Economics is not essentially an experimental science. Essentially – as we can’t put people with their economic problems in a test tube and carry out an experiment to see what will come out and then engage in theoretical deliberations on the subject. This is at least the case regarding a greater part of phenomena and processes which are the subject of economic studies. There are, however, limited possibilities to test some models before they are either implemented in practice or rejected. This is true mostly for microeconomics, especially for management as the consequences of any potential failures in that field are decidedly less severe than for experiments undertaken on a macroeconomic scale.

One more trend is developing on the borderline between management sciences. Behavioral economics – a discipline that derives from economics and psychology. It focuses mostly on factors underlying consumer and investor decisions, which always have a specific psychological background. While psychology focuses more on the mental aspects of decision-making processes, behavioral economics strives to understand the mechanisms of reaching decisions which have economic background and consequences. In many cases, not to say all too often, the decisions taken are far from cool, absolute rationality and instead are provoked by emotions, a passing fascination or a delusion. In such situations, the answer to the question “Why this way rather than another?” should be sought in the sphere of the human psyche, although behavioral economics also tries to establish mathematical models. Its major contribution to dominant mainstream economics lies in drawing attention to the fact that a lot of decisions by buyers and sellers, those saving and borrowing, those accumulating and investing, are taken on the borderline between rationality and irrationality. At this point, economics ceases to deal with just rational economic activity and
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becomes a science with a penchant for the interdisciplinary, which also studies irrational behaviors.

In the light of the above, a comment by the Nobel Prize-winning Daniel Kahneman, an eminent psychologist and also a behavioral economist for some time now, is especially interesting. As he expresses himself, he was startled when he once read the opinion of a classical economist, actually quite a common one among followers of mainstream economics, that “the agent of economic theory is rational and selfish and that his tastes do not change”. For a psychologist, it is a truism that “people are neither fully rational nor completely selfish and that their tastes are anything but stable”.2 In that context, following in other authors’ footsteps, Kahneman refers to the division into “Humans” and “Econs”,3 emphasizing that the traditional economics studies subjects that don’t really exist, who are supposed to be absolutely rational in all aspects of their behaviors. Meanwhile, real humans who always function in specific conditions of informational limitations cannot be continuously either as logical or as constant in their tastes as is assumed in the fully rational Econ model. It appears, therefore, that the classical economics, which bases its deliberations on oversimplified models and adopts overly far-fetched assumptions, and behavioral economics, which relies more on realities, as is rightly claimed by its followers, have gone their separate ways. The essence of an experiment is to adopt specific model assumptions (meaning that it should be backed by a theoretical hypothesis) and to test the phenomenon or process in practice. Except in social sciences and some specific fields of other research, this is carried out in laboratories and testing grounds ranging from a test tube to a home garden, to a superaccelerator, to outer space. Therefore, we distinguish between laboratory and field experiments. It’s a similar situation in economics: the former test assumptions regarding behaviors of a properly selected representative group (the “guinea pigs”) and the latter, research in a social “field”, test a specific hypothesis on people who are not even aware they are taking part in an experiment.

One example of the laboratory type is an experimental verification of a theoretical hypothesis, with some practical implications for production or distribution, that if a hundred students are given $20 each, the majority will buy an interesting book on economics that has been recommended by their professor. We also assume that the professor will not quiz them on what they’ve learnt from it and nobody will make them in any way accountable for their actual behavior. Yet it emerges that 50 percent of the sample population went out for a beer, 40 percent to the movies, and only one in ten students bought the book. Something like