

Some Ethical and Religious Attitudes to Sustainability

Professor Robin Attfield, Cardiff University ©

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First, a few words are in place about what is meant by 'sustainability'. Here in Wales, the word probably conjures up images of limiting carbon emissions through means such as loft insulation or the use of sustainable sources of energy. People would in any case have in mind processes or systems that are benign and conducive to an enhanced quality of life, certainly for human beings and possibly for nonhuman creatures or for ecosystems. But not everything sustainable is desirable. For example, slavery was arguably a sustainable system of production, but highly oppressive. This being so, we need to come clean about which values are being pursued in the name of sustainability. Otherwise there might be no ethical or religious case for sustainability at all, or there might even be a religious or quasi-ethical case for kinds of sustainability of an undesirable kind, such as sustainable kinds of authoritarianism.

It might be replied that at any rate environmental sustainability is free of problems, and beyond objection. But there was environmental sustainability in ancient Egypt, where the annual flooding of the Nile enabled the population to support itself. This, however, was accomplished for many centuries through the labour of slaves, and was therefore an objectionable system. Someone might protest at this point that no one in the modern world objects to environmental sustainability on any such grounds; but they would be wrong. For the Indian philosopher Ramachandra Guha has objected to the

application of Western environmentalism to Third World countries in forms that disregard the needs of local people. More generally, sustainability is unlikely to be defensible unless it is coupled with fairness, and unless its proponents have regard to the basic needs of affected parties, whether human or nonhuman.

This in turn helps explain the need for policies not so much of sustainability as of sustainable development. The phrase 'sustainable development' was the theme of the Brundtland Report of 1987, and was endorsed by most countries in the Rio Conference on Environment and Development of 1992. 'Development' is tacitly short for 'social development', the kind of development in which human needs are met, or in which changes are made in that direction; it can also describe the state of affairs in which these needs are already realised. The inclusion of the epithet 'sustainable' involved, or was originally intended to involve, the requirement that such development should be sustainable not only economically but also socially and environmentally; in other words, development was to be durable, and to be combined with environmental sustainability. This joint objective was to recognise not only the value of satisfying basic human needs, but also those of nonhuman species, including needs for viable habitats. (If nonhuman needs were not included, then this objective would still be open to the charge of treating human beings as having exclusive value and importance, or of anthropocentrism; but there is every reason not to lay ourselves open to this criticism.)

So if we use 'sustainability' as code for 'sustainable development', we are much closer to something for which there is a religious or an ethical case. However, before we can come to any such case or cases, we need to consider Wilfred Beckerman's objection that sustainable development is radically unfair, in particular to earlier rather than later generations. For it surely implies that there should be continual improvement in quality of life, and this would mean that you fare better the later you live, and the less well the earlier you live. And if this is what it means, then there is surely no obligation, religious or ethical, to promote it. However, Beckerman's interpretation is a travesty of what was meant in the Brundtland Report. A corrective has been supplied by Alan Carter. 'Sustainable development' should be taken to involve processes of moving away from poverty and underdevelopment which are prerequisites of sustainability, and lead to a sustainable condition of development (the state in which basic needs are satisfied) which is sustainable in the sense that it can then be maintained indefinitely, economically, socially and environmentally. In this way, the objection about unfairness is overcome, and sustainable development can now be advocated in Carter's sense. We can even use 'sustainability' to mean the same thing, as long as we do not forget the vital qualifications about development and about equity, which are needed, as has been seen, to avoid 'sustainability' being open to objection in many of its forms.

And so, at last, we can turn to the ethical and religious case for such sustainability. Here I say 'case', because that is the kind of thing (grounds, reasons and arguments) that philosophers study. If the question were about

the ethical stance of (say) most people now alive in Wales or in Britain, then it would require a sociological answer, and one that I am not qualified to give. But if it concerns the resources of ethical traditions, then I can at least make a start.

There are three ethical traditions which would struggle to give full support to such sustainability. First there is the one that bases ethics on a contract, whether an historical contract or a hypothetical one. The general idea is that what it is right to do is what would be agreed in some fair bargaining situation. John Rawls was the most prominent twentieth-century advocate of this approach. One problem is that nonhuman animals are not capable of entering into agreements, and are excluded. Another problem, and one that Rawls strove to overcome in his book *A Theory of Justice*, is that future generations will only be included if the people who form the agreement are inclined to represent them, and Rawls did not initially want these people to look out for any interests except their own. (After all, if self-interested people would agree to run society by certain rules, then it seems reasonable to regard them as fair rules.) Rawls tried to get over this problem by modifying the so-called 'initial position' in which the original agreement takes place, but never really managed to do so. Yet sustainability will not be adequately supported unless the interests of every generation, including future generations, count. Not everyone accepts these criticisms of contract-theory, and there are many influential Rawlsians still around. Yet the two problems mentioned, provision for non-human animals and provision for future generations, suggest that no satisfactory basis for sustainability is here to be found.

Another tradition attempts to base all ethical considerations on rights, and the responsibilities that correspond to them. Some of these theorists restrict rights to human beings, and for these the problem of provision for nonhumans applies just as much as it did for contractarians. But there is also a problem with future generations, not only for rights-theorists who are anthropocentric but even for the ones that are not. To have a right, someone or something must be capable of being treated according to their rights or not being so treated. But, generally speaking, most future people would exist only in one possible future, for if current agents (prospective parents, for example) conceive and give birth from different eggs or sperms, then different people and a different future come about. (The mere timing of conception is enough to make the difference between one possible person and another being generated.) Since having rights involves existing in more than one future, but most possible people exist in one future only, most possible people of the future would seem not to have rights. Admittedly they will have rights if they come into existence, on just the same basis as that on which we have rights, for by then it will be possible for them to have their interests satisfied or neglected by their contemporaries. But if the case for taking their interests into account in advance of their lives depends on their rights, then it is a case that collapses. Yet once again, sustainability will not be adequately supported unless the interests of every generation, including future generations, count. From this it may be concluded that ethics must rest on something beyond rights; for it is possible to take seriously the interests of coming generations, but this is not possible on an approach that bases everything on rights.

Yet a third tradition has problems with sustainability. What I have in mind here is Kantianism. Kant's Categorical Imperative bids us behave only in a way in which we could rationally desire every agent to behave. So far, so good, at least where the environment is concerned; some Kantians have taken this to imply that if certain behaviour, such as emitting carbon dioxide unnecessarily, would be undesirable if done by everyone, then it should not be done by anyone. Yet this is a strange principle, for there are many deeds which would be disastrous if done by everyone (like becoming a university student, for example), but which are unobjectionable if done by one or even by many individuals. Besides, when Kant rephrases his Categorical Imperative, he makes it say that we should never treat humanity as a means only, but always as an end. This would be admirable if it were just a sectoral principle, but as a foundational principle it unfortunately excludes any concern for nonhuman creatures. Again, it is less than clear how the interests of future generations are to be safeguarded on this basis, for we cannot treat them as individuals prior to their existence, and, if the reasoning advanced in connection with rights is correct, then we cannot treat unborn individuals better or worse at all, as opposed to determining which ones will live and how well one population or another will fare. Therefore Kantianism, which initially seemed so promising, cannot really uphold sustainability.

A fourth tradition appears to fare better. The philosophy of Aristotle places the virtues at the centre of the moral life, and claims that the criterion of rightness is what the virtuous person would do. So if the virtuous person leads a

sensitive, low-consumption life, consonant with sustainability, that is what it is right to do. Aristotle's own list of virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics* does not quite correspond to these, but his modern supporters (advocates of 'virtue ethics') sometimes revise the list of virtues so as to enthrone green ones. But unfortunately there is surely no guarantee that what the virtuous person would do will be right. So complex is our technological world that many virtuous people would make sincere but disastrous mistakes, from which their virtue would entirely fail to immunise them. Besides, we surely need some criterion of what the virtues are which is independent of what the virtuous person would do, a criterion such as the impacts of their actions. Hence, while the virtues remain important, and possibly central, and while what Aristotle says about them is largely sound, we need some other basis for discovering or deciding what it is right or justified to do.

The approach which makes rightness depend on impacts is consequentialism. The best-known version of consequentialism is utilitarianism, which seeks to maximise the balance of happiness over misery, and to this there are numerous well-known objections. But consequentialism can instead be targeted at maximising well-being or quality of life (broader concepts both than happiness), or, where these are central examples of intrinsically valuable states of affairs, at maximising intrinsic value. Intrinsic value can also be found in the flourishing of nonhuman creatures, and of creatures of the future as well as of the present, and maximising this obviously involves preserving the ecosystems on which they depend. In this inclusive, biocentric form,

consequentialism already looks promising from an environmentalist perspective.

It would, of course, be prohibitively difficult to be expected to calculate the impacts of all one's actions. But here consequentialists can appeal to the impacts not of individuals acts but of whole practices (practices such as recycling), and make actions right which comply with the practices with the best overall impacts. In this way, consequentialism secures some of the advantages that seem to belong to Kantianism, with its universal principles, and to rights theory, which in effect demands across-the-board abstinence from practices such as torture; as long as principles or abstentions have better net impacts than alternative principles or practices, consequentialism can uphold them, and supply a satisfactory reason for doing so as well, as also for any exception clauses required to make the practice as beneficial as possible. Practice-consequentialism avoids many of the pitfalls of act-utilitarianism, and biocentric practice-consequentialism has a broad enough value-theory to avoid most if not all of the others. For example, it supplies a possible basis for testing the desirability of legislation and regulation, including environmental legislation and regulation. Contractarianism and Kantianism might be thought to show more respect for human autonomy, but there is nothing within consequentialism to prevent recognition of the intrinsic value of such autonomy, and thus the rejection of practices which would be unduly paternalistic. However, paternalism is not the same as interventionism, and the latter would be likely to be supported, at least wherever ecological

thresholds were in danger of being crossed or species in danger of being eradicated.

What is still missing here is a recognition of the virtues. Aristotle was right in holding that there are certain virtues such as courage that every society will need. Indeed certain other virtues will also be needed both by individuals, corporations and governments if ecological challenges are going to be met, for all these agents are going to need dispositions to behave in a manner that takes account of relevant characteristic impacts. No longer can it be claimed that behaviour is right simply on the basis that this is what the virtuous person would do; we need an account of why certain virtues are virtuous, and thus why behaviour of this kind is right. For example, the virtues needed are going to include green virtues, recognised as such because habitual compliance with them helps preserve species and habitats while minimising the environmental footprint of the agent concerned. What is needed here is a further broadening of practice-consequentialism so as to embody virtue-consequentialism, as recently advocated in an article by Dale Jamieson (in *Utilitas*, 2007). Needless to say, this should not be anthropocentric virtue-consequentialism, even though this is the variety that philosophers such as Aristotle and Kant might well, at a pinch, have preferred (if they could have overcome their antagonism to consequentialism in the first place); rather it should be biocentric consequentialism, as explained earlier. This is the kind of ethic which in my view will increasingly be needed, and which, even if it is not given explicit recognition, is likely to receive increasing implicit support.

However, I was asked to comment on religious approaches as well as ethical ones. There is time here to comment only on theistic religions (such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam), rather than other religions including eastern religions. Such religions have been accused of being anthropocentric, but this charge does not stand up. The Old Testament is common ground to all three of the great theistic religions, and it is impossible to read passages such as Psalm 104 as upholding an anthropocentric approach. Nor do these religions suggest that humanity may treat planetary nature as it pleases. They all recognise that humanity is in a position of authority over planetary nature, but they all equally treat this as responsibility before God, holding that the earth belongs to God and not to us. This responsibility is to be exercised ethically, that is, sensitively, justly and taking into account coming as well as current generations, and species other than our own. These themes have received new emphasis in recent decades with the rediscovery of the stance called 'stewardship'.

All kinds of objections have been presented to stewardship. For example, it is claimed that it cannot extend to stars and galaxies other than our own. Yet it needs to extend to the entire zone that humanity can influence, since otherwise there would be human power without responsibility. There again, it is objected that the role of humanity should often be one of letting-be rather than stewardship. But this assumes that stewardship cannot justify inaction rather than constant intervention. Where ecosystems are best preserved by letting-be, stewardship will go along with this policy. To consider one last objection, it is sometimes held that stewardship involves managerialism and

an instrumental attitude to nature. But this is to misread the role of a steward, which can also be expressed as that of a trustee. The valuable creatures which are in the charge of human stewards need not be treated as dispensable resources, and can be recognised as the treasures and the bearers of intrinsic value that they often are.

In short, there is nothing to prevent the religious ethic of stewardship being harnessed to the secular ethic of biocentric consequentialism, a consequentialism that can also be one of beneficent practices and virtues. When stewardship is interpreted in this way, non-religious people can, of course, endorse it. I have long been arguing that secular versions of stewardship supply a comprehensible framework for human self-understanding; this approach, after all, embodies the virtue of humility towards nature, which may itself be one of the beneficent virtues just mentioned. (See Attfield, *Environmental Ethics* (2003).) Nevertheless, in my own view, a religiously informed self-understanding such as stewardship supplies a more coherent overall approach to nature and to life, as well as to sustainability, with a greater motivational capacity than its secular counterpart which may well make it intrinsically a more sustainable system of belief.