

SURVEY

On the ethics of environmental economics as seen from textbooks

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Abstract

This survey analyses a number of textbooks in environmental economics, from the earliest ones to recently published, with respect to their treatment of ethical issues. The findings are somewhat mixed. On the one hand, some of the books have a narrow view of environmental ethics. The ethics is usually expressed in the fashion of utilitarianism (utility functions) and is without exception anthropocentric. However, on the other hand, some increase in both the depth and the space devoted to ethics is visible and an increase in the ethical self-consciousness of environmental economics may be noted.

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1. Introduction

According to the traditional gospel of economics there is, and should be, a difference between what is to be considered as goals (values, the normative) on the one hand, and on the other hand, what is to be considered as means (facts, the positive). In recent years, however, there have been some signs observable that this “engineering view” of economics is called into question¹, at least outside the “hard core” of the discipline (see Sen, 1987; Hausman and

McPherson, 1998). Rather than interpreting this to mean that facts and values now are now getting blurred, this should be seen as putting the received view of the relation between facts and values into question again, with the purpose of illuminating problems that this view has apotheosized. That is, to take one example, instead of banning (unselfish) values altogether as a source for human motivation, it might be possible that allowing for such would throw new light on anomalies in economics, such as the voter’s paradox. There are, of course, many facets of this problem, and this is not the right place to give detailed exposition of this. Some brief points will however be discussed in Section 2 below. There are different ways to interpret this possible change, but I would be inclined to think of it, not as reflecting an internal development within economics, but rather more generally as reactions to discussion and develop-

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¹ “In the last 20 years, economists and moral philosophers have renewed a conversation that was interrupted during the heyday of positivist methodology in both disciplines.” (Hausman and McPherson, 1993, p 723).

ment in different areas of moral and social philosophy. This, in turn, is not of course unrelated to what is happening in the real world. One particular area towards which moral philosophers have directed their interest lately has been environmental ethics. As environmental economics is also a dynamic and growing branch of knowledge that is tackling the problems of environmental deterioration, this would seem to be a promising area for studying whether and in what sense ethics has influenced the discipline.

2. Why should ethics be important for economics?

A study like this might be characterised as an effort to picture a no-man's-land between two perspectives. From the perspective of mainstream economics, the role of ethics has been suppressed to the degree that an endeavour like this study would have been out-defined from the very beginning. On the other hand, for moral philosophers, or for unorthodox environmental economists (such as ecological economists), the relation between ethics and (environmental) economics might not be perfectly clear either. Thus, the first and foremost purpose of this paper is to give a picture of the status quo of environmental ethics in environmental economics. It is not the main purpose of this paper to legitimate the role of ethics within environmental economics. However, in a study like this (perhaps especially in a study like this), some words about the place and role of ethics within environmental economics may be in order. What is presented below is of course not intended as anything like a definitive, authoritative statement. The aim is rather to suggest some brief starting points for discussion.

The discussion should be related to the question about the relevance of ethics to economics from a more general perspective. At least the following reasons seem important in this respect:

- (1) It should be recognized, as Hausman and McPherson (1993, p. 671) say, that “moral principles bear on issues concerning evaluation and policy, but they also influence the questions positive economists ask and the answers they find plausible.” That is, even if normative theories are built on assumptions that are often

characterized as innocent, it is clear that different moral views can influence and normative, “pure”, theory. A good example of this can nowadays be found in textbooks at least in public economics, where theories of rights (mostly Rawls's theory) have arisen to competitors to utilitarianism, (cf. Hausman and McPherson, 1993, p. 672). Of course one can claim that a theory is a theory independently of what inspired it. However, the point here is that the theoretical landscape might look quite different depending on what kind of moral view that has inspired it; there is an (inter)dependence which is relevant.

- (2) It is, of course also possible to claim that economics is only about the theoretical implications of economic man, nothing more or less. However, if we believe that economics is an empirical/policy oriented science—what most economists seem to do—it seems hard to deny the importance of ethics. E.g. if we want to understand how people react to different policy measures, or what values form these policy measures, the relevance of ethics seems clear. This means that an economist should have a thorough understanding of the moral philosophical fundamentals of economics, that is, of utilitarianism.² This includes also a conception about the detailed status of utilitarian ideas in economic thinking. E.g. is utilitarianism to be interpreted as a normative or a positive theory?
- (3) Economists should also understand how people's ethical considerations and sentiments affect their economic decisions. That is, people do not always behave like economic men. People do not only know utilitarian ethics, but they often act according to rules which are not compatible with utilitarianism. Thus, if one as an economist is interested in understanding the real decisions of people, one must be willing to go outside the field of utilitarian ethics. Environmental ethics is an important instance of this (see Section 3 below).

² And here am I thinking of more than just the technical side of utilitarianism, but also about the historical and philosophical side of that philosophy.

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