

# ECONOMICS AND MORALITY

## Colin Tudge

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**I**N THE EARLY 1990S I served on the Council of a large zoo. It (the council) was divided by general consent into the 'suits', who ran companies in their real lives and knew and cared deeply about money; and the 'beards', who could actually tell a giraffe from a hippopotamus and believed that zoos were about conservation.

Although this particular zoo was founded in another age for reasons of ideology and science, it was taken to be self-evident by the 1990s that money must prevail. The beards were allowed a minute or two to explain why rare if unspectacular beasts were important, and then we returned to the serious business, of jumbos and fun rides.

Thus was this portentous Council a paradigm of the wider world. For 'beards' read 'Greens'. For 'suits' read just about everybody who has serious power in government and commerce; the people who run the world. The suits currently pay lip service to the 'environment' because they perceive they will lose votes if they do not; but they see 'environment' merely as another item on the agenda, subservient like everything else to economic growth.

On the small scale, 'environment' is conceived as a material asset – essentially, as real-estate: to presidents Reagan and the two Bushes 'environment' means a 'golf-course', and a nice view. Admittedly, many in high places now perceive that large-scale environmental disturbance could make a nonsense of everything they do – with climate change the most immediate threat. Yet the world's biggest and most influential nation is content to flout the scientific evidence, as if even the laws of physics must give way to its whims, and Britain's Tony Blair recently told Jeremy Paxman on television that the Americans have a perfect right to protect their own economy even if the rest of us do drown.

The people who run the world of course lack education. Increasingly they are 'trained' (as opposed to educated) in management, law, or economics (which increasingly is equated with accountancy). The idea that the fabric of the Earth itself must be considered, or that other species have any relevance, remains entirely foreign. These leaders depend increasingly on scientists, who in turn are taught that the prime task of science is to generate short-term funds: which means weaponry, IT, and

biotech. The Greens, for their part, confine themselves to matters of environment – which largely means preventing pollution – yet the ideas that they espouse must permeate all aspects of life if they are to have serious impact. Greenness is an all-embracing attitude. Thus the suits who run the world lack breadth and vision; and the Greens, who in the end must be right, lack a coherent philosophy, that would enable them truly to seize the entire nettle.

At first sight, the aims of modern commerce and those of the Greens seem too far apart to be reconciled. Companies must seek to maximise wealth – and in a competitive world, those who take their foot off the accelerator will miss out to those who keep it most firmly to the floor. If the environment suffers as a result, so be it. In the short term the race is to the most bullish, and in the long term, as John Maynard Keynes observed, we will all be dead in any case. The Greens, on the other hand, urge a general slow-down, and would like to put a stop to some commercial enterprises all together.

Yet there are three theoretical ways forward.

The first, essayed several times throughout the 20th century, is to throw out capitalism, and hence commercialism, all together. The snags are obvious: that useful babies are thereby thrown out with the bathwater; that the transition from a capitalist to a centralised economy is immensely disruptive (and the planet cannot stand much more disruption); and that centralised economies have not generally proved convivial, and in particular have had scant respect for the environment, to say nothing of human rights.

The second two approaches involve liv-

ing with capitalism, but placing it within a moral framework. One route is through social democracy, as, in theory, is currently favoured in Britain. Commercial companies are relieved of the need to act as moral beings – except insofar as they are required to obey the law, as laid down by their own societies. They should not make money in ways that damage society, (for example by running arms, or polluting the North Sea), and a fair proportion of the money they make should be siphoned off for society as a whole to use as it sees fit. Social democracy ought to work but of course increasingly does not, since the companies are now more powerful than the governments who in theory should contain them: they compete with each other largely by flouting national laws and by making their own, while governments are reluctant to take society's share in the form of taxes for fear of killing the geese that lay the golden eggs. In reality, then, companies grow more and more transnational and all-powerful, yet acknowledge no constraints at all beyond those of the market. The battle between commerce and government that has been waged since the 17th century is now well and truly won. Thus, the market itself now defines morality. It really is not surprising that those who traditionally march to a different moral drum, for example the Muslim fundamentalists, feel threatened and affronted.

The third approach is the one acknowledged both by old-fashioned socialists, (those who stop short of the centralised economy), and by old-fashioned Tories: that the private companies who are the commercial players, should perceive themselves as moral entities. Such an attitude was common, even usual, in the early days

of industrial capitalism, as in numerous great Quaker companies. Now it is rare. Nineteenth century capitalist-moralists tended to be non-conformist tub-thumpers, who nowadays for all their virtues would be called 'patronising'. Modern companies who seriously aspired to be moralists should, among other things, have a serious concern for other species and for the environment as a whole. This should not simply be a matter of 'image' and public relations, as now is commonly the case, but truly of conviction.

But is the gap between the commercial companies who need to maximise wealth if they are to stay in business, and the Greens who are concerned for the planet as a whole, too great to bridge? Can we envisage moral principles that both would acknowledge? Nowadays, too, we live in an age of moral 'relativism', so that what's good in one society is bad in another. Can any moral principles be universally agreed?

Despite the apparent moral differences between peoples, and their religions, I think it is possible to discern some universal principles. 'Universal' does not mean 'absolute'; but it is good enough. Those principles are not defined by moral philosophers, who tend on the whole merely to provide complicated justifications for their own attitudes and prejudices, they have been defined by prophets, from all religions, over several thousand years (at least); and they were summarised neatly by the Hindu mystic Ramakrishna in the 19th century. Ramakrishna took the

line, (as prophets do), that morality should be defined not in terms of actions, but of attitudes (and most of the Ten Commandments are about attitude). What really counts, he said, are personal humility; respect for other, sentient beings; and a sense of reverence for the universe as a whole. (Ramakrishna in fact said reverence for God: but the phrase 'the universe as a whole' works just as well and spares the need for theological argument).

The more I've thought about it the more it seems to me that these three – humility, respect, reverence – tell us all we really need to know. If the directors of commercial companies shared these attitudes, they would not do vile things. The spoliation of seas and rivers, the wholesale pillaging of forests, the destruction of other species would not merely be unlawful. It would be unthinkable. So, too, ethnic cleansing; and indeed the replacement of traditional cultures, in all their richness and variety, with hamburgers and coke. This basic code would serve modern science, too. Where is the humility and respect in the present enthusiasm for human cloning, and designer babies?

Go back to first principles, in short, and everything seems to fall into place. I do not have a notably religious background, but I find it more than intriguing nonetheless that the most straightforward and convincing morality has come roaring out of religion, and from religion alone; and not just from one religion, but effectively from all of them. That at least is interesting. ■

*The last stage but one of every civilisation, is characterised by the forced political unification of its constituent parts into a single state.*

**Arnold Toynbee, *The Study of History***  
monitored by Diamantis Pateras