

Valuing the Epistemic in the Search for Betterment: The nature and role of critical learning systems.

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Abstract: The problems now being faced by those concerned with the responsible development of global resources are immensely complex, with many aspects that reflect a very high level of riskiness to the integrity of the entire planet. This situation has many moral as well as techoscientific dimensions, yet conventional development paradigms continue to both exclude serious consideration of the former, while exacerbating some of the dangers of the consequences of the latter. While practitioners of “the systems approach” have long claimed that they do embrace fundamental concerns for ‘ethical defensibility’, their record has not been particularly noteworthy. Four impediments to the integration of moral or ethical aspects of development into developmental paradigms are identified and briefly investigated here: the strength of the prevailing paradigms, the nature of morality, the eclipse of morality, and connections between ‘epistemic’ cognition and moral development. In the second part of the paper, a systemic approach to resource development that has been designed to transcend these impediments, is described, and compared and contrasted with the earlier systemic approaches of Emery and his colleagues at the Tavistock Institute. The Critical Learning Systems (CLS) approach that has been evolving over more than two decades at the University of Western Sydney Hawkesbury in Australia has conceptual and methodological features that allow the explicit integration of moral reason with techno-scientific rationality. The particular significance of emphases on ‘epistemic development’ and on ‘futures orientation’ is explored in some detail. This is essentially a report of work in progress.

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