
OBITUARY

Herman Edward Daly

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David Samways

Herman Daly, founding figure of the discipline of Ecological Economics and valued member of the Editorial Board of the *JP&S*, has died at the age of 84.

Kenneth Boulding once wryly observed: ‘Anyone who believes that exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist.’ Herman Daly devoted his working life to building a saner economics. As one of the first modern ecological economists, his lasting professional achievement was the exposition and development of the notion of the steady-state economy operating within planetary boundaries.

Herman’s distinguished career included academic positions at Yale, Louisiana State University, and latterly the University of Maryland. He also spent a period (1988–1994) as Senior Economist in the Environment Department of the World Bank where he helped develop policy guidelines for sustainable development.

In 1973 Daly edited the still-influential anthology *Toward a Steady-State Economy* and, in 1989, he co-founded the academic journal *Ecological Economics*. In that same year, he and John B. Cobb proposed an ecologically informed alternative to gross domestic product (GDP) in their Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW).

Daly’s ecological economics stressed that the economy is a subsystem of the Earth. As such, the economy cannot continue to grow without meeting physical limits imposed by the natural world. In particular, through the work of Frederick

Soddy and Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (a mentor during his doctoral studies at Vanderbilt University), Daly's approach emphasised the role of the entropic flow of materials and of solar energy – on which nearly all of life on Earth is dependent. From this basis, he concluded that the growth of populations of human beings and their physical stuff (homes, cars, factories, farms, domesticated animals, power stations etc.) are limited by biophysical boundaries. A truly sustainable economic system must operate within these fixed boundaries. Therefore, a large portion of the ecosystem must be left free of human interference to provide a low-entropy source of materials and energy, a high entropy waste sink and life-support services to ourselves and other species. To be sustainable, the global economy would not only have to be considerably smaller than it is currently, but operate at a steady-state in terms of physical throughput.

Inevitably, Daly concluded, a sustainable economy necessitates a trade-off between human population size and the level of per capita welfare. He confessed that he was unable to specify the exact size of a sustainable population and standard of living but observed 'we do know that it is not more people at a higher per capita consumption' (2018: 26). While acknowledging the relationship between economic development and lower fertility, Daly rejected the notion of demographic transition as some natural force that would automatically solve 'the population problem'. Indeed, he pointed out that, while demographic transition provided the politically easiest route to lower fertility, if such development led to a globally higher per capita consumption rate it would be environmentally ineffective.

As Peter Victor (2021) has observed, the influence of Daly's Christian upbringing on his ethics and worldview was evident in his work. Thus Daly's case for a steady state economy is not merely technical-ecological but ethical. Rejecting the value neutrality and emphasis on preferences central to conventional economics, Daly argued that decision-making elites are committed to economic growth not to provide a good life for all, but to maximise the standard of resource consumption for a small minority at the expense of future generations, the world's poor and other species.

Daly's value driven, purposeful and integrated approach to social, economic and environmental problems contrasted with what he saw as the morally nihilistic 'metaphysical naturalism' dominant in the intelligentsia: he observed that it 'is hard to imagine, under such a vision, from where the elite, or anyone else,

would get the inspiration to care for Creation' (2018: 31). For Daly, some notion of intrinsic value was necessary to defining the objectives of the human enterprise and our place in nature more generally. However, human welfare was central to his thinking and while acknowledging narrow anthropocentrism as ultimately contradictory and destructive of human interests, Daly was critical of what he termed 'absurdly strong sustainability' and the notion of the inviolability of nature (Daly, 1995). In a 2014 interview he commented:

We need to ask ourselves what real happiness is while improving our sense of ethics. If we seek growth that exceeds resources, we will create pain for ourselves. We once had plenty of forests and people suffering from poverty; therefore, economic growth was meaningful. The solution to poverty is not the redistribution of capital, but equal growth. In this sense, it is reasonable for us to think about returning to lifestyles of the past. (Daly, 2014)

In 1996 Herman Daly was the recipient of the Right Livelihood Award for 'defining a path of ecological economics that integrates the key elements of ethics, quality of life, environment and community'.

He also received a number of other awards for his work including:

- The Heineken Prize for Environmental Science
- The Leontief Prize
- The Medal of the Presidency of the Italian Republic
- The NCSE Lifetime Achievement Award
- The Blue Planet Prize of the Asahi Glass Foundation.

Herman's contribution to academia will ensure that he will be remembered long after his death, but perhaps most importantly he will be remembered by those who knew him as courteous and kind, generous with his time and encouraging to others. In an interview published when receiving the Blue Planet Prize, Herman said:

My dream is that everyone on the earth will strive for sustainability to ensure that everyone can enjoy a happy life. (Daly, 2014)

References

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