

REVIEWS & REFLECTIONS

ETHICAL ASPECTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

By Bruce Jennings

Ethics or morality has to do with the principles, standards, rules, norms of conduct that make cooperation, justice, and freedom possible. Ethics is inseparable from questions of cultural meaning and social power; it provides a philosophically based touchstone for an ideal of justice, right relationship, and the proper use of power and authority.

The ethical analysis typically has the following four central components:

- an evaluation of the character and intentions of the agent—what virtues/vices does the agent exemplify?
- an evaluation of the inherent properties of an action—what rights or duties does the action fulfill or violate?
- an evaluation of the consequences (most often understood as causal effects) of an action—what benefits or harms are brought about by the action?
- an evaluation of the context within which actions take place—does the action support or undermine the system or context which makes the action possible and meaningful in the first place?

This fourth aspect has the most direct connection with the commonsense meaning of the concept of “sustainability”—not undermining the prerequisites of what you are doing, living on the land without ruining it, using without using up, limiting how much you draw down reserves so that you do not deplete faster than you replenish. But all four aspects are relevant to sustainability, which is not only about living with constraints, parameters, and limits but also about prescribing some inherently wrong or causally harmful types of action, and about creating the proper kind of sen-

sibility, motivation, and moral commitment in people. In sum, virtue, rightness, consequence, and context are all ethically important in navigating sustainability.

A sustainable society lives within the carrying capacity of its natural and social system. It has a system of rules and incentives that promote replenishing and limit depletion and pollution. A sustainable society builds upon the commitment of its members to conform to these rules voluntarily, and it enforces them when necessary.

One final note about ethical discourse in general as it pertains to the issue of sustainability. Ethical analysis is deeply affected by the initial ontological starting point or orientation one assumes. In general, there are three such orientations, the theocentric, the anthropocentric and the biocentric. In the interests of time, I mention only the last two here. The human-centered orientation denies that non-human things have any inherent or intrinsic moral value; their value is only instrumental to human values, goals, and well-being. The biocentric perspective holds that value in the world does not reside within human beings alone. The value in the world—for the sake of which ethics and morality exist in the first place—resides in the natural and biotic context of which human individuals and societies are a part. Therefore, ethical rights and duties, and the good for which ethical agency and action strive, should be understood in terms of systems of interdependency, relationship, sustainability, and resiliency.

Human-centered ethics is the default position of our politics and public policy today, and it leads to a position that might be called unsustainable rapacity. (Not to put too fine a point on it.)

The biocentric perspective gives us three different variants on the ethics of sustain-

ability, which have been in contention throughout the history of American conservation and environmentalism, particularly in the area of forestry policy, where the concept of sustainability originated.

(1) Sustainability as efficient management of resources. This is the scientific and sustainable forestry of Gifford Pinchot.

(2) Sustainability as the preservation of wildness and the radical rejection of an ethic of human use in favor of an ethic of human respect and non-interference. This is the argument proposed by John Muir.

(3) Sustainability as the land ethic or land citizenship—a synthesis of both well-managed human use and respect for the requirements of the systemic properties necessary to the integrity, functioning, and health of a biotic community of which human beings are a functional part. This is the synthetic position developed by Aldo Leopold. (Precursors of it can be found in Alexander von Humboldt, Thoreau, and George Perkins Marsh.)

Arguments in favor of unsustainable rapacity tend to be arguments of convenience, expediency, and self-interest, rather than arguments of principle, so I would not call them ethical arguments at all.

The three versions of sustainability, however, are each grounded on recognizable and serious ethical arguments. No definitive ethical solution to this debate exists. Our navigation of sustainability will be a tacking back and forth among these three orientations and the policies and practices that follow from them. That tacking is a good thing, and it is on the border line between ethics and politics. For me, however, the overall course and direction of our navigation should be set by the third conception of sustainability as land citizenship.

Sustainability as efficient management inevitably falls prey to human ignorance

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and human hubris. And experience since Pinchot's day shows that, despite its genuinely ethical and biocentric intent, it too easily falls back into an anthropocentric orientation in which nature alive becomes nature dead; that is, a system that supports us becomes a stock of raw materials for our consumption and use.

For its part, the conception of sustainability as wildness drives too sharp a wedge between humans and nature and is not ontologically sound, nor is it workable because the problem of sustainability is an agricultural, suburban, and urban problem and is not limited to undisturbed ecosystems in remote or protected areas.

The land ethic, a notion of democratic ecological trusteeship, provides the best moral compass for navigating sustainability in the Hudson Valley and beyond.

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IS IT TIME TO MOURN LIBERAL POLITICS?

A REVIEW OF WILLIAM OPHUL'S *REQUIEM FOR MODERN POLITICS* (BOULDER: WESTVIEW PRESS, 1997)

By Peter Brown

Despite the near decade and a half that has passed since its publication, this prescient book provides a fresh, if also virulent, perspective on our time. Its central argument is that embracing the central values of the Enlightenment—individualism, the separation of morals and politics, and the legitimization of the conquest of nature—have backfired. Rather than the triumph of human virtue and achievement which can set us on the road to progress, we are on the road to a great ecological, economic, and political unraveling, the components of which Ophuls grimly, but compellingly documents.

Refreshingly, and unlike much work in social science, especially mainstream economics, Ophuls draws on a familiarity with science that is contemporary and up to date. In particular, he grounds much of his argument in the first and second laws of thermodynamics. The first law is the conservation of matter and energy; while the second law states that in a closed system all things tend toward disorder and uniformity—what is called "entropy." But as Ophuls points out, the second law also describes the process on earth in which nature captures energy, mainly sunlight, and transforms it into complex biological structures such as plants and other animals; and, of course, ourselves—over very long periods of time. And it is these living and formerly living structures (such as coal and oil) that have made the current political and social orders possible. But for Ophuls, as for Georgescu-Roegen, a principal founder of ecological economics, this

party will inevitably end, and likely very soon.

Virtually nothing escapes the sickle of his argument. In the second chapter, "Moral Entropy," he describes how amoral individualism destroys civil society by destroying the complex social structures on which human well being and meaning depend. It sets us on a tragic course—where what we need and value the most is remorselessly destroyed by the hubris of the person liberated and, to themselves vindicated, by the highest values of human achievement—those of the Enlightenment. In the third chapter, "Electronic Barbarism," he writes: "...the American people are no longer a democratic public, but an electronic mob that reacts to events in the media arena by ricocheting from issue to issue, personality to personality, emotion to emotion without ever really understanding or reflecting upon what it is seeing." (p. 89)

But in *Requiem* the problem is not just what wrong in the United States—there are deep problems with civilization itself. The process of emergence from the primitive societies characterized by, for Ophuls, as embodying "liberty, equality, and fraternity," has been accompanied by four great ills: "...the careless exploitation of nature, organized violence directed at outsiders, political or religious tyranny exerted over insiders, and gross socioeconomic inequality, if not outright slavery." (p. 97)

The Enlightenment remedy is to address the latter two ills—tyranny and inequality, by worsening the other two. The consequence has been the hasty and ruthless exploitation of nature so carefully constructed over countless eons, and the pillaging of the resources of the "lesser peoples." Nature is not something to be respected, but a cluster of interchangeable resources to be exploited, and if they are of interest in the