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The Ethics of Sustainability

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Sustainability ethics is a relevant topic as we humans become more focused on the implications of "going green." We all need to think about what sustainability means and the extent to which we need to change our individual behaviors so that its goals can be met. This editorial will explore the idea of how our ego plays a role in defining sustainable behavior and ways in which a breadth of ethical constructs can guide our thinking on what is right and what is wrong. All of us cannot give up meat or avoid flying, but all of us can engage in healthy dialogue to determine how we all can subscribe to the principles of sustainability in ethical ways, as governed by our understandings and feelings. Ultimately, we recognize ethical behavior as an ecosystem of social, environmental, and intellectual parameters which affect not only humans, but also the non-humans around us.

People Have Different Ways of Being Ethical

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with questions about what is "morally" right and wrong or good and bad. It encompasses the values and principles that guide human conduct in various contexts, such as personal, professional, and societal. "Ethics" comes from "*ethos*," the Greek equivalent to character or custom from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who explored virtue, justice, and the good life. Ethics has evolved and now encompasses theories and approaches, including deontology (duty-based ethics), consequentialism (outcome-based ethics), and virtue ethics (character-based ethics).

Since ancient times, human beings have wrestled with questions on what constitutes right and wrong behavior. Though some common understandings have been reached, from time to time in various communities of people, it would be fair to say that no consensus has been reached on this subject. Rather, different people take different positions and have different perspectives. In the ever-emerging realm of sustainability, an umbrella subject which covers aspects regarding work, technology, and systems, we feel the reach of ethics has not been considered much. Sustainability under the context of ethics refers to principles and practices related to the long-term health and well-being of the environment, society, and economy. It may involve decisions and actions that do not deplete resources and, as according to the 1987 United Nations Brundtland Commission, sustainability is defined as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future."

The point of our essay is to consider how people belonging to different philosophical perspectives can each self-justify living their lives according to the principles of sustainability. Or maybe not. As individuals, each one of us continually makes judgements about what we will be doing in the short term and the longer term. These decisions generally are not a question of self-centered interest, but whether the behavior

compromises a set of generally accepted behavior / norms or codes of conduct that are instituted for the good of a society or organization. For example, one may become a vegetarian to reduce the footprint associated with animal husbandry and thus reduce greenhouse has (GHG) emissions, energy, and water demands despite a craving to eat meat.

Ethical egoism

Let's start by considering one of the inherently challenging cases, namely ethical egoism. Someone can be called an ethical egoist if they generally make their life decisions based on what makes them happy (which falls under consequentialism ethics). One can imagine such a person wearing a pin or T-shirt bearing the message, "eat, drink, and be merry".

To some extent it is likely that you, the reader, fall into this category, at least in part and from time to time. So what does "sustainability" have to do with making you or me happy? How does this question relate to the concepts we wish to elaborate?

A common feature of an ethical egoist is that they tend to be more concerned about their long-term happiness, even to the extent of sometimes foregoing immediate pleasure. For instance, a dedicated ethical egoist may sometimes volunteer to be the dedicated driver – not having alcohol at a party – since they enjoy being appreciated by their friends. Likewise, humans may be forced to put off some potential pleasure (delayed gratification) associated with fossil fuel usage, *etc.*, as their contribution toward a future with cleaner air and more tolerable temperatures.

Consequentialism

The theme of happiness also has found expression in the foundational thoughts of the early modern philosopher Immanuel Kant. However, Kant was focused on the happiness of others, not just one's self. The utilitarian philosophers, such as Bentham and Mill, likewise turned their attention to the good fortune of others. The phrase "the greatest good for the greatest number" is associated with that class of ethical thinking. In one memorable scene from "Star Trek 2: The Wrath of Khan," we recall Spock dying behind a glass wall from radiation exposure, not wanting to save himself because he would hurt his friends if he left that area. When Captain Kirk asked him why, he answered, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few…or the one." We may also call this brand of ethics, "lifeboat ethics," where someone must go overboard to save the others if the lifeboat becomes overloaded. As a consequence, we can use the term "consequentialists" for people who take a utilitarian approach to making their ethical decisions. The future health of our natural environments is definitely a consequence. It follows that sound education about factors affecting sustainability will receive strong support from most people who follow consequentialist principles in their lives.

Non-consequentialism

The term non-consequentialist can be used to denote people who base their ethical decisions on conscience, core beliefs, or some written list of rules, such as a religious text. Someone who genuinely follows such an ethical approach is not basing their decisions on

any results, such as whether anyone will benefit or be happy. For instance, from an individual who has grown up among tribal people who live in close relationship to the native environment, one can expect eager adoption of ideas about sustainability. Natural homeland wilderness areas often have a central focus in such groups. Another non-consequentialist individual might have a primary focus on spiritual aspects. In some cases, the same individual may base their decisions on religious aspects, not on what happens in the present world. Such an individual is less likely to regard sustainability as something worth worrying about. Suppose, for instance, that someone has a primary focus of their ethical behavior on converting people they meet to their religious thinking. That can be a bridge, since one needs to have a viable world, in which people are able to live, in order for such religious work to be able to happen. The tricky thing about non-consequentialists is that their core beliefs can be very different from each other – some well compatible with the principles of sustainability and some not.

Idealism

Although the tendency of some humans to take an idealistic approach to life is not usually regarded as a type of ethics, it can have ethical consequences. Suppose, for instance, that I decided to live my life in a manner that I personally will minimize my adverse environmental impact. For instance, I could give up using my car, give up the eating of meat (due to its high demand for energy and resources), and allow the external weather to determine the temperature within my house. My friends might then regard me as a bit stubborn and maybe even irritable, since the world that I am attempting to live in will never live up to my ideal. But on the other hand, we all have met some idealists. They often will work really hard to achieve their goals and to shape the world into the one that they want. Care for natural resources has attracted high numbers of idealistic people in recent years. These kinds of people may focus on the idea of reducing their carbon footprint and may even make it into a kind of game on who has the lowest one. Though some of their ideas might seem impractical, at the moment, we need to include idealists in our thinking about how to save the natural environment.

Neutral Omnipartial Rule-making

For those of us who wish to see actual implementation of sustainability principles, such that global warming can be slowed and the natural environmental can be sustained, what approach can be used to convince "the greatest number" of our fellow citizens? There is a modern approach in the field of ethics called Neutral Omnipartial Rule-Making (NORM). The NORM approach has been informally adopted by various organizations and corporations in an attempt to consider various disparate ethical points of view in an overall framework. One starts by considering all the stakeholders – everyone who might reasonably have a stake in decisions that may be made on behalf of people. Then one considers what each of these groups would want, based on their own ethical perspectives and life situations. The exercise of putting ourselves into the shoes of people having different ethical perspectives will force each one of us to try to come up with decisions that meet everyone's needs, at least to the greatest degree possible. In other words, one has to come up with win-win solutions that address the ethical scruples of different constituencies, all at the same time. We need to respect our fellow citizen, not just in terms of their greatest benefits, but also respecting their desires for freedom and exercise of their ethical beliefs.

And at the same time, we need to find solutions that tend to preserve the beauty and resources of the world for future generations.

Creative thinking

In pursuing our research in areas related to sustainability, it is important to not merely repeat work, the results of which are already known. Such thinking can be viewed as a case of "herd mentality," as illustrated below at left. Even when one takes pains not to just follow the crowd, various unseen influences may be affecting our decisions. For instance, as illustrated below, at right, the topics of our studies – and sometimes even the results of our studies – can be affected by funding issues. The point of illustrating these points as cartoons is to emphasize the role of humor in helping each of us navigate such issues. An irreverent attitude can be helpful in keeping one's mind open to creative options.

Herd Mentality

Industrial Support for Research
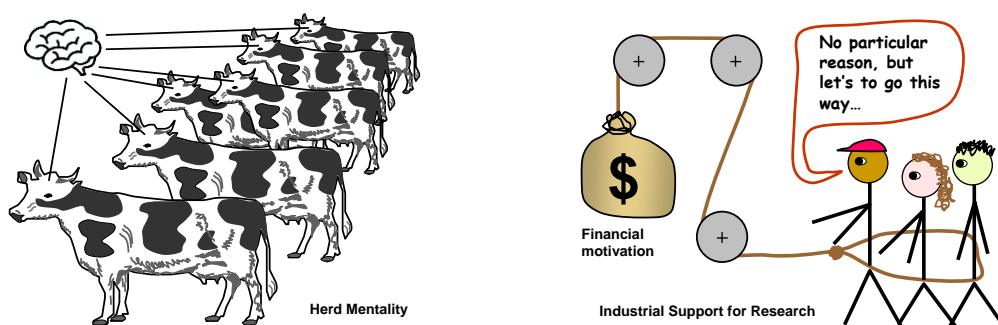
Summing it Up

As mentioned at the beginning, different people often can be placed into broad classes with respect to their ethical practices and beliefs. A large proportion of people will be mainly looking out for their own well-being and fortunes; so, we must work towards plans for the future that can combine both environment-friendly and individual-friendly aspects. One of the most challenging aspects will be to deal effectively when people need to give up some of their freedom – which may include cutting back on a lot of trips by jet – as a way to avoid damage to the global environment. When designing corporate policies or legislation, we need to respect people's diverse viewpoints, realizing that there may be some idealists and non-consequentialists who may not buy into the kinds of sacrifices that all of us may need to make to achieve sustainability goals. The idealists among us will be pushing for perfection in our ongoing efforts. Some of the non-consequentialists among us will be pushing back, arguing that their freedom is being constrained, and that the sacrifices are not consistent with what they feel is right.

All the categories considered up to this point in the editorial have one thing in common: They all are focused on humans. But what about non-human stakeholders? What about the fish in the sea? What about the trees? Philosophy is good at asking questions, and its apparent answers can be regarded as points inviting further discussion. The authors envision a future world in which people continue to grapple with balancing ethical perspectives, consequences, and feelings of right and wrong. We need to continue our conversations in an effective way. It is in our collective interest to preserve the world we live in. At the same time, let's not forget about the non-humans with whom we share our world and who don't want to be left out of the conversation.