

Optimal levels of pollution



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Optimal Levels of Pollution Using the words “ optimal” and “ pollution” in the same sentence may appear daunting to many, however when the notion of an “ optimal level of pollution” is fully explained, it appears more logical and applicable to our current global pollution problem. In his book, “ People or Penguins: The Case for Optimal Pollution”, William Baxter makes several astounding points which lead us to the conclusion that zero pollution is not feasible, therefore we must consider what an optimal level of pollution for the earth is instead. If we can understand the notion that there are optimal levels of pollution, can we then make the assumption that there are optimal levels of most other things, such as violence, disease, and litter? Optimality, if taken into consideration on a world-wide, cross-species scheme, may actually be applicable to most of the things that we come in contact with on a day to day basis. In order to start applying a level of optimality and the lines we can draw concerning it, we must first understand the conclusions that William Baxter has considered concerning optimality. We can then draw a line concerning how the idea of an optimal level can come into consideration.

As stated previously, the notion of an optimal level of pollution is a thought that could be hastily pushed aside by many of today’s deep ecologists and environmentalists. However, Baxter lays out a very detailed and insightful proposition. He begins his essay by asking us what we want to achieve. Let us say that the goal in mind is to take positive steps towards improving the condition of our current environment. If we want to make the air cleaner and reduce GHG emissions, we must first ask ourselves some questions.

These might include: how may we go about doing this? How clean is clean? What exactly does clean mean? How low of a level must the emissions be before they are obsolete? Do we really need them to be obsolete? And skeptics may even ask, " Why do we need clean air? " Baxter says that these questions are inevitable and must be stated in order to make a change concerning the current situation. The only way to both answer these questions and make a difference is to establish some general community goals. The four goals that Baxter suggests shall be explained in more detail later. The goals must be applicable to most people.

We need to consider, first, the nature of human beings. We are a species that is innately self-centered. This is not necessarily a bad thing, because all species are innately self centered. It is natural for us to look out for our own survival and well being. However, humans are a species that also have the mental capacity to think outside ourselves and preserve the goodwill of other species.

Keeping this in mind, we must find a way to promote social change without giving up our selfish nature, but still providing enough room for those who wish to reach outwards (i. . towards nature, animals, preservation) to do so. In order to implement this social change, given our knowledge of the mostly ego-centric nature of humans, Baxter suggests that we need to implement 4 general community goals.

These goals will help to organize and unify our positions and objectives. If we do not organize ourselves, we will not achieve social, environmental, or any other type of change. Without a mostly unified body of goal-oriented

adherents, change cannot be made or manifested. We must have an optimal goal of human involvement in order to accomplish any type change. Baxter, however, does not assume that there will be unanimous consent.

The first of the five goals that he describes is the “spheres of freedom criterion”, in which “every person should be free to do whatever he wishes in contexts where his actions do not interfere with the interest of other human beings”(Baxter 519). The second idea he proposes is that waste is a bad thing. It seems that humans have always been faced with issues of scarcity, resources, labors, and skill in which are always find inadequate. Therefore, we should make use of all the labor, resources, and knowledge that are available to us.

Baxter says that the elimination of waste will bring about greater human satisfaction. Thirdly, he says, “every human being should be regarded as an end rather than as a means to be used for the betterment of another” (Baxter 520). The fourth goal is that every person’s opinion in the community should have equal weight concerning how evenly and fairly the rules are applied. Also, every human should both be encouraged and given the opportunity to improve his or her state of being.

He explains that the criteria by which we induce these elements of optimality must first be people oriented. As stated before, most humans make decisions based upon our ego-centric tendencies. Baxter explains, “no other position corresponds to the way most people really think and act-i. e. , corresponds to reality” (520).

Sadly enough for those of us who care for animals or the environment merely for their own sake, this is true. Although most things in our surroundings will be preserved because of their importance to humans, we cannot permit mass destruction of things that we consider valuable to us. These things tend to be the same as those that are important to animals. For example, clean air and clean drinking water are important for both humans and other existing life-forms. Therefore, we will not be able to destroy other life-forms simply because we do not see a direct connection between their innate value and ourselves. Baxter states that the decisions humans make are either private or collective.

The collective decisions are those that will benefit the human race as a whole, judged by the criterion stated above. However, he does not rule out the actions that individuals may take based upon private interests and concerns. For example, if my neighbor wanted to use his resources to feed the birds in his yard, he would be granted that option. "In short, my basic premise does not rule out private altruism to competing life forms" (Baxter 520).

Baxter says that a lot of goals of environmentalists simply cannot be accomplished for two reasons. He states first that: "I reject the proposition that we ought to respect the "balance of nature" or to "preserve the environment" unless the reason for doing so, express or implied, is the benefit of man" (521). Secondly, he goes on to explain that we cannot try to return to a "good" state of nature because we do not know what exactly a "good" state of nature implies. However discouraging this might be, it is fairly true. How are we to return to an ideal state of nature if we do not know

exactly what that state is in the first place? How can we strive for a goal that we do not know how to achieve? The next point that Baxter makes is that money is not necessarily related to the cost of things.

We need to think of cost to include factors such as resources, human services, and goods. For example, if we decide that we are going devote a certain amount of resources, goods, and human labor to cleaning up a polluted lake, we need to take into consideration the other things that we may be giving up. Once it is realized that dealing with the earth's pollution problem is really a trade-off, we can come to a better understanding of what the earth's optimal level of pollution might be. For example, Baxter suggests that we could give up some of our washing machines in order to save those costs for pollution control. The United States in particular could do well to replace the conveniences of a Starbucks or McDonalds around every corner with state-funded and regulated recycling services for every neighborhood. When this somewhat abstract theory is explained, it becomes easier to grasp the concept of an optimal level of pollution.

The optimal level of pollution theory by Baxter is a tug-of-war of costs. It is about balancing those costs with our current situation in order to do the best that we can for the environment. He is correct in saying that there is no possible way in this day and age that we could bring the earth to a level of zero pollution. To bring the level of pollution to a minimum, we have to first gain human involvement and interest by appealing to our ego-centric natures, creating a set of rules that most can agree upon, and weighing the costs and benefits of the luxuries that we enjoy in order to give them up for greater pollution control. However, is it easy for us to apply this “ optimal

level” theory to other problems and crises that that effect us? Where can we draw the line between what is considered optimal and what is below optimality? In order us to achieve an optimal level of anything; we need to understand the notion of balance. Balance is the understanding that there needs to be a certain amount of what is considered “ bad” and an equal level of what is considered “ good”.

We can think of balance with a kind of yin-yang mentality. We cannot achieve a level of zero pollution because this level would be completely unbalanced and would weigh too far on the negative end of the scale. The human race cannot exist without emitting a certain level of pollution or waste. We reach a state of unbalance when we deal with extremes, such as too much or too little pollution. If the proposed ailment in which we are speaking of begins to harm or take over our bodies or our planet, it should not be considered optimal or balanced. This is the point where the level becomes too positive, of when we have too much of something.

We can have too much disease, pollution, and people. This is where we can draw the line between what is optimal and not optimal. When we reach a level of unbalance, or when we have too much or too little of something, it is not considered optimal for survival. One example of an optimal level that deals with balance is cancer.

Everyone has a certain amount of cancer-causing cells in their bodies. However, when the immune system becomes weak, or is exposed to cancer-causing carcinogens, the cells multiply and cause this condition. Once the patient is infected with the disease, they have reached a level that is not

optimal. Their bodies contain too much cancer. The line is drawn when the health of a person is within question, and it begins to damage them physically and mentally. When the person in question is being taken over by the disease, their particular level of cancer is no longer optimal or balanced.

However, no one can exist without having cancer cells in their bodies, much like the planet cannot exist without certain levels of pollution. The line is drawn when the state within question, (such as cancer or pollution) creates unbalance or disease. For example, when pollution reaches a level that affects the ecosystem, which in turn affects humans, it is no longer considered optimal. It is affecting us in a negative way.

Another example for us to take into consideration is the question of population control. Is there an optimal level of people living on this earth? We need to look at both our resources and our state of living. Most people would consider an optimal level of living one that allows us to survive with minimum amounts of disease and struggle. This is a level that provides enough food and shelter for us to survive. Most people in our country are living at a level that would be considered beyond optimal, while many people in other countries are living in a state that would be considered below optimal. When we reach a population and even distribution of resources that allows everyone to have decent living conditions, we have reached the optimal level.

This would require populations living above the optimal level to give up some of their resources. We need to weigh our costs the way Baxter would recommend in order to reach a more optimal level of population. We would

also need to apply the 4 principles that he set forth in his book in order to encourage a better state of living for everyone on the planet. If we thought of population control in this manner- people would achieve a level of balance. No one would have the extra resources to provide for children that they could provide for. This would allow for the population to control itself in a way.

It might not be feasible for humans to reach a level of perfect balance, but it is possible for us to get as close as possible to this goal. The third example that I wish to explore is one concerning litter. As stated previously, in this day and age, humans need to produce waste in order to survive. Therefore the amount of litter we produce cannot equal zero. We must allow for enough litter production so as not to harm our environment, which would create unbalance and would not be considered an optimal level for our survival. An optimal amount of litter would be one which is between zero and a level which would harm us.

It is easy to think that we can produce as much litter as we want so long as it does not harm humans personally, but we need to keep in mind that when we harm nature and the ecosystems around us, it can harm us in turn. For example, if we pollute a nearby lake with litter that contains fish that the community feeds on, we are affecting ourselves in a negative way by default. Harming the lake's ecosystem with litter will in turn harm the fish. This will then harm the surrounding human population because they will no longer be able to eat the fish in the contaminated lake. Their food source will become obsolete.

It is possible to assume that the humans within this community will try to plant vegetables. However if their main water supply is the lake, the plants may become contaminated by watering. This is one example, however far-fetched, of how littering may harm us in an indirect way. We need to take these indirect causes of harm into consideration when we are thinking about optimal levels of anything. In conclusion, Baxter makes many claims about an optimal level of pollution that may appear to be mindless.

However, given the 4 general community principles that gain support, weighing the costs (not only monetary costs) and benefits of our actions concerning optimal levels, and through appealing to our human ego-centric natures, we can begin to realize that having an optimal level of pollution actually makes a lot of sense. Since it not possible to achieve a level of zero pollution, we are forced to determine what the optimal level of pollution might be. We cannot simply imagine ways to “ return back to nature” because we have no idea in our day and age what the “ state of nature” might be. In order to think about an optimal level of pollution we need to consider the fundamental element of balance.

As stated previously, we can apply this notion of balance and optimal levels to not only pollution, but things such as population control, disease, and litter. It is through a state of balance that we reach optimal levels of anything. The line of optimality is drawn when the problem in question begins to affect its surroundings in a negative way. We can apply these notions not only to pollution, but to our everyday lives.