus, to understand the contemporary ideological power of incentive discourse is to recognize the strange temporality of its claims. Incentive-based causality, this book argues, is a *retroactive* phenomenon, in that the "meaning" of any action is only established by retroactively positing any outcome as *having been caused* by the ironclad laws of economics. Incentive discourse retroactively distills all human motivation into the narrow axioms of consumer behavior, borrowed from neoclassical economic thought, and its epistemological presumptions. The word "incentive" names (and covers) the gap of causality—and, like any gap, it has a form: any outcome becomes understandable once we discover the "hidden forces" of markets that pervade our existence. Incentives offer an account not of what specifically motivates individuals but a formal axiom that claims they are motivated and a promise for how to discover their motives; the analysis retroactively distills what must have caused an action from extant resources. However, this figural occlusion elides questions surrounding structural economic inequalities, and what results is an extreme individualization of responsibility for complex, conjunctural matters. (For instance, economists have argued that if a woman leaves her job to care for children, she is incentivized by a "weakness for children," rather than meaningful employment—therefore no ameliorative legislation or social action ought to be enacted.[6]) As a set of public persuasive acts, incentive rhetoric prescribes a vision of the social bond contoured fundamentally by economic precepts: we must behave like economically rational agents *because we already do*. This approach, which replaces alternative explanations for outcomes with the "one social science" of economics, narrows explanatory faculties and black-boxes genuine questions about complex, noneconomic determinants of social change. When incentives become a univocal explanatory matrix, individuals are held responsible for their (constrained) choices, all structural inequalities can be safely tucked away as results of prior incentive structures, and institutions are at license to prescribe behaviors for their populations. "Incentives" give rhetorical cover to enormously uneven distributions of outcomes in today's society by retroactively ascribing an operative incentive structure that motivated individuals to accept their lot in life; it should come as no surprise that such logics thrive in moments of extreme wealth inequality.

What Is an Incentive?

In chapter 2, I trace a concrete history of the term from antiquity, but for now, a provisional definition of "incentive" will demonstrate how the term extends beyond its original resting place. The *Oxford Dictionary of Economics* defines the term primarily as causal inducement within the workplace: "Rewards or penalties designed to induce one set of economic agents to act in such a way as to produce results that another economic agent wants. As rewards for good results, incentives can include higher pay, better working conditions, better job security, better promotion prospects, or prestige. . . . Incentives cannot be based on inputs or outputs unobservable by management: to motivate these it is necessary to rely on self-respect or team spirit."[7] Workplace incentives solve a motivational problem for employers and managers—they "provide a tool to increase motivation, shape the way people work, and make businesses more productive."[8] Nonmonetary incentives can be "material" like a corner office, or "immaterial," like a title, but unsurprisingly, money remains the best incentive within the workplace, according to a meta-analysis performed by Boswell, Colvin, and Darnold.[9] Similarly, researchers from the *Harvard Business Review* found that while performance pay incentives are the most effective in inducing work and stimulating job satisfaction, they do increase the perception that the extra pay only comes "through an intensification of the work process."[10] Incentives also frequently refer to "tax incentives" offered by governments to induce action in constituents, either individually or for corporations. For instance, when Amazon took bids for a new headquarters in 2018, 238 separate cities offered up bids, largely offering lavish tax incentives and abatements totaling in the billions of dollars to attract the corporation to set up shop.[11] The city of Chicago offered to pay part of the income tax bills of its employees, Columbus offered a 2.8-billion-dollar property tax exemption, and Atlanta offered a car exclusively for Amazon personnel on Atlanta's mass transit system and fifty free parking spots and a lounge for Amazon executives at the Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport."[12]

Today, the logic of the incentive describes monetary and nonmonetary interactions on a single plane; this textbook term has entered new realms but has not shed its neoclassical foundations. As Gregory Mankiw puts it in his *Principles of Macroeconomics*, "People respond to incentives" is the discipline's foundational axiom.[13] Economist Gary Becker advocates a parsimonious rubric for all social questions organized around the centrality of the incentive: human beings (1) have stable preferences (they do not change their beliefs or desires under any circumstances whatsoever), (2) they are utility-maximizing (they act to satisfy those desires), and (3) they operate as if they are working within market structures (in that individuals weigh the "prices" of their behaviors and desires before acting). He writes: "The heart of my argument is that human behavior is not compartmentalized, sometimes based on maximizing, sometimes not, sometimes motivated by stable preferences, sometimes by volatile ones, sometimes resulting in an optimal allocation of information, sometimes not. Rather, all human behavior can be viewed as involving participants who maximize their utility from a stable set of preferences and accumulate an optimal amount of information and other inputs in a variety of markets."[14] Becker's formulation anticipates Arnsperger and Varoufakis's critical definition of neoclassical economics, in which three axioms encapsulate the discipline: methodological equilibration, methodological individualism, and methodological instrumentalism.[15] This approach presupposes that market mechanisms coordinate all behavior, that individuals are the basic (and only) unit of analysis, and that individuals maximize their utility, or happiness, as they see fit. This conceptually slim edifice articulates any present outcome as the result of prior incentives and massages a complex reality into evidence for an efficient market process. Whether monetary or nonmonetary, inter- or intrapersonal, observable or unobservable, incentives discursively mediate vastly disparate orders of being into becoming fungible with one another and provide economic theory with a coherent rationale for all human behavior, which neatly lines up with neoclassical economic axioms of consumer behavior. The logic of the incentive, thanks in large part to influential economists, has spread into domains far beyond that of simple commodity relations.

The cultural metastasis of incentives does not mean that people are motivated by money more than ever but rather that all cultural practices are presumed to obey the tenets of economic theory. In their 2014 self-help book, *Think Like a Freak*, *Freakonomics* authors Levitt and Dubner follow Becker in that they both centralize incentives into an analysis of human behavior and metastasize it to incorporate virtually every motive imaginable: "If there is one mantra a Freak lives by, it is this: people respond to incentives . . . Different types of incentives—financial, social, moral, legal, and others—push people's buttons in different directions, in different magnitudes . . . But if you want to think like a Freak, you must learn to be a master of incentives—the good, the bad, and the ugly."[16] To speak of incentives is tricky because its prevalence stems in part from its conceptual promiscuity. The promiscuity of the concept stems from its status as a load-bearing term for the discipline of economics: if it is the proper object of study for economics and economics is, in the words of one of its theoreticians, "anything an economist studies," then "incentive" is nothing less than the description of quite literally any action in modern life. According to Benjamin Powell, a fellow of the Mercatus Center, a right-wing think tank associated with George Mason University, it is private property itself, combined with a price system, which provides incentives for individuals to both conserve and protect their resources as well as engage in productive economic activity.[17] In this sense, "incentive" functions synecdochically for the capitalist mode of production itself, human beings are at root incentive-driven animals, and capitalism is the best system for coordinating them.

To summarize, the incentive binds neoclassical economics' axioms of behavior, for it lurks below, and motivates, all action (whether it be choosing a brand of peas, a romantic partner, an optimal amount of environmental pollution, or whether to murder someone). Any articulation of reward or motive is redescribed as an economic input, so "personal habits and addictions, peer pressure, parental influences on the tastes of children, advertising, love and sympathy, and other neglected behavior" become material for analysis using a neoclassical economic approach.[18] Thus it is better to think of an incentive less as a "thing" on its own but a name with a twofold status: a signifier attached to economics' object of desire. It is not the commodity that one purchases, it is a measure of its desirability. It is not a monetary reward for one's hard work but rather the measure of one's desire to obtain the wage. Its peculiar status—as signifier, that which represents the subject for another signifier—and as an object of desire, is what makes incentive such a tricky, and useful vehicle for the discipline of economics and its spread into new arenas.

The Imperial Ambitions of Economics

The prevalence of economics, economists and economic theory in contemporary culture is unquestionable—in everything from popular entertainment, journalism, the nonprofit sector, and politics, economics functions as a governing metaphor for imagining the social bond, interpersonal relations, and even the underlying structure of the natural world.[19] Mainstream economics has formidable reach due in part to its imperial ambitions. Jack Hirshleifer, in an essay celebrating the American Economics Association's centenary, writes approvingly of economics' ambitions: "It is ultimately impossible to carve off a distinct territory for economics, bordering upon but separated from other social disciplines. Economics interpenetrates them all, and is reciprocally penetrated by them. *There is only one social science*."[20] Hirshleifer calls economics "the universal grammar of social science" and praises its "imperialist invasive power" because "our analytical categories—scarcity, cost, preferences, opportunities, etc.—are truly universal in applicability."[21] Economist Maurice Allais, in his 1990 Bank of Sweden prize lecture, stated: "I have been gradually led to a twofold conviction: human psychology remains fundamentally the same at all times and in all places; and the present is determined by the past according to invariant laws. It seems to me that, to a very large extent, the social sciences must, like the physical sciences, be based on the search for relationships and quantities *invariant in time and in space*."[22]

Economist Ernest Fehr argues against the insistence on attentiveness to context: "That view lacks any grounding. In this regard, I really like the strong theoretical emphasis of economics and our desire for unifying explanations. It distinguishes us from biologists and psychologists, and provides us with a normative anchor."[23] Imperialism is an apt metaphor for what economics does to other disciplines and to the lifeworld. Empires do not merely materially dominate their colonies, nor do they simply extract and make the people of their colonies poorer. They alter the conditions of production under a new law of value and irrevocably change the horizons of the colonized, while simultaneously incorporating new signs of value under their aegis, thus turning these signs into shibboleths.

Fine and Milonakis call the preeminence that economists are afforded in public policy discourse, and the seepage of economics into such fields, "economics imperialism," or the seepage of economic assumptions and methods into other disciplines.[24] Earle, Moran, and Ward-Perkins term our contemporary conjuncture an "Econocracy"—a government run by and for economists and economic approaches to solving problems.[25] Of all of the social sciences, only economics is associated with a "Nobel," although it is not a Nobel Prize in a strict sense but rather a prize handed out by the central bank of Sweden. Of all the social sciences, only economics has a White House advisory board. In the legal field, as of 2020, twenty-nine faculty members of the country's top-ranked law school, Yale University, have at least one degree in economics. The aforementioned Judge Posner—the single-most cited legal scholar nationwide—explicitly advocates the "law and economics" market-based approach to all matters, legal, moral and ethical. The application of a market framework onto the juridical subject, with an emphasis on protecting property rights and presuming selfish behavior by claimants has been extraordinarily successful, thanks to funding efforts by billionaire libertarian Charles Koch and the intellectual efforts of influential faculty in law schools nationwide. According to Nancy MacLean, "By 1990 . . . a stunning 40 percent of the U.S. federal judiciary had been treated to a Koch-backed curriculum."[26] The University of Chicago, whose economics department birthed the eponymous (and infamous) "Chicago School" of economics, is a leader in this subdiscipline: the law school endows several chairships in law and economics, and organizes a yearly institute on the topic.[27] A 2017 participant, Mateusz Grochowski, was quoted in the school's newsletter as saying the institute "was inspiring and incentivizing."[28]

Other fields, including political science, have witnessed economics enter through the front door. In 2020, at least twenty-nine members of

Harvard's Kennedy School of Government had a degree in the field, most of them graduate degrees. Within academic publishing, rational choice theory, or the adoption of economic tools for political science, has fairly recently arrived within the field as a way to interpret the behaviors of political actors (institutions, voters, politicians) as well as to entreat them to behave according to these economic precepts. To wit: the subject heading "rational choice theory" in the Political Science Complete database yields 550 results from 1965 to 2017; of this number, 455 have appeared since the year 1997, and 515 have appeared since 1987. In other words, 93 percent of all articles engaging with rational choice theory have been published in the last three decades. The tenets of rational choice in economics, law, and now politics have consequences for how public policy is shaped (and defended in court): The Obama administration's signature legislative achievement, the Affordable Care Act, mentions "incentives" 105 times in its text, referring to monetary payments for individual enrollees as well as for health providers that meet certain patient outcomes.[29]

But as Grossberg puts it, coding social activity as "economic" demands critical attention, particularly upon a discipline that has presided over some serious empirical shortcomings.[30] Infamously, following the 2008 financial crisis, Queen Elizabeth II of England asked a group of economists at the London School of Economics why they failed to see the crash coming. The bemused economists returned a three-page letter to Buckingham Palace, attributing the crisis to "a failure of the collective imagination of many bright people" and that the financial sector was "guilty of wishful thinking combined with hubris."[31] Grossberg writes,

> What other discipline claims the right to directly shape real policies, while building analytic tools that enable it to operate by abstracting models that are only weakly if at all connected to reality? What other discipline could claim to be the only true science in the human sciences, while still clinging to its founding texts . . . as if they were sacred? . . . What other discipline can claim to be authoritative, even a 'science,' and yet have such a bad record?[32]

The social power of economics and economists within the academy and within the think-tank, NGO, and political realms has much to do with its status as an affirmative science: economics (and economics alone) is capable of narrating a compelling, coherent, and uncomplicated story about the shape of the present. The very parsimony of economic analysis, whose roots stem back to Adam Smith, William Stanley Jevons, and Alfred Marshall, authorizes its spread across the social field, to solve purportedly "non-economic" problems through recourse to economic axioms. Its ingratiation with the powerful is no historical accident.[33]

Why Psychoanalysis?

It is precisely because incentives are not a natural component of human existence—incentives are frequently imposed upon individuals through forced choices—that they are part of a hegemonic struggle over what is "common sense." And because they are foundational to an "imperial" discipline, it matters less whether they provide an adequate representation of the world as a whole, what matters is that they are an operant, internally coherent signifying structure. The failed predictions, unrealistic assumptions, or moral ambiguities of mainstream economics are not its weaknesses but instead are evidence of economics' status as primarily a signifying system: a system of tropic connections and disconnections largely indifferent to "real-world" referents. As Jacques Lacan puts it in his "Presentation on Psychical Causality," "if a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so."[34] That is, the hyperboles, errors, and imperialistic claims have never prevented an "untrue" discourse to take root. Seen from this angle, Adam Kotsko's judgment of neoliberalism a "political theology," is apropos, for neoliberalism provides "an account of the sources of legitimacy for our social institutions and of the moral order of the world."[35] Theology similarly functions as a signifying system with no external verifiable referent, no "transcendental signifier" that grounds it, and yet discursively stitches up an unstable, chaotic world.[36] The psychoanalytic perspective requires seeing how speech is an instantiation—an insistence—on what is empirically not present. Speech fills in a causal gap precisely because of the lack of a "transcendental signifier" that provides the final word. Thus to demystify the discourse of incentives, and neoclassical economics more broadly, requires taking its signifying practices to the letter.

The language of economic inquiry, its aspirations as a universal social science, the very grammar of our interactional being, and its pretensions at quantifying nonempirical objects, demands a vocabulary capable of sizing it up—hence my introduction of psychoanalysis as an interpretive framework. Incentives function as indexes of desire, act synecdochically for the capitalist mode of production, and all the while, the justifications for their usage are laundered through the symbolic order. Psychoanalytic inquiry attends to these three aspects—it is a style of inquiry that foregrounds desire, its objects, and its intersections with speech. Hence an attention to the rhetorical life of the incentive, this peculiar object, will begin to help explain why economics is so uniquely powerful in everyday life. Following Deirdre McCloskey's (and others') inauguration of the "rhetoric of economics" field of inquiry, scholars have drawn attention to precisely how economic discourse exerts social effects via rhetorical mechanisms. Goodnight and Green retell the story of the dot-com bubble as a fundamentally mimetic process; Hanan, Ghosh, and Brooks deploy the memory studies term "mnesis" to explore how neoclassical economic theory's ontological rhetoric collapses different orders of time to theoretically justify economic equilibrium.[37] Colombini uses the kinesthetic metaphor of "walking away" from homes with underwater mortgages to explore potential resistant practices following the 2009 foreclosure crisis in America.[38] And Abbott traces the public circulation of "confidence" following the 2008 financial crisis, and sees it as the guiding metaphor of the Bush administration's strategic response thereto.[39]

Recent critical scholarship has recently taken up Lacanian psychoanalysis as a method for interpreting texts on a variety of publicly significant matters, and my adoption of Lacan's work follows his careful attention to an economy of tropes in public discourse. The privileged site for Lacan, a practitioner his entire professional life, was speech: "These patients speak to us in the same language as ourselves. Without this component, we would be in total ignorance. It's therefore the economy of discourse, the relationship between meaning and meaning, the relationship between their discourse and the common organization of discourse, that allows us to ascertain that a certain delusion is involved."[40] Lacan's rhetorical artifact is not the discrete utterance of an all-knowing subject, nor is it the epiphenomenal effect of a dominant ideology, but a practice that is mutually interpenetrated by each. Rickert writes: "If it is through signifiers that function not so much as *representations* of the world and people but as their *representatives*, then the relations between language and audience are mystified each time we isolate the two as separate entities."[41] In the absence of a symbolic guarantee, or "click" between signifier and signified, speech mediates this gap, or lack-in-being; it is both a technology of desire and of fulfillment. Speech renders an inconsistent world as "whole," but in so doing, its leakages, breakages, and especially repetitions testify to the presence of the unconscious.

The unconscious, Lacan reminds us, resides in speech, immanent to each utterance. Lacan's twin aphorisms, that the unconscious is structured like a language, and the unconscious is the discourse of the Other, stake out positions that allow psychoanalysis to interpret verbal ejaculations of public import. The irresolvable conflict between "structure" and "agency" is a false problem when supplemented with the unconscious: albeit not predictable from the outset or determined in advance, structure (language) interacts with agency (speech), and obeys certain formal and contextual rules. The grammar of the unconscious, Lacan writes in "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," relies upon the figures of metaphor and metonymy, or condensation and displacement.[42] Metaphor and metonymy, or condensation and displacement, are minimal formal principles of connection, circulation, and difference for any language to operate. And simultaneously, just as Marx argued that humankind can only solve the problems it can set out for itself, the unconscious is made up only of the social, cultural, and historical material that circulates around any speaking subject, the "raw material" (as in Freud's dream-work) of everyday life that constitutes it. A rhetorical unconscious helps explain why, in so many different arenas of life, "incentive" seems to spring to mind for speakers of all kinds. It is doubtlessly encouraged by the powerful (and much of this work attends to the speech of powerful political figures who advocate on its behalf), yet it also appears as a natural, neutral term that summarizes, better than any other, the conflagration of desire, reward, and effort.

A psychoanalytic contribution entails a careful parsing of the mechanisms by which rhetorical mechanisms activate, compel, habituate, and rationalize discursive practices. Much like the way analysands slip psychologically significant admissions into their sessions, the repetition of phrases by speakers in public signals a discursive investment; depending on the translation into English, Lacan refers to this process as the "agency" or the "insistence" of the letter. Lacanian authors have employed various technical terms to explain the engines of circulation, repetition, and purchase on subjects, such as the *objet a*, *jouissance* (enjoyment), the "fundamental fantasy" ($\$\lozenge a$), and *cathexis*.[43] *Objet a* is Lacan's term for the "object-cause" of desire, the quotient of desire that remains in the gap in speech, between the signifier and the signified, or colloquially, that which is "in you, but more than you." To attend to the *objet a* is to recognize that any desired object contains a surplus. Desire is not reducible to a job promotion, new item of clothing, or monetary reward; desire is that which lurks beneath each, an engine that spurs every subsequent desire. The same mechanism operates within speech. As Lacan reminds us, when one speaks, one either says too much or too little—the word is insufficient. At an unconscious level, the speaking subject is aware of two possibilities existing in tandem: both the inadequacy of the signifier to match the signified and an anxiety that the signified is not what one intended in the first place.

The *objet a* is a nonempirical object but one that exerts effects nonetheless and can be located in the disturbances it elicits in speech. Foregrounding the interaction between speech and *objet a* offers a methodological and analytical advantage: economists employ "incentive" as a nonempirical, measurable object that nevertheless exerts effects on subjects. "Incentive" joins together the enigmas of cause and effect and provides, through its habituated repetition, a stable, knowable, and rational world, in which all activity can be attributable to the ironclad laws of economics: prices, preferences, and utility. Thus, in the speech of economists, theorists, ideologists, cheerleaders, and policymakers, "incentive" functions as the *objet a* for the discipline itself, making a "whole" discourse where before there resided a hole of causality. By insisting on the attributive value of "incentive" rather than its causal value, one can identify how it is economics' own object of desire, the thing it seeks in every social interaction, to retroactively render any outcome as quintessentially economic. The supposed neutrality of the term, its function as a form rather than a content, masks its libidinal value for the discourse of economics, for it offers pretentions at causality and a way to retroactively assign casual power to narrow economic precepts.

Plan for the Work

Overall, this work aims to address the question, "Why are incentives everywhere now?" by accentuating the key words in the question: *incentives*, *everywhere*, and *now*. Chapter 1 introduces a set of terms from a politically engaged psychoanalysis, with particular attentiveness to the method's rhetorical dimensions. Psychoanalysis and the language of trope offer a materialist account of economics' contemporary pervasiveness and the symbolic dimensions of its power. An enormously consequential discourse, with pretentions to explain everything in modern life, demands a critical framework that can match its precision on the topic of desires and their objects. In this chapter, I explore the psychoanalytic concept of "retroactive causality" and the trope of "metastasis" to explain why incentives appear to be *everywhere*: incentive rhetoric stakes robust claims about causality, which accounts for how easily its explanatory matrix can spread into new and disparate sites. As described by Quintilian, Cicero, and others, the trope of metastasis designates a rhetorical shift from one cause to another: "Incentive" emblematizes the trope by shifting the cause of any action into that of "the economic." Retroactive causality takes this one step further and elucidates how the causal claims that economists advocate are merely a logical distillation that generates a stable economic cause for any outcome in the present, which renders any outcome (particularly any social inequality) justifiable.

Chapter 2 tells a story about the term "incentive," from its roots in antiquity to the twentieth century, which explains why *incentive*, instead of any other term, has such cultural preponderance. The term's contemporary slipperiness and promiscuity is built into its origins. "Incentive" arrives from the Latin *incentivum*, meaning "that which sets the tune" and in its earliest translations offers the sense of a "spell" or "charm" that allures its listeners. The connection between the magic of an incentive and the magical speech associated with classical rhetoric is clear: Marsyas, the satyr, skillfully played the "incentive pipe" to sway his listeners, the same way Socrates would beguile listeners in the *Symposium*. Here I foreground the Lacanian concept of the *objet a*, a nonempirical quantity that acts as the motivating force behind all economic action; the *objet a* is both internal and external (or "extimate") and becomes the proper object of the discipline of economics. Alfred Marshall and Paul Samuelson, two towering figures in neoclassical economic thought, both adopt the term to describe a signal to induce economically motivated action. The discipline of economics adopts "incentive" to incorporate all goal-directed behavior and then yokes this behavior to the pursuit of the money commodity. "Incentive" is externalized into an objective feature of the price system that generates automatic, economically rational responses. Much like how after Marsyas loses his life after challenging Apollo to a contest of musical skill and his trickling blood forms a river, incentives have trickled into everyday culture as a way to attribute cause to an inherently unstable world.

Chapter 3 marks a pivotal moment for the contemporary prevalence of incentives. One economist is largely responsible for the metastasis of incentives across all social fields: Gary Becker. This chapter gives the reason why incentives are everywhere *now*: Becker gained worldwide fame, and a Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences in 1992, for the theory of an "economic approach to human behavior," in which literally any action can be interpreted according to narrow economic axioms—without reference to context or history. This chapter lays out the rhetorical structure of the incentive that incorporates each of his components: stable preferences, price mechanisms, and utility maximization. Becker's metastatic "economic approach" produces a justification for virtually any inequality imaginable, through the retroactive detection of an incentive: Becker's opposition to environmental laws, public schooling, unions, antidiscrimination laws, and so on, is the result of a methodological deduction from this incentive-based approach. Becker's approach allows for the detection of an economy of enjoyment that underwrites, and operates beneath, commodity-based interactions, such that the rationality of the market is continuously affirmed, and no inequality can ever be deemed unjust. I conclude the chapter by exploring how Becker's unflinching approach is, in some ways, a challenge to the fields of economics and rhetoric.

Chapter 4 takes up debates over equal pay legislation in Congress as emblematic of the Lacanian concept of the "Real": opponents of equal pay simultaneously contend that while the gender pay gap does not exist, if it did, there would be perfectly good reasons for it. The pay gap presents no "neutral ground" upon which to view it and acts as a stain or hitch that blocks the presentation of an "objective" reality. I examine the legislative fates of two bills here: the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act, and the Paycheck Fairness Act, and how incentive rhetoric was deployed in order to sink the latter. Whereas the Lilly Ledbetter Act was named for a woman, it was desexed, and made applicable to the liberal juridical subject writ large. By contrast, the fairly minor labor market reforms promised by the Paycheck Fairness Act were characterized as jeopardizing the free market system entirely. Central to opposition was the invocation of "women's incentives," or the natural desires that women have to care for children and the elderly, that would be either unfairly rewarded or threatened were this bill to pass. Simply put, the "non-monetary incentives" that result from the nature of gendered social reproduction are retroactively laundered into justifications for the continued underpayment and mistreatment of women. Lacan's concepts of "masculine" and "feminine" *jouissance* explain how these justifications functioned rhetorically, with commentators, members of Congress, and testifiers against the bill attempted to answer the question, "What does Woman want?"

Chapters 5 and 6 evaluate the global phenomenon of "nudges" as the political culmination of the logic of the incentive. Behavioral "nudges" emerge from the idea that people occasionally make poor choices, not just for themselves, but for society as a whole; state actors are then authorized to step in and correct these mistakes with a "nudge" in the proper direction. Nudges have been deployed on issues ranging from environmental regulation to healthy eating, education, organ donations, and healthcare, in which "choice architects" nudge individuals into generating economically rational outcomes. This also entails "incentivizing" socially beneficial behaviors, or inducing ethical or responsible behavior by corporations, institutions, and so on. Nudges function as the sublimation of the "economic approach to human behavior": rather than rejecting outright the idea that all human beings behave economically rationally, nudges instead presume that the economic approach on the whole is valid, but that policymakers can systematically adjust the behaviors of individuals by altering the "prices" of their actions. Despite the fact that they tend to promote social and ethical goals, nudges fully embody the tenets of neoclassical economics.

Chapter 5 characterizes nudges as that which instantiates "political neurosis." Nudges force individuals to make choices within marketlike spaces designed to reveal their true incentive but at the cost of denying collectivities universal public goods. Neurosis, understood by Lacan as organized around a repression that guards against an excess of enjoyment, characterize the subjective disposition of a nudge. When offered the appearance of a choice, one is not offered certainty but a question about the Other's desire, phrased as "What does the Other want of me?" Nudges are figures, not only of symbolic exhaustion but also of symbolic impotence: states cannot even appear to offer universal political goods; they can only incentivize individuals to make "good choices" to pursue them. Chapter 6 presents the consequences and limits of the widespread use of nudges in statecraft. Here, I examine two cases wherein nudges and incentives failed to cope with the social crises surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. With reference to Lacan's distinction between the "aim" and "goal" of a subject, as well as the "decline of symbolic efficiency" hypothesis, I evaluate how political figures argued that supplemental unemployment benefits provided "disincentives to work" and that labor must be disciplined through privation. Despite the pretenses of incentives as suasive devices, I expose the coercion upon which incentives rest. Next, I examine the efficacy of vaccination incentives offered by states and cities and why they failed to have an effect on the unvaccinated population. The inefficacious vaccination incentives were victims of the success of incentives writ large, which privileges individual decision-making and weighing of costs and benefits; by addressing people exclusively as individual rational choosers, and not members of communities, incentives failed to hit their mark. The expansion of the logic of private property to not only one's own possessions, but the signifiers that emanate from these possessions, entails that the economic way of looking at behavior is insulated against any attempt to nudge people in a socially beneficial manner through market mechanisms.

The concluding chapter takes up the massive challenge that economics as a discipline continues to pose, not simply to our concepts of representation but also to the social bond as a whole. The rhetoric of incentives provides a coherent rationale for all human activity as caused by an unseen but measurable market force; its public justifications retroactively account for virtually every inequality. Just as nudges do, incentives demonstrate a critique of political representation (in the colloquial sense) and at a conceptual level—only market mechanisms could ever hope to properly represent the desires of individuals. In this chapter, I advance five dialectical postulates of incentives that summarize their commitments and provide actionable rejoinders to each, involving both "mass politics" colloquially understood, and a politically engaged psychoanalytic reading practice. The "hidden forces" of desire that a study of incentives unearths these desires, so only economists are capable of correctly interpreting social reality. The imperialistic discipline of economics succeeds by representing the cause of any behavior as fundamentally economic. In its stead, Lacan's concepts of desire and of the signifier (and the complex interrelation of the two) demonstrate two things: First, all desire is structurally metonymic. This may appear to be a concession to mainstream economics: that any attempt to "guarantee" an outcome ultimately ends up in its diversion. Second, despite this, mediation matters. That is, as mentioned, incentivization does not solve but only displaces the problem of social reality onto that of the economic. Incentives are a framework that rhetorically justifies the commodification of social reality, and are thus an index of the social power of commodity relations.

Contra its depiction by a deconstructive framework, a signifier in the Lacanian sense is fundamentally one of nonidentity—no signifier is adequate to itself (or self-identical), and no signifier equates to the thing it purports to represent. To rephrase Lacan's definition of the signifier, incentives represent a cause for another signifier. If incentive rhetoric names a gap and offers a fixity in the guise of a form, the psychoanalytic task is to resist that fixity, unbind its artifice, and hold the gap open for new ways of being apart from market forces. As Fredric Jameson develops the idea in "An American Utopia," psychoanalysis' base unit of interpretation is never the individual but rather the social existence of an individual in a network of signifiers.[44] The kinds of psychological maladies Freud identified in his milieu—perversion, neurosis, psychosis—are not simply the patient's own but symptomatic of an ill society. Incentive rhetoric arises as the answer to a set of serious social questions; it should be no surprise that extreme income inequality, fiscal austerity, and the retreat of the welfare state, particularly in the United States, are concomitant with the foregrounding of orthodox economic principles that claim human nature is quintessentially economic. The only way out of the logic of the incentive, and of the economization of everyday life, is to refuse methodological individualism and embrace social relations beyond that of the limiting form of the commodity.