

Social Ecological Economies and Nature Based Values

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Abstract

Modern market economies are fundamentally unsustainable for a complex of reasons that include reliance on institutions promoting hedonistic individualism and the exploitation of others: both human and non-human. While environmental concerns, or at least climate change, have now become more common topics in economic debates, the mainstream reliance on consequentialism, and specifically preference utilitarianism, proves highly limiting and exclusionary of plural values. The approach excludes incommensurable values, denies irreconcilable value conflicts and limits the moral considerability of non-humans to human interests. Mainstream economics reduces values and choice to a matter of preference as if buying commodities in a market place. Social ecological economics identifies and emphasise social relations distinct from market institutions, including: female labour power, non-humans and natural systems. We contrast the mainstream approach with the two other major ethical systems in Western philosophy: deontology or rights based ethics and neo-Aristotelian approaches as in virtue ethics. We argue that Nature based values entail an environmental ethics that recognises the ability of non-humans to flourish autonomously and that caring for others is a constitutive of human wellbeing. We concluded that maintaining and reproducing economies as social-ecological provisioning systems requires developing institutions and social arrangements that acknowledge the ethical context of choice. In turn this means rethinking Nature based values to avoid the failings of current economies and mainstream economics.

Keywords: Social Ecological Economics, Environmental Ethics, Value Pluralism, Nature Based Values

JEL: B55, P10, P18, Q51, Q56, Q57

INTRODUCTION

Economics tends to discuss ‘the economy’ as a singular entity, as if there were only one potential form. This is taken to be the currently dominant capital accumulating, and consumer oriented, system ostensibly focussed on maximising human welfare/utility/happiness within a nation state. Whether centrally planned, market based or corporate capitalist, ‘the economy’ is meant to grow, as typically measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The utopian vision is of a never ending expansion of monetary wealth, which is made possible because ‘the economy’ is treated as an isolated system, where goods, services and money flow in a perpetual circle between workers/consumers and businesses/producers, with no connection at all to the environment, non-human animals or Nature in general.

In contrast, social ecological economics concerns the study of social provisioning to meet human needs within an ethical framework of care and justice for others, both human and non-human. Economies can take many forms and are realistically described as open systems embedded within a web of social relations and dependent upon biophysical structures, such as ecosystems and their functions (Spash and Smith 2019). Economic processes are recognised to depend upon inputs of concentrated materials and useful energy (low entropy resources).

Economic activity transforms resources, resulting in their dissipation and qualitative change to useless forms (i.e., low entropy resources become high entropy waste Georgescu-Roegen 1971). The concept of a social metabolism is used in ecological economics and industrial ecology to capture this process. That is, any human society requires materials, energy and the removal of waste products in the same way that a living organism requires the same and has a biological metabolism (Krausmann 2017). Humans neither create nor destroy matter and energy, which means all human activity appropriates materials and energy and returns them to

the environment resulting in impacts. The qualities, scale and distribution of the ecological consequences depend upon human social practices and economic structure.

Modern growth economies, based on fossil fuels, have proven particularly devastating both due to the scale of activity and the unnatural qualities of its waste products. Socially emphasis in modernity has increasingly been placed upon hedonistic anthropocentric values in societies that are basically patriarchal. Promotion of individualism reinforces selfishness and erodes the importance of social institutions promoting sharing, caring, community and cooperation. The result is widespread discrimination against and fear of the 'other' (e.g. female, non-human), including those at a distance in time, space and socially (future generations, foreigners, indigenous peoples, peasants). The rise of capitalism entailed the deliberate eradication of common use rights and traditional management of common-pool resources. In the drive to create a commodified world of exchange values private property rights were enforced and customs held in common were eroded, removed and legislated against (Meiksins Wood 2003; Thompson 1993). Social ecological transformation means imagining and realising different economic structures that learn from and go beyond these mistakes.

All economies are embedded within social institutions (conventions, norms, formally sanctioned rules and regulations) that involve value orientation for its members, affecting how they behave and interact with others, both human and non-human. This chapter will outline the value orientation of the currently hegemonic system and its theoretical description in economics based on preference utilitarianism. In contrast, taking others into consideration in their own right challenges how human society is currently structured and connects moral concern for and considerability of other humans with non-humans. The challenge of reformulating modern social provisioning systems to avoid social, ecological and economic crises is argued to involve

re-evaluating human-Nature relations, and embedding economies within institutions that recognise and respect the values of non-human life and being.

MAINSTREAM ECONOMIC THEORY AND THE VALUE OF NATURE

Economic activity is commonly explained in standard textbook approaches as the production of commodities, or goods and services, to satisfy consumer desires or wants. Nature appears as an input to production in the form of 'land', which combines with labour and capital to produce outputs for sale in the market place. Land is then typically ignored as a fixed factor. Specialists in agricultural, forestry, fisheries and non-renewable resource economics add their own perspectives and concerns, but remain a marginalised minority group in the profession (Spash 1999). Until the rise of ecological crises, and especially climate change and biodiversity loss, on the international political agenda, most economists paid absolutely no attention to the role of natural systems in economic processes, let alone concern for non-humans.

In more recent decades, arguments have been put forward that the concept of capital should be extended to include Nature under the term natural capital (Spash and Clayton 1997). Natural capital is an anthropocentric and utilitarian view of Nature, where Nature is reframed as contributing goods and services solely for human well-being (Hache 2019). Environmental goods and services as well as damages that lack a price in actual markets must be given a monetary value for inclusion in the overall assessment of what contributes to the social well-being of humans.

Most recently, this logic has been strongly advocated in the context of biodiversity by *The Dasgupta Review*, which recommends converting everything, both human and non-human, into forms of financial capital (Dasgupta 2021). Only that which contributes to human well-being measured in monetary terms is included. This places monetary valuation at the centre and,

specifically, the claimed ability to assess social costs in order to know which investment projects are socially desirable. Such social costs are also referred to as shadow prices (Dasgupta calls them accounting prices) because actual market prices fail to take account of environmental contributions and harms and, therefore, need to be adjusted.

The production, or supply-side, of an economy is complemented by consumption, or demand-side, which involves an explanation of value as subjectively attributed by individuals based on their preferences. From this perspective, 'the environment' is treated as a commodity that can be supplied like any other (Vatn 2000). Thus, species loss, for example, is simply a failure of people to pay enough to create their supply. Excessive pollution is the result of not paying for resource use, leading to environmental damages that are not reflected in prices. That markets may be missing, or prices fail to reflect environmental damages, is regarded as correctible by pricing the environment to make consumers and producers pay as for any market good or service. Government intervention is necessary to establish markets with the 'correct' prices. So, once again, the tools of social cost-benefit analysis (CBA) are called upon to calculate the value of everything in monetary terms. The government may also be called upon to extend private property rights to enable market trading (e.g. carbon emissions) and so establish prices on the same logic that markets will then allocate resources efficiently. Although, the claim of social efficiency requires that the prices be 'correct' which would necessitate knowing the 'true' social costs and benefits, where truth remains abstract and undefined.

The approach assumes some social evaluation process will take care of finding the 'true price' by valuing everything as a money metric. Social CBA is to be conducted by expert economists. Decades ago environmental CBA developed a range of methods for imputing monetary values, but with limited applicability and only operating under specific restrictive conditions (Hanley and Spash 1993; Spash 2005). For example, these methods only apply to marginal changes in

environmental goods or services, not least because the value of money itself (its marginal utility) alters when there are large changes affecting income; also, economic welfare measures assume other things (e.g. all other prices) remain the same which is violated by large changes. Clearly, things like mass extinction of species and human induced climate change are not small, marginal, changes. There are numerous problems with social CBA and the ability of economists to assess people's willingness-to-pay for environmental improvement and willingness-to-accept compensation for environmental harms (e.g. see Spash 2008a; 2008b; Spash and Hache 2022).

The whole approach is based upon a very specific set of ethical assumptions. The view that rational environmental decisions require a single measure of value to assess alternative options is derived from the utilitarian roots of welfare economics and a theory of choice as individual preferences. As an anthropocentric consequentialist philosophy it makes the claims that only human welfare is intrinsically valuable (i.e. not a means to something else), only the consequences of an action determine whether it is right or wrong, and the best outcome is that with the greatest net value in terms of preference satisfaction (O'Neill 2017). Preference utilitarianism is combined with framing environmental issues as a commodity choice so that clear, discrete, and definable trade-offs are assumed to be possible. Making preferences king in such a context also assumes preferences are both well-formed and well-informed.

A basic problem, with appealing to human preferences, occurs when people lack understanding of complex environmental issues, or terminology (e.g. biodiversity), or have never encountered a species or know nothing of the object of value (e.g. genes, microbes or distant ecosystems). The problems with respect to biodiversity have long been recognised (Spash and Hanley 1995). However, many economists, including Dasgupta (2021), naïvely refer to establishing 'true values' as if people had, stored away in their brains, values to every entity on the planet in every

quantity and quality in which it might appear in an economic equation to be traded-off against something else, and that they can immediately produce such values on demand when asked their maximum WTP (for or against an environmental change). Rather than empirically revealing respondents values economists can form their 'preferences' and monetary value responses (Spash 2002). Ecological concerns over nutrient cycles and soil microbe biodiversity have little cognitive relevance for the general public and, therefore, appeals to their preferences also seem to have little relevance. Preference driven conservation effectively favours selective extinction of 'unattractive' species (Maresová and Frynta 2008). Price-making market institutions are the wrong structures to address the values of Nature and fail as means to address the importance of social relationships.

SOCIAL RELATIONS OF PROVISIONING AND ECONOMIES AS INSTITUTED PROCESSES

The complexity of the system of resource use is misleadingly simplified by reduction down to production by firms and consumption by households. Actual economies involve the government at multiple levels, the military, corporations and various organised social groups and social complexity. The orthodox economic approach suffers a lack of understanding concerning social relationships because economists generally assume society is just a collection of individuals who are assumed to be totally autonomous units. A Weberian ideal type is advanced that characterises humans as individuals only concerned with their own self-interest achieved by undertaking utility maximising calculations to determine their actions. This *homo oeconomicus* is the archetypal uncaring and isolated male ego reduced down to a calculating machine. Indeed, while choice in the market place is central to the current orthodox mainstream approach, in fact there is no ability to choose freely or do anything but maximise an objective function as if an automaton not a value conflicted, uncertain, emotional and social being.

In contrast, feminist economists have highlighted the interdependencies of humans on each other. In particular, they have raised the role of care ‘work’ and social reproduction within the household, largely undertaken by the application of female labour power, as necessary for the operation of the capitalist economy. This role of unpaid labour is effectively ignored both in mainstream economics and amongst heterodox schools (e.g. classic Marxism). Ecofeminists extend the argument to include the regenerative role of Nature (e.g. Salleh 2017). The value of what is produced by humans is interdependent with non-humans and ecological structure and function. The core of ecofeminism concerns the close proximity of women’s exploitation and domination to that of Nature’s and non-humans’ under the dominant male and capitalist political economies (Oksala 2020). Common elements across feminist and social ecological economic understandings are the systemic undervaluing, ignoring of values, reduction of plural values to monistic money values and attempts to convert everything into a commodity form.

That orthodox mainstream economics fails on these fronts and fails to account for social relations should be kept distinct from how actual economies operate, but the two have too often been confused. Distinguishing economics as a discipline from the actual economy is important exactly because what is termed economic by the mainstream has been reified as the actual economy in almost total disregard for reality. This problem was termed the ‘economistic fallacy’ by Polanyi (1977a). In part of his research, he explored economies throughout human history (Dalton 1971; Polanyi, et al. 1957). What his economistic fallacy showed was how not just economists but also anthropologists, historians and sociologists adopted a basically neoclassical economic price-making market theory and applied this to every human society that ever existed. Due to the rise of neoliberalism, the ‘economistic fallacy’ has become even more prevalent today. All human choices are deemed to be within the remit of economics because they are defined as individual cost-benefit decisions that can be made most efficiently by placing them within a price-making market (e.g., the work of Becker equating life and death

decision to buying a cup of coffee, as made most explicit in his suicide economics). Polanyi was concerned with exposing the erroneous imposition of a specific, price-making market and utility maximising logic on all social reality. However, he accepted that the new neoclassical economics of the late 1800s, the marginalist revolution, that became the modern mainstream orthodoxy was a valid and insightful analysis of actual capitalist economies, despite its failings (Spash 2019). Thus, Polanyi (1977b) also argued that the rise of capitalist market economies saw the actual disembedding of the economy from society, as opposed to simply economics failing to take the social aspect into account. The concern is not unfounded in that what is termed the formal economy takes over from previous social provisioning systems based on different conventions, social norms, customs and practices. Polanyi claims that during the 1800s the market economy took over control of human dependence on Nature and community for the means of survival. That is the substantive economy, which involves social provisioning via non price-making market institutions to meet needs, seems to be removed. This led to “an even more extreme development, namely a whole society embedded in the mechanism of its own economy—a *market society*. [...] For all practical purposes, the economy *did* now consist of markets, and the market *did* envelop society” (Polanyi 1977a: 9, italics original).

According to Polanyi (1977c), Menger is the key inspiration for his formal vs substantive definition of economic. Polanyi (1971: 18) references Menger as defining these “two basic directions of the human economy”. Polanyi (1977c: 23) quotes Menger as stating that in “the actual economy” these two directions occur as a rule together and indeed are almost never found separately. Indeed, it seems impossible because, while an economy without economising activity is possible, no economy, nor any human society, can exist without the physical requirements for sufficiency! This emphasises the universal importance of the material aspects of social provisioning and what Polanyi termed the substantive definition of economic. This is the dispute over meaning in Polanyi’s writing because of his contradictory claims that, on the

one hand, all economies are embedded in society, but, on the other, the market economy is disembedded and takes over society.

Polanyi followed a common 19th Century position that contrasted ancient with modern societies based on the former being built around status, instinct, feeling and custom, while the latter involved contract and rational decision-making. In particular, Polanyi's theory—the extension of price-making markets to new areas of social life—borrows heavily from Tönnies 1887 theory of historical evolution (Gemici 2008). Tönnies argued that human history had consisted of living in mostly natural relations of community (*Gemeinschaft*), but the rise of capitalism had led to, what he termed, a “great transformation” into an artificial society increasingly based on contract (*Gesellschaft*). Although he held that social entities contain elements of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* the change was the domination of the latter over the former (Gemici 2008: 23). Tönnies believed this transformation was irreversible and tragic, but that a new communal age might arise (Dale 2011: 310). As Gemici (2008: 23) notes, Polanyi develops Tönnies' theory into a general proposition about the changing place of economy in society, but in so doing adopts dichotomies that do not hold (e.g., contract vs. status, divorcing contract from its social and institutional elements).

The ecological and social emergence of economies is relevant to all economies, not just historical or traditional/indigenous ones. Institutions for coordination and social integration are part of that and are constituted of the conventions, norms and formally sanctioned rules of a society (Vatn 2015: 78). Institutions support certain values, and produce and protect specific interests, promote some and demote others (Spash 2017). The failings of existing institutions concerning the environment and the need for their reform are summarised by Vatn as follows:

“They create interests and motivations that are largely irresponsible and insensitive regarding environmental limits. The failure seems to demand a fundamental restructuring of the economy making it much less dependent on growth and the interests protected by growth. It demands policies and economic actors that are socially and ecologically responsible.” (Vatn 2017: 37)

Vatn argues that institutions do not determine action, but rather they create expectations and provide structures that require individuals to interpret and evaluate the institutional context (e.g. market, firm, family, community).

Typically, the focus when using the term ‘social relations’ is on humans. However, Benton argues that human social relations and practices inevitably include non-human animals: “as partners in human labour, as objects of labour, and of consumption, as well as competitors for habitats and common sources of food. [...] other animal populations are profoundly affected by ecological outcomes of our social practices in ways which clearly call for moral reflection” (Benton 1993: 18).

NATURE BASED VALUES AND MORAL CONSIDERABILITY

The ethical position of economics explained earlier is that humans are the only morally considerable entities and, as such, humans pursue their own good (variously referred to as utility, well-being, happiness or similar). All else, whether living or inanimate, has only instrumental value for human ends. Such a human based, anthropocentric, position contrasts with an ecocentric or Nature based orientation. The latter recognises that non-humans also have their own interests independent of humans, for example, in terms of surviving, reproducing and fulfilling their potential. That humans’ impact on non-human interests is blatantly obvious, but what humans should do about this, if anything, is highly contested.

In Western philosophy, there are three main ethical theories: utilitarianism, deontology (rights-based) and virtue ethics. Utilitarianism is a specific form of consequentialism originating from Jeremy Bentham's philosophy of judging what is best on the basis of achieving the greatest good for the greatest number of morally considerable individuals. As noted economists have used a preference utilitarian variation. Deontology is derived from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and regards an individual undertaking the right action as good in itself, so that conformity to principles of right action is intrinsically valuable. Virtue ethicists focus on being over doing, and what is of value is who you are, which character traits you express through your actions, where the right actions express virtuous character traits—a moral philosophy tracing back to Aristotle. A common concern across ethical theories is for the alleviation of suffering and the promotion of well-being (Pojman 1989). Arguments have then been made for the extension of these moral theories to include Nature and primarily, but not exclusively, non-human animals. Moral considerability under such extensions is generally dependent upon sharing some human attribute(s), such as sentience, level of communication or ability to show pain/pleasure.

Utilitarianism is egalitarian in that it considers equally the interests of all morally considerable beings affected by an action (e.g. the ability to suffer). As Bentham (1823 [1789]: 235-6 original emphasis) mentioned in a footnote: "The day *may* come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. ... the question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but Can they *suffer*?" However, Bentham did not pursue the matter. His own utilitarian approach aimed for the greatest good for the greatest number of humans, and so allowed the sacrifice of the individual (and their well-being) for the greater good. Peter Singer (1990 [1975]) is amongst the strongest modern advocates of extending a utilitarian ethic to all beings with the capacity to suffer. Animal welfare exemplifies a form of utilitarian argument for avoiding negatives. Utilitarianism claims to commensurate all values so that pain and suffering can be equated to

determine what is good, and this means human pleasure can outweigh non-human suffering as in justifications for, say, humans eating sentient beings that are given pleasurable existence and painless deaths. Of course, the problems of measurement and commensuration loom large in such claims.

The other major argument for the extension of moral theories has been animal rights. This is exemplified by the work of Tom Regan (1983). Determining the grounds for attributing rights poses similar problems as those faced by extending utilitarianism, i.e. on what grounds to do so. The extension approach requires claiming morally considerable animals are those that have human characteristics (e.g. dispositions, capacities, liabilities) and, therefore, must be given the same rights. The proximity of the Great Apes to humans is an example. Crucially, under deontology, rights-bearers possess equal standing, and rights apply equally. The classic problem is what to do where conflicts arise between rights.

The utilitarian and rights theories being promoted for extension are predominantly individualistic accounts of human moral standing. They look to human attributes for moral considerability. There is then a tension between the attribution of moral considerability on the basis of possessing human-like qualities and clearly being non-human.

An Aristotelian ethical approach is less common and takes a different line of reasoning. This involves recognising that non-humans have the potential to flourish and so have their own good. O'Neill (1992: 129) quotes Wright as follows: "The question 'What kinds or species of being have a good?' is therefore broadly identical with the question 'What kinds or species of being have a life' ." This argument focuses moral attention on what is constitutive of the flourishing of a living thing, without reference to humans, and so recognises the ability to develop natural characteristics as a member of a species. However, O'Neill notes that restriction to being alive

excludes the good of collectives (e.g. colonies, ecosystems), which may be regarded as not having their own lives while being able to naturally flourish and have an identifiable and objective own good.

Recognising what constitutes the good for non-human entities fails to entail that this good be realised, e.g. the flourishing of Covid-19. Indeed, much contestation in human society, and motivation for the environmental movement, is the extent to which non-human interests can justifiably be curtailed by human actions (e.g. insecticides, pesticides, land–use change) and subordinated to human ends. A moral agent may be indifferent to others' good or believe there is a moral duty to inhibit their flourishing, e.g. removing invasive species, eradicating a virus, overthrowing a dictator, or removing a fascist regime. So, there remains the need for establishing the grounds on which humans are morally required to act even once the existence of others' good is recognised. O'Neill (1992) believes an environmental ethic should be based upon promoting the flourishing of a large number of, although not all, individual living things and biological collectives as an end in itself. As an Aristotelian, he regards this as constitutive of humans leading good and meaningful lives (in Aristotle's terms being *eudaimon*).

There is in this the concern for understanding and connecting to the otherness in Nature (Hailwood 2000). Intervention on behalf of Nature and non-human's own interests is then an increasingly relevant topic, as evident in the debate around rewilding (Drenthen 2018). At the same time, human interventions into Nature have become more worrisome, such as the genetic engineering of crops and animals, along with the Promethean eco-modernist advocacy of the Anthropocene (Baskin 2015). This makes understanding what is meant by the value of Nature and naturalness more important than ever (Deckers 2021). Vetlesen (2015) has pointed out how the non-human is repeatedly reduced down to human relations, and so relations of the non-human to non-human are excluded and ignored. In O'Neill's terms, little moral consideration

is given to the autonomy of non-human life or biological collectives for them to achieve their own good and flourish in their own terms.

Utilitarian animal welfare and animal rights arguments are typically limited to how individual deliberating moral agents should treat other morally considerable individuals in what Benton (1993) calls a liberal-individualist view. Such a perspective tends to favour the extension of individual human moral sensibility connected to changes in personal lifestyles rather than a more fundamental systemic and institutional change. What is then missing from the individualistic account is the need for a nurturing community and environment within which to develop moral considerability of and sympathy for others. This brings us back to establishing the institutions of a caring society that recognises the quality of social relationships and interdependencies as constitutive of a good society.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary economies promote self-interested individualism and the attainment of the good as hedonistic pleasure or preference satisfaction fulfilled by consuming goods and services—a caricature of human existence perpetuated by mainstream economists. In fact, such economies cannot be maintained or reproduce themselves without social relations outside the market both in terms of female labour power, non-humans and natural systems. While a critique, this is also a hope because it identifies not just what is wrong but also the institutions and social arrangements that maintain social provisioning within an ethical context. Beyond human self-interest, there is a recognisable good in the non-human world that can be expressed as the ability of life forms and collectives to flourish. Such Nature based values are distinct from the typical approaches of extending utility or rights. Closing the gap between Nature based values and human centred societies is no small task, but neither is it impossible. Some would argue the institutions of traditional and indigenous societies achieve exactly such a rapprochement. What

seems clear is that social ecological transformation to economies that promote care for and interest of others, both human and non-human, requires attention to the full range of human institutions to promote ethical practice in our daily lives.

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