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Response to Robert Costanza 2000. "Visions of alternative (unpredictable) futures and their use in policy analysis"

Relaxing in Uncertainty

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Costanza (2000) has solicited the participation of his readers. In furtherance of his goal (and my own goal of promoting brevity on the Internet) I offer the following observations for the consideration of Costanza and others.

1. To the degree that wealth is gained by exploiting earth resources, that wealth may be expected to decline along with, and at a similar (related) trajectory, of the exploited resource. But indirect damage to ecosystems and earth structures upon which they depend may be a more potent force for destruction and extinction than direct exploitation—much like "incidental take" on a grand scale.
2. The problem with consensus is that it is by definition an average, appealingly democratic, but not necessarily, nay, unlikely, to be the optimum path toward a future that can sustain both a dynamically stable world (or local) ecosystem and a cash/credit economy with excess at its core.
3. Opinions are by definition connected to perceived individual self-interest. "Expert" opinion may be little better, sometimes far worse, than "inexpert" opinion. A nuclear scientist, for example, may persist in the opinion that technology will someday be developed to neutralize nuclear wastes; an inhabitant of a remote tribal/barter economy may believe that he/she needs an Internet connection to market his/her art work. There is a kind of seductive optimism in both positions; neither may foster a better world in the long run; either, to some extent, may—at least temporarily. That is to say that most "public judgments" will require the application of principles through a continuous process that questions those judgments—and the principles themselves. Opinions are adversarial; seeking a common truth in the recognition that all opinions share both truth and error and contain independent error and truth is more intellectually and scientifically defensible. This is the essence of intellectual discipline, and it can be learned; it can supplant winner-take-all debate and adversarial "law." To attempt to secure unanimity, even with public policy power, is a Gordian Knot of infinite proportions.
4. Resolving the conflicts is a large enough chore, but by what means and by what standard is "judgment" to be defined?
5. Regardless of the time remaining before the "ultimate" point of no return is reached, it should be at least theoretically possible to move the "ship" (Tyson 2000a) of destiny toward betterment and away from disaster by adding increments of reasoned judgment and action at all levels—personal, group, community, state. It is also possible to transcend such rigid hierarchical structures by emphasizing interconnected strands of relevance across them. *Conservation Ecology* is an exemplary example. It is perhaps no accident that "Internet" and "Worldwide Web," like those superior structures woven by eight-eyed arthropods, are a combination of superior strength and resilience. It may similarly be no accident that when they do break, their weavers simply keep weaving.
6. "The vision thing" has been discussed elsewhere in this Journal (Holling 1999, Tyson 2000b) but suffice it to say that vision needs to be organic and dynamic, continuously adjusting itself as the uncertainty principle does its work, much as organisms and ecosystems do. One need look no further for an "appropriate" model.
7. It may be necessary and desirable to accept "irreducible uncertainty" as a norm rather than an obstacle.

Movement toward betterment that has organic, ecological origins may beat "appropriate analysis" and "innovative implementation" in the long run.

8. Certainly a cooperative, precautionary "policy" is preferable to a competitive zero-sum game that is more "rational," since both rationality and policy have dismal records of performance. Something quite different in the human psyche is likely to be a precondition for these pop-philosophy elements to produce the "intended" result. Perhaps just as religions grew out of the parables of oracles to amuse and guide the distracted masses in the early days of civilization, a network of common, interconnected webs of new eternal verities will be needed to move world religions and secular thought into an integrated whole. Christianity and Islam can be honestly interpreted as requiring a respect for the Earth and its life, and secularism should welcome an enlightenment consistent with its own principles. Ultimately the final power and decision rests within each individual, not a universally "shared vision." The real challenge is to imbue the disparate expressions of uncertainty-fear with an invisible shared web of principle common to all.

RESPONSES TO THIS ARTICLE

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