

Values and Environmental Ethics – Pillars of Changing Human Behaviour Toward Sustainable Development

Authors: **Florina Bran**, Faculty of Agro-Food and Environmental Economics Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies Romania florinabran@yahoo.com
Carmen Valentina Radulescu, Faculty of Agro-Food and Environmental Economics Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies Romania cv_radulescu@yahoo.com
Ildiko Ioan, Faculty of Agro-Food and Environmental Economics Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies Romania ildiko.ioan@yahoo.com

Sustainable development necessitates the harmonisation of human's and nature's needs under the siege of continuous demographic growth and the quest for wellbeing based on material things. This outcome implies important changes to occur at individual, collective and corporate behaviour. How they could be accomplished is a question that animates debates for several decades and revealed that solutions should be related to the process of valuation. Better understanding of value and how it relates to the needs of environmental protection is the aim of our analysis that recalls axiological milestones and compares them with environment related issues. Value as a product of object and subject in the framework of human aspirations is at some extent transposed in economic value. Environmental goods valuation in economic terms encounters numerous difficulties, including high costs and low reliability. Therefore we conclude that decision making should be underpinned not only by economic valuation, but also by value judgement that cannot be expressed in monetary terms.

Keywords: sustainable development; valuation; economy; changes

Introduction

Sustainable development is embodying human vision on a future in which nature is not a restraint but a stable support for economic activities and

provides all types of resources at a constant level. The concept emerged at the edge of economy-environment confrontation as one of the many solutions proposed to save the survival of humankind. Although controversy still persists about its appropriateness for acting as a framework for environmental policies worldwide, sustainable development became in most developed countries the support for high level decision making.

Despite wide acceptance sustainable development is expected as a result of many and profound changes in society [1]. These changes should occur especially in the field of economy, but they are not limited to this area. In addition, changes to occur in this field are depending on more profound changes such as the changes in the value structure that organize society. Economy is currently the most important driver for the path of material flows which, on their turn, determine the environmental changes able to threaten the wellbeing of humankind, but also its survival.

Our paper addresses the concept of value that lies at the core of decision making although its significance is different from one field of knowledge to another. What is valued by society depends on many factors and in the current context natural components are not granted with enough positive value to resist the quest of immediate needs fuelled by demographic growth, but also by affluence. How this unfavourable position could be changed is a question that necessitates an incursion in axiology in order to understand what values are and how they could be changed.

The value concept – its origin, definition, and characteristics

Origins

Environment and its components are judged in accordance with human needs and aspirations. Replacing indifference with basic valuation built on certain criteria is the defining component self-consciousness. Selections, hierarchies, preferences for objects, phenomena, human behaviours, material or ideological creations by the measure of how they satisfy at a certain moment or in general the human needs, desires and ideals define at the highest level the force and depth of self-consciousness and self-knowledge.

In case of many choice situations, humans should make a decision. The basis of this decision consists in motives and criteria that create a hierarchy of choices. Preference was and it is determined by a number of conditions that belong to the complex bio-psycho-social and historical nature of the human

being. Value is featured by diversity and permanence and it represents the framework for the entire human existence.

The field of our interest and appreciation transforms a property, an object, a relation, behaviour, a human creation, an idea, a theoretical system, a human individual etc. in value facts. Each of these gains a variable significance, in accordance with the particularities of the individual or social subject that makes the assessment. His/her judgement depends on the personal taste or cultural style, customs, tradition, historical and social circumstances.

Value facts outline a certain field of action where is possible to confront nature, as a need for detachment, but also of inclusion, integration. The construction of this field needs a division in opposing components, positive and negative ones. For instance, on the one hand there is nice, desired, promoted, cultivated, while on the other hand we find unpleasant, undesirable, avoided, rejected. Further, between the two poles a number of intermediary steps occur, imposed by the richness and complexity of the axiological phenomenon. The positive side of the judgement process are defining the values that are respected at a certain moment by society. The value is a philosophical concept and it is analysed within its branch called axiology.

The value concept was approached since ancient times and continues to fuel vivid debates especially in relation with environmental issues. Platon and Aristotel are the most prominent philosophers that provided important milestones for axiology. In their world vision unity in diversity is subordinated to a deep understanding of human essence by the values of Good, Beautiful, Harmony, Justice or more precisely by the unique Value principle that is unchangeable, imperishable, eternal, absolute. This vision was challenged later on by [2] who founds a theory of values that does not have on the top of the pyramid the Good, but the possible carrier of values, Human. In his work *The critique of judging capacity* Kant considerably restrains the part dedicated to explain nature by final causes in favour of the theorisation of the pleasure feeling, related with the concept of nature's finality, but having a pregnant independency in the field of art. The step is aimed both to outline the role for judging capacity in establishing a bridge between intellect and rational and subordinating its critical capacity to the active function of human subjectivity, materialized in the purpose of valuation.

Definition

Defining value is an important challenge for philosophical thought,

since its materiality is illusive. Values are not things, but they cannot exist without a material support. They are not ideas also, or concepts, notions, symbols etc. Values of correctness, goodness, beauty etc. do not confuse with the ideas of being correct, good, beautiful etc. because, unlike of these last ones, that are analyzed using concepts belonging to theoretical knowledge, values could be known and understood by the subject's unmediated experience and by its affective feelings. Nevertheless they do not confuse also with feelings because they have a general character and could be transposed in conceptual terms.

The differentiation of values from concepts was captured and explained by [3] who stated that values are generated as concepts, but they are general in another way. Concepts are general by comparing them with particular things that are subsumed. Values are general by comparing them with knowledge that comprises them as desirable things. They are general concepts because there are things that cannot be subsumed. There are general values because there could be identical desires. The generality of values does not assume the multiplication of partially different things and partially resembling, but the multiplication of entirely identical desire acts. Therefore values do not have a natural existence, but a social and relational existence. Further, values are neither an intrinsic attribute of material or ideal structures, nor an intrinsic attribute of the subject, but a specific way of referential and desire relation of subject with object, based on social criteria, therefore being variable, but only within certain limits.

Man grants value to objects, behaviors, ideas etc. or these get utility, ethical, esthetical, scientific value because man finds in them the echo of certain human needs and wishes, because he/she does not remain indifferent in front of them, but he is impressed by the features and qualities carried by them. Thus value is not something by itself, regardless to its belonging to object or subject, but the outcome of an interaction. It could be defined as the possibility hold in the thing that integrated in human activity could not remain neutral from the axiological point of view; or the possibility to be held in a subject that always have an axiological potential. Value emerges from the concordance, by knowledge and action of both factors. In [3] it is stresses that "value is for us the expression of a certain possibility, a possibility to satisfactory adaptation between thing and consciousness. People are always different, needs are changing and the objects that satisfy them could disappear. Something remains permanently and this is the value as the ideal expression of

accordance between it and the thing that could be always made.”

As the result of an interaction value is becoming a reality by the existence of an objective moment represented by the thing, phenomenon, feature, idea, behavior etc. that supports assessment and is the object of a valuation process and the subjective moment – human – considered from the point of view of his/her axiological capacity, features that allow a correct appreciation. The linkage between the two factors depends on the amplitude of social and historical experience, on the cognitive and axiological valences of human community, the overall features that define human condition, in general, and in a certain moment. Values cannot be reduced to individual desire or preference. They occur as a result of a wide range of appreciations. Values are not constitutive parts of things, but qualities that are gained for humans by certain elements of objective and subjective reality, elements regarded through the lens of a human attitude determined by the general historical context.

Value is a relation, a relation between human and the diversity of his world in which by polarity and hierarchy there is expressed the appreciation granted by a person or a collectivity to objects, phenomena, features (natural, social, psychological), behaviors, facts, ideas, various types of creation etc., in relation with their capacity to satisfy needs, aspirations, and desires.

Characteristics

The first characteristic of value is the one of quality, attribute, and feature. This characteristic reveals the degree of serenity against the erosive power of time. In the great masterpieces there is something universal, that does not disappear despite numerous and radical changes that occur in society.

The second characteristic of value is the one of relation. It reveals the history and process of values that have a formative, changing action deployed in a dynamic world. From this point of view the great classics of culture although remain the same they are always different by having different resonance in the mind and soul of people.

All types of value are featured by polarity and hierarchy. The polarity consists in the fact that value implies the presence of a yes or of a no, an approval and disapproval, a value and a non-value. Truth, good, and beauty are correlative with error, bad, and ugly, useful with useless, braveness with cowardice, modesty with infatuation, kindness with cruelty, intelligence with stupidity etc. A deep affinity mutually links and poses condition the terms of these relations. Because people are enjoying truth, good, and beauty, they will

reject error, bad, and ugly. “Only because our aspiration discovered bravery, nobles, and moderation, our repulsion records cowardice, vulgarity, and greed. Who wants not only to comprise, but to realize values, should defend them against the non-values with which they are related.”

The practical implication of this characteristic is that a positive value should not be defended against another positive value. Good should not be defended against beauty. It should be defended against the negative value which is its opposite. Beauty should be defended against ugliness, sacred against profane, justice against injustice etc.

Because the field of values is situated where objects, creations, behaviors etc. are not in the same level being granted with unequal ranks and senses (positive or negative), being appreciated differently in accordance with the degree of satisfying needs and aspirations, values are featured by hierarchy. Human experience reveals a wide range of attractions, intentions that express the complexity of the valuation process.

Valuation is an act of appreciation, being a result of a process of recognition that supposes the objective existence of values. Value is an investment of intelligence, sensitivity, passion, fantasy etc. Valuation is the process of making these investments as a spring of spiritual richness and driver of action. In [4] it is stated that the entire human existence supposes value. “This value is involved in any act of knowledge being the true creative power of knowledge. Value is a logical condition of general human knowledge and therefore there is no field in which value is not affirmed.”

Environmental ethics – a new valuation framework

Human’s spiritual dimension is considered the distinctive feature from other living things. We are pleased by thinking that we are different because we respect spiritual laws, because we are conscious and have feeling to assess the world of unspeaking life, where the strongest is the best.

From this perspective, human behavior is directed by different principles than the ones that underpin the rest of the living world. These principles are considered to be beyond the natural ones, being superior since they lead to more than survival – the spiritual satisfaction. Nevertheless, the overall behavior of human population is not different in ecologic terms from the behavior of other species in similar conditions. Within the human population, relations among individuals and the systems resulting from their

interaction are different. Poor physical status is not a conviction to perishing. Society cares more and more about the ones that are less endowed for the confrontation with the material world. Individual behavior is not determined only by primary needs. Relations among individuals comprise competition, but this is not the only type of relation to occur in social systems.

Currently, the prevalence of economic rationality sheds shadows over other drivers of human behavior. Regardless if it is the case of daily shopping, transportation, job, spare time, culture, or even religion, market forces seem to enforce the trends and influence decisions. Therefore, even in the field of environmental protection, the economy is considered the key component for finding solutions against the imminent ecological crisis.

The economic underpinning of human behavior is relatively young and despite its high efficiency it should not be considered the ultimate driver. This reason is strengthened by the fact that the economy engine of society has a very strong relation with the material flows contributing to environmental degradation. The same material framework is the one that is at some extent blamed by the spiritual aspiration of humans.

Economists are also engaged in an effort of widening of conceptual scopes. The final outcome of the economy's domination as source of social development was not entirely positive. Social and ecological outcomes are external reasons that support the reform of economic principles. Past and current economic crisis are internal reasons that hit in the same direction.

Economic growth is a subject of value judgment too. It is considered acceptable only if its finality is social progress and environmental sustainability. Human wellbeing is the ultimate goal of the economy [5].

In these conditions a secondary level intervenes in the control of human interaction and this is what humans respect as the most precious feature [6] – their spirituality. The influence of spirituality on human behavior along history is expressed in various and more or less overlapping forms. The most simple form is thinking, the conscious decision that is combined with learning and valuation of previous accumulations. At this level, spirituality serves individual aims, being loaded with use value. The true form of spirituality starts when it is accomplished at the level of collectivity, when it is distilled in internal norms of the society. Within social groups the laws that determine interaction are different from the ecological ones and they are based on spirituality. These laws are ethical norms a “carcass that protects the human ecosystem according to its internal needs and level of development.” [6] These ethical norms are the

value judgments that divide things, behaviors, ideas, patterns etc. between the two poles of desirable and undesirable.

The comprehension of values used for judgment is limited to things, ideas, patterns that could be compared with human needs and aspiration. Therefore, value is a human feature which is judged in the conduct of humans. An attempt to widen the content of valuation is made by emergence of deep ecology concept as it is expressed by the following principles [7]:

- Human and non-human life's welfare and bloom on Earth have intrinsic value. These values are independent from the use non-human elements for the satisfaction of human needs;
- The richness and diversity of life forms contributes to these values and are values by their selves;
- Bloom of human life and culture is compatible with a significant decrease of human population, while the blooming of non-human life is not compatible with such a process;
- Development strategies should lead to structural changes in economy, technique, and ideology.

The changes proposed by deep ecology are not easy to be accomplished. Ethics is facing a revolutionary situation. Only the human being has the capacity of moral evaluation. On the other hand, this species acts only on its own interest using all the other life forms. Human could be the only judge, but he/she should not be the only measure of things.

Conclusions

The continuous research of environmental degradation's causes revealed a variety of drivers. Following the track of causes we find firstly the incapacity of the economic system to value environmental goods and damages, while on the final section collective desires and aspirations underpinning the axiological support of society reveal their selves as contributors to the processes that released pollution in air, water, and soil, changed to global climate and convicted to extinction hundreds of species. The scope of ethics and axiology is outlined by the interaction of humans with things, ideas, behaviours, species etc. Within these limits environmental components are as valuable as their contribution to human wellbeing could be demonstrated. What is falling out from this circle has no value and is treated as such. Since many environmental components have an indirect contribution to human wellbeing, contribution

which is not perceived as such, they end up by having no value at all. A reorganization of values should include nature preservation in the positive axiological family.

The power of value judgment in substantiating decisions that have impact on environment is not high and their effectiveness could be contested. On the other hand, sustainable development necessitates significant reduction of human pressure on environment to occur within a narrow timeframe. The goals of climate change mitigation are already obsolete, since the economic and legal mechanisms were unable to induce high enough path for decarbonisation. This is also true for the fight against biodiversity loss. In these circumstances, any other contribution, including the value judgment of decision makers that acknowledge environmental ethics, could be a useful contribution. Further, recognition of environmental ethics could foster the improvement of policy and business tools used to reconcile human development with environment.

References

- [1] P. Bran, *Managementul prin valoare*, Universitară Publishing, Bucharest, 2010;
- [2] I. Kant, *Critica rațiunii pure*, Univers Enciclopedic Publishing, Bucharest, 2009;
- [3] T. Vianu, *Introducere în teoria valorii in Opere*, volume 8, Minerva Publishing, Bucharest, 1979;
- [4] P. Andrei, *Filosofia valorii*, Fundația Regele Mihai I, Bucharest, 1945;
- [5] C. Popescu, D. Ciucur, *Tranziția la economia umană*, Economică Publishing, Bucharest, 1996;
- [6] M. Bleahu, *Ecologie – natură – om*, Metropol Publishing, Bucharest, 1998;
- [7] B. Devall, G. Session, *Deep Ecology*, Peregrine Smith Books, Salt Lake City, 1984.