

Anthropocentrism vs. Non-Anthropocentrism: An Ongoing Debate in Policy Decision Making

Allan Maram, *The University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa*

Maram, A. (2009) "Anthropocentrism vs. Non-Anthropocentrism: An Ongoing Debate in Policy Decision Making", *Social & Public Policy Review*, 3, 1, pp. 50-54.

Anthropocentrism vs. Non-Anthropocentrism: An Ongoing Debate in Policy Decision Making

ALLAN MARAM, Graduate Research Supervisor, The University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Introduction

What are the ends of public decision; what should it try accomplish? Stokey and Zeckhauser, (1978) point out that this question has occupied the minds of philosophers and other students of society for hundreds of years. One of the issues that complicates the matter is that there is no universal agreement regarding the manner in which we define the welfare or well-being of society. A question that arises in this regard is whether the well-being of society depends solely on the welfare of its individual (human) members, as suggested by Stokey and Zeckhauser, or whether we need to additionally consider the welfare of nonhuman entities.

At the root of this question is a debate centred on the principles of anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is the view that the nonhuman world has value only insofar as it directly or indirectly serves human interests. Non-anthropocentrism argues, in contrast, that the nonhuman world has value in and of itself i.e. intrinsic or absolute value (Wenz, 2001). In this paper I will argue, along the lines of Stokey and Zeckhauser, that within the context of public policy analysis, an anthropocentric approach is a more favourable approach, as it is pragmatic i.e. by assigning values to non-human entities, we render them measurable and quantifiable. This provides policy makers with a basis to evaluate alternative policies that concern nonhuman entities. It is relevant to note that much has been written regarding the ethics of valuing natural resources (Clinch, 1999). However, in this paper, I do not intend to discuss the virtues of valuing the environment from an ethical standpoint. Rather, I intend to highlight why it is in our interest as policy makers to value nonhuman entities, and to describe the manner in which this can be achieved (I will discuss natural resources in particular).

Stokey and Zeckhauser (1978) outline a number of principles, which serve to guide the public decision maker in his or her judgment of public policies in the real world. They begin with the proposition that the purpose of public decisions is to promote the welfare of society. The welfare of the individual members of society is said to constitute the building blocks for the welfare of society. Consequently, anything that affects individual welfares, affects the welfare of

society. It is an individual's own judgments that should be accepted as the appropriate indicator of his or her own welfare. "This 'criterion of individual choice' means merely that the individual's preferences are the standard by which we judge his well-being". Lastly, Stokey and Zeckhauser emphasize that it is not individual welfare, but rather the welfare of society as a whole (social welfare) that must be the principle concern of government policy makers. They point out further that there is no clear-cut criterion for evaluating social welfare, "because, in general, the government policy that is best for one is not best for all". Consequently, most public decisions require agonizing decisions to be made – both ethically and politically – between policies that favour one group over another in society. These perspectives are clearly consistent with a welfare economics approach to public decision-making.

According to Stokey and Zeckhauser, "The well-being of society depends solely on the welfare of its individual members". "Our main point is that its people, and only people, that count. This means that the redwoods and bluebirds and Lake Baikal and the Old Man of the mountain are worth saving only if people believe them worth saving". Therefore, Stokey and Zeckhauser adopt an anthropocentric approach, which proposes that the nonhuman world has value only insofar as it directly or indirectly serves human interests. They state that while a non-anthropocentric approach to public choice may appear to be enticing at a philosophical level, the problem is that it is not practical ("neither the redwoods nor the bluebirds can speak for themselves"). Therefore, it is necessary for humans to speak on their behalf. This inevitably involves assigning values to nonhuman entities. By assigning values to non-human entities, we render them measurable and quantifiable (from an economics perspective). This in turn provides policy makers with a basis to evaluate alternative policies that concern natural resources. Lastly, Stokey and Zeckhauser note that even proponents of a non-anthropocentric approach engage in the valuation of nonhuman entities. For example, they point out that there are no voices raised on behalf of the smallpox virus, which is itself a vanishing species.

Grasso and Pareglio (2002) note that economic choices about natural resources are more difficult to make than those about private goods. This is due to the fact that natural resources are public goods, and the market cannot provide a correct price for them, or derive an economic value reflecting their social importance. As a result, a more appropriate economic framework is required to support decision-makers in their choices. They argue that environmental economics provides such an approach. To overcome the absence of a real market, the environmental economics approach simulates such a market by considering the potential behaviour of individuals. Basically, within this methodology a sample of people are asked how much they would pay for a good with no market (such as air quality). The data is then aggregated to develop a demand curve.

According to the environmental economics approach, natural resources such as air, water and landscapes, are measurable goods because they offer a stream of services to people. “The activities of the State and of other institutions, those of citizens and of companies cause changes in those streams, resulting in costs and benefits. The measurement of changes in economic value of the natural resources services can thus be studied within a cost-benefit framework” (Grasso and Pareglio, 2002: 3). If a society wants to use available resources in the most efficient way, it needs to compare the values that accrue from the use of the goods and services streams (the benefits), with the values that they sacrifice by not using these goods/services in other ways (costs). Thus, costs and benefits are measured by considering their effect on personal welfare. It is relevant to note, in addition, that what is being measured is not the natural resource itself, but rather people’s preferences towards quality and/or quantity changes of the resources, which causes fluctuations in the streams of received natural services (Grasso and Pareglio, 2002).

Grasso and Pareglio, (2002) point out that critics of this approach contend that natural resources have an “absolute value”, independent of peoples preferences (non-anthropocentrism). However, they state that that the two perspectives are not necessarily incompatible. Rather, the two perspectives can be construed as operating on two distinct levels. “The economic approach provides the economic value of people’s preferences towards (or against) an environment change; the former (absolute values approach) looks at the natural resources itself, in terms of quality and characteristics” (Grasso and Pareglio, 2002: 6). They go on to state that while economic value can generally be measured, “absolute value” cannot. If the policy decision-maker, for some reason, does not need to determine the associated costs and benefits, then the absence of measure is not important. However, if this type of knowledge is relevant, then economic approach must take priority.

Lastly, it is relevant to note that critics of the environmental economics approach contend that because individuals are essentially materially-driven and self-serving, their preferences will inevitably favour destructive environmental policies, that fulfil their personal, immediate needs. However, in a book entitled, “Searching for Sustainability”, Bryan Norton argues that this perspective of human nature and human values is far too negative and limiting. Rather, he proposes that humans have a wide range of values, including altruistic values, which manifest in a strong sense of consideration for future generations. Consideration for future generations implies that humans have a need to preserve natural resources for future generations. Viewed from this standpoint, human preferences will favour environmental policies that conserve and protect the environment. While Norton makes an important contribution, I believe that both sides have merit.

Conclusion

The debate concerning the valuation of natural resources is a lively one, a certainly not one that will be resolved any time soon. While the non-anthropocentric approach may be enticing at a philosophical level, it is the contention of this paper that it is impractical and consequently of little use to the policy analyst. Therefore, while this paper does acknowledge the fact that an anthropocentric approach may be questionable in ethical terms, it serves as a foundation for disciplines such as environmental economics. Furthermore, while techniques of environmental valuation are complicated and not entirely objective, they nevertheless make an important contribution to policy decision-making (Clinch, 1999).

References

- Clinch, J.P. (1999) *Why should we value the environment and how can we do it?*, Environmental Studies Research Series Working Papers, Department of Environmental Studies, University College Dublin.
- Grasso, M. and Pareglio, S. (2002) *Economic Valuation of European Union policy-making*, Monterey, CA: Second World Congress of Environmental and Resource Economists.
- Norton, B.G. (2003) *Searching for Sustainability: Inter-disciplinary Essays in the Philosophy of Conservation Biology*, Cambridge University Press: United Kingdom.
- Wenz, P.S. (2001) *Environmental Ethics Today*, Oxford University Press: New York.