



Methodological and Ideological Options

The shallow or the deep ecological economics movement?

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ABSTRACT

Ecological economics and its policy recommendations have become overwhelmed by economic valuation, shadow pricing, sustainability measures, and squeezing Nature into the commodity boxes of goods, services and capital in order to make it part of mainstream economic, financial and banking discourses. There are deeper concerns which touch upon the understanding of humanity in its various social, psychological, political and ethical facets. The relationship with Nature proposed by the ecological economics movement has the potential to be far reaching. However, this is not the picture portrayed by surveying the amassed body of articles from this journal or by many of those claiming affiliation. A shallow movement, allied to a business as usual politics and economy, has become dominant and imposes its preoccupation with mainstream economic concepts and values. If, instead, ecological economists choose a path deep into the world of interdisciplinary endeavour they will need to be prepared to transform themselves and society. The implications go far beyond the pragmatic use of magic numbers to convince politicians and the public that ecology still has something relevant to say in the 21st century.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of ecological economists from their former relative obscurity marks a turning-point in our scientific communities. However, their message is twisted and misused. A shallow, but presently rather powerful movement, and a deep, but less influential movement, compete for our attention.

That opening paragraph is borrowed from [Arnae Naess \(1973: 95\)](#) with the replacement of 'ecologists' by 'ecological economists'. Some twenty-five years after its modern incarnation the ecological economics movement has reached a parallel with the concerns Naess had for ecology in the early 1970s.¹ The movement has expanded to include all sorts of academics and researchers, it has a successful journal as measured by such things as citation indexes, and an international society which has spread regional branches globally. Some of the founders have gained a second life while others have risen from relative obscurity to international renown. Economists well embedded in the establishment (including winners of the Sveriges Riksbank prize in economic sciences in memory of Alfred Nobel) have seemingly paid attention by gracing the movement with their presence at conferences (e.g., Sen), their thoughts in print (e.g., Solow, Stiglitz), their collaborations (e.g., Arrow) and some, possibly less embedded, have done all three (e.g., Ostrom). Yet the coherence in the message and conception of what this movement is all about

heavily diverge amongst 'participants', whether they be undergraduate students looking for alternative thinking on economics or heavily cited professors with recognised standing in the field. Indeed, what is deep, thought provoking and new in ecological economics may be more easily articulated by the former, while being totally absent from the writings of the latter.

This paper aims to explore and explain what is deep and what is shallow in the ecological economics movement at a time when I believe there are crucial crossroads to be negotiated and a path to be chosen. This paper is not a philosophical manifesto in the way that Naess's deep ecology proposals might be regarded, but does share his concerns for the articulation and redefinition of underlying reasons for pursuing a given area of study. More than that there is an implication in [Naess \(1973\)](#) that being a field ecologists makes a person aware of various aspects of and values in Nature. In the same way [Faber \(2008\)](#) has described how serious commitment to ecological economics requires an attentiveness which raises awareness of and ability to understand key concepts and values. As he states: "we need the ability to experience unfiltered what we see, feel, smell, hear and taste in nature. ... For only if we are attentive to the dimensions of real life can we make sure that our choice of scientific lens for observing the world does not altogether obscure our true problem of caring for nature and justice." This is something of a rejection of the Humean fact-value dichotomy and an appeal to our basic understandings of the real world as both empirical and moral.

Naess made a similar appeal in his definition of deep ecology. However, despite potential similarities, deep ecological economics is a rather separate undertaking than deep ecology. One reason is its

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¹ I refer to ecological economics as a movement or field to cover the various descriptions given by authors, including: discipline, school of thought, paradigm, emerging paradigm, transdiscipline and perspective.

independence from mystical and spiritual overtones.² Instead an emphasis should be placed on addressing concerns about environmental values and human relationships with Nature through a theory of ethical conduct, where an explicit account is given of the political and economic implications.³ In order to be successful, such a frame must certainly be able to take seriously, and address, the deep philosophical concerns raised by Naess and others (e.g., eco-feminists) about human alienation from and domination over Nature, as built into modern patriarchal society. What I will explore here is how this should lead ecological economists to a radically different approach from mainstream economists for addressing a range of both theoretical and practical concerns relating to the social, ecological and economic reality in which we now live.

Actually, in exploring these issues I wish to largely avoid a simple dichotomy with deep on one side and shallow on the other, although this serves as a useful shorthand for the general issues raised. As Nelson (2009) has argued, such black and white divisions can prove unnecessarily antagonistic. The world is rarely so simple as dichotomous categories claim and human affairs least of all. Indeed, what I will show is that the ecological economics movement is populated by a variety of contributors and affiliates who can be separated by their theoretical and ideological positions into three main camps. Even this proves inadequate for capturing the full picture of argumentation in the field about direction and meaning. Thus, the three camps are supplemented by the philosophy of one 'big tent' and three other conjunctions of the main positions. The extent to which these seven positions are populated by a substantive number of researchers, or representative in any way, is an empirical question that this paper does not venture to address, but investigation of which is ongoing and pursued elsewhere (see Spash and Ryan, 2012). The aim here is to set out the theoretical and ideological landscape of ecological economics in order to identify where people are located. This requires not being afraid of pointing out where substantive divisions, and inconsistencies, lie.

The paper classifies thought within ecological economics as broadly constituted. In the next section I briefly outline the history of the movement and how this created the background for the development of different camps and advocacy of incompatible epistemologies. I then, in Section 3, propose a set of categories to explain how ecological economics has developed and where it now stands as a conflicted and divided field of research. The three main camps are described as new environmental pragmatism, new resource economics and social ecological economics. In Section 4, I consider the implications of these categories for unity and division within ecological economics. In the conclusions, Section 5, I return to the question of what is deep and what is shallow in the ecological economics movement.

2. Ecological Economics as a Movement

Modern ecological economics arose partially from a crisis in environmental economics which by the late 1980s appeared devoid of novelty and influence (Spash, 1999, 2011a). In the 1960s and 70s environmental regulatory agencies had been established in many

countries and legislation brought-in to control some serious pollutants and toxic substances using physical standards and bans, which made economic instruments politically unnecessary. In the ensuing era of increasing neo-liberalism (e.g., under Thatcher and Regan), the environment largely dropped-off the political agenda. Yet, despite the preceding era of legislative action, major environmental problems had not gone away. Ozone holes, acidic deposition, human induced climate change and species loss were some of the still present and real dangers. At the same time the discourse of environmental and resource economics, and its academic curricula, began to exclude radical economic critiques and earlier free thinking theories (e.g., Daly, 1977; Hirsch, 1977; Kapp, 1978; Kneese et al., 1970; Mishan, 1969; Page, 1977; Schumacher, 1973). The field became inherently conservative.

Ecological economics then offered a new and exciting prospect for critical environmental economists to rekindle the flame of passion for their subject, even though it required moving outside the institutional boundaries of their discipline and learning from ecologists. Modern ecological economics was from the outset operating on an openly ideological basis, by which I mean there was no question that environmental problems were real social issues needing political and economic action. The important thing was to get the message 'out there' and raise awareness of the environment–economy interconnect. The first conference of the International Society for Ecological Economics (ISEE) was held in Washington, D.C., and hosted by the World Bank, where, with much publicity, Herman Daly had recently been appointed.⁴ The hope was for some major impacts by creating a union of ecologists and economists seeking new avenues into the policy debate.

Intrepid ecologists and other natural scientists concerned by environmental degradation could see the need to connect with the social sciences even if this made them unpopular in their own fields (Röpke, 2004). The idea was that resource and environmental economists, or indeed any economists, were to be welcomed into a common movement because the environment was no longer on the political agenda as it had been in the 1970s. In Europe a wider group of political economists and social scientists was attracted in addition to the orthodox environmental and resource economists (Spash, 1999). The open door to all economists and indiscriminate approach was something described as transdisciplinary (Costanza, 1991) and pluralist (Norgaard, 1989). No unifying theory was then seen as possible or even desirable, no paradigm was to be put forth to replace the one deemed to be outdated but dominant (Costanza, 1996; Costanza et al., 1998; Norgaard, 1989; Turner et al., 1997). Ecological economics was instead a movement for expressing concern over environment–economy interactions with the potential for common cause to be expressed through shared concepts.

Yet, how the new field might proceed was unclear. Despite the transdisciplinary rhetoric, linking mathematical models was initially popular leading to an 'ecology and economics' multidisciplinary approach, especially in the USA (Spash, 1999). After all, ecologist and zoologist could be found using optimisation models which seemed similar to those of economists. For some, socio-biology (in the mode of Becker, 1976; Wilson, 1975) provided something of a precedent, despite the warnings that such approaches entail an unpalatable political economy (Gowdy, 1987). There was also lobbying in favour of reviving energy as a monistic unit of value to challenge money and cost–benefit analysis due to their lack of a link to physical reality. Again there had been stark warnings of the inadequacies of such an approach (Georgescu-Roegen, 1975). However, in the early 1990s, theoretical problems and political differences seemed less important than renewed engagement between natural and social scientists working on environmental problems, and the prospect was of open acceptance of various disparate ideas without too much criticism.

² The mystical overtones of deep ecology might be attributed to it by some because of its philosophy of self awareness or ecological consciousness which appears more Eastern than Western in philosophical terms. This means harm to the environment is seen as harm to a broadly constituted self, or at least personalised due to achieving self awareness (Fox, 1985a). However, there seems much of psychological and philosophical relevance to these arguments which does not necessitate a spiritual or mystical viewpoint (but which also does not exclude one). For example, eco-feminists might share similar concerns over the human connection to Nature, but on the basis of emphasising the importance of relationships and emotions (McShane, 2007b; McShane, 2007a).

³ In this respect 'deep green' proposals by Sylvan and Bennett (1994) were claimed by the authors to diverge from deep ecology. Although, some regard Sylvan as having started with an unsympathetic characterisation of deep ecology in the first place (Fox, 1985b).

⁴ Herman Daly left the World Bank after six years with his opinion of it much downgraded but that institution unchanged. His farewell speech, besides pointing to flaws in external policy, criticised management and noted a climate of censorship and excessive control over staff (Daly, 1999).

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