

INTERGENERATIONAL EQUITY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND ETHICS ISSUES IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Keywords: intergenerational equity; human rights; ethics issues; sustainable development; ethical dimensions; John Stuart Mill; deliberative democracy

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Summary

The first section of this article evokes the new perception of “ecological scarcities” that underlies the concern for the (un)sustainability of “development” in our contemporary societies. This allows the introduction in the second section, of the irreducible ethical dimension of any concern for sustainability. The “Brundtland” definition of sustainable development, as a development process that “meets the needs of the present generation without compromising those of generations to come,” announces intergenerational equity as a basic precept. Yet, to what extent can the two goods—the needs of the present” and those of the future generations—be satisfied simultaneously? Supposing that the economic and ecological feasibility of a sustainable development can be demonstrated, what are the societal (ethical, political, institutional) motivations that may assure its attainment? The third section gives a quick overview of the (mostly economic) literature that discusses intergenerational equity as an arbitrage of costs and benefits between present and future generations. The economic analyses highlight the need for societal commitment for achieving any meaningful intertemporal equity of resource allocation. The fourth section deepens this argument, drawing for illustration on the arguments of John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century on justice and the stationary state. In the fifth section, it is noted that the antagonism between present and future generations, is only one aspect of a generalized structural opposition—between “us” and the “other,” between self-interest and interest in the life of another, between the human and the nonhuman world, between “our” culture and other cultures. The quest for a sustainability ethic centers on questions of coexistence and respect of difference, where notions of hospitality and human dignity are perhaps more important than material wealth. New forms of politics will have to be invented that seek out

prospects of coexistence and reconciliation. The sixth section discusses some seeds that can be found in a variety of deliberative democratic practices.

1. Introduction

The term sustainability evokes a broad and diffuse set of concerns to reconcile the tensions between (1) exploitation of the potentials of nature in the pursuit of human well-being, and (2) coexistence of diverse life forms, both human and nonhuman, on the planet. When Ricardo (1817) wrote, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, on the “indestructible” (but scarce) powers of the land, he wrote also of the abundance of nature’s free gifts. “The brewer, the distiller, the dyer,” he said, “make incessant use of their air and water for the production of their commodities; but as the supply is boundless, they bear no price.” Evidently, now that not merely continental freshwaters but also the high seas fisheries and global atmospheric systems are the object of international agreements on pollution emissions controls, it is no longer remotely plausible to treat the raw materials and “services” furnished by nature as indestructible and/or non-scarce.

This new—or, at least, newly perceived—ecological scarcity must be analyzed in political and economic dimensions, both of which open out onto considerations of justice and ethics. The political dimension refers to the need for institutional mechanisms for resolution of conflicts over access to raw materials and environmental services. Economists have typically approached the environmental problem in terms of the idea of “correct prices” for environmental goods and services reflecting the opportunity costs of their use. Exploitation of a natural resource implies a reduction in what is or might be available for use tomorrow. Similarly, destruction of a habitat or of life-support functions of an ecosystem through pollution discharges, impairs the capacity of that ecosystem to deliver services such as amenity, clean air and water, and thriving plant and animal populations, into the future. Thus, the future generations’ access to environmental sources of well-being is neither “exogenously given” nor indestructible. In this context, what is the appropriate distribution of endowments or “rights” to use of the environment—between rich and poor, between present and future, between tribal versus industrial users, for subsistence versus exports, and so on? Whose conception of rights, wealth, duties, fairness, dignity or decency will, or should, prevail?

2. Ethical Dimensions in the Supply and Demand of Sustainability

The most widely referred to definition of “sustainable development” is the one given by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987 (The Brundtland Report), as “paths of human progress which meet the needs and aspirations of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” and as “a process of change in which exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.” Here, explicitly, is already a notion of intergenerational equity, and as such, a basic ethical precept for sustainable development.

The Brundtland definition expresses a wish, a hope, a desire for harmonization, but without having established the feasibility of achieving it. To what extent can the two goods—the needs of “present” and “future” generations—be satisfied simultaneously? Even if the physical (economic and ecological) feasibility of a sustainable development comes to be demonstrated, it still remains to outline the societal (ethical, political, institutional) preconditions for attainment. This is the first opening onto the problematic of sustainability ethics.

Sustainability studies have, since the 1970s, developed a heavy emphasis on analyzing feasibility of a “sustainable development” respectful of biophysical constraints. Yet, it cannot be deduced how future societies “ought” to develop simply from diagnoses of the opportunities and constraints imposed by nature. The present article is thus focused more particularly on the ethical dimensions of the “social demand” and motivations for sustainability.

As will be discussed in Section 3, established economic analysis has tended to represent economic welfare as a function of levels of produced goods and services as a stock (capital, property holdings), or as a flow level (rates of consumption of produced goods and services). Ecological scarcity means trade-offs between present and future welfare levels. However, it becomes quickly evident that changes in patterns of resource use activity are unlikely to occur without major changes in social values: the greatest challenges are posed at the level of political process, decision-making, and institutions for conflict resolution. In particular, the question arises of the extent to which collective social objectives of equity and environmental sustainability can be reconciled with the notions of freedom and “self-interest” widely valorized in the West. Here a return is made to old questions of individual rights and duties, virtue and vice, license and public order, that have preoccupied centuries of political philosophy.

Boulding (1966), in his famous “Spaceship Earth” essay, envisaged the need for a sustainable economy’s insertion in a “cyclical ecological system.” The image of a reciprocal exchange across space and time conforms to the notion of an ethical commitment to future generations. Boulding proposed that “the welfare of the individual depends on the extent to which he can identify himself with others, and that the most satisfactory individual identity is that which identifies not only with a community in space but also with a community extending over time from the past to the future.”

Daly (1973) pleaded, in a similar vein, for a “moral growth” that would translate into a willingness to embrace steady-state, citing satirist Jonathan Swift to the effect that, when individuals’ pursuit of self-interest is bounded (whether by law or by moderation), “they have nothing to do but to take care of the public.” Daly also drew inspiration from the writings of Mill (1848, 1861), who, in the middle of the nineteenth century, had already addressed the problem of how to reconcile ethical norms of individual freedom with requirements of social solidarity in a finite (planetary) living space. In Section 4 Mill’s original conception of a just “stationary state” of society is reviewed. From starting points of the respect for individual freedoms, Mill ends up espousing a “duty of care” and ethical norms of reciprocity and solidarity that are really quite different from the self-interest of contemporary free-market discourses. If Swift’s “care for the public”

is extended, following the arguments of Mill, towards future generations and to the vitality of nonhuman life, then an arrival is made directly at a social ethic for coexistence, respect of diversity and sustainability!

Section 5 develops the theme of ethical issues inherent in the notion of coexistence, in contemporary writings. A definition of sustainability which emphasizes the ecological dimensions, has been offered in ecological economics by Costanza and colleagues (1991): “Sustainability is a relationship between human economic systems and larger dynamic, but normally slower-changing ecological systems, in which (1) human life can continue indefinitely, (2) human individuals can flourish, and (3) human cultures can develop; but in which effects of human activities remain within bounds, so as not to destroy the diversity, complexity, and function of the ecological life support system.”

The accent is placed on diversity in relation to life-support capacities. This leads to noting that the antagonism between present and future generations is only one aspect of a more generalized structural opposition—between “us” and the “other,” between self-interest and interest in the life of another. Analysis of this multifaceted “us/other” opposition allows a deepening of the question, what is distinctive about an “ethic for sustainability” in comparison with the ethics that guide business-as-usual in the modern world?

Finally, in Section 6, the distinction between substantive and procedural aspects of sustainability concerns is reviewed. The “substantive” refers to descriptions grounded in physical or monetary measures of stocks and flows. The “procedural” refers to collective processes of action and decision-making seeking to reconcile differences, mitigate conflicts, and provide for coexistence. These include deliberative democratic processes, community participation in resource management, and various other forms of “participation” that give scope for individual expression and the circulation of collective meaning.

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Biographical Sketch

Prof. Martin Paul O'Connor is from Christchurch, New Zealand, and studied physics and humanities in his native country and in Paris. After completing his Ph.D. in economics (*Time and Environment*) at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, he was for several years a Lecturer in Economics at the University of Auckland before taking up a professorial position at the University of Versailles St-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ) in Paris, in 1995. He has research degrees in physics, sociology and economics, and specializes in interdisciplinary work in ecological economics theory, development theory, environmental policy and social sciences epistemology. In New Zealand during the 1980s he was active in a range of critical and consulting studies including public policy, environmental and social impact assessments, energy and banking sector studies, in parallel to academic teaching and writing. Since 1995, as Project Manager at the C3ED (Centre d'Economie et d'Ethique pour l'Environnement et le Développement) research institute, he has participated in numerous French and European studies in the environmental valuation, green accounting, scenario studies, integrated assessment, risk and water governance fields. He is a member of the editorial advisory boards for the journals *Capitalism Nature Socialism (CNS)* and *Environmental Values*, and currently edits the interdisciplinary *International Journal of Water (IJW)*, published by Inderscience. With colleagues he is active in the development of international teaching networks, notably through the 3^E-SDP (European Ecological Economics and Sustainable Development Policy) program including North-South cooperation.