

Ethics and The Environment

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Abstract- Contemplation of the world's disappearing supplies of minerals, forests, and other exhaustible assets has led to demands for regulation of their exploitation. The feeling that these products are now too cheap for the good of future generations, that they are being selfishly exploited at too rapid a rate, and that in consequence of their excessive cheapness they are being produced and consumed wastefully has given rise to the conservation movement.

Indexed Terms- Conservation, Minerals, Forests, Future Generations

I. INTRODUCTION

Environment and development are not separate challenges: they are inexorably linked. Development cannot subsist on a deteriorating environmental base; the environment cannot be protected when growth leaves out of account the costs of environmental protection. Ecological economics is a relatively new, interdisciplinary, field. In the 1980s a number of economists and natural scientists came to the conclusion that if progress was to be made in understanding and addressing environmental problems it was necessary to study them in an interdisciplinary way.

The International Society for Ecological Economics was set up in 1989. The precise choice of name for this society may have been influenced by the fact that a majority of the natural scientists involved were ecologists, but more important was the fact that economics and ecology were seen as the two disciplines most directly concerned with what was seen as the central problem – sustainability.

Ecology is the study of the distribution and abundance of animals and plants. A central focus is an ecosystem, which is an interacting set of plant and animal populations and their abiotic, non-living, environment. The Greek word 'oikos' is the common root for the 'eco' in both economics and ecology. Oikos means

'household', and it could be said that ecology is the study of nature's housekeeping, while economics is the study of human housekeeping. Ecological economics could then be said to be the study of how these two sets of housekeeping are related to one another.

Sustainability involves taking care of posterity. Most of those who would wish to be known as ecological economists are concerned that the scale of human housekeeping is now such that it threatens the viability of nature's housekeeping in ways which will adversely affect future generations of humans. The distinguishing characteristic of ecological economics is that it takes as its starting point and its central organising principle the fact that the economic system is part of the larger system that is planet earth. It starts from the recognition that the economic and environmental systems are interdependent, and studies the joint economy–environment system in the light of principles from the natural sciences, particularly thermodynamics and ecology.

Environmental and resource economics is concerned with the allocation, distribution and use of environmental resources. To some extent, these matters can be analysed in a framework that does not require the adoption of any particular ethical viewpoint. We can focus our attention on answering questions of the form 'If X happens in a particular set of circumstances, what are the implications for Y?' Analyses of this form constitute what is sometimes described as 'positive' economics. However, limiting our scope to answering questions of this form is restrictive. Many economists wish also to do 'normative' economics, to address questions about what should be done in a particular set of circumstances.

To do this it is necessary to use ethical criteria derived from theories about how persons ought to behave. In doing normative economics, generally referred to as 'welfare economics', economists usually employ

criteria derived from utilitarian ethical theory. Normative resource and environmental economics are predominantly founded in utilitarian ethics. The main purpose is to provide an introduction to and overview of the nature of the utilitarian approach to ethics, and to show how it informs normative economics. In the context of economic activity and the natural environment, the question of how we should behave with respect to future generations is important. Many, a concern that current economic activity is affecting the environment so as to entail damage to future generations. A fundamental distinction can be drawn between two broad families of ethical systems: humanist and naturalist moral philosophies. In humanist philosophies, rights and duties are accorded exclusively to human beings, either as individuals or as communities – while humans may be willing to give them consideration, non-human things have no rights or responsibilities in themselves.

A naturalist ethic denies this primacy or exclusivity to human beings. In this ethical framework, values do not derive exclusively from human beings. Rather, rights can be defined only with respect to some natural system. Peter Singer (1993) describes this position as a ‘deep ecology’ ethic. When a development is proposed, a deep ecologist might argue that the project would not be right if significant disturbances to ecosystems are likely to occur. Given that a large part of human behaviour does have significant ecological implications, strict adherence to a naturalist philosophy would prohibit much current and future human activity. The implications of a thoroughgoing adherence to such a moral philosophy seem to be quite profound, although much depends upon what constitutes a significant impact.

Ecological economists have argued the need to work towards a more holistic discipline that would integrate natural-scientific and economic paradigms. Some ecological economists argue further that the sustainability problem requires nothing less than a fundamental change in social values, as well as a scientific reorientation. While some movement has been made in the direction of interdisciplinary cooperation, most analysis is still some way from having achieved integration. At the other end of a spectrum of methodologies are economists who see no need to go beyond the application of neoclassical

techniques to environmental problems, and stress the importance of constructing a more complete set of quasi-market incentives to induce efficient behaviour. Such economists would reject the idea that existing social values need to be questioned, and many have great faith in the ability of continuing technical progress to ameliorate problems of resource scarcity and promote sustainability.

A weak form of naturalist ethic – roughly speaking, the notion that behaviour which has potentially large impacts on those parts of the biosphere that are deserving of safeguard, because of their unusualness or scarcity, should be prohibited – has had some impact on public policy in many countries. Examples include the designation of Sites of Special Scientific Interest and the consequent special provisions for management of these sites in the United Kingdom, the system of National Parks in the USA, and the designation of Internationally Important Sites by the Worldwide Fund for Nature. Libertarianism is a humanist moral philosophy. It takes as its central axiom the fundamental inviolability of individual human rights. There are no rights other than the rights of human individuals, and economic and social behaviour is assessed in terms of whether or not it respects those rights. Actions that infringe individual rights cannot be justified by appealing to some supposed improvement in the level of social well-being.

Libertarianism asserts the primacy of processes, procedures and mechanisms for ensuring that fundamental liberties and rights of individual human beings are respected and sustained. Rights are inherent in persons as individuals, and concepts such as community or social rights are not meaningful. Libertarians are entirely opposed to concepts of justice based on the consequences or outcomes. An outcome cannot in itself be morally good or bad.

Libertarian moral philosophy is likely to drastically limit the scope of what government may legitimately do. For example, policy to redistribute income and wealth (between people, between countries or between generations) in favour of the poor at the expense of the rich requires taxation that is coercive, and so unjust unless every affected person consents to it. Government action would be limited to maintaining

the institutions required to support free contract and exchange. Those who believe in a limited role for government have adopted libertarianism enthusiastically.

Utilitarianism originated in the writings of David Hume (1711–1776) and Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), and found its most complete expression in the work of John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), particularly in his *Utilitarianism* (1863). The ethical basis for modern normative economics is a particular variety of utilitarianism, as we shall explain. ‘Utility’ is the term introduced by early utilitarian writers for the individual’s pleasure or happiness. Modern economics still uses this term in that way. The term ‘welfare’ is used to refer to the social good, which in utilitarianism, and hence welfare economics, is some aggregation of individual utilities.

For utilitarian actions which increase welfare are right and actions that decrease it are wrong. Economists make recommendations concerning environmental policy objectives, such as, for example, the level of pollution to be allowed. Such recommendations are derived from welfare economics, the ethical basis for which is a form of utilitarianism where the criterion of what is good for a human individual is that individual’s own tastes. Many of those who are concerned about the natural environment have different ethical positions. Some want, for example, to confer moral standing on non-human individuals. In the preference-based utilitarianism that underpins welfare economics, the interests of non-humans get taken into account only in so far as some humans care about those interests. Many of the decisions that have to be taken regarding the use of the services that the natural environment provides have implications for human interests that stretch out over time. The question that then arises is whether future effects should be given the same weight as current effects in current decision making. This is the question of discounting. In thinking about this question, it is important to keep clear the distinction between discounting future utility and discounting future consumption.

CONCLUSION

It is also important to be clear that the implications of discounting vary with the terms on which consumption and utility can be shifted over time. But we can be fairly certain that no new technology will abolish absolute scarcity because the laws of thermodynamics apply to all possible technologies. No one can be absolutely certain that we will not someday discover perpetual motion and how to create and destroy matter and energy. But the reasonable assumption for economists is that this is an unlikely prospect and that while technology will continue to pull rabbits out of hats, it will not pull an elephant out of a hat – much less an infinite series of ever-larger elephants! Economists typically conceptualise sustainability as constant, or non-declining, consumption (or utility). Given the use of a model where there is a single commodity, this is equivalent to sustainability as maintaining productive potential through time. Ecologists are more inclined to focus explicitly on the properties of the biosphere, such as resilience, than on human welfare. However, in effect, their approach is also anthropocentric and at the level of general objectives the approaches should be seen as complementary rather than competitive. Ecologists tend to be less optimistic than economists about the possibilities of substituting human-made for natural capital, so that at the level of particular objectives they tend to favour some variant of ‘keep natural capital intact’ whereas economists tend to favour ‘keep total capital intact’. Ecologists tend, that is, to be ‘strong sustainability’ whereas economists tend to be ‘weak sustainability’. Ecologists are more inclined to urge a cautious approach to policy objectives, and less inclined to rely on price incentives as policy instruments.

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