



## Methods

# Environmental sustainability as the first principle of distributive justice: Towards an ecological communitarian normative foundation for ecological economics

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## ABSTRACT

The ecological economic concern with environmental sustainability embodies the normative orientations of the field. This concern is foremost a matter of distributive justice, the definition of which determines the relevance of the appropriate scale and efficient allocation criteria. Yet it would appear that the discipline lacks a shared, internally consistent set of ethical premises by which this concern might be legitimized. Various authors have embraced a Rawlsian conception of liberal justice as the appropriate banner for ecological economics in place of the consequentialist–libertarian foundations of neoclassical economics (including environmental economics). It is argued here that this is insufficient in so far as it is premised on a vision of a discrete, self-sufficient economic actor. Instead, it is posited that an ecological economic ethic must proceed from an understanding of the economic actor as community member – a recognition implicit in recent ecological economic contributions focused on discourse ethics and deliberative democracy. An ecological communitarian conception of distributive justice, which views the well-being of the individual as inseparable from the integrity of its implicate, mutually constituting human and non-human natural communities, is advanced as the appropriate basis for the ecological economic world-view. In this light, the thermodynamic foundations of ecological economics are seen to provide the necessary departure point for normative decision-making oriented towards ensuring sustainability in economic organization.

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## 1. Introduction

Economic systems embody the rules by which scarce resources are allocated across relevant populations. Allocation presupposes the resolution of distributive norms that both define the constellation of economic actors as well as how and to whom the costs and benefits of economic activities accrue. These norms must thus derive from specific conceptions of distributive justice in material relations. Given that the meaning and application of just distribution must, in turn, be founded on shared interpretations of the right or good, an economic system operationalizes a core component of a society's moral universe.

The neoclassical economic model has been roundly criticized for (among other things): its analytical myopia with respect to the foundational role of ecosystem goods and services in economic activity; the attendant environmental degradation resulting from the omission of this consideration in economic policy; and the implications for both economic and environmental sustainability within and across generations. In large part, these failures reflect a fundamental incompatibility between the underlying ethical premises that inform neoclassical economic conceptions of distributive justice, incommen-

surability in the spectrum of values which must be weighed, and the operational realities of economic activity in a finite biosphere. The discipline of ecological economics arose precisely to address this deficiency in contemporary economic theory and practice. The overarching goal of ecological economics is to advance a body of theory and tools conducive to operationalizing an environmentally sustainable mode of economic organization (Soderbaum, 1999).

Of the three conditions ecological economists prescribe as necessary for sustainable economic activity (appropriate scale, efficient allocation and just distribution) (Daly, 1992), the just distribution clause embodies the discipline's normative orientations. This is implicit in the sustainability objective, which is concerned with maintaining the integrity of the ecological systems foundational to the well-being of both current and future generations. Moreover, a shared understanding of distributive justice is prerequisite to establishing the related criteria for efficient allocation, as well as for legitimizing the relevance of both the scale and efficiency variables (Martinez-Alier and O'Connor, 1996).

Given the central importance of just distribution as the normative foundation for ecological economics, the topic has received remarkably little treatment in the disciplinary literature. In the absence of a clear, shared understanding of distributive justice and how it animates the balance of ecological economic theory and practice, disciplinary cohesion, evolution and operationalization are impeded. This paper presents an attempt to resolve this lacuna. I begin with a

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brief overview of the major conceptions of distributive justice, each of which is moored in a specific interpretation of the (deontological right) or (consequentialist) good. I next review the normative dimensions of neoclassical economics, and compare and contrast these with the limited treatment of distributive justice in the ecological economics literature. I suggest that both are undermined by a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the individual. Turning to the core insights of ecology as a basis for the necessary reconception of the economic actor as ecological community member, I posit that an expanded ecological communitarianism, which views maintaining the integrity of the web of biotic and abiotic processes and communities that mutually constitute the biosphere as the first principle of distributive justice, offers the most appropriate departure point for ecological economics as a normative enterprise. In this light, the thermodynamic foundations of ecological economics are shown to provide the necessary reference point for normative decision making in economic organization.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Distributive Justice

Justice, in the normative (as opposed to procedural) sense, is the principle of moral rightness or goodness. Views of what constitute justice are therefore highly variable because they are moored in competing conceptions of the (deontological) right or (consequentialist) good, which is prior, and how it is achieved. In most cases, these can be traced to the major traditions of normative moral philosophy.

Following Lamont and Favor (2008), principles of distributive justice are "normative principles designed to guide the allocation of the benefits and burdens of economic activity." The western tradition of normative political philosophy comprises several major interpretations of distributive justice along a continuum encompassing libertarian, socialist and liberal theories. Also notable are emerging theories of environmental justice (Sterba, 2003; Okereke, 2006).

According to libertarianism, individual liberty (i.e. the state of being unconstrained by other persons in pursuing one's self-interest) is the ultimate moral and political ideal (Sterba, 2003). Libertarianism typically entails an ideological commitment to private property rights (within, although not necessary between, generations), with distributive justice as that which provides freedom to individuals to pursue their respective material desires. In this light, the free market is viewed as inherently just because it expresses the sum of selfish desires. Any redistributive interventions by non-market forces are seen as violations of the individual's basic right to liberty (Hayek, 1976). These consequentialist libertarian premises are central to the free-market principles of Chicago School-style neoclassical economics (Friedman, 1953, 1962), and bear similarities to neoliberal orientations.

The socialist conception of justice views equality rather than liberty as the moral imperative. Following Marx, just distribution conforms to the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Socialist justice therefore demands egalitarian access to resources (Sterba, 2003), and is distinctly deontological in flavour.

Justice in the liberal democratic tradition attempts to balance the ideals of liberty and equality. Liberal distributive justice has been approached under various guises ranging from free market neoliberalism to welfare liberalism. The most popular contemporary construction of contractual liberal justice is that advanced in Rawls' seminal *Justice as Fairness* (1971). Rawls argues that just distributive principles for society must be acceptable to free and rational persons under initial conditions of equality, which is ensured when we adopt a "veil of ignorance" with respect to our initial conditions in deciding on fair agreements (Rawls, 1971, 1999). This conception of moral equality in the right to resources is often evoked in support of the Brundtland version of sustainable development, which expressly

prioritizes the equitable satisfaction of human needs within and across generations (Brown, 2000; Langhelle, 2000; Wenar, 2001).

Theories of environmental ethics are inherently theories of distributive justice because they largely center on delineations of moral considerability and the definition of moral communities across species boundaries. How environmental ethicists have variously championed specific delineations may be usefully characterized into four categories along two key demarcations. The first demarcation separates anthropocentric from non-anthropocentric orientations (along with the attendant debate regarding attribution on intrinsic value to nature). The second delineates individualistic from holistic theories. Throughout the history of Western philosophical thought, the focus of ethical concern has largely been interhuman behavioural norms. The animal rights and welfare positions simply extend distributive concerns from humanistic ethics to individual animals based on arguments of utility or agency (Singer, 1975; Regan, 1985). Biocentric ethics extend distributive concerns based on the criteria of being alive, with the focus remaining the individual (Taylor, 1981). Holism has been championed on both anthropocentric (Norton, 2005) and non-anthropocentric grounds (Callicott, 1984, 1987, 1989, 1999; Naess 1973, 1989; Westra, 1994). Here, distributive justice requires allocative strategies which serve to maintain the integrity of host ecosystems and, by association, the well-being of those entities dependent upon them.

#### 2.1.1. Distributive Justice in Neoclassical Economics

Economic systems serve two primary purposes — the allocation of resources amongst competing uses, and the distribution of costs and benefits among market participants. In neoclassical economics the former is the domain of microeconomics, which emphasizes the development of market policies to maximize allocative efficiency. The latter is the domain of macroeconomics, and requires political decision making reflective of a society's distributive ideals. Since the positivist revolution in economics, it has been assumed that microeconomic questions can and should be neatly divorced from broader, macro-economic distributive objectives (Lipsey, 1983; Routh, 1989; Arrow et al., 2004). However, an examination of the assumptions underpinning the neoclassical conception of allocative efficiency reveal that efficiency cannot be defined in the absence of pre-existing distributive ideals. Although frequently portrayed as value neutral, even a superficial consideration of the neoclassical treatment of efficiency points to the numerous normative assumptions upon which it depends for its legitimacy. Thus distributive issues are considered irrelevant in neoclassical microeconomics not because they have no bearing but because they have already been, a priori, resolved. Specifically, neoclassical economics assumes: that initial endowments are irrelevant to the calculus of welfare; that the aggregate utility (a concept derived from utilitarianism, which occupies a minor position in humanistic ethics) of rational, self-interested utility maximizers is a defensible metric by which it is assessed; that individual preference communicated through the market mechanism constitutes an ethically sound basis for social organization; and that the calculus of well-being need only consider human agents (van der Veer and Pierce, 1997). It is for this reason that Keita (1997) argues, in defiance of positivism, that neoclassical economics should be viewed as a branch of applied ethics.

If any of these assumptions are rejected, then the legitimacy of the model itself is called into question. It would appear that each has, in fact, been richly explored and contested by numerous authors (for example, see van der Veer and Pierce, 1997; Sagoff 1981, 1998, 2004; Vatn and Bromley, 1994; Norton and Noonan, 2007), whose detailed arguments need not be repeated here but from whose work it is apparent that the value assumptions underpinning the neoclassical model are morally bankrupt. It is therefore constructive to entertain what might be more appropriate ethical premises for economic organization.

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