

Reflections on Pluralism in Ecological Economics

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INTRODUCTION

Ecological economics was defined by Costanza (1989: 1) as including neoclassical environmental economics and ecological impact studies, as well as encouraging new ways of thinking. The name was taken to signify an “interdisciplinary, and holistic view”, although soon Costanza (1991, 1996) strongly advocated transdisciplinarity. The journal was stated to be pursuing “a strategy of pluralism”, which was defined by Norgaard (1989) under the title of “methodological pluralism”. Ecological economics has since been open to including everything from the naïve objectivism of mainstream economics to the strong constructivism of the post-modernists. I have argued for a revision and rejection of this position in favour of realism and reasoned critique (Spash, 2012) and for the rejection of neoclassical economics in preference for heterodox economics (Spash, 2013), not least on ontology grounds.ⁱ

Within economics there is actually methodological diversity and some recognition of the necessity for reasoned critique. This is hard to discern because mainstream economics appears highly prescriptive and restrictive in its ever increasing reliance on mathematical formalism as a monist methodology. In practice there is mixed application of and attention to the strictures of deduction and empiricism, and substantive variety in methodology across schools of economic thought. Post Keynesians, neo-Marxists, critical institutionalists and feminists each have a somewhat different approach.

Within each school there may be reliance on a range of different methods on the grounds that no one method is sufficient, something Dow (2007) refers to as pluralist methodology (not to be confused with methodological pluralism).ⁱⁱ She notes that these methods must be incommensurate, otherwise they would collapse into one method. Explicit adoption of this type of methodology typifies heterodox economics.

The question for ecological economics is then on what grounds it should remain open to various approaches to understanding, including those advocated by mainstream economists? An even more fundamental question is how far different forms of pluralism are even feasible?

MISLEADING FOUNDATIONAL CLAIMS

Norgaard (1989) claimed the necessity for adopting a form of pluralism that included the naïve objectivism of mainstream economics. His argument for this ‘methodological pluralism’ has at its core the belief that “a diversity of methodologies is appropriate and pressures to eliminate methodologies for the sake of conformity should be avoided” (1989: 37). However, this is an argument against prescriptive epistemology,ⁱⁱⁱ and dogmatism, not the elimination of some methodologies *per se*. Intellectual progress requires deciding what contributes to knowledge or, as Norgaard (1989: 38) himself admits, “the intellectual environment we create to sort the good from the bad”.^{iv} In addition, accepting mainstream knowledge as valid involves more than methodological pluralism, it also involves ontological and epistemological pluralism.

Yet, Norgaard (1989: 44) then claims that: “In fact, few scientists study methodology or make their beliefs explicit. Individual scientists, and eventually whole disciplines, succeed by being pragmatic”. Later he concludes that “logical positivism is inappropriate but necessary”, and it is necessary “because modern people perceive science in terms of objective, universal truths” (Norgaard, 1989: 51). So ecological economists must apparently accept arguing on the same naïve objectivist grounds! This amounts to recommending methodology on the basis of presumed popularity and fails to address the critical epistemological concerns and realist arguments he himself has raised.

Despite this poor foundation, the idea of an uncritical pluralism spread within ecological economics and has been promoted at the highest levels. Ecological economists Costanza, Perrings and Cleveland represent between them two former Editors-in-Chief of the journal and two former

international society presidents. In their combined opinion: "Ecological economics is necessarily eclectic and pluralistic. It is therefore difficult to pin down and summarize." (Costanza et al., 1997: xiii). Acceptance of this as the natural order of things seems to condemn ecological economics to ultimate irrelevance. Yet the journal has moved to accepting anything on the environment-economy relationship in some 'Big Tent' (Howarth, 2008), because the current editor believes ecological economics is equivalent to the field of environmental studies in the USA where anything goes.

The conundrum for 'methodological' pluralists is that they must either indiscriminately accept everything, and so lose any meaning for the concept of knowledge, or accept some grounds for rejecting ideas and approaches which they find strongly objectionable. As Dow (2007: 448) states "unstructured pluralism or eclecticism, understood as an absence of selection criteria, or "anything goes", is antithetical to the building up of knowledge". In addition, a belief in some external independent reality (rather than a strong social constructivist position) adds further restrictions. As Dow (2007: 455) goes on to remark: "There is a limit to how far there can be plurality of understandings of the nature of reality, approaches to knowledge, and meaning, when knowledge needs to be developed within groups of researchers and communicated to others. Plurality in practice cannot be infinite". Developing bodies of knowledge (e.g. disciplines) entails group conceptualisation of reality while being restricted by the extent to which knowledge is judged to be true (i.e., captures the nature of things as they are). Misconceptualising reality leads to descriptively inaccurate theories, practically inadequate knowledge and ultimately failure in action.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF PLURALISMS

The need to save ecological economics from an "arbitrary openness to just everything" is recognised by Baumgartner et al. (2008). Although their discussion still claims an epistemological plurality to support plurality in the use of methods.^v Besides being unnecessary, there is a problem in proposing multiple epistemologies. This is the simple impossibility of simultaneously holding two (or more?) contradictory approaches as to what is to be taken as a valid knowledge claim.

The failure of economics, and ecological economics, to address epistemology and only discuss methodology means it conflates the two without thinking. In addition, focussing only on how to gain knowledge as if there were no need to agree upon what is actually being studied leads to the epistemic fallacy.^{vi} This means assumptions about reality are made implicitly and so never questioned.

Reality, the objects of our study and their relationships, is again not something about which there is room for some generic pluralism. We certainly can and do conceptualise objects in different ways, but that does not mean the object itself changes so that a different reality comes into existence to match whatever a person holds to be real. More practically the idea of 'ontological pluralism' implies accepting two (or more) different realities could exist simultaneously e.g. planet Earth is round and flat, or it is the centre of the universe and as well as the Sun being centre.

So founding our ideas upon an ontology means rejecting contradictory ontologies. That we accept knowledge as being fallible is important to state here but also a separate issue. Heterodox economics shares a common ontology. The ontological presuppositions of ecological economics share aspects of heterodox economic thought that also provide a link to critical realism that is absent from mainstream economics. For example, in a comparison with Post Keynesian economics the state of the world is seen in common as one involving strong uncertainty, social indeterminacy, emergent properties and historical dynamic process (Holt and Spash, 2009). In contrast the mainstream can be seen as treating individuals as passive agents in a static closed system with an ontology of isolated atomism. This justifies the orthodoxy in their formulation of social reality as typified by regularities so allowing the methodology of deductive reasoning and mathematical formalism. Ecological economics, like other heterodox traditions, accepts the transformative power of human agency with emergent properties arising from a dynamic interconnected process of multi-layered social interactions. Modern heterodoxy is then distinguished from the mainstream by allowing theory and method to be informed by insights into social reality. Heterodox economists resist the mainstream

reformulation of their concepts (e.g. uncertainty, evolutionary developments, institutions, motives, ethics) not so much through being committed to them per se, as insisting on their possessing specific ontological properties (Lawson, 2006).

Neoclassical economics is rejected because the reality it conjures up is a total fiction that fails to prove its worth as either a description of or means for comprehending what goes on. At its best a nice deductive and logical model that has no relevance for understanding real social ecological economic interactions. This is exactly why mainstream (and other) economists retreat into their models, because they are safely divorced from having anything to do with reality and so impervious to empirical criticism or reflection upon the nature of that reality.

If ecological economics wants to be insightful and meaningful as to the real social problems of the world, and their political aspects, then it cannot accept the relevance of a discipline that rejects any role for society beyond the individual and rejects any role for power, or ethics. These aspects of social reality must be an explicit part of analysis in understanding real economic systems. Why then waste time discussing theories and ideas that lack anything to do with this, or worse argue this reality is itself irrelevant?

Another aspect of pluralism that may mistakenly be merged into the generic concept concerns values. Ecological economics has argued for the importance of incommensurability (Aldred, 2002, 2013; O'Neill, 1997), the role of weak comparability in decision-processes (Martinez-Alier et al., 1998) and the existence of multiple values in society (Spash, 2000, 2008) and conflicting meta values (Spash, 2002, 2006). This means value monism is rejected and value pluralism accepted. Again why then spend time on a discipline based on value monism let alone try to incorporate it or pretend collaboration and mutual learning are possible?

Then there is education. Pluralism is widely pushed these days as a good thing in economic education because of the dominance of mainstream economic thought which is dogmatically imposed as the right way of doing economics. So strategically, the idea of rejecting the mainstream looks like a non-starter and pluralism is argued for as needing to include it. The hope is therefore just to get back to where the economics profession was in the early 1980s, namely a more level playing field in which economists are trained to argue and analyse rather than preach and repeat the gospel. Pluralism in ecological economic education means understanding different disciplines as they exist today and that includes the dominant forms of economics in both orthodoxy and heterodoxy. This does not mean every student must have a degree in mainstream economics so that they are able to criticise it. Instead this means being able to have enough insight and analytical capability to argue against fallacious knowledge both in orthodox and heterodox economics and indeed elsewhere.

This last point is important in interdisciplinary work. There is a lot to be criticised in the conduct of ecologists, conservation biologists, environmental NGOs, and others. That criticism should also be based upon firm foundations and not in eclecticism, or choosing whatever happens to seem like a good counter argument for now in some pragmatic environmentalism (Spash, 2009, 2013). So pedagogic pluralism is about the necessity of being trained to understand what is going on, not accepting the righteousness of all positions that exist.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, pluralism too often appears as one thing and always a good thing. For a start, there needs to be a distinction between education and a field of knowledge. Pedagogic pluralism is necessary because of the state of political, economic, social and ecological knowledge. It is also necessary in order to know what is wrong and to counter that with sound arguments and valid evidence. Understanding different inconsistent and contradictory fields of knowledge, and learning how to evaluate them, is part of education (or at least it should be and is not so in economics today).

Creating a field of knowledge is something else. A field of knowledge consists of ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods. I have argued pluralism at the ontological level is illogical. This does not mean there is only one conceptualisation of reality, but rather that clarity is required at the ontological level for us to debate how we conceptualise, indeed what we are trying to

conceptualise. Ontology should then inform the necessary epistemology. The nature of things informs us as to how we can understand them.

Holding two or more ways of understanding what is to be taken as valid knowledge means allowing for totally contradictory grounds upon which to understand. In the extreme one moment everything could be understood as a social construct and nothing more, and the next as an observable objective reality and nothing more. So the idea of epistemological pluralism, as using whatever approach is convenient to validate knowledge claims, would result in inconsistency, contradiction and confusion, as well as failing to relate to ontology.

Methodological pluralism, within a unified body of knowledge, is only feasible in as far as methodologies share an ontology and epistemology. In as far as mainstream economic orthodoxy is based upon a fundamentally different ontology and epistemology from heterodoxy there are no grounds for collaboration.

So we must ask, what is the aim of pluralism in ecological economics? A Tower of Babel where everybody has their own language and nobody understands anyone else? A Big Tent full of clusters of people who agree with each other in their own group but fundamentally disagree with other groups about reality and how to understand it?

Clearly I reject the usefulness of these pluralisms. Instead I am arguing for a unified field of knowledge that develops the means to offer insight into an agreed object of study through a common conceptualisation of reality. I believe this can be achieved given the will to do so, and can avoid the dogmatism of the mainstream by remaining a critical and interdisciplinary social science that also works with the natural sciences to create mutual understanding.

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ENDNOTES

- i The metaphysical (ontological) question concerns asking what exists and how the things that exist are related.
- ii Tools of scientific investigation form the methods and the term method should not be confused with or used as shorthand for methodology (as is too often done). Methodology concerns the principles that determine how such tools are deployed and interpreted. Methodology is used in two senses referring to (i) the principles and practices that underlie research in a discipline or subject area, and (ii) the appropriateness of the methods. This requires general principles about the formation of knowledge in practice and so becomes interrelated with the theory of knowledge (i.e., epistemology)
- iii Epistemology (from the Greek episteme, meaning knowledge) concerns the theoretical basis on which we create understanding of the world. This involves theories about the origin and limits of knowledge. It describes how we can form knowledge about the world and what is the meaning of truly knowing something. A prescriptive epistemology defines a field/discipline of knowledge by the assertion of an approach to understanding as constitutive of that field/discipline e.g. economists use mathematical formalism, those who do not use it are not economists.
- iv He is highly critical of specific epistemological features—unity of science, universal laws, independence of reality from observer and culture—and he clearly favours their rejection from any epistemology for ecological economics (see also Norgaard, 1994). Furthermore, Norgaard (1989: 38) explicitly criticises both ecologists and economists for their adherence to such a prescriptive methodology as ‘logical positivism’, and states he is in “opposition to this long-standing belief in a right way of knowing and precise prediction”. Of course, in doing so he is unwittingly offering another “right way of knowing”. In any case, his point does not seem to be that all methodologies can be regarded as equally valid or acceptable.
- v Plurality in epistemology is taken here to mean a belief that there are multiple ways of achieving equally meaningful knowledge and these can be employed interchangeably as seems appropriate to the investigator, e.g. social construction might be interchanged with logical empiricism. Use of plural methods can be justified without requiring such a belief, e.g. on the basis that there are alternative means of achieving the same goal or that different aspects of reality are revealed by different methods.
- vi The epistemic fallacy can briefly be summarised as operative when someone ignores ontology (i.e., fails to state what constitutes reality) while maintaining epistemological (i.e., knowledge) claims and so implicitly describes reality. Ontology is then effectively merged into epistemology.