

*Sustainable Development and the Ethical Issue of Human
Morality; an Overview*

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“Purely untutored humanity interferes comparatively with the arrangements of nature; the destructive agency of man becomes more and more energetic as he advances in civilization.” – March, G. P.

“We have a crisis in mental health today, all over the world, because technology has thrown humanity out of the window.” – Foudraine

The ultimate goal of sustainability is to meet the basic needs of all and extend to everyone the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations for a better life, while moderating and renewing the use of finite resources [1]. Thus, the effort to improve environmental quality, the relevant decisions and the moral precepts that lead to a sustainable world should be directed at the transformation of production – in the industry, agriculture, energy and transportation [2].

This article therefore attempts to discuss the concept of sustainable development on the basis of human morality arising from established ethical system. Nonetheless, ethics and the practice of ethics for a sustainable world is the crux of the discussion; and understanding it is the objective of this study.

Perry Minnis in Huggins [3] thus recounts;

“You cannot be considered an ethical company if you do not follow sustainability principles. Nor can you apply sustainability concepts if you do not have a strong foundation of ethical principles. The two are intrinsically intertwined”

In the same vein, Albert Einstein [3] also relates that;

“The most important human endeavour is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life”

Many have however, elaborated on the principles of morality as the fundamental gateway to achieving sustainability. Gomis et al. [4] contend that sustainability is 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. Giving the challenges facing the earth today, a much more meaningful instrument is required to address the limits of the earth's resilience and our failure to curb consumption. This has to be a new ethical system based on ecological carrying capacity of the earth [5].

Today, we are faced with the daunting problems of greenhouse effect, the destruction of ozone layer, the presence of toxic and nuclear wastes; with such negative effects as the growing disappearance of wilderness areas, a steady loss of biodiversity and even the actual extinction of some species. These problems call for a definite ethical-driven solution approach with an environmental dimension.

Generally, the need for ethical application arises as a concern with actions and practices directed to improving the wellbeing of people [6]. Thus, environmental ethics is concerned with the morality (right and wrong) of human actions as they affect the environment or natural world we live in. The effort is focused on addressing global environmental problems which we are currently familiar with due to the massive increase in global human population; and the associated urbanization, industrialization, and technological advancement. This causes increased pollution of the air, water and soil; and has also added the depletion of these and other important natural resources.

Decisively, the advocated moral practice refers to social norms and values that guide both individuals and their interaction with their fellow human beings and communities, and with their environment. These moral factors are usually interwoven with religious practices and social power structures [7].

In fact, the global environment is an agglomeration of multiple facets of existence: politics, economics, education, trade, industry, agriculture, science and technology, etc. But it has been observed that the continuous and growing human activity on the planet Earth is having a great and detrimental impact on the global environment. There is a decline in the biodiversity as a consequence. Thus, the ethical dimension of current environmental problems is centred on the manner of responding to the challenges that humanity has to face.

A more recent task of ethics is to resist the fashionable tendencies of globalization, marketization and technologization that erode biodiversity and valuable aspects of cultural identity-

and may even have effects that threaten human rights. Although, these tendencies are often presented as value-neutral, they carry with them hidden assumptions that are potential sources of inequity and abuse [7].

One of the prime challenges of sustainable development is how the moral precepts can be reduced to practice. However, it is understood that people are concerned with their values according to ethical and/or moral standards and, are said to be principle driven. These inherent values give a general idea of the behaviours of people. But the remarkable question is how would the principles of sustainability with set out values (life-style priorities) be developed and efficiently practiced?

The 'Hanover Principles' [8] has proffered that we should insist on the right of humanity, and nature to co-exist in a healthy, supportive, diverse and sustainable conditions by adopting the following precepts;

1. **Recognise interdependence.** The elements of human design interact with and depend upon the natural world, with broad and diverse implications at every scale. Expand design considerations to recognise even distant effects.
2. **Respect relationships between spirit and matter.** Consider all aspects of human settlement, including community, dwelling, industry and trade in terms of existing and evolving connections between spiritual and material consciousness.
3. **Accept responsibility for the consequences of design decisions upon human well-being, the viability of natural systems, and their rights to co-exist.**
4. **Create safe objects of long-term value.** Do not burden future generations with requirements for maintenance or vigilant administration of potential danger due to the careless creation of products, processes or standards.
5. **Eliminate the concept of waste.** Evaluate and optimize the full lifecycle of product and processes to approach natural systems, in which there is no waste.
6. **Rely on natural energy flows.** Human designs should like the living world, derive their creative forces from perpetual solar income. Incorporate this energy efficiently and safely for responsible use.
7. **Understand the limitations of design.** No human creation lasts forever, and design does not solve all problems. Those who create and plan should practice humility in the face of nature. Treat nature as a model and mentor, not an inconvenience to be evaded and controlled.

8. **Seek constant improvement by the sharing of knowledge.** Encourage direct and open communication between colleagues, patrons, manufacturers and users to link long-term sustainable considerations with ethical responsibility, and to establish the integral relationship between natural processes and human activity.

In addition to the above-stated Hanover Principle, this article prescribes the following precepts;

1. **Recognition of the existence of God Almighty.** Promote the recognition of God as the Sole Creator of the Universe and all that is within it, with a specific purpose. Understand the symbiotic co-existence of nature as a divine clue to sustainability.
2. **Accept the role of ‘master’ of the environment, and as ‘vicegerent’ of God.** Man is a vicegerent of God on earth charged with the responsibility of the total upkeep of the environment. He must not fail in the discharge of his duty to ensure sustainability.
3. **Always subdue the self from the danger of ‘Play God Syndrome.’** Always guard against ‘Play God’ tendency which may arise due to arrogance in demonstrating an exclusive knowledge or discovery. This tendency is liable to derailing the course of sustainability.

Finally, the quest for a sustainable world in which man and other life in the environment would co-exist in a flourishing manner now and in the future has prompted the need to determine the effects of morality and ethics on sustainable development. However, theoretical reviews and analyses have revealed that ethical values are the basis of decision-making and action in accordance with ideal accepted in a given moral system. Such values are promoted through ethical principles which would assist to transform the behaviour of the people in the society. In fact, undertaking ethical analysis helps to identify human and non-human interests, and the value of ecosystem as a whole. Therefore, addressing the well-being of the ecosystem in itself and the basic human interests, and the long-term social benefits thereof becomes a crucial assignment. This would eventually lead to accomplishing the objective of sustainability in meeting the basic human needs of welfare, freedom and justice for the present and also for future generations through the application of the overall sustainability ethics.

References

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