The role of **ethics** in the new economy

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A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.
Quote from a letter of condolence to Norman Salit on March 4, 1950
Teleology – why are we doing what we do?

• Our problems are *real* – so why is our economy and society doing what it’s doing?

• Teleology, the ‘study of purpose’, one of the dominant concepts of an earlier age, has apparently been banished today (Daly, 1991)

• What drives our current deeply *unsustainable* economy?
The ethics of what we are doing

We can break the mountains apart; we can drain the rivers and flood the valleys. ... We can pollute the air with acids, the rivers with sewage, the seas with oil - all this in a kind of intoxication with our power for devastation .... And why? To increase the volume and speed with which we move natural resources through the consumer economy to the junk pile or the waste heap. ... But our supposed progress toward an ever-improving human situation is bringing us to a wasteworld instead of a wonderworld.

Thomas Berry (1988) ‘The Dream of the Earth’
What is the ethics of economics?

• Today the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘economics’ are not often spoken of together. They need to be.
• However there is an ethics of neoclassical economics. It is based on anthropocentrism and ‘utilitarianism’ (the happiness of the human majority is the greatest good).
• Daly (2008) notes:

  ... the neoclassical view is that man will surpass all limits and remake Creation to suit his subjective preferences, which are considered the root of all value. In the end, economics is religion.
Why worldview and ethics are critical

Many things change (and solutions become easier) if we change our worldview and ethics. Donella Meadows (1997) explained:

*The shared idea in the minds of society, the great unstated assumptions ... constitute that society's deepest set of beliefs about how the world works. ... Growth is good. Nature is a stock of resources to be converted to human purposes. ... Those are just a few of the paradigmatic assumptions of our culture, all of which utterly dumbfound people of other cultures.*

Meadows (1997) concluded:

*People who manage to intervene in systems at the level of a paradigm hit a leverage point that totally transforms systems. ... In a single individual it can happen in a millisecond. All it takes is a click in the mind, a new way of seeing.*
Thought experiments (Richard Routley)

• Experiment 1) Imagine that all living organisms have been destroyed by nuclear war and the last person is the only living being, who will die soon.

• This person has the ability to destroy all diamonds remaining in the world. Will she be destroying anything of intrinsic value?
Experiment 2) Consider the case after nuclear war where all sentient creatures are gone, while plants remain. The last person intends to cut down the last tree, which *could* recolonise the world. Will the person be destroying *something of intrinsic value*?
How you respond depends on whether you have taken an *anthropocentric* or *ecocentric* attitude to nature. For anthropocentric people, killing the tree is not wrong as it has no value and doesn’t benefit people. For ecocentrics, cutting the last tree would be *ethically wrong* as it has value in itself.
Me! Me! Me!

• **Anthropocentrism** is an obsession with ourselves
• Attributes no intrinsic value to other life
• Believes everything is for human use
• Fails to listen to other living things and extend compassion *outside* our species
The Great Divide – Anthropocentrism vs. Ecocentrism

• A ‘great divide’ in terms of our, worldview, ethics and values in how we think about nature.

• Endless growth has been possible due to dominant anthropocentric modernism (Curry, 2011), which sees the world as being essentially just a resource for human use (Crist, 2012).

• Do we believe in the ‘intrinsic value’ of nature?

• Ecocentrism – focus is on nature, of which we are a part.

• ‘Anthropocentric fallacy’ - just because humans can only perceive nature by ‘human’ senses does not mean we cannot attribute intrinsic value to it.

• Dominance of anthropocentrism in society and academia
The problem of anti-spirituality

Tacey (2000) in ‘Re-enchantment’ argues:

*It is vitally important for capitalism that we continue to experience ourselves as empty and small, since this provides us with the desire to expand and grow, and this desire is what consumerism is based on. ... If we stopped believing in the myth of our shrunken identity, the monster of consumerism would die, because it would no longer be nourished by our unrealized spiritual urges. Therefore true spirituality .... is extremely subversive of the status quo. This is why consumer society is keen to debunk or ridicule true spirituality.*
Sustainable worldview and ethics

• We need to ask whether anthropocentrism is in fact practicable? Humanity has *obligate dependence on nature to survive* (Washington, 2013). The food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe - all come to us *from nature*.

• We need to live in the real ecological world that supports humanity. That means *respecting nature and ecological limits*.

• Ecocentrism naturally respects nature, while anthropocentrism denigrates and denies it.

• So what change is needed?
We need to change society’s worldview, and move to an ecocentric worldview—‘care for all’ (Catton, 1982; Naess, 1989) and an ecological ethics (Curry, 2011; Washington et al., 2017), an ethics of kinship with the rest of life.

This provides the deep belief that motivates strong and difficult actions—like changing our economy!

We need a new ecological ethics, or at least a return to the teachings and ‘law’ of indigenous cultures (Curry, 2011; Rolston, 2012).
Aldo Leopold (1949) wrote:

*The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.* ...  
*In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.* ...  
*A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.*
A new environmental ethics

Environment ethics is vital because the survival of life on Earth depends on it.

Now we need to be liberated out of egoism, out of humanism, into a transcending overview that sees earth as a blessed land, exuberant with life, a land filled with integrity, beauty, dynamic achievement, and storied history.

We are searching for an ethics adequate to respect life on this Earth, an Earth ethics.

Holmes Rolston III (2012)
A sense of Wonder

• Many of us feel a sense of wonder at nature. All children do.

• All peoples need a sense of ‘my country’, of belonging to a landscape they possess in care and love (Rolston, 2012).

• An Agnostic, a Christian, a Buddhist, a Muslim ... all can feel a sense of wonder, even if they call it by varying names.

• There can be illuminating moments, which have been called ‘transcendent’ or a ‘hierophany’ or epiphany (Oelschlaeger, 1991).
‘If you listen you will learn’

- Listening = empathy = contemplation

Aboriginal Elder Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr speaks of ‘dadirri’, which is ‘something like what you (white people) call “contemplation”’.

- Tacey (2000) calls this is a ‘spirituality of deep seeing and deep listening’.

- Miriam-Rose says dadirri is ‘perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our fellow Australians’ (Tacey, 2000).
Conclusion

• An ecocentric worldview is essential to change the way society thinks about its interaction with nature.

• If we change this, moving to a new economy becomes so much easier.

• If we stay with anthropocentric modernism, then I agree with Herman Daly and John Cobb ...
We find it hard to suppress a cry of anguish, a scream of horror. We humans are being led to a dead end, we are living by an ideology of death and accordingly we are destroying our own humanity and killing the planet. ... Before this generation is the way of life and the way of death.

Herman Daly and John Cobb (1994) ‘For the Common Good’
Sign the ecocentrism statement!

• Go to Ecological Citizen journal website: http://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/statement-of-ecocentrism.php

• Join scientists Paul and Anne Ehrlich, David Suzuki, Michael Soule, Reed Noss, Jane Goodall, Eileen Crist; ecological economists Herman Daly and Joshua Farley; philosophers Holmes Rolston III, J.B. Callicott, Joanna Macy, Michael Nelson and over 500 other Earth citizens in signing the ecocentrism statement.

• Show your commitment to an ecocentric worldview and an Earth ethics.