# ETHICAL CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING ALTERNATIVE ENERGY STRATEGIES

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A part of the backdrop for a consideration of the energy issue is a shared sense that we are caught up in something quite new and quite different from the inherited and customary. A part of the old that I would be glad to get rid of is the alienation of humanists and scientists, the stereotyped images that humanists are concerned with the ideal and scientists with the real, each group dominant in its own domain, separate and isolated, without ever really meeting.

The old way of thinking, in relation to the energy issue, would suggest that values reside in some remote area outside what remains the basically technical realm of alternative energy strategies. But now it seems the recognition is growing that values are inseparably intertwined with technical considerations. Technical developments and their implications and possible consequences inevitably have value components. And so an important part of our task is the identification of these value components and an assessment of which values should be given greater weight in policy decisions about energy strategies.

For example, one of the powerful values that is operating in the current energy picture was identified by the former Monday night philosopher Dandy Don Meredith in his emphasis on Mo-mentum. One might even be able to formulate an operative moral law of momentum. "What we have geared up to do, we *ought* to do." I take it that momentum lies with the development of the nuclear energy alternative although it has been slowed somewhat. Vast resources of time, activity, personnel and money have been thrown into the development of this particular energy source so that with each step it becomes increasingly difficult to say, "Hey, wait a minute; Are there other alternatives?"

In a sense the nuclear energy issue is symbolic of a broad range of public policy issues in a technological society. Some critics of technology suggest that technology creates a momentum of its own that channels decisions in a highly deterministic fashion. According to these interpreters, freedom to channel technology according to human valuing and intentions is limited at best and illusory at worst. Instead, they insist, it is technological developments that determine values and

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choices. I am not ready to concede this, but the challenge is forcefully posed to prove otherwise. And the proof will not be at the level of theory but through concrete demonstration.

If one of our values is, as I hope it is, that we as persons and as a public have the freedom to shape the direction of technology, rather than being merely shaped by it, then it is important to resist the law of momentum so that we can give serious attention to a broad range of energy alternatives. This would suggest that we need to be cautious about making decisions in our generation that narrowly predetermine the options available to future generations. It may also suggest the desirability of intentionally supporting a variety of technologies for a variety of energy sources to keep alive the possibility of genuine options.

Along with momentum, it seems to me that there is another operative value framework in discussions of energy strategies. This is the pragmatic risks/benefits analysis. Pragmatism has long been an extremely influential orientation of the American people, of humanists as well as scientists, in its emphasis on efficiency, practicality, feasibility and rationality. It is frequently linked with the utilitarian ethic of the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people.

Although there is much that is valuable about this orientation, I believe it is inadequate by itself as a basis for evaluating alternative energy strategies. A pragmatic orientation helps in getting a job done; it is not very helpful in dealing with whether or why it ought to be done. It is not very helpful in setting the long range goals toward which we direct our practical know-how. Moreover, a pragmatic orientation may too prematurely label some alternatives as realistic, others as unrealistic. It may foreclose the dreaming of dreams, the creation of visions, or the exercise of our imaginations. Our crisis today, to use again that overworked word, is as much in the realm of moral imagination and intellectual vision as in the area of energy itself.

It also seems to me that a risks/benefit analysis begs alot of questions. What kinds of benefits and for whom? What kind of risks and costs, and who will bear them? How does one weigh present benefits with future risks? I know of no calculus for doing so. Nor do I believe it is simply a matter of applying a supposed objective rationality to such an analysis. Rather how we assess risks/benefits depends much more on our angle of vision on the matter, our interests, on what set of glasses we put on. In other words, it depends on a larger framework of values and commitments.

In identifying or developing a value perspective on energy re-

sources, there are two movements that are required of us, movements that are already part of our consciousness but that we have not even begun to incorporate adequately in public decision-making.[1] One movement is toward the future, not just the near future but also the far distant future. It is becoming ever more clear that our responsibility extends not just to our children and grandchildren but to generations beyond them as well.

The other movement that is required is suggested by the ripple in the stream analogy. In our considerations we shall have to learn how to move beyond the limited communities of locality, region and nation to the global community and even beyond that to the planetary ecosystem and the cosmos. Those of us who have specialized in values will have to confess that we have done little to develop value perspectives that include an expanded sense of time and space in a way that would be helpful in policy making. Criticism and challenges are by no means limited to the technologists!

Such value perspectives will by no means provide a neat resolution of value conflicts. Indeed they will probably make us more aware of such conflicts, between present needs and future considerations, between regional concerns, national concerns and global concerns. But the greater danger lies in pretending that there are no such conflicts, in trying to smooth them out too neatly.

Within this enlarged framework, it seems to me that there are at least three value clusters[2] that need to inform our consideration of alternative energy strategies. By clusters I mean that various values are related through certain groupings. The three I would propose are material well-being, energy conservation and environmental quality.[3] Obviously, these value clusters are interrelated, but each needs to be brought to bear on questions of energy strategies. Now just a brief word about each.

Concerning the value cluster of material well-being, it is clear that energy will have to be sufficient for sustaining an adequate life for the world's peoples. Included in this value cluster would be such concerns as available supply, accessibility; safety and health; economic impact in terms of jobs, financial cost, and capacity to provide for life's basic necessities; political impact in terms of peace and justice

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[1]See Larry L. Rasmussen, "The Obsolescence of Conventional Deciding," *Dialog,* 13 (Winter, 1975), 42-47.

[2]For the term "value clusters." see James Sellers, *Warming Fires: The Quest for Community in America,* New York: The Seabury Press, 1975, p. 39.

[3]These are similar to the criteria proposed by the 186th General Assembly (1974) of The United Presbyterian Church U.S.A., "Christian Responsibility in the Energy Crunch," *Church and Society,* 65 (September-October, 1974), 47-55.

considerations. Moreover, special stress needs to be placed on an equitable distribution of the earth's energy resources for the benefit of the global community. I believe this will require much clearer distinctions than we have made so far between high priority and low priority human needs with energy strategies being developed principally to provide for the high priority needs. Perhaps we can take a cue from John Rawls' influential theory of justice.[4] Any inequity in use or distribution of energy would have to be justified by its benefit for all, particularly the most disadvantaged. Or, put another way, as we make decisions about energy strategies, we need to evaluate them from the standpoint of those who currently lack a sustainable level of material well-being.

A second value cluster is organized around energy conservation. Many persons have spoken of the exponential growth in energy use, a growth that is staggering when projected on the screen of the future. There is not just a limit to our energy resources, there is also a limit to growth on this finite planet Conservation is necessary not just for insuring quality of life for future generations but simply for survival. As has been said many times, this will require changes in life style and policy not just to stabilize but to reduce consumption. Persons who do not approach a condition of material well-being would place conservation low on their scale of priorities, but we cannot afford to pit these two value clusters against each other. As demanding as it might be, we must seek energy strategies that are responsive both to material well-being and conservation.

A third value cluster centers around environmental quality. A number of concerns are gathered up here as well. The fragile web of life in our planetary home must be protected from harmful pollutants. Aesthetic values also come in here. Preserving the beauty and accessibility of natural environments is basic, not secondary, to the quality of human life. But even more may be implied. We have been inclined to look at nature anthropocentrically. We relate to nature in terms of its utility, hazards and beauty for us. We see ourselves as the center of the ecosystem. What would happen if we placed our ecosystem at the center seeing ourselves in relation to it? Maybe this would be a way to seek that harmony with nature that overcomes the alienation we currently experience.

To summarize, then, I am proposing that as criteria for evaluating energy strategies we consider material well-being, energy conservation and environmental quality within an expanding context of time and space.

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[4]John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971, esp. pp. 54-65.