

From the archives

Time to see the light

Why are the birds and the beasts of the forest not stewards too? Why must anyone be responsible for Earth?

The sun must rise on the science of economics to make it clearer for people to understand

IN THIS ISSUE we have explored the related ideas of humanity's common good and our stewardship of the Earth. These are core areas of modern human concern. But they are areas in which the present conventions of economic science give it little to say. This is a big problem, because it blocks clear thinking – where much tricky thinking is going on.

We have seen that stewardship is an important concept. Yet it seems that in several respects it is wanting and insufficient. It is a concept and a 'purpose' which is easily co-opted. It is easy for regressive privileged interests to present it as their heavy exclusive burden – and therefore as a public favour generously done, a responsibility more-than-shouldered – one that's due public recognition, and if possible public subsidy. And so we see that stewardship can serve as the weekday cloak of landed privilege.

Stewardship also suffers from being anthropocentric. It ignores the equal right of all life on Earth, in favour of our own species.

Stewardship is often an action of selective concern. It is a sake which is often offered in the non-ecological land manager's excuse note.

We might ask why it is that the human community in particular, and solely, is charged with the duty of stewardship. Why not, somehow, the birds and the beasts of the forest too? Why, indeed, must anyone or anything at all be responsible for the Earth?

It is George Monbiot who explains: it is we who are responsible for the Earth, because it is we, humanity, who have the power to destroy it. That destroying might come by the biggest of bangs, or the lightest of straws. As Monbiot says: with power comes responsibility – the greater the power, the greater the responsibility. And that is why we, humankind, are stewards of Earth: that is why stewardship falls on us.

But we have come to understand that our place on Earth not only imposes the duty of stewardship. Stewardship is a necessary but

insufficient declaration of humanity's place on Earth. What more is needed?

The concept of covenant has also been raised in these pages. A covenant is an agreement or understanding. The idea helps us to understand that there are two responses to our condition on Earth. Mankind's covenant is the gifting of the Earth to us. So we receive something for life, as well as being restricted in how we use it. It is the gift which in fact requires the stewardship. So we learn that we are just as duty-bound to the enjoyment of covenant – the full and common enjoyment of the gift of nature and community – as we are to the requirement of stewardship. How might that gift be received?

These questions bring us to the economics of stewardship and covenant. That is to say to the economics of responsibility and gift. This is the point to which mainstream economics must now turn its attention. Its help is needed to frame the answers to these questions.

The gift of all that nature and community provides is a common gift. We must respond in kind. We must conclude the bargain. Where what we enjoy is to the exclusion of others, people must return the gift of the benefits they receive from the common resource, as a rent

paid for what they receive. So returning the gift again to the intergenerational common pot.

Economics must become less abstract and obscure than its practitioners have lately made it. What it has to say must become more meaningful to people – both in their daily lives and in their more reflective moments. It must be solidly

grounded on the whole of our human social existence. Its purpose must be to explain to us the fundamental relations of that existence. By doing this it must direct us in the best ways of managing our social affairs. And that must start with our individual place in society on Earth. The practice of economics must have humanity's common good firmly in mind. People need to be put at the heart of economics.

Peter Gibb

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