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Frugality and the Intrinsic Value of Nature

Abstract

The encyclical letter of Pope Francis, “Praised Be: On the Care of Our Common Home” (*Laudato si'*) presented an excellent opportunity to spark a conversation between economics and faith-based discourses on sustainability. The encyclical underlined the human origins of the ecological crisis and proposed fundamental changes in organizing our economic life. Among the important suggestions put forward by the Pope are increased frugality in consumption and acknowledging the intrinsic value of nature.

Frugality implies rebalancing the spiritual and material values in economic life. This may lead to the rehabilitation of the substantive meaning of the ‘economic’ and the revival of the corresponding logic of sufficiency. Despite their different ontological and anthropological conceptions the ecological position of the Pope’s encyclical has close links with Deep Ecology and Buddhist Economics. Both Deep Ecology and Buddhist Economics point out that emphasizing individuality and promoting the greatest fulfillment of the desires of the individual together lead to destruction. Happiness is linked to wholeness, not to personal wealth.

Mainstream economics fails to acknowledge the intrinsic value of nature. It is happy to put value on environmental goods and services merely on the basis of a market value determined by competing economic actors. But price, for sure, is an inappropriate model for assessing the value of natural entities. There is no algorithmic solution to nature’s allocation problems. Decisions and policies related to nature require making qualitative and multiperspective considerations and the proper use of our wisdom, knowledge and experience.

Keywords: *Laudato si'*, intrinsic value of nature, frugality, Deep Ecology, Buddhist Economics, environmental decisions.

For millennia, a thick layer of sea ice has defended the pristine, beautiful and utterly unique marine world of the Arctic waters around Svalbard, in the Barents Sea. But global warming is melting the ice and industrial fishing has started moving in, leaving behind a trail of destruction.

Svalbard's seas represent some of the last pristine environments left on earth, and are home to some of our planet's most incredible and mysterious creatures, creatures which thrived in this area that was once off-limits to humans, and stayed remote, unapproachable, protected beneath the ice. Species include beluga whales, narwhals, sea butterflies and lion's mane jellyfish.

Sea has lost 59% of its sea ice coverage since 1980 exposing the new territory to exploitation by industrial fishing fleets. We've barely even begun to discover all the incredible natural wonders beneath the Arctic ice.

Profit-driven fishing in the Arctic is a prime example of the market metaphysics. Market metaphysics is a worldview which can be characterized by the following statements: (i) 'to be' is to be a marketable resource; (ii) 'to be' involves being either an object available for productive activity on the market, or else a subject who makes use of such objects; and, (iii) the only mode of thinking is calculative thinking; the consideration and measurement of every being as a marketable resource. (Zsolnai, L. and Wilson, D. 2016)

1 Laudato si'

Integral Ecology, proposed by the Pope's encyclical, integrates the concerns for people and the planet. (Pope Francis, 2015). It is consistent with the "transdisciplinary" solution-oriented science advocated by Future Earth, the research program for global sustainability. (Future Earth, 2015) An integral and transdisciplinary understanding of the world links up science to human values and sees the world as a systemically connected ecology, economy, with equity and justice accessible through natural and social sciences, arts and humanities. Integral ecology and transdisciplinarity show a path to sustainable development through frugal

consumption, and acknowledge the intrinsic value of nature, and seek holistic and actionable knowledge.

In the encyclical the Pope underlines the human origins of the ecological crisis and proposes fundamental changes in the organization of our economic and social life. Among the important suggestions by the Pope are frugality in consumption and recognition of the intrinsic value of nature. Both these propositions pose serious challenges to economics and business as we know them.

In the encyclical we see a condemnation of the current “use and throw away” culture which “generates so much waste, because of the disordered desire to consume more than what is really necessary”. (Pope Francis 2015 para 123) It calls for “modifying consumption, developing an economy of waste disposal and recycling, protecting certain species and planning a diversified agriculture and the rotation of crops”. (Pope Francis 2015 para 180)

The Pope fears “we have too many means and only a few insubstantial ends”. (Pope Francis 2015 para 203) He encourages us to develop “more sober lifestyles, while reducing their energy consumption and improving its efficiency”. (Pope Francis 2015 para 193) He believes that “a decrease in the pace of production and consumption can at times give rise to another form of progress and development”. (Pope Francis 2015 para 191)

Christian spirituality underlined in the encyclical proposes “an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption. (...) We need to take up an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible. It is the conviction that ‘less is more’.” It is a return to simplicity “which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack”. (Pope Francis 2015 para 222) “Happiness means knowing how to limit some needs” (Pope Francis 2015 para 223)

Today the most advanced economies create a huge ecological overshoot, and use far more environmental resources and space than their fair earth-share would indicate.

Herman Daly (2008) has argued that frugality should precede efficiency if we are to achieve sustainability. Efficiency alone is not a solution for downsizing the material part of our overgrown economies. “An improvement in efficiency by itself is equivalent to having a larger supply of the factor whose efficiency increased. More uses of the cheaper factor will be found. We will end up consuming more of the resource than before, albeit more efficiently. Scale continues to grow.” (Daly, H. 2008: 222).

Frugality implies rebalancing the material and spiritual values in economic life (Bouckaert, L., Opdebeeck, H. and Zsolnai, L. (Eds.) 2008). This may lead to the rehabilitation of the substantive meaning of “economic” and to the revival of the corresponding logic of sufficiency.

Karl Polanyi (1977) introduced the basic distinction between the formal and the substantive meanings of the term ‘economic’. The formal meaning springs from the means-ends relationship and brings the scarcity definition. On the other hand, the substantive meaning points to “the elemental fact that human beings, like all other living things, cannot exist for any length of time without a physical environment that sustains them” (Polanyi, K. 1977: 12)

The substantive meaning reflects the patent dependence of humans on nature and their fellow beings for their livelihood. “Man survives by virtue of an institutionalized interaction between himself and his natural surroundings. That process is the economy, which supplies man with the means of satisfying his material needs”. (Polanyi, K. 1977: 11) So, in a substantive sense, ‘economic’ refers to the process of satisfying the materials needs of the community. (Zsolnai, L. 2002)

Thomas Princen (2005) argues that we need to move away from an economy built around the principles of profit maximization and efficiency towards one based on the logic of sufficiency. We agree with this and think that achieving frugality “requires more substantive organizational forms that radically alter the underlying structure of currently dominating configurations of formal economizing. This means (...) introducing smaller scale, locally adaptable, culturally diverse modes of substantive economic activities”. (Zsolnai, L. 2002: 661)

A reassessment of the role of business is inevitable. Sustainable development will require transforming businesses into progressive social institutions which respect nature, think of future generations and take into account the common good of society. Social and technological innovations are a crucial part of this transformation. Environmentally-benign and regenerative business solutions can be developed in collaboration with communities and societal organizations, where the bottom line concerns more than mere profit-seeking but the creation of socio-ecological well-being. Democratic participation in creating new and community-oriented governance mechanisms may create and encourage the required value-shift in business and bring about environmentally-appropriate technological development.

Pope Francis urges us to accept the *intrinsic value* of *nature* and to express appreciation for it. Natural beings and ecosystems “have an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness. Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself; the same is true of the harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in a defined space and functioning as a system”. (Pope Francis 2015 para 140)

In a very telling passage the encyclical emphasizes that “environmental protection cannot be assured solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits. The environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces”. (Pope Francis 2015 para 190)

The Pope’s encyclical recalls that Jesus taught the attitude of admiration when „he invited us to contemplate the lilies of the field and the birds of the air”. (Pope Francis 2015 para 226)

2 Deep Ecology and Buddhist Economics

Despite their different ontological and anthropological views of the world, close links can be seen between the ecological position of the Pope’s encyclical and the thinking found in Deep Ecology and Buddhist Economics.

The Deep Ecology viewpoint, developed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, (1989) provides a perspective in which humanity is inseparable from nature. If we hurt nature we hurt ourselves. Naess uses concepts from ecology (complexity, diversity, symbiosis) to clarify the place of our species in nature through the process of working out a total view (overlap between ecology and philosophy). (Drengson, A. and Inoue, Y. (Eds.) 1995)

Deep Ecology can be characterized by the following principles: (Ims, K. 2015)

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves - independent of their usefulness for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital human needs.
4. We need a substantial decrease of human population.
5. The present interference with the nonhuman world is excessive.
6. Policies which affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures must be changed.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will have to be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
8. Those that support these points have an obligation to try, directly or indirectly, to implement the necessary changes in a non-violent way.

Arne Næss suggested some of the inspirational sources behind Deep Ecology and included ideas from Hinduism, Confucius and Buddhism on the one hand, and Aristotle, Spinoza and Heidegger on the other.

Næss argued that we need to distinguish between a deep and a shallow approach to environmental problems. Shallow ecology represents a technocratic attitude to pollution control and resource depletion. Such a shallow approach assumes the interest of humanity in which the affluence of the people is vital. Consequently production and consumption levels and patterns go entirely unchallenged. In contrast to that Deep Ecology assumes a relational, total field perspective that fits into a non-reductionist, non-anthropocentric worldview and focuses instead on the underlying causes, the roots of the problems. The cure is quite radical: to change the basic ideological structure and that means changing how we, as humans, regard ourselves. Thus Deep Ecology redefines the very notion of self as a subject – and opens up the concept of an eco-Self. (Ims, K. 2015)

Næss' view begins with the one basic norm - Self-Realization! And that means "Self-realization for all beings!" The Self to be realized for humans is not the ego self but the larger ecological Self. Næss focuses on the human ability to identify a larger sense of Self. Næss stresses that we have to produce and consume less –in other words we should tread more lightly and more wisely on the Earth. His motto is: "Simple in means and rich in ends" - concentrating on the *quality* of life instead of the standard of living and celebrating instead the virtues of slowness and smallness in an age of speed and scale.

In his best-selling book, "Small is beautiful" E. F. Schumacher (1973) emphasized that the task and aims of economizing are to provide peace and permanence. Buddhist economics is dedicated to this dual task. The main goal of a Buddhist life is liberation from all suffering. Nirvana, which can be approached by want negation and the purification of the human character, is the final state.

Values central to Buddhist economics are simplicity and non-violence. From a Buddhist point of view the optimal pattern of consumption is to reach the highest level of human satisfaction by means of the lowest rate of material consumption. This allows people to live with less pressure and strain. People living simple lifestyles are less prone to aggressive behavior than those heavily dependent on scarce natural resources.

Buddhism rejects the assumption that man is superior to other species. Its motto could be "noblesse oblige"; that is, man must observe kindness and compassion toward natural creatures and be good to them in every way. In Buddhism the idea of separation is an "illusion". The whole is inseparably linked to its constituent parts and vice versa. Caring for the environment begins with caring for self. That is what leads to Buddhist precepts of respect for all life, simplicity and moderation, appreciating the natural cycle of life, not killing, not stealing, not taking more than you need. Craving and greed are sources of unhappiness, and demands for material possessions can never be satisfied so they represent a massive threat to the environment.

The Buddhist cosmology, in contrast to the anthropocentric worldview of Western culture, has the entire universe at its center.. To Buddhists human beings are humble in the totality and are essentially no more than grains of sand in the vast limitless ocean of space (Welford, R. 2006).

The Four Noble Truths of the Buddha address the dynamics of human life:

- (1) Life is suffering. This has to be comprehended.
- (2) The cause of suffering is desire. This has to be abandoned.
- (3) The cessation of suffering is the cessation of desire. This has to be realized.
- (4) The path to the cessation of desire requires practice.

Buddhist economics challenges the basic principles of modern Western economics and proposes alternative principles. (Zsolnai, L. 2008)

While modern Western economics promotes doing business based on individual, self-interested, profit-maximizing ways, Buddhism suggests an alternative strategy. The underlying principle of Buddhist economics is to minimize suffering of all sentient beings, including non-human beings. From a Buddhist viewpoint a project is worthy

of being undertaken if it can reduce the suffering of all those who are affected. Any change in economic-activity systems that reduces suffering is to be welcomed.

Modern Western economics cultivates desires. People are encouraged to develop new desires for things to acquire and for activities to do. The profit motive of companies requires creating more demand. Buddhist economics suggests that we do not multiply but simplify our desires. Once the minimum standards of material comfort, which include enough food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, have been achieved it is wise to try to reduce one's desires. Wanting less could bring substantial benefits for the person, for the community, and for nature. This is what anthropologist Marshal Sahlins calls a "Zen road to affluence." (Sahlins, M. 1998). Buddhism recommends moderate consumption and is directly aimed at changing one's preferences through meditation, reflection, analysis, autosuggestion and the like.

Modern Western economics aims to introduce market solutions wherever social problems need to be solved.. This leads to the process of marketization by which spheres of society became subordinated to the market mechanism (Polanyi, K. 1946, Sandel, M. 2013). Non-violence (ahimsa) is the main guiding principle of Buddhism for solving social problems and it is a basic requirement that an act does not cause harm to the doer or the receivers. Non-violence prevents doing actions that directly cause suffering to oneself or others and urges that participative solutions are found.

In modern Western economics the value of an entity (be it a human being, other sentient being, object or anything else) is determined by its marginal contribution to the production output. A project is considered worthy of undertaking if and only if its discounted cash flow is positive. The basic problem with this, the instrumental calculative approach, is that it generates the worst response from the beings involved. To get the best from the partners requires taking genuine care of their existence. Caring organizations are rewarded for the higher costs of their socially responsible behavior by their ability to form commitments among owners, managers and employees and to establish relationships of trust with customers and subcontractors. (Frank, R. 2004)

Western economic man is allowed to consider the interest of others only if it serves his or her own interest. The self-interested, opportunistic behavior often fails. Generosity, suggested by Buddhism, would work in business and social life because people are, in fact, “homo reciprocans” - we tend to reciprocate what we get and often give back more in value than we receive. (Bowles, S. and Gintis, H. 2011)

Buddhist economics does not aim to build an economic system of its own. Rather, it represents a strategy which can be applied to any economic setting at any time. It helps to create livelihood solutions that reduce the suffering of all sentient beings through want negation, non-violence, caring and generosity. (Zsolnai, L. 2008)

The ideas of Deep Ecology and Buddhist economics are strongly correlated. The Deep Ecology perspective presupposes that nature and humanity are inseparable and both have intrinsic worth. Buddhist Economics implies simplicity and non-violence in lifestyle and production. (Im, K. and Zsolnai, L. 2006)

Today's business model is based on and cultivates narrow self-centeredness. Both Deep Ecology and Buddhist Economics point out that emphasizing individuality and promoting the greatest fulfilment of the desires of the individual together lead to destruction. We each need to find our greater Self, and this is something which is more inclusive and all encompassing than the standard approaches permit. Happiness is linked to wholeness and not to personal wealth.

We need to find new ways of doing business and these ways must respect the ecological and ethical limits of business activities. Acting within limits provides the hope and promise of contributing to the preservation and enrichment of the world.

3 The Commonwealth of Life

Mainstream economics fails to acknowledge the intrinsic value of nature. It suggests valuing environmental goods and services on the basis of a market value determined by competing economic actors. The value of the elements of nature is calculated by using the „willingness to pay” principle or shadow price techniques. But the value of

natural entities cannot be calculated merely on the basis of their usefulness for humans. Price is a poor and misleading model for assessing the value of natural entities. John Gowdy and Carl N. McDaniel (1995) demonstrated that the value of natural entities cannot be determined by the market mechanism.

There is no algorithmic solution to nature's allocation problems. Joan Martinez-Allier showed that ecological and social values are basically incommensurable. (Martinez-Allier, J. et al. 1998) Decisions and policies related to nature require making qualitative and multiperspective considerations and the proper use of wisdom.

Peter Brown suggests that the following ethical postulates should be accepted for making decisions and forming policies about nature. (1) *membership* – humans are not masters but members of the community of life; (2) *householding* – the Earth and the living systems on and in it have intrinsic value and are worthy of respect and care in their own right; and (3) *entropic thrift* – low entropy sources and capacities that undergird the possibility to let life flourish must be used with care and be shared fairly. (Brown, P.G. 2015: 16)

We can agree with Hans Jonas whose ontological imperative states that there “ought” to be a continuation of “is”; that is, “nothing should be done to threaten the continued flourishing of life on Earth.” (Jonas, H. 1984:)

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