

Values and Ethics in an Alternative Degrowth Society

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This paper is part of the special session called: “Exploring Transformation to a Radical Alternative Gesellschaft: Economy, Ethics, Ecology” (RAGE). All papers in this session will be 10 minutes and presented in the first hour of the session. They are split between introductory and topic based presentations. Presentations are meant to guide the discussion of the following five questions in breakout groups that will take place in the second hour of the special session.

1. Drivers: What is driving the current system?
2. Objectives: What needs to change?
3. Barriers: What are the barriers to transforming the current system to a more social ecological economy?
4. Means: How can change be achieved?
5. Actors Role: Who needs to take action and what action should they take?

The overall aim is to explore whether the degrowth community can form a synthesis for a radical alternative world view and how to achieve this.

Abstract

The values of modern industrial growth society are instrumental, anthropocentric and hedonistic. These contrast with the values of many others in society and their desires for a better world. For example, the environmental movement promotes non-humans, feminists call for a caring and inclusive economy and Marxists point to the social and community values of a less oppressive world. What are the values that would make for a better world and how can they be sustained?

This paper gives a brief overview of some key aspects of the major value systems prevalent in Western societies. The three main meta-ethical systems are utilitarianism, rights (deontology), and virtue ethics. While this classification is Western in origin the systems they describe can be seen as operative in many countries and all major industrialising economies tend towards a utilitarian mode of ethical conduct.

A central controversial question has been how environmental change and entities should be valued. In accord with the pragmatic drive high profile attempts have been made to produce single monetary numbers meant to represent the value of the world's ecosystems and all remaining wild nature. More generally there has been a thrust of work in the direction of commodification of nature into goods and services. This monetisation work goes against the existence of value and ethical pluralism. Indeed the basic value theory behind such work is either totally absent or identical to that from orthodox environmental economics with its foundation in microeconomic welfare theory.

In social ecological economics there has been a long standing awareness of the problems embedded in both welfare economics and environmental economics. The problems inherent in the commodification of Nature have been explored and explained (O'Neill 1993; Vatn 2000). There has been open criticism of the inadequacies with the benefit and value transfer work behind the ecosystems valuation work, and indication of better alternatives. The use of preferences as the basis for valuation has been shown to be highly problematic (Spash 2008a).

In addition, there has been a range of work pointing out the failures of the economic approach to the behaviour and psychology of the individual including the assumptions encapsulated on the economic definition of rationality (Vatn 2004). Interdisciplinary work on economics and social psychology has expanded the limited mainstream economic model to include attitudes and norms, and further beyond this ethics (Spash 1997). In so doing research has revealed the inadequacies of the economic concept of value for interpreting public responses to environmental change such as biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation (Spash 2006; Spash et al. 2009).

A related issue is the meaning and relevance of refusals to trade. Individuals may refuse to trade or be compensated for the loss of environmental attributes or entities. This may be seen as maintaining principles such as protecting rights for animals. For example, defending whales at the risk of loss of life by the person involved as found in environmental activist organisations such as Sea Shepherd. This literature covers the intrinsic value of nature (O'Neill 1992), the incommensurability of values (Aldred 2006), the weak comparability of values (Martinez-Alier et al. 1998; O'Neill 1993) and the presence of lexicographic preferences and rights based thinking (Spash 2000). This shows the widespread basis for defence of Nature on grounds which do not fall within the economic preference utilitarian calculus.

A result of recognising the impossibility of reducing environmental values to a single metric is to open up the question as to how incommensurable values can be taken into account. The critical institutionalist and ecological economist, Arild Vatn has pointed towards the need for developing 'value articulating institutions' (Vatn 2005). This links to calls for approaches that allow public participation (Kallis et al. 2006), representation (O'Neill 2001) and deliberation (Spash 2008b) rather than the expert led cost-benefit analysis and ecosystem services valuation approach.

A related concern is how to represent different values and interests. There is a particular problem in the environmental area with the inclusion of silent voices. That is how voice can be given to those who are silent or not present such as non-human animals and future generations? Similarly, how can the poor can be given representation as opposed to being excluded by an approach oriented towards an ability to pay.

As part of the RAGE special session this talk will briefly outline key aspects of these debates on values and ethics.

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