

A Failure of the Will

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Like most others who have been confronted with the specter of peak oil and climate change, I, too, am deeply concerned about the question of whether or not we will be able to change the tide of human impact in time to prevent the worst of catastrophes, possibly even the premature extinction of the human race, not to mention countless other species. The elephant in the room for such debates (and many others) is, in my humble opinion, the question of *values*. Unless we address this question explicitly, I fear we will continue indefinitely spinning on the same old intellectual merry-go-round – which might turn out to be a not-so-merry-go-round. The problem of stating what we mean by “values”, however, is not a simple one, which explains why, understandably, it has been so thoroughly avoided – at least, of late.

With great interest I have followed much of the culture wars within the “peak oil community” as reported regularly and extensively on Energy Bulletin. In fact, the stimulus for submitting this particular contribution to that discussion was a provocative blog entry by Lakis Polycarpou, [*Is the Desire to Relocalize merely Aesthetic?*](#) – itself one of a series of responses to Stuart Staniford’s polemic on the Oil Drum, [*The Fallacy of Reversibility*](#). Staniford’s initial diatribe had evoked a whole series of rebuttals. The entirety of this discussion is rich enough to deserve its own in-depth analysis, but I will skip over that. In a nutshell, Polycarpou raised a courageous question: Do aesthetic values matter? Polycarpou’s own answer was, I presume, YES. Whereas, one can assume that Staniford and others, who would espouse to the primacy of the “scientific approach”, would probably say NO. This might, indeed, be an oversimplification, but let’s start here anyway.

First, though, let’s go back and rephrase the question in broader terms: Do values matter? And, if so, where do they come from? And how do we determine what they are? How do they relate to “scientific” knowledge? And a million other attached questions that have been debated for centuries. Etc. Etc.

To avoid this seemingly endless set of questions, at least for now, let’s go back to the initial concern as stated above: how do we stem the tide of human impact? Staniford’s approach was to address the question of predictability. He assumed that a certain group of people, given the derogatory name of “reversalists”, have “predicted” that the inevitable increase in the price of oil will lead to a favorable economic atmosphere for local, small-scale farming. Then he proceeded to demonstrate that, according to his own quantified economic analysis, this prediction was not necessarily valid. So, of course, the next question becomes (besides asking why Staniford has the personal need to deride other people with creative names): what consequence does his conclusion actually have? Should we give up or not bother with local, small-scale agriculture altogether? Should we just stop growing vegies in our backyards, because it is so much more “reasonable” to buy our “organic” food at Safeway? After all, you just can’t compete. Staniford’s exact point was left unstated – probably for a good reason.

Now, to play devil's advocate, let's assume that Staniford's economic analysis could be clearly and definitively refuted and that it is inevitable that industrial agriculture will soon be doomed and that we are compelled to take up "local" farming and "revert" to a more "rural" lifestyle, etc. Would this make us feel any better? Does this motivate us? Does it matter how we feel about the situation at all? Are there other factors besides strictly economic analysis and material necessity that could in some sense be operative in our lives?

In other words, if there really were two clear sides to this debate and it were not a totally artificial construct (which it clearly was), then both sides would be missing the point – at least, as far as I'm concerned. Don't we have a choice? Are we always merely driven by economic factors? Does not what we value matter? And so, we return to that dreadful question of values.

But to put it off a bit more, let's turn first to another issue. Those of us who have viscerally had the fear of God put in them by the apparent "facts" of peak oil are inevitably frustrated by the intractable public denial we are confronted with when we attempt to "enlighten" the uninformed with all of the relevant data that has been amassed in support of our convictions. Hence, we have seen the equally endless debate (on Energy Bulletin and elsewhere) about why the attempts to "educate" the public are not working.

But how is this related to the question of values? It is related because we can approach this "problem" of education likewise in various ways. One would be to determine through the "scientific approach" that, for example, "humans are evolutionarily hard-wired to think about themselves in the here and now first". Thus, it would be of little use to try to appeal to the mere "lay person" with the long-term effects of our behavior. Accordingly, it is thought to be strategically better to use more direct arguments, such as the idea that they could save money (right now) by reducing their energy consumption. Appeal to their immediate sense of self-gratification. Yeah, right, like that's gonna work! Not to mention the obvious questionability of the thesis itself. Presumably as long as the next "scientist" (e.g. say Staniford) does not come along and "prove" the economic "fallacy" of our argument, we should be fine with this strategy.

Did anybody ever ask these people, the ones who are to be "educated", what **they** think? Do **they** view themselves as "lizard brains"? And wouldn't you be somewhat offended if someone else treated **you** like a robot, a mere machine-like object to be tinkered with at will? It seems to me this "educational" approach is somewhat flawed. Is it totally absurd, from the "scientific" point of view, to think it could be more appropriate to consider appealing to people's values? Can we not give people a bit more credit? Or, in other words, shouldn't we treat them with a little more respect, like, say, as human beings? Something of implicit and undeniable value? Rather than a mere machine that has become somewhat dysfunctional? And needs "fixing"?

So, now let's get down to the question. Let's face it head on. How can we address the question of values? Well, I said it wasn't going to be easy. The first thing we will discover is that it is inevitably linked to almost every other question of significance you might ever dream up. Questions that address the concepts of objectivity, truth, knowledge. Etc. Etc. Yes, we are delving into the depths here. Imagine you are standing at the first rung of a ladder. It is the ladder to the 10-meter diving platform. You have never even made it to the 3-meter springboard before. But now you must climb that ladder and jump from 10 meters

into the complete unknown. And nobody else has done this for a while, either. Are you scared?

Surprisingly, I find that such questions do seem to evoke more fear in many people than facing death – perhaps even extinction. We would much rather tinker with the artificially construed “mechanics” of things – not that that’s much easier, of course. Tinkering until our tinkering proves to be fatal – as it is appearing more likely every day. Fundamental questions, like values, are too tedious, too “long-term”, too unlikely to be resolved, too unreliable, too uncontrollable – so we tinker, tinker on. Looking for the relatively simple “fix”.

Now, to finally overcome our avoidance of the question, let’s just start with the basics: When we say that we “value” something, we generally mean that we consider it to be “good”. Sounds simple enough. And that leads to the next question: good in relation to what? Or should we even say it is relative? Is there anything that is good “in and of itself”? Do values have any claim to something we might even remotely call “objectivity”?

But before anyone starts yawning, let’s pull this back down to earth before going on. One of the things that we “peak oilers” want to “convince” other people of is the need to rethink their relationship to transportation. This is approached in one of two ways. Either you can say that we need to find more efficient ways to get ourselves around (hybrid or electric vehicles? maybe even mass-transit? trains?). Or you might ask yourself: is the idea of mobility always something desirable in the first place? In other words, is it good “in and of itself”? If not, then what is it good in relation to? It seems to me that most people do not question the desirability of mobility, even when they do understand that the consequent CO2 emissions are not beneficial. So isn’t the real question: what are our values? Is it “irrelevant” and merely “subjective” to dig a little deeper here? Is mobility (at least, in its current hyper extent) a “non-negotiable” aspect of life? Are we “hard-wired” for it? Is it a good in and of itself?

Clearly, opening up these questions is precisely to address the question of values. At least, I, for one, do not see any strictly technical resolution to this issue on the horizon any time soon. But I certainly do not want to trivialize such value questions either. They are never easily answered. Nor do I want to imply a false promise to the reader that I – or anyone else – can deliver specific and definitive answers. And probably nobody will fault me for that. It is not hard for us to admit to being mere mortals when it comes to understanding questions of value. We are, after all, mere mortals. I think we can all agree to that. But we are also mere mortals when it comes to “knowledge”.

What I am suggesting is that the “problem” may have less to do with our lack of technical understanding of the dire situation we are in, but rather more to do with a failure of the will to do something about it. And this very well may be related to our lack of willingness to examine the nature of our values – or perhaps even to realize that values are not only relevant, but significant, even operative. And, if we don’t find a way to talk about them, we will fail at everything else, as well.

Obviously, though, I’m not going to be able to resolve this in a short essay. Instead, I will leave this much as an introduction and hope I will find the time between gardening and community involvement to go into more detail in future contributions to this discussion. Or maybe someone with better writing skills than I have can take this up from here.