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What Needs To Be Done To Assure That Ethical Principles Guide Climate Change Policy Making: A Look At The Bridge at The End OF The World

By DONALD A BROWN on August 6, 2010 1:24 AM| 1 Comment | 0 TrackBacks

I. Introduction.

Every once in a while a book is published that goes to heart of issues examined in ClimateEthics This is a review of such a book. This post reviews *The Bridge At The End Of The World, Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing From Crisis To Sustainability* by James Gustave Speth. (Speth 2008)

Although this new book examines the causes of an unfolding failure to protect the environment on a matter of a number of global environmental issues, this book makes a major contribution to many issues that have been of interest to ClimateEthics. It is a provocative book, but in the best sense of the word. It is a compelling exhortation to look deeper and more critically at the institutions, dominant discourses, and reigning ideas structuring and defining global environmental controversies-matters that for the most part have gone unchallenged by civil society including environmental groups.

According to Speth, it is the current form of capitalism and its influence on governing institutions that it has that is most responsible for global environmental deterioration. If Speth is right, the dominant ideas shaping our environmental discourses must be confronted if there is any hope of moving away from the approaching environmental abyss.

Speth's new book is a clearly written, exhaustively researched, courageous, and compelling description of why the global environment has continued to deteriorate despite forty years during which the modern environmental movement has risen. Seeing a huge failure to make progress on protecting the global environment after almost four decades, Speth explains that in this book he is attempting to go deeper than he has before to examine the root causes of the growing global environmental crisis.

Speth's conclusions are remarkable coming from someone who has been called an "insider's insider." Speth was a co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council, member and chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality in the Executive Office of the President during the Carter administration, Professor of Law at Georgetown University Law Center, founder of the World Resources Institute, a senior adviser to President-elect Bill Clinton's transition team, administrator of the United Nations Development Programme; dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, and now a professor at Vermont Law School. There are few people in the United States that have been in a better position to diagnose the worlds environmental problems and their causes.

Because Speth so forcibly attributes the causes of the daunting global environmental crises to an out-of-control global capitalism, given his background as a very well connected Washington insider, the books conclusions are an astonishing lightening bolt that illuminates both the nature and causes of the environmental abyss the world is facing. That this book has come from the dean of the prestigious Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies with high-level ties to some of the most respected environmental institutions is astonishing.

The main idea of this book is that there is no hope of solving the world's major growing environmental and social problems unless there is much more robust government intervention in global economic markets. Although Speth in the end is not completely anti-market-he is very strongly critical of market failures and the hegemony of market ideas. Speth wants to keep a place for markets, but believes governments must keep markets in their place.

Speth concludes that lack of progress on menacing global environmental problems stems from global markets' inability to get prices right, produce public goods, exclusive focus on economic growth at all costs, sheer lobbying and political power, and their tendency to commodify everything including things that should be held sacred.

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II. Global Environmental Crisis and the Inadequate Current Response. .

Speth begins the book by looking into the abyss of unfolding global environmental deterioration. In addition to climate change, he examines global loss of forests, biodiversity, freshwater, and marine fisheries, as well as dangerous increases in toxic substances, nutrient loading, and land degradation.

On climate change, Speth points to increases in malnutrition and deaths disease and injury due to heat waves, floods, storms and droughts. Climate change's harsh impacts on human health include increased diarrheal disease, increased frequency of cardio respiratory diseases due to higher concentrations of ground-level ozone, and changes in the spatial distribution of infectious diseases. Speth is worried about climate change's growing threats to forests, rising sea level rise impacts on Egypt, Bangladesh, Louisiana and other places. If this weren't bad enough, Speth worries that the world is facing the potential of abrupt climate change and as a result believes the world is now dangerously near several tipping points. Speth believes that the planet is facing a dire emergency from climate change and other global environmental problems.

Yet since 1980 the environmental movement has analyzed, debated, and negotiated environmental policies, but failed to reduce these serious environmental threats. In fact, according to Speth, these dangers have become more serious and intractable during this time.

Speth attributes the emerging disasters to the form that modern capitalism has taken, a capitalism that makes economic growth a secular religion in all advancing industrial societies. As a result, whenever anyone wants to stop a proposal to protect the environment, the most effective argument is that the proposal will hurt the economy.

The book criticizes today's environmentalists for assuming that the growing global environmental problems can be solved within the current economic system. Today's environmental organizations, according to Speth, tend to be pragmatic and incremental and taks what they can get. For reasons explained by Speth, this approach will not work to solve the urgent environmental problems threatening the world

Today's environmentalists also act as if great global environmental problems can be solved at an acceptable economic cost, and often with a net economic benefit, without significant lifestyle changes or threats to economic growth. Speth believes that environmental groups have not focused strongly enough on political activity or organizing at a grassroots movement.

To understand the current feebleness of environmental groups, according to Speth one must understand the rise of organizations that have supported market fundamentalism. As the environment organizations were gaining some traction in the 1960s and 70s, the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage foundation, the Cato Institute, the Pacific Legal Foundation and other right-wing leaning groups worked with market fundamentalists and gained strength that effectively neutralized the environmental agenda Yet the drive for profits and economic growth has kept the environmental problems coming at society at the same time as environmental problems were becoming increasingly complex and scientifically difficult.

According to Speth, during the last forty years there has been less willingness to regulate environmental problems as environmental groups have failed to realize that their pragmatic compromising approach only works to protect the low hanging fruit, that is problems that can be solved without disrupting the economic juggernaut. Speth believes that environmental groups have not come to terms with the fact that the system of modern capitalism, as it operates today, will generate ever larger environment consequences outstripping efforts to manage them. Working only within the system as it is currently constituted will in the end not succeed. According to Speth what is needed is transformative change in the system itself.

The solution according to Speth is not to destroy markets but more significant government market intervention that demands that markets protect the global environment and solve other social problems. Among other things, needed to facilitate the needed market intervention, the international community must begin by facing the limits of the analytical tools that are frequently used to frame and structure solutions to social and environmental problems.

III-Analytical Tools-And Ethics

It is when Speth turns to the need to transform the policy tools that currently frame environmental problems that their emerges a clear connection between his analysis and some of the interests of ClimateEthics. Speth claims that the there are major flaws with the analytical tools that are used to assess social and environmental problems under the influence of reigning economic powers. These tools obstruct the kind of government intervention in markets that is needed.

Current economic analyses of environmental and social issues reduce all entities to money terms yet human life, health and nature cannot be described meaningful in monetary terms; they are priceless. According to Speth, when the question is whether to allow people to destroy human life, health, and nature itself, then market values tell us little about the social values at stake . Speth implicitly argues that analysis of environmental problems must consider how to think about the need to protect human health and the environment in regard to their ultimate values, an issue ultimately different than maximizing economic efficiency which has been often the ultimate goal of the analytical tools currently framing environmental controversies.

Of particular concern is the common use of formal cost-benefit analysis (CBA), an analytical tool that according to Speth often hurts more than it helps. In essence, the economist's position in

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Elaine Cimino commented on What Needs To Be Done To Assure That Ethical Principles Guide Climate Change Policy Making: A Look At The Bridge at The End OF The World: I enjoy re

supporting CBA is that everything has a price and price is the major determinant of human flourishing. Yet most people recognize that matters of rights and principles are beyond economic calculation. In fact setting the boundaries of the market helps to define who we are, how we want to live in what we believe in. There are many activities that were not allowed at any price and markets must operate within the framework constructed initially on shared values, ethics, justice, and common visions of the good life. Market rationality has colonized political rationality driven by ethical considerations. There is an important place for markets in public life, but markets are only a means to achieving some of societies most noble goals.

Although Speth does not expressly mention this, those who justify reducing all value to market value are usually understood to support an ethical theory often called "preference utilitarianism". "Preference utilitarianism" holds that governments should choose options which maximize humanity's ability to fulfill its desires where the values of human desires are determined by the market value of the objects chosen by individual preferences. CBA is justified on the basis of "preference utilitarianism" a position to be distinguished from mainstream utilitarianism because it is peoples' preferences expressed in market transactions that are maximized according to this theory. On the other hand, mainstream utilitarianism is concerned with maximizing happiness not simply human desires measured by preferences.

"Preference utilitarianism" is a much more ethically controversial theory when applied to problems like climate change than mainstream utilitarianism because the latter encourages exploration of what actually makes people happy, not just the preferences people express in market transactions. (Sagoff, 1982) That is, utilitarians urge decision makers to choose alternatives that will produce the greatest happiness- not simply to assume that happiness is equal to what people are willing to pay for something. For this reason, utilitarians advise careful thinking about which options under consideration will create the most happiness while "preference utilitarianism" is often exclusively interested in which options will produce the greatest economic value. For instance, a utilitarian may approve of spending money for such economically low payback activities as schools or parks because a case can be made that these investments produce greater happiness than other investments with higher economic returns. Moreover, utilitarians do not necessarily believe that all human choices made in market transactions lead to happiness. In fact, utilitarians urge that people reflect upon their desires and that people sometimes select behavior that is contrary to desires. As Ernest Partridge points out, happiness may require that people not act according to preferences.

> A recovering drug addict desires not to have the desires that he does. Which economic transaction is responsive to his wants, and to his interests: with his therapist or with his dealer? (Partridge, 1995)

In addition to these problems with "preference utilitarianism." since the very idea of morality requires that people reflect upon their preferences and not act in response to them particularly if they are destructive of other peoples' rights or interests, preference utilitarianism can be criticized for failing to consider whether the preferences of people are justifiable on ethical grounds. That is preference utilitarianism assumes that any preference satisfaction is good no matter if it is a preference to buy a rapist's knife or a serial killer's gun. For this reason a preference to buy a gas guzzling sports utility vehicle is as good as a preference to buy a hybrid fuel cell powered Honda or Toyota. If the United States were to tighten fuel mileage standards for SUVs this would be a cost according to preference utilitarianism.

Philosopher Mark Sagoff has argued that preference utilitarianism makes a mistake by confusing a person's action as a consumer with an action as a citizen.
As a citizen, I am concerned with the public interest, rather than my own interest, with the good of the community, rather than simply the well being of my family. (Sagoff, 1988: 8)

Acting as a citizen, according to Sagoff, I may take actions that are inconsistent with actions I might take as a consumer. As a citizen, I may support policies that harm my economic interests. For instance, as a citizen I might support policies that reduce global warming that might threaten people living on islands through rising sea levels even though I may not be personally threatened by rising seas because I live in Nebraska. I might support these policies even though the policies might drive up the cost of my electricity in my home. Yet preference utilitarianism would not acknowledge my vote for responsible global warming policies as a preference satisfaction while assuming the increased costs of the global warming program are limiting my individual preference satisfaction and therefore should be categorized as a cost.

Sagoff gives additional examples of conflicts between peoples' roles as consumer and citizen, and thereby demonstrates why individuals often have a greater commitment to their role as a citizen over their role as a consumer. One such example given by Sagoff is as follows:

> Last year, I bribed a judge to fix a couple of traffic tickets, and I was glad to so because I saved my license. Yet at election time, I helped vote the corrupt judge out of office. I speed on the highway, yet I want the police to enforce laws against speeding....I love my car: I hate the bus. Yet I vote for candidates who promise to tax gasoline for public transportation. ..The political causes I support seem to have little or no basis in my interests as a consumer.. because I take different points of view when I vote and when I shop..I have an "Ecology Now" sticker on a car that drips oil everywhere it is parked. (Sagoff, 1988::52-53)

Even though I may prefer to take action as a citizen that might work against my personal economic interest, preference utilitarianism assumes that people only act selfishly or that acting selfishly is morally acceptable.

Preference utilitarianism also does not usually count the beauty of a sunset or poem or the intelligence of public debate For this reason, preference utilitarianism often fails to measure things that make life worthwhile or sustainable unless they have substantial market force. For these reasons, preference utilitarianism, the philosophical underpinning of CBAs for many economists that have often been relied upon in arguments made in opposition to government programs to reduce the threat of climate change is often ethically dubious or at least raised ethical questions which remain hidden behind the apparent clarity of calculation.

Preference utilitarianism also conflicts with human rights , and procedural and distributive justice-considerations that most climate ethicist should be considered in examining climate change options, a subject frequently considered in ClimateEthics. See for example.Ethical Issues in the Use of Cost-Benefit Analysis of Climate Change Programs. http://rockblogs.psu.edu/climate /2008/06/ethical-issues-in-the-use-of-cost-benefit-analysis-of-climate-change-programs.html

According to Speth, assigning monetary values to everything also buries government in a blizzard of hypothetical valuations, obscuring rather than clarifying our collective priorities. It also forces analysts to numerically value things about which people disagree. For instance, is the existence value of abortion clinics a positive or negative number? It depends on who you ask. It is, according to Speth, likely that no one would be happy about making a decision based on society's average monetary valuation of the right to get to choose abortion.

According to Speth, the valuation controversy is only one of several that swirl about in an effort to reconcile the reigning paradigm of neoclassical economics so that it is sync with other values controversies.

IV. Speth's Solution

Speth makes many recommendations about how to fight the current dominance of narrow economic ways of looking at the world's problems. Included are the following recommendations. Governments should:
• Base environmental policy on the "polluter-pays principle" not economic efficiency alone. This would require those causing environmental degradation to pay the full costs of their behaviors..
• Eliminate the perverse subsidies in agriculture, energy, transportation or fisheries and forestry that have been enacted at the behest of the powerful interests.
• Recognize the limits and boundaries of market commodification
• Recognize that there is no quantitative methodology for making hard decisions and trade-offs. This recommendation is an implicit recommendation for framing environmental conflicts as ethical questions. Ethical questions, by their nature, cannot be reduced to an algorthim but must be supported by arguments about what is the good life and how to get their, what are our responsibilities and obligations to others including future generation, and what should be treated as sacred.

These recommendations will require citizens to see that environmental policy is ultimately a political and ethical issue and not simply about economics. According to Speth, we must realize that the faster market transformation is pursued, the better off our children and grandchildren will be

Speth is not completely against markets but he says we must get to a place where markets and the government are partners. We must, however, be anti-capitalists in the sense that argues that society and governments no longer concede special significance to the objectives or moral claims of the owners of capital. Speth argues that we must work for something new to be born from the need of markets and capitalism to work together to achieve morally acceptable goals. We must, however, recognize that today's system of modern capitalism is destructive of many things that we should value, not in a minor way, but in a way that profoundly threatens a planet

Finally Speth calls for a change in human consciousness. It's not enough to invent new machines, regulations, or institutions. He claims we must develop a new understanding of the true purpose of our existence on this earth and only a fundamental change in human character can save us

As we said at the beginning of this post, The Bridge At the End of the World is truly a provocative book. That is provocative in the best sense of the word-a calling to look deeper and more critically at the economic institutions, dominant discourses, and reigning ideas that for the most part go unchallenged and have been largely responsible for failure to protect the global environment..

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1 COMMENT

Elaine Cimino | August 6, 2010 10:24 AM | Reply

I enjoy reading your posts and often re-twweet them, especially facts that can be condensed into 45 characters.

I agree with the premise and problems that you outline. There are a few environmental groups that get it. The NRDC and the EDF and a few others do not. There has been a coupe de tat of sorts by these main stream environmental groups to corral smaller groups and take over the funding for them. I know I have been on the frontline in New Mexico for about 15 years on nuclear contamination, land use issues. I was present in the now infamous meeting that took place in 2002, when the conspiracy was starting to be implemented. You see the ethics problem of these groups are deep and corrupt and involve their funding. They also have the political clout in DC with spouses overseeing the till.

Much of the inability for groups to form a grassroots opposition was usurped by funding starting about 10 years ago. Those that took funding from were curtailed by being told to hold the NRDC policies which are to support the markets, cap and trade, offsets along with nuclear stockpile modernization, the list is too long to go on. You get the picture and so does Speth. 350.org, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth come the closest to being effective.

Why is there no funding for these and other grassroots groups to launch an effective campaign? There are people that can be motivated to not compromise our planet and who believe in the rights of nature on a global scale.

Outside of arrest for non violent civil disobedience on a large enough scale to stop the markets in its tracks, I don't see how to get the attention and challenge the mindset that can change the way we now live.

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