THE ETHICS OF SUSTAINABILITY

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Summary

In this article the ethical dimensions of sustainability are explored in two ways. First, the key issues concern the ethical grounding for sustainability. Why is sustainability a positive value and what exactly needs to be sustained—the environment itself as a source of value, or human development for which the environment is to be sustained as one important means? Sustainability cannot be equated with sustainable development, and even if we focus on sustainable development, there are different views about what its implications are (e.g., continued economic growth with modified technology or a challenge to the European way of life). The different views are in part based on different empirical assessments but also on different values and priorities (e.g., concerning the future, ethical consistency at a global level, and responsibility for what one country may indirectly cause in another country). The second issue concerns ethics as a means and what is increasingly recognized as the importance of the ethical commitments of ordinary people if adequate environmental protection is to occur. This involves the emerging concepts of global democracy, and civil society, governance and citizenship, especially in their global aspects.

1. Ethics and Agenda 21

The idea of sustainability and its employment in the pivotal idea of sustainable development are central features of *Agenda 21* and many other international documents of the last decade of the twentieth century concerned with the challenge of pursuing development while protecting the environment. Yet, it is a striking feature of *Agenda 21*

that there is little explicit reference to ethics in the document, though of course the whole document is dominated by *prescriptions* about what governments and other bodies ought to do to achieve sustainable development.

The *Rio Declaration* itself which preceded and formed the basis for *Agenda 21* assumes in the preamble the "goal of establishing a new and equitable partnership" and of working toward international agreements which "respect the interests of all and protect the integrity of the global environment." *Agenda 21*'s Principle 1 states that "human beings are the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature," and Principle 10 recognizes the importance of participation of all concerned citizens and encourages public awareness. In Section 1 (*Social and economic dimensions*), there are chapters on combating poverty in poorer countries and changing consumption patterns in richer countries. In Section 3 (*Strengthening the role of major groups*), there are chapters for instance on children and youth in sustainable development, strengthening the role of NGOs, and the involvement of Local Authorities in implementing *Agenda 21*. There is an underlying commitment to the idea of sustainable development as that which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs"—the famous definition given in *Our Common Future* in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission, which proposed that the Rio conference take place.

In all these respects, *Agenda 21* is concerned with ethical issues and ethical claims, albeit of different kinds. One of the purposes of this article is to offer an analysis, by identifying and then systematizing these ethical aspects, another is to apply this analysis to the European context. Before we look at matters systematically, we need to pick out various features informally in what has been said so far.

First, the document is full of prescriptions about what governments *should* do. Are these ethical prescriptions? It might be thought not, for two reasons: first, ethics is about what individuals ought to do, not what government ought to do. Second, these prescriptions are practical not ethical, in the sense that they specify various courses of action which are necessary means, *given* that the overall goal of sustainable development has been accepted as an internationally agreed upon goal.

Neither of these reasons is acceptable as a basis for denying that these shoulds are ethical. First, ethical predicates apply as much to what corporate entities such as governments and business companies do as to what individuals do; but perhaps more important, what a government ought to do needs to be in the context of what ordinary people—its citizens—think it ought to do and think they ought to do in relation to it. Second, that something ought to be done as a *means* to a goal does not make it *not* ethical. If the goal is an ethical goal, then the means adopted for the sake of that goal are ethical or "what ethically ought to be done." Of course governments (as indeed individuals) may have prudential or self-interested *motives* for accepting the shoulds and shalls of the document—they might protect the environment (and try and get others to do the same) to protect that bit of the environment which affects them directly—but the language of the document runs contrary to such an official interpretation of the shoulds. It is the *global* environment that is to be protected; it is equity for all people that needs to be observed; it is poverty in the poorer countries that must be tackled, and

not merely because it a good way of protecting the environment for all or for each. These are ethical goals, and the means to achieve them are consequently ethical too.

These goals which indicate what should be done are of course also grounded in a set of assumptions about what is of value. The ethical character of these values is hardly brought out because it is taken as self-evident, but we get indications of it in statements about achieving a high quality of life for human beings and the claim that humans are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.

In the chapters in Section 3 we turn to what ordinary people, through NGOs or in activities linked to Local Authority initiatives (see *Local Authorities in Support of* Agenda 21), should do. Here again we are dealing with a range of means through which central overall goals will be achieved. But ethics enters the picture here in a rather different way. For reasons which will be expanded later, whatever may be the case at other levels such as government departments, what will get ordinary people involved in NGOs and local actions is precisely an *ethical* commitment to play their part in sustainable development. This is the ethical consciousness of ordinary people that has been harnessed to the overall goal.

The ethics of *Agenda 21* are largely assumed because they were taken to be self-evident and universally accepted. What has become increasingly apparent, however, is that the ethics of both the goals and the means of sustainable development are by no means self-evident and need to be set out and explored. This is in keeping with general trends, certainly Europe, during the 1990s, in which ethical debate became much more extensive in many areas, such as medical ethics (life/death issues, allocation of scarce resources), welfare state issues, animals rights, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and so on.

It is interesting to note that another important international document which came out just before *Agenda 21*, *Caring for the Earth—A Strategy for Sustainable Living,* is much more explicit about the importance of ethics, and indeed the first of its nine principles which underpin all ten others— Respect and care for the community life—is explicitly stated to be an ethical principle, and in Box 2 is described as a world ethic for living sustainably.

In many ways the two documents map each other quite neatly. Both see the main challenges to be to integrate development and environment and to accept the key concepts of sustainable development for doing so. Both indicate a similar wide range of practical measures for government to take; both stress the need to involve people and other kinds of bodies such as NGOs. But there are important differences that are instructive for the discussion to follow. The tone of *Caring for the Earth* is more radical; there is a clearer message that what is needed is a *change* in the way we live— in the values and priorities of ordinary people. This is perhaps not surprising, since it was produced by the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), the World Conservation Union (IUCN), and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), whereas *Agenda 21* was the product of consensus by all governments. Although it signs up to sustainable development, it is careful to distinguish development from economic growth, and furthermore the emphasis is upon sustainability expressed in other ways, such as

sustainable society or living sustainably. This is no accident because one of ethical controversies concerning sustainability is over what we count as sustainable—and it is by no means self-evident that development, at least as it ordinarily understood, *is the key thing to be sustained*.

2. Sustainability in the European Context

Because this article is concerned with ethical issues which by their nature are seen by most thinkers to be *general* in character, the discussion of matters specifically related to Europe will be relatively brief. However there are various features of the European situation that make certain kinds of issues of particular relevance to Europe and have thus prompted certain kinds of response within Europe, in terms of thinking within Europe itself (and the literature which this generates), and in terms of various cultural, social, legal, and political changes. These will be commented on as the discussion proceeds. First, though, it will be useful to outline some of the characteristics of the situation in Europe which are relevant to the way issues of sustainability are taken up.

The main characteristics of the European situation are the following:

- High levels of material affluence and consumption are enjoyed by most people in its populations. Populations are largely stable with concentrations of populations in cities and towns. High levels of industrialization and advanced technology in industry and agriculture are pervasive.
- Little of the European landmass can be described as wilderness; almost all of it is managed in one form or another (forests, farms, game areas), with small areas designated for protection as national parks or areas of scientific interest.
- Disproportionately high levels of use of resources, especially energy, compared with poorer parts of the world, are clear and are the bases of much geopolitical confrontation between the rich North and poor South.
- The cultural legacy from the European tradition, especially with respect to religious and philosophically inspired worldviews, has sustained both an anthropocentric and a Eurocentric perspective on the world. Particularly striking was the period of the Enlightenment when European influences spread across the world, but these attitudes and perceptions are still pervasive today, despite various countervailing trends, some of them emanating from Europe, associated with nonanthropocentric environmental ethics and with postmodernism, multiculturalism, and global thinking.
- Although religion still plays an important part in the lives of many of its members, European culture and politics are largely secular, and based on principles of liberal democracy, individualism, and varying degrees of commitment to welfarism.
- Green political consciousness is a significant but not dominant feature of the political landscape, giving rise to green political parties such as *Der Grunen* in Germany and to significant concern from members of larger political parties, so that major political parties have taken on board the ideas of sustainable development.
- There is a significant minority interested in green consuming, animal welfare issues, other issues such as GMOs, which is evidenced in a large number of

environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), big and small, which all flourish as part of civil society. Ordinary citizens have become involved in varying degrees with environmental measures, such as efforts to recycle materials (glass, papers, metals).

- The main problems of the environment *internal* to European countries' own immediate environments have to do with level of pollution (from industry, agriculture, lifestyle practices such as using the private car), with pressures of encroachment on rural areas (from expansion of urban areas), and of modified use of rural areas (through modern development, tourism), especially areas of aesthetic beauty or protected habitats.

While some environmentalists see the high levels of material affluence as being the underlying problem, the generally agreed approach of governments, industry, and most citizens is that modifications in technology, regulations, and economic incentives among them provide adequate answers. It is in this sense that industry also has taken on board the goals of sustainable development.

Europe has a dominant role in the global economy, partly through for instance investment of major companies, with consequent repercussions, both positive and negative, for the level of environmental and employment protection in other parts of the world.

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Biographical Sketch

Dr. Nigel Dower is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, University of Aberdeen. His research interests center around the ethical/philosophical aspects of international relations, and development and the environment and their interrelationships. He has published numerous chapters and articles in these areas and is author of *World Poverty Challenge and Response* (York, UK: Ebor Press, 1983) and *World Ethics—the New Agenda* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1998), and editor of *Ethics and Environmental Responsibility* (Aldershot: Gower, 1989), and with J. Williams, *Global Citizenship: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002). Dr. Dower is President of the International Development Ethics Association, a member of the UN Association, and a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). His interests include music, walking, and gardening.