
Human Well-Being and Economic Goals

Human Well-Being and Economic Goals. Frank Ackerman, David Kiron, Neva R. Goodwin, Jonathan M. Harris, and Kevin Gallagher (eds.) Island Press, Washington, DC, ISBN 155963-561-4 (PB) xxxii + 427 pp, 1997.

This reader is an important source of information for ecological economists. It brings together a considerable amount of material debating the meaning of human welfare in economics while using perspectives from other disciplines, but mainly philosophy. Seventy-eight academic articles form the basis for the short summaries, by an extended editorial team, which make up the book. Each summary is a precis of an author's work including some quotations from the original article. In addition, the nine main sections of the book are introduced by editorial overviews.

The ten parts of the book cover contemporary discussions on economic well-being, the 19th-century debate on utilitarianism, 20th-century approaches such as welfare economics and social choice theory, cost-benefit analysis and commensurability, critiques of utility theory, ethical norms and citizenship, issues of social justice, the meaning of development, and finally, critiques of and alternatives to standard measures of economic growth.

Selecting key pieces to cover the literature past and present is always a difficult task in a

reader, but the mix here seems excellent for raising issues and stimulating debate. The precis for each article forms a succinct summary of the main points. The overviews to each part are also well-written brief guides to the development of ideas on each topic. Despite all the editors being based in the US, there is a reasonable representation of non-North American positions with about a quarter of the contemporary authors in that category.

Defining and justifying the economic goals pursued by society is the core issue being addressed. Concerns central to the future path of ecological economics are raised, such as what makes a good society, the role of environmental valuation, and debate over growth versus development versus sustainability indicators. The theme throughout is to reflect upon orthodox economic positions then broaden horizons and question how we proceed. As Scitovsky points out in his foreword, a better approach than technical mechanical reductionism is to expand the research agenda to related philosophical inquiries into the operative context of evaluation and purpose of economic activity. This harks back to the classical approach to political economy where the limits to the modern theory of economic motivation are obvious because it describes so little of the picture.

In providing short pieces students will be able to pick up on issues quickly while in-depth reading of original works is encouraged with clear citation throughout the book. However, this is more than a very useful teaching aid because the issues raised must be addressed by all ecological economists, regardless of their seniority, and the presentation here is a clear aid to understanding why, especially for those who may doubt the relevance of philosophical reflection. The crucial role of values in ecological economics is a methodological problem for some because discussing values raises difficulties for the purely scientific approach, as found in mainstream economics, which favours definition, identification, analysis and measurement. This book provides guidance as to why the answer to our problems is far from reduction of well-being to monetary sums, but in addition presents past

and current thinking on a range of alternative perspectives.

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