

Prudence and Precaution in Sustainability: synonymous or antithetical?

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The role of the precautionary principle in sustainability

- ◆ ...is obvious and has been well explained and developed essentially since Rio 1992 and Agenda 21, Johannesburg 2002, Rio 2012, etc.
- ◆ ILA in 1998 defined SD: “The need for medium and long-term planning in order not to operate structurally beyond the limits of environmental utilization of space and not to undermine the integrity of the environment on which nature and human life as well as economic development depend.”
- ◆ The PP helps in setting standards and guidelines when activities contemplated may result in damage, but there is no or little scientific evidence of the damage or of its occurrence.
- ◆ The issue is: how to set the standards in circumstances when we do not know the consequences of planned activities?

Precaution and Prudence

- ◆ UN Millennium Declaration (18 September 2000):
“Prudence must be shown in the management of all living species and natural resources, in accordance with the precepts of sustainable development. Only in this way can the immeasurable riches provided to us by nature be preserved and passed on to our descendants.”
- ◆ “There is no precautionary principle, only the criteria for assessing what actions are prudent” (George Pell, October 2011).

The philosophy of precaution

- ◆ To adopt caution when risks of damage are suspected but not confirmed by scientific evidence.
- ◆ Limits in law: the principle has no “animating spirit” (Ong) that would draw the line between “acceptable and unacceptable risks” (Bodansky); it is “literally incoherent” and “paralysing” (Sunstein) because it commands both action and inaction.
- ◆ Which come first, the standards to set the procedures, or the procedures to set the standards? (standards for *what?* The good life? The safe life? The controlled life? The autonomous life?)
- ◆ *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Hans Jonas, 1984: *homo faber* and the indefinite future.
- ◆ “In the face of the quasi-eschatological potentials of our technological processes, ignorance of the ultimate implications becomes itself a reason for responsible restraint—as the second-best to the possession of wisdom itself”

Precaution *or* Prudence?

Precaution	Prudence
<i>Homo faber</i> : what man can do	<i>Homo sapiens</i> : what man can understand
Making decisions for the collective	Man making decisions for the individual
Decisions for an indefinite future	Decisions for immediate context
Supreme wisdom unattainable because man rejected objective value and truth	Wisdom is necessary for prudence, and prudence leads to wisdom. Contemplation is essential.
Ideal knowledge (consequences of actions unknowable)	Knowledge of reality
Conjure up evil through our imagination and avoid evil through fear (heuristic of fear)	Seek, love and know what is good, avoid what is bad
Decisions based on probabilistic moral truths often never realised	Decisions based on search for and knowledge of what is good

Conclusion

- ◆ Many differences between precaution and prudence.
- ◆ The most striking is that precaution doesn't require to seek what is good, and is focused exclusively on what is bad, in a bid to try to avoid it.
- ◆ Prudence on the other hand is based on the wisdom acquired from contemplation of what is good.
- ◆ Aristotle and Aquinas posed the 4 essential human goods: the desire to preserve our being, the desire to propagate our species, the desire to live together and to seek higher spiritual things.
- ◆ The Rio 2012 Declaration was entitled "The Future We Want".
- ◆ Is it going to be precautionary, or prudential? Imagined, or real? Lived through fear, or through love?

Heuristic of Love

“Love seems to be implanted by nature in the parent towards the offspring, and in the offspring towards the parent, not only among men, but also among birds and most animals; and in those of the same race towards one another, among men especially- for which reason we commend those who love their fellow-men. And when one travels one may see how man is always akin to and dear to man.

Again, it seems that friendship is the bond that holds states together, and that lawgivers are even more eager to secure it than justice. For concord bears a certain resemblance to friendship, and it is concord that they especially wish to retain, and dissension that they especially wish to banish as an enemy. If citizens be friends, they have no need of justice, but though they be just, they need friendship or love also; indeed, the completest realization of justice seems to be the realization of friendship or love also.”

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