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RETHINKING THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

The term "sustainability" is a relatively new addition to the popular vernacular, but the concept has ancient and universal roots. In the earliest days of Chinese civilization, the Taoists and Confucians showed a deep respect for nature by advocating an approach to life that was understood to be in accord with an ordered and balanced world.

Keywords: sustainability

Content

RETHINKING THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY

1. Introduction: In Search of the Justification for Sustainability

From Rio to Kyoto, Bali, and Copenhagen, one of the defining concepts of our contemporary global culture is "sustainability." But what is sustainability and how is it justified? What are we trying to sustain? Obviously, not everything that is sustainable is worth sustaining. So what makes some things worth sustaining and others not? Different answers have been given by different groups that reflect their own interests. How are we to judge among competing interests? To answer these questions, we will argue that sustainability is at its heart a matter of ethics. To some this view may seem obvious. However, it is often overlooked or assumed without question. The problem with this situation is that when ethical views are left unspoken and assumed, the door is opened for counterproductive disputes. The goal of this paper is to explore the ethical foundation of sustainability, and highlight its essential importance.

We will argue that sustainability is not simply a trend or fashion that has gained currency due to circumstantial conditions. What gives sustainability its importance is not as an engineering, environmental, or management concept, but as an ethical concept that can and should guide conduct. The perspective we will advance is that sustainability is integral to the way in which we as humans rationally order our experience of the world through the lens of ethics. We will argue that sustainability can most readily be understood if interpreted from an Aristotelian perspective of that which is conducive to a flourishing life, but it is also consistent with other major philosophical systems of ethics. We hold,

therefore, that sustainability should be recognized as belonging to the canon of ethical concepts, such as courage, prudence, and temperance.

2. Examining the Record: How is Sustainability Understood?

The term "sustainability" is a relatively new addition to the popular vernacular, but the concept has ancient and universal roots. In the earliest days of Chinese civilization, the Taoists and Confucians showed a deep respect for nature by advocating an approach to life that was understood to be in accord with an ordered and balanced world. The Hebrew Scriptures affirmed the idea that human righteousness involved not only having the right relationship with God and other people, but careful stewardship of the earth. And around the world, we can find many examples of people such as the Native Americans who emphasized notions of harmony with nature as a sacred duty of human life. More recently, due to the emergence of serious problems associated with the human impact on the environment, the idea of sustainability has taken on an unprecedented significance, and the seriousness of this problem only seems to grow by the day.

Within the last 40 years, one publication that stands out as a landmark in ushering in what could be called the "sustainability movement" was the 1972 book, *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows & Club of Rome, 1972).[1] Although the word "sustainability" didn't appear in the book, the book conveyed a simple message: the contemporary mode of massive economic consumerism, on which the industrialized economies were based, was unsustainable, and humankind had to choose between creating a self-inflicted global catastrophe or adopting a path of sustainability. It turned out that the predictions made by the book failed to materialize, but the threat to society was accurate. As a result, this book contributed to a growing awareness of the perils facing the environment, society, and economy, brought about by widespread societal actions that were incompatible with sustainability.

In recent decades, with the expanding awareness of the threat of global warming, the public awareness of sustainability or sustainable development has grown steadily and spread around the world. How is the term understood?

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[1] The authors state, "It is the predicament of mankind that man can perceive the problematique, yet, despite his considerable knowledge and skills, he does not understand the origins, significance, and interrelationships of its many components and thus is unable to devise effective responses." We agree and would suggest that almost 40 years later, the significance of the problem of sustainability is not adequately understood.

There are numerous definitions of the word, "sustain." In its everyday use, the term refers to that which is able to be "supported," "borne up," "endured" or "maintained" over time. When we use the term "sustainability" in this paper, we will be referring specifically to the idea of "sustainable development." The British sustainability scholar, John Blewitt, defined sustainable development as, "the idea that the future should be a better healthier place than the present" (Blewitt, 2008, p. ix). In an often cited study, another scholar, William M. Adams, noted that the Brundtland Report defined sustainability as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Adams, 2006, pp. 1-2).[2]

Although these definitions serve a functional purpose, we will argue that they fail to capture important aspects of the meaning of sustainability. Before explaining what we see as the deficiency in these interpretations and proffering an alternative, we want to also point out that there are extensive ramifications of this popular view of sustainability as it has been operationalized by academics working in various fields, such as business, economics, the sciences and various social sectors. For example, there has been an explosion of literature in which sustainability is the main concern and is used to describe matters pertaining to technology, economic development, and approaches to management in areas such as "sustainable business," "sustainable technology," "sustainable agriculture," "sustainable economics," etc. In virtually all of these cases, sustainability is understood in terms of technologies and practices in which the human impact on the environment — primarily through its "carbon footprint," and other such measures — is minimized. The literature, therefore, tends to be descriptive of problems regarding the negative human impact on the environment, or prescriptive in the sense of describing methods to reduce the deleterious impact of human actions on the world — i.e., "how to" be sustainable.

As an example, in a study from the journal *Land Economics,* the authors try to engage in a cross-disciplinary analysis from the fields of ecology and economics. One of the key issues discussed in this paper pertains to the "contrasts between the views of ecologists and economists on the issues of resource substitutability and the reversibility of the consequences of ecological change" (Norton & Toman, 1997, p. 555). In another article in the popular press, and with a less theoretical orientation, BBC News recently reported on the city of Masdar being built from the ground up in Abu Dhabi with the aim of being the world's first "zero-carbon city," powered entirely by the sun. In describing how the "eco-city" is being designed to martial the latest in technologies in order to maximize sustainability, the article quotes one of the architects, Gerard

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[2] Adams drew this idea from the World Commission on Environment and Development's, *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 43. (Adams, 2006, pp. 1-2)

Evenden, as saying, "Lunar technology has begun to influence our thinking" (Heap, 2010). These are examples of sustainability expressed through research and technology, and in such articles, the ethical goodness of sustainability is a subtext that is assumed and not questioned, and the focus is on how to solve the empirical problem at hand.

In the area of management, sustainability or "going green" is increasingly seen as a central component of business strategy. For example, a 2010 Accenture-Global Compact study reports that 93% of CEOs believe that sustainability issues will be critical to the future success of their business," and "96% of CEOs believe that sustainability issues should be fully integrated into the strategy and operations of a company (up from 72% in 2007)" (Lacy, Cooper, Hayward, & Neuberger, 2010, pp. 13, 14). But what does it mean if business leaders embrace sustainability? Typically, in the business literature, the justification for supporting sustainability is couched in economic or management terms, such as profit or strategic advantage. As an example, in a *Time Magazine* article, "GE's Green Awakening," it states, "GE has a history of opposing environmental regulations that don't suit the firm." And yet, according to the article, the company's new CEO, Jeff Immelt, is pushing the company in areas associated with sustainability. "Is Immelt responding to a guilty corporate conscience?" the article asks. "Nope. He's seizing a blossoming opportunity: Green is where the green is" (Fonda, 2005). Taking this idea even further, in a *Harvard Business Review* article, Nidumilu, Prahald, and Rangaswami state: "Our research shows that sustainability is a mother lode of organizational and technological innovations that yield both bottom-line and top-line returns" (Nidumolu, Prahalad, & Rangaswami, 2009, pp. 57-58). Here and in countless examples in the current business literature we find the idea that the business justification for sustainability can be found in terms of profitability and strategic advantage.

It is virtually universally the case that the literature on sustainability follows on the assumption that "sustainability is good." But why? The problem we see in all the descriptions of sustainability is that either it is understood as an essentially amoral engineering or economic concept, or the ethics is assumed with little or no philosophical justification. Is sustainability "good" because it is conducive to profit or strategic advantage? We think not. Some might assert that there is no need to justify sustainability because the ethics is self-evident. Again, we disagree. Moreover, we argue that if the ethics of sustainability is not philosophically defensible, then it may be nothing more than platitudes and wishful thinking. This would render the entire ethics of sustainability suspect and easily manipulated to serve purposes that, in fact, are not ethical.

In light of this, we believe that to understand the meaning of sustainability, it needs to be seen as a matter of ethics, and even as a kind of virtue similar to the Aristotelian notion of "temperance." With this is mind, we offer the following as a provisional definition of sustainability:

Sustainability refers to a moral way of acting, and ideally habitual, in which the person or group intends to *avoid* deleterious effects on the environmental, social, and economic domains, and which is consistent with a harmonious relationship with those domains that is conducive to a flourishing life.

During the remainder of this paper we attempt to show why we think this provides a more adequate understanding of sustainability as an ethical concept.

3. On the Multiplicity of Rationalities and the Experienced World

Although the idea of sustainability or sustainable development has gained near universal acceptance, the reasons for supporting it vary based on the interest or perspective of different groups. In this case, we will argue that there is a risk that the pursuit of sustainability could lead to conflicts among competing interests. On what basis can such conflicts be reconciled? To answer this question we ask whether there is any basic, philosophically defensible reason for advocating sustainability as an ethical good, or is it instrumental, serving only to support the objectives of other interests, whatever they may be?

To get at the ethical nature of sustainability, let's reconsider how it is often interpreted. We think that a very good report on sustainability is that written by William Adams, "The Future of Sustainability: Re-thinking Environment and Development in the Twenty-first Century." According to Adams, sustainability is often illustrated as a condition which is supported upon the three pillars of environment, society, and economy.
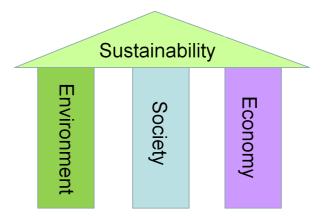
Figure 1: The Three Pillars of Sustainability (Adams, 2006, p. 2).

But he suggests that a better illustration uses "the three interlocking circles model" in which there is a "balance between the dimensions of

sustainability" (Adams, 2006, p. 2).[3] The three circles to which he is referring are depicted with the following illustration:
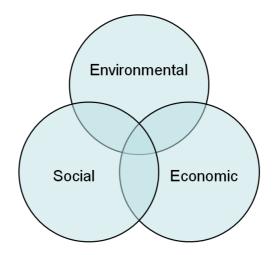

Figure 2: The Three Interlocking Circles of Human Experience Interconnected through Sustainability

This illustration or the idea it conveys has been widely adopted in many publications. There are many things that we find valuable about this illustration. Most importantly, this graphic attempts to communicate two important points: first, the three circles capture in a simple manner three essential domains of the world experienced by humans[4]; and, secondly, this illustration is meant to suggest that sustainability is or could be seen as the mutual intersecting of these domains.[5] Later in this paper, we will reflect more on the qualities of the three identified domains, but for now, suffice it to say that this description is intended to provide a simple, yet comprehensive schema that covers some of the major domains of the world as experienced by people. We agree that sustainability can provide a bridging rationality among the three depicted domains. The reason why, however, is unclear. The reason, we suggest necessitates that we recognize that these domains have their own characteristic rationalities and that

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[3] The use of three interlocking circles to represent the idea that sustainability is the intersecting point among the domains of the environment, society, and economy is repeated in many publications. What we think is not adequately explained, however, is why this is the case.

[4] By illustrating the world as experienced by human beings in terms of three domains, we are not suggesting that this is a complete picture. There are other major domains, such as religion, that could be added. For the sake of simplicity, however, we have limited our schema to three domains.

[5] For another discussion that interprets sustainability in terms of the intersection of the domains of environment, society, and economy see the publications by (Goodland & Daly, 1996) (Sarkis, Meade, & Presley, 2006, p. 751)

sustainability ethically construed serves to bridge these domains. To clarify this point, we will elaborate on the ideas of "multiple rationalities" and the "experienced world."

To understand sustainability, we need to understand its underlying rationality, but what do we mean by "rationality?" Rationality is a mode of thinking according to which we order the world. We distinguish the "experienced world" from the "world" as a general term, because the world as we experience it gains its meaning based on the way in which it is ordered through human rationality. The experienced world of a bat, a shark, and a spider are very different from that of a typical human being.[6]

Our use of the term "rationality" needs some explication. When we use the term "rationality," it is often equated with reason, and as such is thought to be unitary and universal, as exemplified in areas such as symbolic logic or mathematics. In these cases, for example, the principles of modus ponens or equations such as 1+1=2 are considered not to be domain specific, but true in all possible worlds. Logic and mathematics may serve as the prototypes for the universality of reason, but in the course of everyday life, "rationality," at least as we are using the term, is domain specific. It would be more accurate, therefore, to speak of multiple "rationalit*ies*," rather than a unitary and universal "rationality."

To elaborate, we will use the term "rationality" to refer to a way of thinking that exhibits its own "internal logic" or consistency according to a loosely agreed upon set of goals or ends pursued and the rules or principles that are applied to the interpretation of phenomena within a particular domain of experience. Here we are not denying the objectivity of reality and the capacity of human reason to understand and explain this reality. What we mean is that in different contexts the same reality is interpreted from different points of view. "Rationality," in this sense refers to a phenomenological gestalt or "world view," held together by its own loosely related principles, rules, interests and goals that are used to interpret, organize, and evaluate phenomena.[7] It is through such

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[6] Indeed, although not its main point, this is in keeping with Nagel's seminal article, "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?"

[7] The idea of domains of rationality as we are describing it bears much in common with Wittgenstein's "language games." According to Wittgenstein, within our ordinary language we can find usages, which he calls "language games" that are guided by a grammar and syntax that helps to give meaning to that particular language game. Nevertheless, these interpretations of the world through the intermediation of different rationalities are just that, interpretations. We are not denying the reality of the world itself and the human capacity to access such a reality. What we suggest is that there are different phenomenological approaches to the same reality.

rationalities that our experiences are interpreted and, in the process, our world is ordered.

To give a simple illustration, let us consider professional sports as a domain. Within this domain, we can distinguish many sub-domains, each of which is organized around distinct principles that give the sport its character. These principles and rules form the rationality that characterizes the sport. Boxing and figure skating are both sub-domains of the parent domain of Olympic sports. As such, both sub-domains are found in Olympic competitions and both are judged with awards that lead to bronze, silver, and gold medals. However, the rationality that leads to the gold in figure skating is very different than that associated with boxing. If figures skaters started throwing punches at their partners or if boxers started dancing in romantic embrace, the rationality of both sports would have been violated and such incidents would be disqualified as inadmissible aberrations that violate the rationalities of each of the sports.

Unlike boxing or even sports generally, sustainability is a domain that is so broad and basic that its rationality is linked to the entire spectrum of human experience, and this, we would suggest, contributes to the lack of clarity regarding the justification thereof. In analyzing arguments pertaining to sustainability, we will find that in some instances people will be arguing based on the rationality of economics, while another person may be arguing in terms of environmental security, and so on. Moreover, one person may move between domains of rationality without even being aware of doing so. This change may be appropriate because one form of rationality may be more suited from one perspective than another. But, this may add to a lack of clarity. Metaphorically, one person may be arguing about apples, while the other is concerned with oranges, and a third may be focusing on fruit generally.

If sustainability is, as is often suggested, found at the intersection of the domains of environment, society, and economy, it must follow from an underlying rationality that is common to all three and more basic than that which is peculiar to each one individually.[8] We argue that this unifying underlying rationality is ethics.

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[8] In our discussion thus far, we have focused on the idea of multiple rationalities that are domain specific. Sustainability, we are suggesting, is the rationality that represents a point of convergence among the three rationalities. As such it constitutes a kind of bridging or unifying rationality.

For our analysis, we will stay with the widely used schema of the world as divided into three domains of environment, society, and economy.[9] One might think of this as an elaborate way of referring to what more simply could be referred to with just one term, such as the "world," or "earth," or "environment." However, that is not the case because when we say that sustainability refers to the "experienced world," we are referring to the world as experienced by people through the intermediation of the rationalities specifically associated with the environmental, social, and economic experiences. Sustainability, we would suggest, only applies to this *experienced world*, not to a world outside the domain of human rationality. Consider this: the sun will eventually burn itself into extinction, and along with it the earth as we know it will cease to exist. And yet, it would be a misuse of the term if we referred to the sun as an example of non-sustainability in the way we are using it. Sustainability doesn't apply to the physical environment in itself, but rather our human relationship with the world.[10]

We have stated our central question as, "Why sustainability?" We are now ready to begin to offer an answer, which is that sustainability is part of the answer to the ancient and central question of ethics, "How are we to live?" As such, sustainability is a matter of ethics, and as with ethics generally, it applies to humans qua conscious beings and our relationship with the world, by which we mean the "experienced world," understood in terms of three major domains: the environment, society, and the economy.

Let's briefly elaborate on what is meant by each of these domains, beginning with the "*environment.*" By "environment" we are not referring simply to an "external ecosystem," but an *experienced* ecosystem with which we

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[9] Sometimes the same idea is expressed with different terms, as is the case with the idea of Elkington's well-known idea of "triple bottom line." See, for example, *(Elkington, 1998)* and *(Fisk, 2010)*.

[10] Just as we would not attribute sustainability to the physical environment, so too, we would not apply it to animals. For example, ecology books have many examples of over-predation, whereby, for example, a hypothetical wolf population is so successful against its main prey that its food supply is diminished and the wolf's population is forced to decline. Although an ecologist might predict that the wolf population was not sustainable in its ecosystem, we would not criticize the wolf for acting in a way that violates sustainability (or "sustainable development"). We may think it unfortunate for the wolf, but two important points apply: first, we would accept that as a part of the way nature maintains balance, and second, we would refrain from critical thoughts against the wolf because it can't be held accountable for understanding its own impact on the ecosystem. The rise and fall of its population has nothing to do with sustainability in the sense of sustainable development any more than does a tree's shedding of leaves in the autumn.

as persons have a conscious and deliberate relationship. The experienced environment is the complex ecosystem which has at its center conscious human life. It is not simply a planet cloaked in gases; it is one in which air quality can be assessed as good or bad. *Society* consists in the complex web of relations that together constitute our personal and collective lives, which may be defined as parents, football fans, or members of a political party. The *economy* refers to all those relationships in which there is an exchange of goods and services usually through the financial system, but it may also be through alternative means, such as barter.

4. On the Ethics of Sustainability within the Domains of Rationality

We have suggested that the ethics of sustainability can serve as a bridging rationality among the three domains. Let's now consider how this is the case. To do so, we first need to better understand the nature of the rationalities that characterize the three domains and consider how the domains may interact with each other. As we will show, there can be conflicts within and among the different domains, but the ethics of sustainability can serve as a bridging rationality that reconciles competing interests.[11]

To begin, let's consider the place of interests within domains. Among the three domains — society, environment, and economy — the one that is most easily grasped is the economic. In the *economic domain*, as in others, the relevant variations on economic rationalities are not limited in a strict and singular manner, but cluster around a variety of economic perspectives that differ according to the individual's interests and experiences. The rationality of the consumer seeks to maximize the value of expenditures; the rationality of the shareholder is one that seeks to maximize profit, and so forth. Among the cluster of economic rationalities, there may be some people who will be so obsessively profit driven that all other interests will be sacrificed. Such a person would not hesitate to sacrifice the interests of other stakeholders in order to maximize profit. Naturally, someone who exercised his or her economic rationality in this way would run into very serious conflicts either with others who hold to different interests in the economic domain or with others concerned with defending interests associated with other domains.

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[11] In the following paragraphs we will illustrate the idea of competing interests by describing the situation as if individual persons represented one particular interest. This may be the case. However, it may also be the case that within the mind of an individual, different interests will be represented in the way that a person reasons through a problem.

Similarly, the *environmental domain* is a function of the rationalities that cluster around environmental interests. At one end of the spectrum, a person may be so focused on environmental protection that virtually every deliberate action he or she does would be done with a view of eliminating or minimizing the impact on the environment. But there are other specific rationalities associated with the environmental domain, such as aesthetics and security. The aesthetic perspective would focus on the beauty associated with the natural world, whereas the security perspective would focus on the environment as it pertains to human survival. Consider the practice of open–pit mining: an environmental rationality that emphasized security might permit open-pit mining so long as certain security standards were not violated, whereas an aesthetically-oriented environmental rationality might object to open-pit mining on aesthetic grounds.

Finally, the rationalities associated with the social domain cluster around what is in the interest of a particular society or community, which could be defined according to many criteria. For example, society may be drawn very widely so as to embrace all of humanity, or one may narrowly restrict it to one's clan, nation or any number of subgroups. The way a society is identified follows from a defining rationality. While every member of society is guided by a social rationality, political leaders have a particularly prominent role not only in carrying out civic duties, but also in influencing public opinion regarding how to interpret the defining characteristics of membership in a society and the rights and duties associated therewith. [12] To illustrate, at one extreme, persons such as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela dedicated their lives for the sake of a social rationality that accords political-rights to all people irrespective of race; at the other extreme, the Nazi party used ethnicity as the defining criterion in their social rationality and based thereon launched the holocaust. Clearly, the conflict of interest between the inclusive Mandel type rationality and an exclusive Nazi rationality is categorical and of paramount importance since what is at stake may be human survival.

As with ethics generally, an individual can act as a "free-rider" by violating the norm of sustainability, but if a society did so in an extreme way, it would risk collapse. Easter Island is an example of a society that violated environmental sustainability to a point that was irreversible. A non-sustainable economy would be one that depended on activities that led to irreversible exhaustion; some have argued that the Roman Empire was such an example. And similarly, a non-sustainable society would be one that failed to meet the needs and interests of its members. One example might be the Shakers, a society in which all the members were expected to be celibate. If new members joined

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[12] In this sense, we are using the term "politician" to mean "a leading civil servant."

in sufficient numbers, the group could have survived, but this seems not to have been the case and so the group is almost, if not completely, extinct.

Many or most interests can be carried out without engendering conflict. Every day people cultivate flowers in their gardens without having to engage in battles with multinational corporations. Towns pay teachers in their schools without engendering protests from other town employees or entangling themselves in disputes involving acceptable automobile emission levels. It's not that some connection can't be imagined, but in the practical course of events, the two interests don't intersect. When interests do intersect, then they must be moderated and the process of moderating among competing interests is called *dialog*. We illustrate this dialog among interests across domains as occurring within "the area of inter-domain dialog."
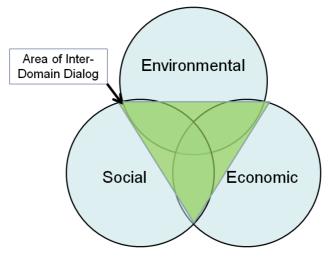

Figure 3: Area of Inter-Domain Dialog

If there is opportunity for conflict within a domain, the opportunity for conflict is even greater between domains. An advocate for environmental issues may be completely unconcerned with the implications for business, and someone advocating on behalf of a particular social group may consider environmentalists to be nothing but insufferable nuisances. How can competing interests be reconciled? We would suggest that between the alternatives of non-intersecting interests and conflicting interests, there is an area of convergent interests and this is the area of shared ethics of sustainability, which is depicted in the illustration below.
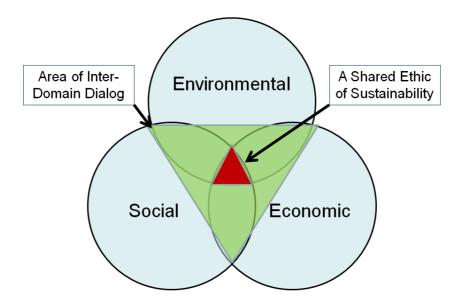
Figure 4: A Shared Ethic of Sustainability

What should be stressed is that when there is a conflict among interests within a domain or between domains, sustainability when interpreted as an ethic, provides the common framework of human flourishing for moderating and adjudicating among competing demands. It provides the same standard that can be applied to both sides in a conflict and offers a convergent and universal bottom line resolution across all three domains.

Let us make a qualification: we are not saying that convergence occurs only in an ethic of sustainability, nor are we saying that sustainability is the only form of ethics. However, we are saying that all three domains must share in an ethic of sustainability, and if this were not the case, the world as experienced would, by necessity, fall apart. Why? If a domain is unsustainable, it will fail and if any domain fails, then the lived world will fail, just as no stool can stand on two legs. The world as experienced most obviously needs the environment, but while it may be less obvious, without society a person would lack the resources to be a person in the sense of a language-speaking, civilization-building creature, and the same would hold true if there were no economy.

5 Sustainability: Does it Embody the Criteria to Qualify as an Ethic?

We have maintained that the three domains of environment, society, and economy are a schematic representation of much of the experienced world of human beings. Furthermore, only when sustainability is present in all three domains can we talk about a holistically lived world. This is relevant to understanding the current pervasive focus on the issue of sustainability. Problems of non-sustainability that are manifested in issues such as global warming cannot be limited to a single domain, but affect the entire experienced

world. And, unlike isolated examples of small societies such as that of Easter Island that suffered demise due, at least in large part, to environmental non-sustainability, the current problem of global warming affects the entire planet. This situation has forced an awakening within us that sustainability is central to human flourishing.

We can now see that sustainability pertains to an attitude or respect towards the world that leads to a prudential interaction with and among the environmental, social, and economic domains. This is not simply a matter of engineering efficiency, it is a way of life, and as such it is a matter of ethics. This ethical connection is further elucidated when we consider sustainability from the perspective of the major ethical schools of thought. There is, for example, an obvious connection between this view of sustainability and Aristotelian ethics, although the connection can also be seen in terms of other schools of ethics. According to Aristotle, the virtues are "a mean between two vices, one of excess and the other of deficiency" (Aristotle, 1976, pp. 108-109). Crucially, it is those "excellences," i.e., virtues, that ultimately are conducive to *eudaimonia*, the happiness[13] associated with human flourishing. Human flourishing, therefore, is the ultimate indicator of Aristotelian ethics. Similarly, we see sustainability as a virtue that consists in the mean between the extremes of wasteful excess and an emaciating deficiency in our encounter with the three domains. As we see it, although Aristotle didn't identify it as such, sustainability could be seen as a "virtue" similar in nature to prudence or practical reason (*phronesis*) and temperance. And, as with all virtues, the virtue of sustainability is one that is conducive to creating the happiness that follows from a world in balance, which is essential to human flourishing.[14] It is important to stress that if sustainability is not understood from an ethical sense, then it cannot serve as the basis for adjudicating among competing interests.

If sustainability is interpreted as an amoral concept, it no longer has within it the qualities that would enable us to meaningfully distinguish between valued and deleterious conditions. Consider the example of slavery. It is a reprehensible institution that has existed for millennia and continues to do so in

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[13] The term happiness is the translation of the Greek concept *eudaimonia* and cannot be understood in its contemporaneous meaning of "happiness" because eudaimonia has not just a sentimental or affective meaning; it refers to human flourishing or human fulfilment.

[14] At the level of the individual, Aristotle describes eudaimonia as "an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue." (Aristotle, 1976, p. 76) When applying this generally to society, according to Sarah Broadie, "A true, articulate, substantial conception of the human good, such as he means to present in *Ethics*, is in Aristotle's view an instrument to aid the statesman in his work of maintaining and developing a flourishing human community (1094 a 22-24)." (Broadie, 1991, p. 204)

certain areas. Now, if sustainability were not conceived as being a moral concept at its core, in which is implied notions of the good such as is found in the idea of social flourishing, then slavery could not be considered inconsistent with sustainability. However, as soon as we recognize sustainability as an ethical concept, slavery no longer would qualify as being considered sustainable.

Following Aristotelian tradition, moral goods can be distinguished from useful or pleasant goods, and among them we find human motives such as justice, truthfulness, honesty or peace. These goods are associated with anything that contributes to the flourishing of human beings and their moral character (Ryff & Singer, 1998), but also with meaningful purpose and transcendent principles (Dent, 1984; Roberts, 1988). Sustainability, therefore, would be classified among this kind of moral good.

Significantly, this interpretation of sustainability qua ethic is not limited to an Aristotelian outlook but is consistent with many of the major systems of ethics. For example, sustainability is consistent with the Kantian categorical imperative. The first form of Kant's categorical imperative is, "Act only according to the maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law (G 420)" (Kant, 1983, p. 29). Certainly, we can universalize the principle of sustainability, but could not do so with non-sustainability. Sustainability is also consistent with the Kantian notion of "universal dignity" according to which one is enjoined "Act in such a way that you treat humanity whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means (G 429)" (Kant, 1983, p. 36). Sustainability honors the dignity of others (in this generation as well as generations to come), by treating the world as experienced as our collective inheritance. Non-sustainability clearly violates the dignity of others since a person who pursues non-sustainable actions may benefit him or herself but in doing so may be violating the needs and interests of others.

Sustainability is also consistent with the core moral precept of utilitarianism as expressed by John Stuart Mill as the "Greatest Happiness Principle." According to this view, the "good" is understood as that which contributes the greatest happiness to the greatest number (Mill, 1993, p. 3). This too may be most readily seen via the negative interpretation, since actions that are unsustainable may lead to serious adverse effects on others, whereas sustainable actions should generally provide benefits to the actor without inflicting negative consequences on the majority of others.

Sustainability conforms to notions of reciprocity expressed in the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," since by consciously acting sustainably one is consciously regulating one's behavior in such a way that shows similar consideration both to the needs and interests oneself and others.

Finally, it is worth noting that while sustainability is not specifically mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human rights, it is implied in such aspects as Article 1, which affirms the universal dignity and rights of all people, and Article 3, which states, "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." Without sustainability, none of these rights can be honored.

7. Concluding Thought

What do we mean when we take something for granted? Often what we mean is couched in terms of regret; namely, that we overlooked or failed to give proper recognition to something that we knew to be true and essential to, say, a relationship. This occurs, for example, when one fails to tell or express one's love to a 'significant other.' If we take for granted that which is essential to it, the relationship can be damaged. Sometimes it is recoverable, sometimes not.

It may be true that most would agree with us that ethics is essential to a proper understanding of sustainability, and even that at its core sustainability itself is an ethical concept. However, we fear that too often, this truth is taken for granted, and in doing so, our understanding of sustainability may be flawed. And we see this as posing a risk that the sustainability movement may lose its way or even fail entirely.

We have tried in this paper not only to reaffirm and clarify why and how ethics is the justifying rationale of sustainability, but also to underscore that, in the final analysis, ethics is the key by which disputes and conflicts among the rationalities of the economic, social, and environmental domains can and ought to be resolved. We are not saying that these are the only domains of rationality that are important to a complete understanding and proper implementation of sustainability, but that they are crucial domains and the ones referred to most often in the current sustainability discussion. Nor are we saying that the ethical rationality is fully sufficient to solve all the problems of the sustainability movement.

However, we are saying that if we fail to recognize the essential ethical grounding of sustainability, or if we take it for granted, then sustainability can easily lose its way and will, in the end, fail to be justified. To say this is simple, and perhaps too easy. To keep ethics as the sustainability movement's polestar will continue to be demanding and difficult.

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